



The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Imaginary Weapons

By Danielle Parker

I read a tremendous amount of non-fiction, but most of my non-fiction samplings are not particularly appropriated for a speculative fiction webzine. At last, however, I found one that I just *had* to review for this zine. That's both because it's a fascinating story in itself – one I did not put down until I had finished it – and second (more on this later) because it's an entirely appropriate topic for a science *fiction* audience.

The book is journalist Sharon Weinberger's *Imaginary Weapons: A Journey Through the Pentagon's Scientific Underworld*, and it is the story of the isomer bomb.

First, *what* is an isomer bomb? It's also been called the 'nuclear grenade' or the ultimate 'dirty bomb', and with good reasons. A single molecule of hafnium isomer (*hafnium*, like plutonium, being the metal, and *isomer* being, more-or-less, its charged-up, or radioactive state), stores, according to Ms. Weinberger, about *two and a half million electron volts of energy*. That's compared to a single molecule of

dynamite – which stores just *one* electron volt.

And unlike an atomic (that is, conventional nuclear) bomb, an isomer bomb would release *almost all* of its energy in the form of deadly gamma-ray radiation, capable of penetrating concrete and steel. Want a comparison between old and new horrors? The more radioactive a material, the shorter its *half-life* – the amount of time it takes the material to lose half its radioactivity. Radioactive uranium has a half-life of thousands of years. Radioactive hafnium ($H a f n i u m - 178 m 2$),

produced at an estimated cost of *\$30 billion* per thirty grams, has a half-life of *thirty-one years*. Don't stand too close to ground zero! According to one scientist, the isomer bomb would turn you into glue.

You can imagine how such stats excite bomb-makers the world over. Indeed, not only were bomb-makers excited. Some considered hafnium an ideal nuclear battery (depicted in a wishful *Popular Science* issue, no less). Others envisioned it as a deadly gamma-ray cannon – Buck Roger space-ray, here at last! And finally, more optimistic, (and gentler), souls dreamed of beaming energy to Mars or the moon to power future space exploration and colonization, or using hafnium's ultimate potency against cancer.

But there was, it seems, a problem with these rosy (or for those who have not learned to love the bomb, less than rosy) scenarios. Hafnium had just one problem (other than that horrendous manufacturing cost of \$30 billion dollars, of course!) that prevented all this wishful thinking from coming true. *Hafnium wouldn't give up its energy*.

Weinberger uses, cleverly, the analogy of a sugar molecule to explain the problem. A molecule of plain old sugar – the food that fuels our bodies, in one form or another – has more energy, or electron volts per molecule, than TNT. We do not, of course, build sugar bombs (no, Krispy Kreme, get thee behind me!). We build bombs out of *dynamite*.

That is because dynamite, as well as conventional uranium (plutonium) bombs, can be *triggered* into giving up their matter into a flash of energy. *Sugar just doesn't work*. And fortunately for peaceniks the world over, neither would hafnium. The silvery metal stubbornly held on to its energy, no matter what was done to it.

At this point, Weinberger's story became even more fascinating for me. Now we get into the stranger-than-make-believe real-life history of the would-be isomer bomb. Its history involves the Pentagon, (and a familiar, scolding, grandpa-like figure in wire-framed glasses who wanted a really big, really *bad* bomb, and just wasn't going to take no for an answer); a mysterious, anonymous group of

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The RPG Corner v5.6: Playing for Keeps

by Doug >!< Roper of EPIC Gaming

In the current RPG that I am participating in, I have come to realize that there are vast differences between the Players' objectives with respect to the game. What we ultimately want out of the game, and the method that we employ to achieve it, seem to differ greatly sometimes. We all want to have a good time and that is a unifying goal for our troupe, but there are different levels of enjoyment to be had, which keeps even this singular objective from really pulling the Players together. As we are now, our characters seem to be a group of individuals who are compelled by certain events to cooperate together, but there is no chemistry between the characters, and I feel it is because there is little chemistry among the Players.

So where does the division begin? Well, at the risk of sounding like a broken record, it is a question of differing philosophies attached to Role-Playing. The Models in which we are role-playing together do not seem to blend well, and I must admit that I am the odd man out in this particular example. Those of you good enough to stop by my little corner of the *Illuminata* regularly (and I'd like to thank both of you now) will know that I am all about the stories that can be told, and the experiences that can be had through the concept of Role-Play. I couldn't care less about the mechanics, so long as they don't distract from the story that is unfolding. I'll gladly throw in my two cents on whether a particular rule or rote is distracting, or damaging to the experience, but on the whole I'm content to let the story happen without getting bogged down in rules-lawyering.

When I play, I operate in the Immersive Model as much as I can, with no small amount of dabbling in the Actor Model as well. For those too new to the column to know what this means, check out the October 2002 *Illuminata* from the archives (<http://www.tyrannosauruspress.com>) for the article where I go into the Models of Role-Play, but a quick summation of Immersive Role-Playing is that I attempt—through my character—to become as integral part of the story as I can, with my actions in the game actually creating new plot and new opportunities for Role-Play. The Actor Model means that I attempt to really become my character during the time that I am playing him. This includes mannerisms, accents, clothes and props to support the performance. The other Players in the game are less passionate about the experience, and fall into a Recreational Model, where the ultimate goal is to get together and have a good time, and if some

things get accomplished in the game then it's an added benefit.

This is the root of my difficulty in finding real enjoyment with the game, and is a common problem in a lot of gaming troupes. As the lone Player concerned with greater detail, and with the creation of believable persona's, I exist outside the others in the group, who are more concerned with discovering what is happening, or shooting the breeze while they wait for something to happen. So, how does a Player who operates in one model function with Players who seem to operate in another? Essentially it comes down to a choice for the odd Player out, either conform and adjust to the other Players, thereby absolving you of the ostracism and taking the frustration out of the experience, while sacrificing your own overall enjoyment to make the game easier to handle, or, the odd Player out can work and hustle to draw in the other Players, using his performance and props to build the other Players into a similar model.

Both of these paths contain difficulties, but the first only holds the promise of diminishing returns. If you settle for a less that desirable result, then there is no way you will enjoy the game, and interest will wane, and soon, you stop caring about all the things you cared about when you began gaming. The second path, making the game more like you want it, is more difficult, but if successful you will have created a bonded troupe that is more unified in purpose, and which has a greater potential for good Role-Play. This effort must be done subtly, and slowly, but it can be accomplished if you are patient.

Little things like note-taking are the first step. As the primary note-taker of my troupe, I am the bastion of information that everyone turns to when they cannot remember a name or event and since everyone knows that I will record all of the important things, no one else bothers. This leaves too much time for goofing off. One way to remedy this is to shift some of that responsibility to another Player. Concern your fellow Players with details, and they will spend more time in the game searching for them, and one must also be interested in the details that they do turn up. Positively reinforce that behavior, and lead them on to another step.

Props are a wonderful Immersive tool. They allow the Player to handle an article that directly represents something from within the word of the game. Even if the GM doesn't supply many props, you can. Even

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Women in Gaming: Critical Hit

by Terry Crotinger/montanasing

Traditionally, women have been the servants at poker parties (if even allowed in the house). They are permitted to fix wonderful munchies for Super Bowl parties. Occasionally, they are encouraged to be spectators and go-fers, but rarely allowed to be players unless they are superb—superbly endowed, rich and stupid, or dykes who won't take "No" for an answer. Sound stereotypical? Unbelievably old fashioned? Status quo, ('hey, what's wrong with that?') or old-school? In some science fiction circles, this mindset still lives—for a couple of reasons. If your local Renaissance bunch keeps with tradition, this was a woman's role in society—joining such a group goes with the understanding that your role is fairly well fixed and unquestioned. Or, you may just know a bunch of Bubbas (A "Bubba" includes: resistance fighters, gangs, staunch religious groups/cults and mercenaries). There are pockets of Bubbas everywhere and some like sci-fi (in all it's various and wonderful *speculative fiction* forms). Not all Bubbas feel this way about women, but some do. Fact. I've witnessed it in several of the above "Bubba" definitions (and I won't go into how I know that just now...).

I'd like to think the stereotypical profile/mindset is never seen in rpg circles, but I hear from others that it still exists. So, when my friend and mentor, Scott, explained that, yes, he'd love to have me join his rpg group and, no, you may not like it—depending on the other players, I was interested and curious. My bra-burning antennae had not risen yet, so I was *game*, so to speak, to try it.

"Go to the net, thou convert" he told me. "Read posts from other women gamers." So I did. I found in some groups, women are not allowed to participate at all. It's a man's game. Though in all fairness, there were a few Amazonian women gamers who did not allow men or allowed them as servants.

Some posts spoke of being patronized as a player and with their character—who usually was sent to town to buy supplies or was *shared*—with a fun time had by all (except her). If a gal wanted to stay in the game at all, they were expected to just take any abuse the other characters/players gave her. One character tended to be injured within the first five minutes of the game and mysteriously un-healable, and exiled into eternal sideline-ism. One post said that she was told to go buy a new dress/gown, and if that doesn't make your character happy, find another group or get used to it. Another was told to "go see the local

magician and have him get rid of the baby. We can't have children here if you're going to play." The poster wasn't sure if that meant her character or her, since she was expecting. She left the group and started her own. The posts described verbal abuse in hoary detail.

Some gamers had cross-gendered characters hoping to be treated like a regular player and "get to do something besides stand guard over the larder". Players of both genders reported it was easier to relate to a male character, even if a female was playing it. Scott, however, had real trouble allowing me to play a male character—for personal reasons he never shared with me. So we compromised. I created "Patrick O'Leary", aka, "Patty" for a *Call of Cthuluh* character set in the 1930s. "Patty" was a male drifter, hired by a detective agency as a grunt and driver. Patty was slight, but kept a cool head in a monster fight (most of the time). Unbeknownst to my fellow players, O'Leary was a girl cross-dressing as a man. Joining the agency helped him/her track down the human-monster who killed her sister as a side plot. Worked for Scott, and I had a wonderful time with my Irish brogue, keeping in mind I'd be bunking with Dr. Berdy when we went out of town. Keeping my persona intact took some doing, but between my GM and I, we kept O'Leary's secret for almost a year, in spite of some close calls (rolls) where the good Dr. had to patch up my character after being shot in the shoulder or chest or fix a broken rib. How could he miss seeing me as a girl? Must have been very flat-chested or my GM was lying about the saving rolls/chance rolls he made behind his skull bedecked Cthuluh screen!

In the 18 months I played with that group, I never felt unsafe or any negative reactions from my fellow players because of my gender. Yet, I was still surprised to learn some (luckily, very few) women had actually been raped during the game—not their characters, but them (usually starting with the character and working on up from there). Thinking back, I could almost see how that could happen, almost. Most women who venture into fandom (dating, life...) probably possess some kind of saavy to keep themselves safe or else have an agenda of their own. Just like guys.

Our group gamed alongside or near an ongoing and eternal Magic competition (specifically), rpg and other table-top fare. The entire building was nothing but guys, me and one other female compatriot. If booze had been part of the deal, I would have been more concerned—my safety senses were on alert, but never alerted. Everyone seemed bent on playing, and not on anything else. The

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The Writer's Block: An Error in Detail

by Charles Gramlich

As a writer, I often find myself reluctant to criticize other writers publicly who I know are trying to make a living and who are, quite likely, doing the best they can. For that reason, even though I'm going to talk in this column about a serious writing mistake that I've recently seen in print, I'm not going to name names. (Speak to me privately after you've bought me a few beers and I'll probably spill my guts.)

I started reading a book not long ago by an SF author who has published many novels and short stories, and whose work I have admired in the past. This book I did not admire, and I went from reading, to scanning, to paging through, to tossing aside. The problem lay in the details, not in the details of grammar or punctuation, or even in the particulars of the prose, but in the details of the description that the writer *chose* to focus on.

For example, at one point the hero needs to burglarize a sorcerer's house to obtain an important item. The windows are barred, so he finagles a jack from a local watchman and climbs up the wall to where he can use the jack to force the bars out of the sill. So far, so good. But then we are treated to *three whole pages* of our hero struggling as he works on the bars. Every drop of sweat and quiver of muscle is lovingly described, which would be fine if our hero's life was at stake while he hung from a cliff a thousand feet in the air. Instead, we are left on the outside where it's boring looking in at what promises interest. The scene is simply wasted.

Later, after the hero gets inside the house with his companions, they awaken a guardian demon. *Cool*, I thought. *Now we'll see our hero sweat for a good reason*. I thought too soon. The buildup to the demon's actual appearance was full of extraneous detail that sucked the atmosphere from the scene, and when the evil being did finally appear it took less time to dispense with him than it had to get the bars out of the window.

Let me point out that the actual description of the break in was quite good. I could *feel* the hero tiring as he strained at the bars trying to force his way into the sorcerer's abode. I just didn't *care*. Nothing important hinged upon our hero's struggle at the window, and it had no real effect on his future actions. It was a waste of both the writer's and the reader's time.

Now, if the hero had been given only a few moments to get through the bars before a demon would be released, then we'd have tension. If the hero had come upon the barred window while trying to *escape* from the demon, we'd have tension. But just the fact that something is hard doesn't make it suspenseful. Changing a flat tire is hard, too, and requires a jack. But unless the difficulties of changing a tire somehow affect the plot, so what?

The break-in scene, and others like it early in this book, felt very much like padding, as if the writer was trying to stretch a short story into a novel. In fact, I suspect that's exactly what he was doing, and that makes me a little angry. Maybe the guy needed the money, but it's still poor writing, and it may cost him a few bucks out of his pocket in the future. At least, he won't be earning any more money from me.

Another book that I read recently, a thriller about angels and demons written by an author who regularly hits the bestseller lists (and no, not Dan Brown), had a wasted scene where the main character is going to inspect an ancient painting (it's still not Dan Brown). There was some mystery about the painting, and I was geared up to find out what, and then the writer left us cooling our heels in an art gallery waiting area for nearly a full page while he described the cluttered arrangement of a bunch of cardboard boxes. I didn't toss that book aside because there weren't many such lapses, but even the one frustrated me and I don't feel the slightest urge to pick up more of this writer's books.

The real world is rich with, or perhaps cluttered with, immense detail. It would take me many pages just to describe what I see on my writing desk at this moment. Even our brains are overloaded by all that immensity and tend to ignore everything but a few choice details. How much *more* the writer has to cut and prune away the excess detail so that the readers can get to what they need to know. And while it's OK if my real-world eyes notice something unimportant, it's not OK for a fiction writer to.

Consider again what I see on my desk. Which of the opening paragraphs below suggests the better story? Which presents the details in a way that might tempt you to read a little further?

1. He sat at his black, Compaq EvoN1000c Pentium 4 laptop computer, which was "designed for Microsoft Windows XP" and which had "Intel Inside." To the left on his black metal desk was the single white sheet of a student curriculum report and a nearly full PC Accessories holder for 3 ½ floppies. To his right was a 1 liter (1.05 QT) bottle of Fiji "Natural Artesian Water" with a picture of greenery and a pretty pink bloom on one side. Also on his right was a 50 tablet bottle of Nature Made Super B-Complex vitamins, "with Vitamin C added," a 100 tablet bottle of Centrum Advanced Formula multivitamins, "from A to Zinc®," and a 150 tablet bottle of Original Rolaids antacid in peppermint flavor.

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Reviews

Dzur

Steven Brust

Tor, 2006, 285 Pgs

ISBN 13-978-0-765-30148-2

Review by D. L. Parker

Speculative fiction – horror, fantasy, science fiction – is like the less-than-respectable, hog-ridin', black sheep juvenile in the family in my branch library. Our central branch supplies it to our small outlet, but clearly without much knowledge of the genre. Thus we end up with the third volume in a six-part fantasy series, orphaned and lonesome on the shelf, with nary a hope of catching a new reader who can't get the prequels; we end up with execrable stuff, some of it horror or S&M stuff so blood-drenched I am sure circulation had not a clue as to what they *really* supplied us. We get the latest Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Award winners rarely and seemingly randomly. My personal belief is that the circulations librarian walks along the shelves of the warehouse counting to herself, "*one – two – three – PULL!*" and drops the book she has selected into the cart. *Done!* More science fiction for those drooling hordes!

If that's true, then our circulation librarian must have hit Stephen Brust more than once on the count of "*Pull!*", because just in the last few weeks, a number of shiny new Brust books have shown up on our shelves. Or, since I see there are now *ten* books in his Vlad Taltos series alone, maybe the increase is just because Brust is a *very* busy man. He and Mercedes Lackey should get some kind of award, all to themselves, just for hard work. I wish *I* could produce like that.

I started in the Vlad Taltos series at the *Issola* book, and just finished the latest, *Dzur*. For those of you who, like me, have not read the preceding eight or nine books, the first question I can answer is – yes, you *can* jump in without having read the prequels. You may, like me, find it a bit difficult at first, since the story assumes quite a lot of background knowledge (I am still not clear on exactly what defines an Easterner, a Dzur, an Orca, or a Dragaeran, not to mention the difference between witchcraft, sorcery, and wizardry). But it doesn't seem to matter too much, if you just keep reading. And if I were a reader who had already consumed the first eight books, I would no doubt be grateful the author doesn't belabor the point with repetitive info-dump.

Brust (in the Vlad Taltos books, at least) gets lots of comparisons to Roger Zelazny's *Amber* series, and though these back-cover marketing blurbs usually amuse (or annoy) the heck out of me, in this case, the book pimps have a point. The hero does sound a lot like a Zelazny voice.

There are, however, some significant differences. Vlad, wisecracking, lets-go-kill-someone-and-have-a-good-time guy, is basically a thug with a supposed heart of gold. Corwin, hero of the *Amber* chronicles, played the Game of Kings, not the Game of Crooks, which put him on a different level indeed. Of course the games often play out much the same way in real life, with assassinations, bribery, murder, and assorted other atrocities... but still, one's definitely a more interesting game than the other.

I could summarize the plot of *Dzur* for you, but it is, as I said, all about old-fashioned thuggery. One criminal group wants to put the lock on the local rackets, and another one objects; one ambitious fellow has a mistress in the opposite camp and thus causes a lot of trouble; so-and-so wants to be the King of Crime; and, of course, heads eventually get knocked around a bit. Vlad rides to the rescue of his ex-wife (what a sweetie! How many men have a soft spot for their ex-wives? *None* of you?! I *said* he had heart of gold).

In any event, Vlad's ex-wife, who doesn't actually appear much in the story, has gotten herself entangled with said criminal groups. Vlad, who has a price on his head from *both* sides, has to make everyone play nice together. He does his usual wisecracking, nobler-than-I'll-admit-I-am job of it.

Brust's books are unexceptional, fairly simple fun, though not up to the *Amber* series his back-cover book blurbs take in vain. I do wish the author would lose the self-conscious *I'm-talking-directly-to-you, Dear Reader*, asides he sprinkles throughout, and the wit is pretty juvenile. But then, Vlad is a fairly uncomplicated sort himself: he still longs for the days when he was a just an assassin-for-hire who went out and did the "shine" (as he calls it) and celebrated his ill-gotten gains at his favorite restaurant. (There is a lot of talk about food in this book, so do *not* read the story when all you have in the house is leftover Chinese takeout. It will make you grumpy).

I *could* be annoyed with the whole unrealistic killer-with-a-heart-of-gold riff (which is about as likely as the old whore-with-a-heart-of-gold cliché). But suspend belief and your higher cortical functions, jump on for

Reviews

the ride, and enjoy Vlad's latest adventure (and these books are *all* about Vlad and his sounding-board pet familiar – other characters are definitely sketchy). Anyway, I did read two of these in a row, didn't I? So they're not too bad!

Aerie

Mercedes Lackey

Daw, Oct 2006

\$25.95, Hardcover, 291 pgs.

ISBN 075640391X

Review by Harriet Klausner

Kiron once known as the serf named Vetch was a captured peasant in the land of Tia, which was at war for years with his native Alta. He was Ari's dragon boy and stole a dragon's egg, caring for it until it hatched and then when it was grown enough he flew it to Alta where he taught the dragon riders how to bind their dragons to them with love not drugs. The Magi, an evil group of priests, were responsible for the war and the deaths that ensued in their quest to become the rulers of both lands. Kiron placed a significant role in defeating them.

The dragons and their Jousters, the king and queen of Alta and Tia, and some others fled their destroyed land and moved into the city of Sanctuary, located in the desert. In time more and more people showed up so they the Jousters and their dragons were forced to move to the stone caved up of Aerie. Lord Kiron is the de facto ruler of the Jousters and he realizes that with the war at an end and the two kingdoms about to become one the Jousters will act more like a police force than an army. However, in a border town all the inhabitants disappear and through the use of magic it is discovered that an old and ancient enemy is preparing to war against the two lands. Only the gods can stop them if they choose to interfere with the Jousters taking up a vanguard position against the Nameless Ones.

This is the fourth and probably the last book of the Dragon Jousters and readers have seen how Kiron has changed and grown into his power through the strength of his personality and his great leadership abilities. This is an exciting saga that shows prejudice can be overcome when former enemies work together for the common good. Mercedes Lackey has a unique voice and an ability to write tales that readers want to read.

Dead Beat

Jim Butcher

Roc, 2005, 435 pgs

ISBN 0-451-46901-X

Review by D. L. Parker

I just *loooove* discovering a new series that I enjoy. There's that wonderful anticipation: *seven* more books in the series that I have yet to read. *Oooh!* And as a librarian, one of the privileges of my disgustingly underpaid job, my woefully nearsighted, over-used eyes, the sore feet I take home at night and the sufferance of the occasional ill-mannered, unshaven patron who screams it ought to be his turn *now* on the one public Internet computer, is that... I can order them *all* at once. Just for little old me. Tell me a pleasure (that I can write about in a family-rated zine, I mean) equal to *that* one.

OK, so some of you out there have already discovered Jim Butcher's *Dresden Files* series, featuring that black sheep, Chicago gumshoe, Harry Dresden (who is a wizard on the side, I should mention). It's been real unfriendly of you, as we say out here in the West, to keep the news to yourself. I could have been on book number five by now if you'd just *talked*.

Dead Beat is book seven in the series, (I think), and there's one more after (*Proven Guilty*). But you can jump right in. Harry Dresden is a wizard who helps out the Chicago police Special Investigations now and then. His day's turning out pretty bad. His half-brother is bunking at his apartment, jobless and wrecking havoc with the décor. The woman Harry's more than half-way stuck on takes off on a sex-fling with the office cad, and just to twist the knife a little more, she asks Harry to *water her plants while she's gone*. Isn't that the deepest cut of all? *You're my good ol' pal?*

Then a really ugly vampire pulls a little blackmail. She's got some photographs that neither Harry nor his boss (the same slumming female who's off with the office Romeo) would like to see published. She wants Harry to find her a book. (I wanted to offer *my* services here, but...) The book is called the *Word of Kemmler*, and it was, of course, written by a very bad man... a necromancer.

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Supposedly, the White Council of Wizards (of which Harry is on less than comfortable terms) has snatched up everything bad old Kemmler wrote. Only the news that's there something still out there has gotten around to all the wrong parties. Harry, who's on the edge of being #1 on the White Council's hit list, doesn't dare ask for help – though he needs it. Soon he's falling over one would-be impatient reader after another. They're all necromancers, they're all nasty customers, and they all think Harry can lead them right to what they want. Just a little more torture and intimidation should do the trick!

It doesn't help that soon Harry *does* get help from more than one questionable friend, including werewolves (who find Harry himself scary enough to whine about); a classic Chicago gangster or two; a rabbit, polka-loving (ooh, *that's* scary) mortician; and a sweetly reasonable, just-ready-to-serve-you-master feminine demon. With friends like that, who needs to have the White Council show up? Only they *do*, of course, and Harry's in still *more* trouble.

Jim Butcher (who looks just like a wizard himself, even to the long, dark locks) has written a fun series. It's more classic gumshoe in tone than the Anita Blake series (and *not*, thank goodness, the soft-core porn Hamilton's works have increasingly descended to). Harry's still a guy who believes in right and wrong and in making the best choices he can in a gray world. I liked him. Enjoy, readers!

Illuminations 2006 Writing Contest

Entries have started arriving en masse for the 2006 Speculative Fiction Contest, but we want more. Our goal is to help talented but unknown writers gain more exposure in the field, skyrocketing them to the fame, fortune, and artistic recognition they deserve. If you or someone you know likes to write, but you haven't been able to find an outlet for your creative energies, [visit our website](#) and learn more about this contest! The top ranked story wins a \$25 prize, and all entrants are considered for inclusion in the next volume of *Beacons of Tomorrow*, T-Press' short fiction anthology. This is an opportunity that no burgeoning writer should pass up.

A Message From the Editor

Just in case anyone was really looking forward to the next installment of my series on remakes, it will continue next month. Real world concerns made writing an article and formatting this newsletter impossible.

Dark Moon Defender

Sharon Shinn

Ace, Oct 2006, \$23.95

ISBN: 0441014305

Review by Harriet Klausner

One of the fifty elite King's Rider, Justin heads to the remote town of Neft because some recent activity against King Baryn of Gillengaria seems to have initiated at the Daughters of the Pale Mother religious sect led by Coralinda Gisseltess located there. This Moon Goddess worship faction insists that other forms of mysticism are abominations and needs to be dealt with by death to the heretic. Thus the two travelers are to infiltrate this fanatic's House to determine whether Coralinda fosters anti-monarchy fervor.

Justin goes undercover obtaining work at the stable where he soon meets novice Ellynor, a healer with stealth skills that she hides for fear her superiors will sacrifice her as a heretical mystic. He uncovers her magical secrets even as they fall in love with one another. Her fears prove true when she is condemned to die at a fiery stake for being an unholy magical practitioner. Only Justin can save her, but by doing so he would reveal his identity as an undercover King's Rider and ergo jeopardizing the mission.

The third Twelve House saga (see *The Thirteenth House* and *Mystic and Rider*) is a superb romantic fantasy starring a dedicated hero struggling with saving the woman he loves that would most likely devastate his mission. The action-packed story line is driven by the relationship between Justin and Ellynor; ironically if he saves her, his family and his peers still will not accept her as his spouse because she is a Lirren. Fans of terrific character driven tales will fully appreciate the wonderful *Dark Moon Defender* that deftly blends deep characterizations inside a strong saga.

Reviews

Promise of the Witch-King (Sellswords, Book II)

R. A. Salvatore

Wizards of the Coast, 2005

ISBN 13-978-0-7869-3823-0

Review by D. L. Parker

Who's the most requested fantasy author in my library? If you're thinking folks pay too much attention to the latest Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy Award winners, you're wrong. In my alternate librarian persona I have never had *one* patron request one. If a young man comes up to my desk, and he wants me to order a fantasy for him, I know who the author's going to be before he finishes telling me. It's going to be R. A. Salvatore. Without a doubt, he's the most read, most requested author in the entire under-thirty young male group.

The reasons for that are pretty obvious as soon as you open any R. A. Salvatore book. Let's take *Promise of the Witch King*, the latest one that's come into my hands, as an example. What we have here is a computer game in print, with all the elaborately portrayed action-adventure a husky young fellow could want.

As the book opens, indeed, the former assassin Artemis Entreri (former nemesis of the elf Drizzt, for those of you who have followed the series), along with his new partner the dark elf (not exactly reformed, either) Jarlaxle, are rolling around the tunnels and stairways of an enchanted tower. They're out there battling killer rolling balls, man-eating gargoyles, iron golems and an undead sorcerer in action sequences as intricately crafted (and unreal) as *Swan Lake's* Prince vs. Rothgar denouement. I can see every slice and dice and explosion in all its full-color pixel glory even as I read it – and it's all in the first ten pages.

The characters in the series, too, are stock. We have elves (dark and light, bad and good), dwarves, orcs, stupid thuggish goblins who provide lots of opportunities for head-bashing and chop-chop work, sorcerers, and humans of various, generally tough-gal or tough-guy ilk. Game fanciers will recognize them all at a glance. Did I forget the dragons? We've got those too. Oh, what Tolkien let loose upon the world! Do you suppose he's doing penance for it now, somewhere in Purgatory, or in one of the softer circles of the Inferno, with Virgil at his side?

But I'm doing Mr. Salvatore a bit of an injustice here. I, too, have read a number of R. A. Salvatore stories, and I actually remember the earlier works featuring Drizzt and his companions with some affection (although I

was *so* impatient every time I picked up a book and discovered that no, the anticipated Drizzt and Catti-brie consummation would not happen until the next book, and then the *next* book, and so on...) That's because, among all the chopping, bashing, twirls and acrobatic fighting maneuvers, Mr. Salvatore can actually make us care about his characters. Affection, or at least interest, creeps up on one unawares, so to speak. Who would have thought?

Mr. Salvatore has mixed success with his cast in *Promise of the Witch King*. Jarlaxle, the ambiguously motivated, charming conman, is an intriguing character. Entreri is not quite as successful; it's not easy to portray the emotional redemption of a cold-blooded killer, but Mr. Salvatore works at it. Entreri gets briefly struck on female after female, which doesn't seem like him; the one he actually gets it on with by the end of the book hardly plays a part in the story at all. There's nothing like the delicate Drizzt-Catti-brie romance here – at least in this outing of our almost-heroes.

For those of you who care about the plot rather than just those action scenes, Jarlaxle and Entreri and a cast of various dubiously motivated fellow fighters battle a magically constructed castle and its denizens. The castle is a relic of the evil Witch King, of course, and it's got a dragon, more golems, more gargoyles, and plenty of undead to chop-chop. There are traitors and good guys and one annoying selfish dwarf who speaks in nothing but inane rhymes, and by the end of the tale, of course, quite a number of dead characters, both villainous and heroic variety.

Come to think of it, I don't think I ever *did* reach the book in the original series where Drizzt and Catti-brie *do* finally plight their undying troth. Does anyone remember which one it was? Did it ever actually *happen*? *Sigh*. I think I'll go find myself a paranormal romance to read, after all that chop-chop stuff I just finished. *Yes*, Virginia, men and women really *are* different. So if you're an under-thirty guy, take my advice – go get Mr. Salvatore's latest! You'll love it!

Lost In Translation

Edward Willet

Daw, Oct 2006, \$6.99, Mass Market 317 pgs.

ISBN: 1594143056

Review by Harriet Klausner

The S'sinn, a bat like sentient creature, colonized K'ikks'sarr; shortly thereafter humans established colonies on the planet. From the first contact, the two species were antagonistic towards one another. When the humans

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killed several S'sinn, war broke out with the S'sinn vowing to take it to any orb that contained the dreaded humans. Mankind retaliated leading to a belligerent stalemate until the multi-species Commonwealth declared the end of all hostilities with humans and S'sinn remaining on K'akks'sarr within separate boundaries.

The human Kathryn and the S'sinn Jarrikk lost much that they held dear during the war; Kathryn's parents died while Jarrikk's training group perished along with his ability to fly. Both are empaths and become Translators in the Commonwealth. Another planet is claimed by both species so the Commonwealth sends the two translators to negotiate a peace that neither side wants. To avert renewed hostilities, both translators will have to break respective oaths. Betrayed on all sides, Jarrikk and Kathryn turn to one another forging a new telepathic weapon that hopefully will prove strong enough to stop the bloodshed.

Lost In Translation delves into the society and mores of the S'sinn that explains why they seem to behave in a feral manner towards humans. This in depth look at an alien culture makes for fascinating reading. The bond between the two cross translators enables them to understand the other side's perspective. The military science fiction audience will believe that Edward Willet is a Translator with first hand experience working with the sentient S'sinn and want future Translations.

Women in Gaming (con't)

Magic Gatherers gathered and I'm not sure if they even knew we were in the room. Other patrons went about their business, or stopped by to observe (we *were* a raucously loud bunch). With a less public location, add socially challenged, frustrated male players and booze and anything could happen—and not just to women.

Luckily for women, me, gender roles have evolved into more *fair-play*, if you will, since Dungeons and Dragons, the holy grail of gaming, developed. Keeping a woman in her place may have just been a cultural norm, a reflection of what was happening in society at the time. The late 60s and 70s still had fairly definable roles for women, so it was understandable other disciplines would keep tradition. It seems the Bubbas are fewer. There is more equality, but the soup's not done quite yet. Being aware of what your group dynamics are, what you want as a player and how your GM feels about women (along with some ever-present safety senses) will clue you into the possibility that your rpg group will treat each player with respect. But watch out. Your character still might get a critical hit sooner than expected.

Note: The word is out in Iowa City; Scott's rpg group added three more women players!

Once Upon A Spring Moon

Dennis L. McKiernan

Roc, Oct 2006, \$23.95, 400 pp.

ISBN 0451461126

Review by Harriet Klausner

Once upon a time in the Kingdom Of Springwood, Princess Celeste sits in her favorite tree thinking when a group of bandits try to kidnap her. Unwilling to be a damsel in distress, Celeste tries to fight them off, and when the chevalier knight Roel enters the battle on her side, the thugs are killed. Roel is in danger of dying due to a poisoned arrow, but he recovers.

While Roel recuperates, he and Celeste fall in love but he can't stay with her because he is on a quest. His sister was taken by the Changeling Lord and his two elder brothers went after her but never returned. Roel intends to rescue all his siblings. Celeste, who doesn't want to depart from her love, joins him.

The road they travel is hard and they must pass through different kingdoms in faery using a map recovered from the pirates to guide them. The Three Fates, at different times, assist them during their perilous journey by giving cryptic instructions and gifts they will need if they reach the Changeling Lord's kingdom. Along the way various villains of faery attack them; it takes all their cunning as well as their strength to continue on a quest that seems likely will kill them both.

Dennis L. McKiernan is a wonderful worldbuilder who reminds readers of the magic that can be found in fairy tales. Celeste is an independent woman who believes she is the equal of any man and Roel is happy to have her as a partner instead of a subordinate. They battle trolls, goblins, sirens, ogres and a host of other creatures working together as a team. This is an enchanting tale that will have readers spellbound.

Writer's Block (con't)

2. He sat at his laptop with a big bottle of Roloids near to hand.

Choosing the correct details for a scene is far more about elimination than it is about addition. It's like panning for gold. You sift the material again and again until you're left with just the nuggets. Everything else gets tossed on the dross heap.

Show the readers only what they *have* to see. They'll thank you for it. And I'll be happy to name you in print.

RPG Corner (con't)

your game notes can count as a prop, but more classic items include books, diaries, photographs, jewelry, clothes, and small trinkets. Speak with your GM and find out if there is an interesting item around the house that can be brought into the game. Anything to keep the Players in the moment and focused on what their characters are doing will help.

The last and in some ways easiest trick to lure the other Players into a more involved model of Role-Play is to eliminate distractions. By having only the game's subject matter to occupy them, they will find fewer ways to divert conversations. Like wise, without televisions, radio or books that are off topic, there is a much smaller chance of the Players refocusing on material with no relevance to the game.

All of this becomes moot if the matter of the game is too weak to support the active, probing interest of all the involved Players. This then becomes an open discussion with the GM and the other Players. Look for ways to help the GM increase the depth of his stories by offering to supply some interesting sidelines to his plots (all with his prior review and approval, of course). If ways to involve the other Players cannot be found, or if methods to keep them in character cannot be constructed, then there may just be a simpler solution for the frustrated Player, namely finding another group. I acknowledge that this is a daunting prospect, especially now a days when it seems that everyone and their uncle has been sucked into online gaming, which is why every effort to keep a functional gaming troupe together ought to be made, but at the same time there is no reason why an unhappy Player should be forced to settle for a game he knows could be better.

Political tags - such as royalist, communist, democrat, populist, fascist, liberal, conservative, and so forth - are never basic criteria. The human race divides politically into those who want people to be controlled and those who have no such desire.

— Robert A. Heinlein

Imaginary Weapons (con't)

scientific advisors called the JASONs who panned the isomer bomb early on and more or less got fired over it; and, last but not least, a renegade Texan scientist whose promising results with hafnium just couldn't be reproduced by *anyone* else. (Does anyone remember cold fusion? Does any of this sound familiar?).

This last same scientist and his supporters convinced those gotta-have-it-now believers in the US government to hand over an unbelievable amount of money. DARPA, the US government agency which funds various far-out sciences, (in the spirit of "*we can't let those Russkis surprise us!*"), awarded him at least \$40 million dollars for research... grandpa sure wanted his bomb!

By the time the fountain of cash ran dry – squeezed off by an alarmed Congress – the US government had little more than an aged dental X-Ray machine to show for its results (our Texan's jury-rigged machine being the sole device that *ever* seemed able to generate any hafnium triggering). That's according to Collins, the Texan scientist and dental ray operator, at least. And, at last, we had one Russian scientist, taking pity, I suspect, after a long, no doubt partly worried, partly smirking silence, who wrote an article referring delicately to the "*lack of science*" in certain physicist's supposed results.

Somewhere, I suppose, there's a stubborn Texan who just won't give up, laboring away with his dental X-ray machine and a few precious samples of hafnium, trying to build the nastiest bomb the world has ever dreamed of. But he's descended into the scientific underworld now, right along with the man who sold the Pentagon on those psychic powers (who *also* worked for DARPA during this time period, in spite of his test psychics' failure to find those hidden Russian missile sites. Did I also mention that this same government agency held meetings at Disneyland? I hope they've sobered up since).

Let's hope the isomer bomb stays in fantasyland, though. The world doesn't need something worse than Hiroshima. Please, God, let this story stay fictional!

I highly recommend Ms. Weinberger's book. Thank goodness for those old-fashioned, intrepid journalists who just keep digging in spite of all those smacks in the keister... Free Press, *live on!*

Imaginary Weapons

Sharon Weinberger

Nation Books, 2006, 276 pgs

ISBN 0-56025-849-7