

THE ILLUMINATA

QUARTERLY E-ZINE OF SPECULATIVE FICTION

*Keeping SF From Extinction
Since 2001*

*Volume 9 • Issue 1
January 2011*



Tyrannosaurus Press
Zachary, LA
www.TyrannosaurusPress.com

Digital Evolution By Bret Funk

There is a great deal of talk in the publishing world about ebooks and Print-On-Demand publishing. Not much of it is good, but that's mostly because the loudest voices belong to the biggest, most entrenched publishing houses, wholesalers, and distributors (not to mention a fair number of bookstores). They talk of "digital revolutions" and "the destruction of traditional books" and "flooding the market with substandard fare". They may be partly right about the last, but their concern stems not from some aesthetic appreciation of literature, but rather from the knowledge that they no longer fully control the flow of the substandard works entering the marketplace (and thus the revenue from their release).

This is not a new battle. This is the same fight that's been going on in the other media industries. It's another front in the war between the RIAA, musicians, and consumers; between the MPAA, actors, and consumers; between news channels, bloggers, and consumers. This is a war about control of media, a war about intellectual property rights, and in many cases, a war about who gets how much money how quickly.

Traditional publishing is expensive. To print affordable books in an offset print run, one must print by the thousands (or millions). The retail price of a book (which, unlike in most industries, is set by the first person in the chain—the publisher—instead of the last person in the chain—the retailer) must take into account not only the printing and shipping costs, but warehouse costs for all those books, the discounts given to wholesalers, distributors and retailers, royalties which must be paid to authors, and the everyday expenses incurred by any business. It also has to take into account the fact that the vast majority of published books barely (if ever) make a profit, and the profits from "best-sellers" has to subsidize the publication of all those other books.

The traditional system of publishing grew out of those realities. Publishers invested in works they were confident could make them a profit, and occasionally in books they liked. A few small presses popped up here and there to fill a niche not adequately represented by the big houses, and a handful of "vanity" presses were shunned by the mainstream, as is evidenced by the name such presses were given. Because what value could writers' works have if they had to invest their own money to publish it? I'm sure such decisions were never made because the authors wanted to keep control of the work (and the subsidiary rights) for themselves rather than sign them over to a publisher in exchange for a meager advance and a tiny royalty.

Then came the advent of Print-On-Demand. This opened up a whole new world. Higher (sometimes much higher) per unit costs, but the ability to print books relatively affordably, more environmentally-friendly, and often of higher quality in runs as small as were deemed wise. No warehousing. In some cases the ability to drop-ship directly to wholesalers and retailers from the printer. No doubt one would expect the publishing world to grab onto this technology with both hands and hold on tight.

Not exactly. The established publishing industry tried to shun POD, highlighting its shortcomings and stigmatizing the technology by calling attention to a few less-than-scrupulous POD printers who jumped into the game early and allowed (or perhaps tricked) aspiring writers into thinking that by paying a POD publisher a fee to print anything (no matter how poorly conceived, edited, or typeset) in a bound book made them a "published author". This quasi-con may have flooded the market with some terrible POD-printed books, but the technology was not to blame for the content of those books. Nevertheless, the term "POD" still evokes a certain shudder response in certain circles, especially among the big publishers and wholesalers.

Not so with many small publishing houses. In fact, an explosion of small presses followed the POD "revolution" as the technology made it more affordable to print books and less risky to try out new authors. Have traditional runs disappeared? Not yet, nor are they likely to as long as you can print millions of books for a fraction of the POD cost. But most books are sold in the thousands, not the millions, and a smart publisher will use the print method that makes the most sense for any given author, or for any given work. POD printing for a Stephen King book? Not even if he wrote the book in his own, made up language. POD printing for a book written by a twelve-year-old savant no one's ever heard of? You bet, unless he has a few thousand aunts who will buy his book in preorder.

Ebooks have been around for a while now, but recent developments in the ebook reader and tablet market have finally pushed this format into the forefront. At the moment, with so many competing formats and file types out there, there's still a lot of confusion and a little hesitation about ebooks, but their market share is growing rapidly and will no doubt continue to grow as the years go by. Personally, I think ebooks are perfect for textbooks, guides, instructional manuals and any other work that tends to be bulky and that may require frequent updates and revisions. I find ebooks less ideal for pleasure reading, but they are far more convenient than lugging around a sack of books on vacation like I used to do.

Publishers big and small have embraced ebooks with more fervor than they ever did POD, with varying degrees of success, and with a lot of debate over things like price, features, and royalties. They kind of had to. The ebook "revolution", coupled with the digital revolution in general, opened a whole new world to writers. Why pay a publisher to release your book in Kindle format when anyone with even a basic knowledge of computers and the ability to read instructions can upload their own works to Kindle (or to any of a dozen other digital collaboration and sharing sites)? The only reason is that in order to get a book published in the traditional way, authors also have to generally hand over digital rights to their works. If publishers didn't embrace digital media, then how could they 1) demand the rights for it, and 2) make any money from it.

Both of these technologies represent a paradigm shift in publishing. POD and ebook technology put more power in the hands of publishers and authors, open up new market opportunities, and reduce (or even eliminate) the need for some of the middle men in the supply chain. What purpose does a wholesaler truly serve when a book can be ordered by a bookstore and drop-shipped within days by a POD printer, or perhaps even printed at the bookstore through an “expresso” book machine (a technology I think is amazing, but ten years too late to really catch on)? What need is there for a brick-and-mortar store when a publisher can sell via his website and pass along the wholesaler and retailer’s discounts directly to the reader, or sell an ebook version and pass along the savings on the printing costs as well? For an average POD trade paperback costing readers \$19.99 at a retail outlet, a publisher might be able to sell an ebook directly to readers for \$5.00 and still make more profit.

Print-on-Demand and digital media are not part of a revolution in publishing. Revolutions can be stopped. These technologies are part of a digital *evolution*, a vast restructuring of the way the entire system functions. And every creature in the food chain, from the smallest retailer to the largest publisher, needs to bear in mind that you cannot fight evolution. There are only two options: adaptation or extinction.

SF/Fantasy Marketing By TerryCrotinger/montanasing

My head is swimming—TMI overload from Internet research. It started when I picked up a lobby card at ICON (Cedar Rapids, 2010). Curious at the usual publishing company offerings for their books, websites, games, ad nauseum... I selected (every) piece of junk, literature, bookmark and flyer available to peruse at a later time, and wondered about this mass of dead tree spirits in my backpack. Why were some more interesting than others? More importantly, were these even effective? Did someone rush to their computer when they got home and started ordering this Fantasy book, that Sci Fi game? Would I find anything interesting enough to tax my dwindling PayPal account? Checking out each item gave me an idea, though. If these colorful glossies produced little sales, why put out the expense?

The freebies and fliers at conventions are called "Swag". Swag is responsible for sales, or can be a huge money pit preferring little results. The most interesting lobby card I selected lists several ways to help the author generate interest in his Sci Fi title. (*Translation: Help me sell my book; you don't know me, but you'll get my eternal gratitude if you blog, twitter, volunteer to go to sci-fi cons and promote me, and oh, btw, a little "donation" would help a lot!*) My wallet wanted to hide that very moment and my vocabulary of fan-based terms sports a new word: crowdfunding. I don't find this a positive experience. Is this what low-budget marketing has become?

A search for a logical plan to make book sales starts with the Internet. Add personal experience from successful small publishers/authors and a caveat from an early morning chance encounter in the anime room at ICON by a professional salesman, and a well-rounded marketing plan emerges.

The Internet experience starts with a Google key phrase and careful look at the top five websites on the coveted First Page. Continuing on, an eye-crossing look at every site on the next two pages. Many people and publishers had similar ideas, website format and self-selling tactics. Some sites even bothered to covertly advertise their own products. What I learn from this experience: one must be blatant and blunt (buy my book) or not try to sell anything, just be supportive.

My Salesman encounter (We were the only ones at a 2 am anime showing with a stuffy and stilted 80's something historical/alterverse flick, poorly English subtitled that only a champion speed-reader could appreciate.) blended these two ideas. I left our hour-long discussion with this thought: be real, be polite—even if it means asking outright for a sale.

Moving on, I search out successful authors. Best-selling authors—almost always—have agents and top publishers who have assembly-line formats for marketing. These publishing house Agents are magic and secure billing in trade venues with the mention of a name. Hooray for that lucky gal in backwater Nebraska with a good agent and publisher (with an enviable marketing strategy). For the smaller publishing houses or self-published authors, a grueling task awaits: successful marketing on a budget.

This returns me to all that swag. Do these result in sales? Authors tend to see their works territorially and soul-inspired and hope others will want to share the esoteric atmosphere of owning Their Soul. Publishers see Their Soul as meat. Perhaps crudely put, and yet...we want _____. (Insert: a good reputation, notoriety, sales, wealth, perpetuating success...)

For the small publishing company or self-published author, what works? Professional advertising agencies will concentrate on one goal: get the Name (catch phrase, title) repeated in as many ways as possible with a positive slant. (Though, negative publicity works, too.) For the intrepid, this is a sweet challenge. An older book on sales (1960's) suggested that to promote yourself, periodically call the local hospital, airport, (WalMart?) and ask for yourself so your name is broadcast over the public address system (think, "Paging, Terry Crotinger. Pick up the Courtesy Phone."), thus letting listeners become familiar with your name (and after a few-too-many broadcasts will wish you'd just pick up the phone and stop avoiding your spouse). Cheesy? It works. Search engines are based on familiarity. The ratings for websites are based on content (tags / links to and from) and how many "hits" a site or reference receives. The coveted First Listing on Google is a market prize in itself.

Multiplicity is the key. With numerous ways to get "hits" for a name or website, not all are appreciated—and some search engines reject certain tactics. Hence, the "be real" of Mr. Salesman comes into play. Book reviews, interview, blog comments, open (or poor privacy) social network sources can promote you or your work. However, doing these simply for the "hits" with no real content is unethical.

Be Real. Be Polite. One website suggests not promoting yourself at all, just be supportive and real (but do a lot of it). This goes back to the "it's not cool to promote yourself" idea. It is okay to promote yourself or your product and ask for a sale, politely. Even better is a skillfully presented request. An entire industry revolves around the concept of knowing your audience and how to communicate with them, including asking for a sale and completing the paperwork to finish the deal (my favorite is Brian Tracy.com).

So what about all that swag? Are they cheaper than a formal advertisement in the newspaper or on the local radio show? Perhaps not. But I sure have a lot of the stuff!

Be real. Be polite. Be inventive.

Peter Elbow and the Real Voice

By Charles Gramlich

I recently read Peter Elbow's *Writing with Power* and found quite a bit to agree with. One place I *disagreed* with him was on the topic of "real voice."

Frankly, I've never completely understood what "voice" is. It's not style. It has nothing to do with genre. As near as I can tell, voice is when a piece of writing sounds as if it's written by a real person instead of a committee.

Elbow first chooses an example from a textbook that he says is written without voice. I agreed with that example; it was the last time I did so. Most textbooks, most interoffice memos, and a majority of speeches lack voice. Textbooks are designed to communicate tough information in the clearest way possible. Memos and political speeches are often designed to say nothing while appearing to say much. The authors of such works are actually trying to *hide* rather than reveal themselves.

But then Elbow breaks into a discussion of "real" voice, and he includes good and bad examples. To my ear, these were all backward. "Real" voice is more mysterious than voice in general, but as far as I can tell from Elbow's discussion it's supposed to have a greater sense of authenticity, as if you can hear the actual or real person behind the words.

If so, Elbow apparently can't recognize "real" voice. Or I can't. Or maybe neither of us can. He gives two examples of real voice. The first is a section of the *Falconer* by John Cheever, the other a short essay on the comma by Gertrude Stein.

Neither of these comes close to having real voice to me. The Cheever piece is so polished and smoothed that it comes perilously close to lacking a voice at all. It makes me think of Muzak. Real voice should be like a road with some curves and potholes. Cheever's prose is a straight highway that's as smooth as glass. Any real person is lost. The Stein piece definitely has some roughness, but it seems very contrived to me, very deliberately manufactured to produce an effect. That gives it voice, but hardly a real one. When people *speak* with a real voice there is honest emotion, not careful contrivance. Shouldn't the same be true in writing?

Elbow then baffled me further by reprinting a D. H. Lawrence piece about "the perfectibility of man." He considers it "kooky and mannered" rather than "earnest and authentic." I think he's completely wrong. *This* piece has real voice. I can hear an actual person talking here, speaking with passion and plenty of humor, and not polished to the point of blandness. This piece, I'll remember.

Ultimately, I suspect we can never be absolutely sure how contrived or uncontrived a piece is simply by reading it. We don't know how much rewriting for effect the author did. That makes me wonder whether "real" voice is even a viable concept. The only question is whether a piece of writing works, whether it resonates with readers. And the answer to that may not be the same for every reader. Elbow likes Cheever. I don't. Neither of us is wrong.

Mind Control

By Joe Vadalma

One of the most frightening themes in science fiction and fantasy is that of mind control, that your mind could be manipulated to make you perform actions against your will. In SF this is usually done with some sort of gadget implanted in your body. In fantasy, mind control is performed by a controlling being such as a wizard, vampire or demon.

Apparently, the SF version is already available. It is done by brain chips. In 1970, Jose Manuel Rodrigues Delgado, a professor of physiology at Yale University, pioneered an electronic device that can manipulate the mind by receiving signals from and transmitting them to neurons. At present, brain chips are used to treat such conditions as epilepsy, Parkinson's disease, paralysis, blindness and disorders.

Delgado, however, was performing experiments that were more dramatic than anything done today. He implanted radio-controlled electrode arrays in various animals and even humans. He showed that he could control subject's minds and bodies with a push of a button. For the most part his work has been forgotten, but he is alive and living in San Diego.

Between 1952 and 1970, Delgado implanted electrodes in twenty-five human brains, most of whom were schizophrenics and epileptics. He showed that stimulation of parts of the brain could cause a physical reaction. Patients were made to perform such actions as tightening a fist or shaking the head from side to side by applying small electric currents to certain areas of the brain. Delgado also induced such emotions as rage, lust, hilarity and fear.

In one experiment he caused a macaque monkey bully to be pacified when a lever was pushed. One of the female monkeys learned this and would press the lever whenever the bully tried to molest her.

One troubling aspect of Delgado's experiments is that they were supported by the Office of Naval Research. Some conspiracy theorists believe that the CIA was involved. Delgado countered any claims of mind control by saying that brain stimulation can increase or decrease aggressive behavior, but not direct it at a specific target.

Currently, many people suffering from certain brain malfunctions have chips implanted in their heads that stimulate areas of the brains by wireless communication to the chip. Whether this technology will be expanded to actually control human beings to act according to another person's will is yet to be seen. It is certainly a frightening thought.

Most of the information for this post came from an article in the October, 2005 Scientific American entitled "The Forgotten Era of Brain Chips" by John Hogan.

Authentic Author—Walter Rhein By Terry Crotinger/montanasings

As an author, Walter Rhein grabbed my attention with his writing; not simply in terms of his inventiveness in storytelling, but his authenticity. However, his marketing strategies mirror his writing—authentic and inventive. Walter Rhein, author of *The Bone Sword* (reviewed in this issue of *Illuminata*), made a bold claim: each paragraph would be a cliff-hanger. Why? Because he felt his work would appeal to “gamers”. (*Translation: they get bored without constant stimulation.*)

A few words about The Cliffhanger concept. Some SF/Fantasy publishers attempt to sell novels by hiring well-known authors to (ghost) write stories based on Games and Roll Playing Games using the cliffhanger concept. It's been my experience that after only a few pages into the work, if not skillfully handled, it stops functioning as an attention keeper and becomes tedious reading. And, while not completely failing—there *is* plenty of action—these novels often lack depth. Consistently climaxing, paragraph after paragraph, Walter has produced a “can't put it down” kind of story. He said, “*The Bone Sword* was designed to appeal to a generation of young adults who have become conditioned by the instant gratification of video games. I intended that book to be just a fun, escapist adventure.”

“I learned that if you're going to get anything published these days, especially on the Internet, you have to have a quick payoff in anything you write. People get a headache when they stare at a computer screen for too long, so there's no way you could take your time and write “War and Peace” and publish it online. Nope...today, you've got to hit people quick, and then hit them three more times before they've even registered the first hit. I did take that philosophy into writing “Bone Sword.”

TERRY: Would *this* story make a compelling electronic game?

WALTER: Actually, I think it would! In the past, sword and sorcery games have been a bit disappointing. Point and shoot games are good because it's fairly easy to put a trigger on a video game control pad, and that makes the game real. Until recently, you couldn't have a video game that recreated a sword battle effectively.

Now, however, with things like the Wii, the potential for a good “point of view swordsman” game is out there. I don't think the wii is precise enough to do it yet though, but give it four or five more years. I think you'd have to have a bit more of a video reference than just a single screen too. Imagine if you had three 50-inch screens arranged in a half circle around you, and two or three movement sensors to pick up your sword swings! That'd be a cool game!

Marketing a novel to this genre of readers is a bold tactic. Marketing is a fickle field that is always changing, replete with its own fads and trends. Walter has taken advantage of networking—Internet-style—by availing himself to book reviewers, interviewers, blogs and his own feedback mechanisms.

“I am learning tons about this subject from looking at the various online venues that come up in a Google search (interviews, book trailers on You Tube, blogs, etc). Whose ideas were these, and if you could market your work differently without additional cost, what would you do?

“Most of these ideas are just out there to be picked up. I've been interviewing authors on my blog, and I always ask them what they're doing for marketing. This is an exciting time for writing since there are so many different ways that can bring a lot of attention to your work with very little cost. Things go viral, etc. Actually, you have to spend as much creative energy marketing as you do writing (which is crazy when you think about it). I'm by no means an expert, but here are a couple of articles I've written on the subject: <http://www.rhemalda.com/info/2010/11/digg/>

<http://www.rhemalda.com/info/2010/12/networked-blogs-facebook-book-promotion>

“Flash Fiction” is a new term for me, and from research I knew he uses this method when writing, which he tries to do everyday. As Walter is also a Writing / English instructor on the collegiate level, I asked about using “Flash Fiction” in his classes and how he would describe it.

WALTER: Flash Fiction is a great exercise for a classroom. It's essentially just a really short short story. It's generally prose, but you could make a poem out of Flash Fiction I suppose. I'm sure there are some “Flash Fiction Purists” who believe there are a required set of rules that people must abide by in order for their writing to “truly be” Flash Fiction...but I'm an anti-rule kind of guy. It's art after all! You can't limit it!

TERRY: Is not Flash Fiction and comics—where every word often does double duty—similar? How about comics or pulp fiction?

WALTER: Yes, I would try my hand at comics/pulp fiction. That would be nice because you could concentrate on dialogue and not worry so much about describing the setting.

TERRY: Are you a member of a writing society?

WALTER: Not any official ones. I tend to gravitate towards people that are either writers or otherwise creative. We had a writing group down in Peru. I was the editor of a publication down there, so I was always looking to find new writers and help cultivate them. That was pretty fun, actually. Instead of writing, you just encouraged people to write and it was rewarding to see them respond to the attention. Still, I'm a bit of a "writing addict," I could never take a job that didn't require me to write at all.

TERRY: Some of your descriptions are surprisingly literal.

WALTER: I actually try to sidestep most of the descriptions of swordplay, but in a way that makes it look like I know what I'm talking about. I suppose I could do the research and be able to use a bunch of terms that people in fencing know, but the problem with that is that the regular, everyday people that read the book wouldn't know those terms. Instead, I try to focus on the physical aspect of things and for that I draw on my experiences running marathons and competing in cross-country ski races. I don't know how many authors have been athletes because it's striking how infrequently they discuss the effects of exhaustion, etc. I like to bring in a little bit more realism simply from what I know about how the human body reacts under extreme exertion. My next book is about the American Birkebeiner.*

TERRY: *The Bone Sword* is quite graphic; your descriptions had me squirming. At what age will you let your daughter read this?

WALTER: In terms of my daughter reading it, that's a difficult question and I'm not sure how accurate an answer I can give you. As of right now, I'm pretty hardwired to give people an honest answer about anything they ask me, no matter how difficult the subject is. I kind of cringe when people "sugar coat" things because I think it's better to just tell people the truth and prepare them for the world. Children are going to be exposed to difficult things, and they're a lot more clever than most people give them credit for. If they figure out that they never get a straight answer from daddy, then they'll stop asking daddy. That scares me more than any potentially uncomfortable question she might ask.

However, as I write this, my daughter is 4 months old, and if having children has taught me anything, it's that your perspectives tend to change dramatically on things. When she's ten and reading, perhaps my ideas will be different. Then again, if she's ten and reading that's something to celebrate too, isn't it?

TERRY: Absolutely! What do you want your daughter to remember most about your life/writing?

WALTER: Well, there's a lot of violence in "The Bone Sword," but it's essentially just an action story. I think thematically there are some pretty important ideas, such as the quest for self worth, and I'll definitely want her to be exposed to ideas like that. Actually, when I think of my daughter, "what I want" rarely comes into the equation :). I think a person can become overwhelmed if they try to control too many things. Right now, I just make sure that my daughter falls to sleep on my chest every day (since she won't be able to do that forever). I'll want her to remember that her daddy loved her more than anything and did everything he could to protect her, prepare her, and ensure her happiness. What she thinks about my writing is entirely her opinion; I'll be curious to hear it.

TERRY: Were you bullied as a child? I read when asked to pick a character of your choosing, you chose Darth Vader.

WALTER: Really? Picking Darth Vader means I was bullied :) Someday I'll have to do a Rorschach interview! No, I had a pretty tame childhood. I still haven't been in a "real" fight (little skirmishes are unavoidable as a child I suppose). Then again, one man's "skirmish" is another man's "fight", so there you go. I have been bullied as an adult.

When I was working in Peru I found that places often wanted to give you attitude instead of paying you. There have been a couple situations in my life when I have seen people engage in unfair treatment (either against me or somebody who was important to me) and I have felt I had to do something about it. Usually the offending parties thought they were in some sort of higher social position, so they weren't bound by the same rules that everyone else is. These people need to be taught that they ARE bound by the same rules as everyone else. Sometimes I have been able to teach that lesson, and sometimes I have failed.

Put it this way, when your bank charges you an unreasonable \$1 fee for a "currency exchange" or something...you're being bullied. When some company denies you the cash rebate you were promised at the store...you're being bullied. People are going to treat you unfairly on a daily basis. You're constantly being tested, and it's important not to submit to it...ever!

TERRY: In earthwalkr.wordpress.com, you said, "I think that stories are model for behavior." What is the behavior "repeated by people" you hope to see, based on *The Bone Sword*?

WALTER: Independent thought and the willingness to take action when a situation is clearly corrupt or otherwise wrong.

TERRY: Quoting from the same website: "There are times in your life when you are vulnerable and you need some guidance, and unfortunately, there are many unscrupulous people in the world who will instantly try to take advantage of you in those moments." Is this a glimpse of personal wisdom?

WALTER: If you take it that way I suppose :) I'm always amazed by how people refuse to accept what their senses tell them. You see people who are constantly kicked when they're down, and yet they continue to hang out with the people who do all the kicking. The thing is, people who are down don't stay down forever. If you help a person when they're down, you've just gained an ally for life. This is the same basic principle as the stock market (buy low, sell high), yet you still see people chasing the "high" and failing to do the work to transform the "low."

TERRY: "The counter-intuitive part of this is that when you are writing well, you are, in fact, revealing yourself." (Hubpages.com) In *The Bone Sword*, what is revealed about yourself, and yourself as a writer?

WALTER: Well, fantasy is great because you are certainly able to purge yourself of frustration. It's very cathartic to construct representations of characters you hate, and then cut their heads off! As a writer, I wanted to remove myself a little bit in this project. All artists have a bit of a tendency to get too self indulgent (a little too flowery in their prose for example), and sometimes it's best just to strip things down and create something raw and forceful. Actually, it's pretty tough to admit what's been revealed about me in "The Bone Sword." I have an impression of the type of person I am, but that impression is probably wrong (or at least biased for better or for worse). The impression you get from reading the book is probably more accurate than anything I'd say.

TERRY: My last question is about the cover, as I'm a cover-art snob. How important is the cover?

WALTER: The cover is very important obviously. It's the first thing people see, and honestly you can drive a sale just on cover alone.

Walter Rhein is working on the sequel to *The Bone Sword* (and cover) in this series, to be published in 2012 as well as *American Birkebeiner*, available October 2011. Good luck with your race, Walter!

*American Birkebeiner: The "Birkie" is an 88-kilometer trail that started as a ski race and now encompasses year-round events in the Hayward-Cable, Wisconsin area. Walter is a professional skier and snow enthusiast.

How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe

Charles Yu

Pantheon Books, 2010

ISBN: 978-0-307-37920-7

239 pages

Review by Danielle Parker

I rarely get out and read other reviews of a book before I write my own, wanting to have a pure opinion (for what it's worth). But once in a while, nagged by something I can't always vocalize, I read other reviewers just to see if they experienced what I did (good or bad) from the story.

One of the signs of the vast divide between literary darling and popular appeal (or, vice versa) is wildly divergent ratings by reviewers and general readers.

And yeah, that's exactly what we've got with Yu's "How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe". On Amazon, the ratings tend to run either to a gushing five stars or a grim one, averaging out to a midpoint few readers actually gave it. You either loved this story, or you found it as boring as the back of a cereal box.

In truth, I could understand both sets of readers.

To give a short synopsis, we've got a time travel mechanic who's the classic geek, flabby nerd, flinching from life, hiding out in his out-of-sync time travel machine. He can't even manage to interact with his machine's A. I. or his weird not-really-alive dog. He doesn't call Mom, has lost his father somewhere in or out of time, and eats a lot of ramen noodles. He's too dysfunctional to endure living in real time anymore. He tries to avoid all interactions with, well, anything. Everyone petrifies him.

So this is the story of how Yu (the protagonist is autobiographical, which means, I suppose, this whole book is its own metaphor) meets his future self, shoots himself in a fright, hunts for his daddy, and manages to start living life in the present tense. The work could be subtitled, "The Geek Grows Up", or "The Nerd Learns to Stop Panicking", or something like that. I think that describes the feel-good arc of this story.

And that, I think, also explains the widely divergent love-hate reaction to this story. It's a feel-good son-grows-up tale, full of reminiscences and family history, like Amy Tan for the future. That accounts for the rave ratings.

The one stars for this book are because it's also terminally boring. The whole book is cloaked in pseudo-scientific time travel mumbo-jumbo. Most readers will glaze over and turn the page as fast as they can (and that includes me). The narrative style is lengthy, rambling, and just what you'd expect in the stream of consciousness of one boring, terrified, no-social-skills and no-guts geek. If you like that headset, dig in.

Maybe what a reader should do is skip to the end. Get to the feel good fast, and close the page on Happy Ever After, and sigh. Son comes to terms with past, determines to call on Mom more often, decides to look for Good Woman and have enough guts to ask her out this time. Ah! I'm tearing up already.

Surrogates

Touchstone Pictures, 2009

Bruce Willis, James Cromwell

Review by Bret Funk

Surrogates takes place in the semi-near future, in a society where people can control life-like robots (aka Surrogates) with their thoughts. The advantages are many: Surrogates can look however one wants, limited only by imagination and finances; one need not fear death or injury since the safeguards built into the Surrogates send a person back to his body if there is any trauma; germs are never spread so disease has become virtually eradicated; violent crime has virtually disappeared. The disadvantages are carefully hidden (at least from those in the movie) but should be painfully obvious to viewers even without the movie driving home all the dysfunction, failing relationships, and identity issues that no one seems to notice.

The plot follows FBI agent Tom Greer (Willis) as he investigates the destruction of a Surrogate that also resulted (despite the safeguards) in the death of its operator, an eventuality everyone thought impossible and one that threatens the entire Surrogate market. The investigation takes Greer to Cantor (Cromwell), inventor of the Surrogate technology, to a Surrogate-free reservation where revolution is brewing, and even out into the real world. As expected, something of a conspiracy appears to be afoot, no one can be trusted, and since some people have found a way to operate any Surrogate, one can't even be sure if the person in front of you is who he says he is.

As usual, Surrogates offers up some interesting ideas and an interesting take on the future. Also as usual, its failures in execution detract from the movie as a whole. Not quite a good mystery, not quite a good action blockbuster, Surrogate flounders to find its proper genre. More bothersome is the convenience with which script writers ignore the very problems they design for their universe. Operators can only control their own Surrogate... except when it's essential that the protagonist control another one. Being locked in their houses living vicariously through Surrogates has created a condition whereby people get anxious when in the real world. Very much a problem... for at least an entire city block. The problems created by the Surrogate society were intriguing; I would have preferred that they be dealt with rather than avoided.

Though I watched this movie in realtime (On my movie rating scale of realtime, 10-seconds, 1-minute, or 3-minutes, based on what time increments I tend to skip using my DVR to make the movie watchable) I feel that was mostly out of courtesy for Bruce Willis. In the end, I would rate this movie as 10-seconds at a time movie. With a little polishing, and a little more thought, it could have been a keeper.

The Bone Sword

Walter Rhein

Rhemalda Publishing (November 1, 2010)

ISBN-13: 978-0982743720

ASIN: B004AE34RI (Kindle)

Review by Terry Crotinger/montanasings

Hold on to your seat, Walter Rhein's *The Bone Sword* starts fast and will have you panting and wanting more up to the very last sentence! Packed with action, intrigue and refreshing authentic relationships, this book will be one you can't put down. Mr. Rhein's writing style keeps the reader engaged with every paragraph.

The story begins with Malik, a young man running from pursuit and from his past, trying to survive in a culture that is brutal to the lowborn. Commoner he seems, but in a fight no one can best him. He trained with the best and has a special talisman to prove it: a sword with a bone handle—a symbol of accomplishment, respect and terror.

By chance, Malik rescues Noah and his sister, Jasmine, from a horrible death, insuring that he, too, will be slated for the same, should he be captured. The grateful siblings have a secret that has caused them to be hunted by the powerful and dreaded Father Ivory. Jasmine has a gift that threatens the Religious establishment, and Father Ivory has vowed to hunt her and burn her to keep her from using this secret gift. Malik makes a fateful decision: he is not only going to protect Noah and Jasmine, but begin an uprising that will result in gruesome destruction effecting innocent peasants and highborn, alike.

Throughout the story, the sword with the bone handle is as essential as Malik, and will result by bringing a terrible justice of its own. But that is only the beginning of the sword's story... Mr. Rhein has woven a bold tale that is a must-read for any who love weaponry, honor and compelling action.

The Other Side

By David Emmitt

I'm walking down this long dark tunnel. I think I've been here before. There's an unseen hand resting on my shoulder; it's guiding me towards the light. What happened? I'm a beautiful woman of twenty-five; a successful lawyer, in great health, and have lovely skin. I exercise daily. But, now, in this dreary darkness, my skin looks pale and dry.

"Why? What have I done wrong this time?" My clenched fist is raised in anger. I stop moving towards the light. The perceived hand allows me to turn around, and when I do, I remember seeing the young boy that ran out into the street after his ball. I recall swerving to avoid hitting the young boy.

That was on Monday. What day is it today? There is no time here, no night and no day, just this long, dark tunnel, and the unceasing moving towards that spot of light.

I pinch myself, but I feel nothing, only the penetrating cold that hovers around me.

I recall that I lost control of the car. I remember the screeching tires and the loud crash as my car plows into the concrete pole that holds the high tension cables. The steering wheel bends forward, and the steering column pushes against my chest. Glass particles spray my face. The pole collapses, the cables break, and one lands on my car.

I remember thinking, why didn't I have that leaking hose to the fuel filter repaired? There was only a hint of that gassy smell when I drove. The mechanic said he could fix it in a couple of minutes. It would only be a couple of bucks. No-o-o, I was too busy, and wanted to wait to see if the hose would go on sale, what a jerk. If I had only repaired the leaky hose, the car wouldn't have caught fire and exploded.

I turn back towards the light; the unseen hand again pushes me forward. Moving along the tunnel, I see men, women and even children also walking towards the light. They have smirks on their faces, are they glad they are here?

"It is no use," I yell at them to get their attention. "First you live to die and then you die to live. It just keeps going on. It doesn't end. There is nothing to smile about, you fools!" They don't listen. No one ever does. They just keep walking towards the light at the end of the tunnel, oblivious to anything else.

As I come near the light, I see those cardboard faces wearing their plastic smiles, images of people I think I knew before. They look like three-dimensional statues, moving only their arms, waving lifelessly at me. I see a face, but I don't recognize her. Maybe, they have to keep replenishing those pseudo-greeters.

I cry out, "No, not again." My voice echoes down the long dark hall. "I do not want to do this again!" No one hears me, they just keep waving. THERE IS NO END! I am so frustrated. Wait a minute; I will feel the warmth of the light touching my body. Is this the time that I can experience the presence of the Holy one? That's my one big dream, my goal. Will I have it fulfilled, now?

The light is nearer; hope builds in me. Is this the beginning of eternal life?

The hand leaves my shoulder, and all I see is the light falling away, getting smaller and smaller. I'm moving away from the light, going backwards. There is painful slap on my bottom, whack!

"Ouch," I yell. "That hurts, do it again and I'll bring you up on charges." But the only sound that comes out of my mouth is a cry.

A strange voice speaks, I don't recognize the person. But, I recognize the setting—a hospital delivery room. There are green scrubs milling about, pungent scents I do not recognize, the clattering of metal dropping into the silvery bowls, and a voice says, "Mrs. Parker, I would like to introduce you to your beautiful son." The obstetrician holds me up, a new born child, and places me in my mother's arms.

My mother beams and smiles down at me.

"So you are my mother, hello, Mom." I say, but it comes out only as the cry of an infant looking for nourishment.

Dust

By Kaitlin Bevis

"Well, here we are," said a teenage girl dressed in a bright pink space suit.

"Wonderful," her friend, dressed in lime green, said dryly.

"Oh come on Carrie! We're on *Mars*! How often does that happen?" At her friend's eye roll she continued, "Show some excitement. You know they think there used to be life here? There's evidence of running water, and the soils got tons of iron."

"Oh come on Elisa, it's a field trip. We're probably going to have to write a paper about it when we get back." Carrie yawned and stretched, already feeling the boredom of homework creeping through her body. "Anyhow, they have too much iron to support life."

Elisa shrugged and looked at the group of school children fading into the Martian landscape, "We're getting pretty far behind," she said nervously, "let's go catch up now."

"Just a minute," Carrie said, bending down with an open glass vial, "I want a souvenir."

"We're not supposed to take anything back with us," Elisa cautioned.

Carrie stuck a cap in the vial, and held it between her thumb and forefinger, shaking the dirt inside back and forth. "It's dirt." Carrie said, "No big deal, I'm sure NASA brings stuff back all the time. I'll give you half when we get back..."

Elisa eyed the vial nervously. "It would be cool..." She wistfully.

"Yeah it would!" Carrie said, "Let's go catch up with the group. You don't want to get left behind, do you?"

"Carrie! Wait!" Elisa called. She sighed and gave in, racing her friend to catch up with the class. Carrie won, as usual.

After the field trip Carrie and Elisa filed onto the spaceship with their classmates and trudged back to the school building.

"I'm so tired!" Elisa said, stretching once they reached the stone steps outside the building. "Who knew those suits were so heavy."

"We were in them for a while," Carrie said, furtively tucking her vial into her book bag.

Their classmates streamed around them, chattering excitedly about the field trip and their plans after school.

"Carrie! Elisa!" A blonde called, as she was swept away by the crowd. "Pizza after school right?"

"You got it, Chrys!" Elisa shouted back. She met Carrie's glare with an innocent smile. "What? She's nice."

"Watch it! Coming through!" came a male voice as a group of boys tore through the crowd.

"Hey! Watch it!" Carrie shouted angrily as one of them pushed past her. She stumbled off the steps and landed on the packed dirt beside them with a loud thud. Her book bag flew from her hand and landed a few feet away from her upside down, books and papers littering the ground around it.

"Sorry!" he shouted, still running.

"Are you ok?" Elisa asked. She helped Carrie up, shooting a glare at the students who shoved their way around the girls.

"I'm fine, but that jerk broke my vial!" Carrie grumbled as she shoved her books back into her book bag.

"Here, take mine." Elisa said, scooping up the remainder of the red dirt into a fresh container. She gathered the rest of the scattered papers and pressed them into Carrie's hand, "Come on, we're going to miss the bus."

The next morning Carrie approached the school with a worried feeling gnawing at her gut. Reporters, policemen, and men in lab coats formed a ring around the school stairs, all talking loudly.

"Elisa!" She called, catching a glimpse of blonde hair through the crowd. She pushed her way through the crowd until she reached her friend. "What's going on?"

"We just destroyed out planet." Elisa whispered, her face as white as a sheet.

"Huh?"

"Remember how I told you they think there was life on Mars?" When Carrie nodded she continued, "Well, now they're saying that there was, but this really bad bacteria ate it all. It works really fast; it penetrates the core before the surface even shows any signs—"

"Signs? What signs? Elisa, you're not making any sense. What are you talking about?" Carrie demanded.

"Just look!" Elisa said yanking Carrie's head down. Carrie blinked, then gasped. The soil beneath them was turning red. Carrie followed the red dirt to the stairs and saw a broken vile of glass in the center of the circle, which was slowly expanding.

"Everyone back up!" The police officer called.

She stumbled backward with the rest of the crowd, clutching Elisa's hand as she took in the scene. The plants were gone. The middle section of the stairs were gone. There was nothing in the red circle but dust. Something tickled the bottom of her feet and she looked down horrified to realize that the red dust was clinging to her sneakers. She screamed and kicked them off. They flew through the air and disintegrated into red dust, the wind throwing it into the crowd.

"Everyone stay back!" The policeman yelled again as the crowd began to scream and panic.

Elisa grabbed Carrie's hand, and the girls ran towards their houses. They stopped when they were a block away, breathing hard.

"NASA will fix it." Carrie said, gasping for breath.

Elisa watched the ground, waiting for it to turn red. "It's too late."

"So this is earth?" A little girl gasped.

"Yes children, this is earth." The teacher gave her class a beaming smile, "Isn't it beautiful?"

"What are all the dark spots?" Another student asked, looking up at the teacher.

"Our scientist believe that this planet used to have water. Who knows, it may have even had some form of life."

The children gasped, chattering amongst themselves excitedly.

"But teacher, why is it red?"

"That's all the iron in the soil." The teacher explained patiently, "Too much iron turns the soil red."

"I'm going to take some home." A little girl whispered to her friend.

"Ooh, me to!" Another little girl said. "Put it in this." She handed her friend a vial.

T-Press Update

Forge of Faith now has a semi-firm release date for May 1, 2011 for trade paperback publication. We may have books in stock before then for pre-orders, but there is also a chance final publication will still be delayed by unforeseen factors.

However, the pre-release ebook discussed in the previous *Illuminata* (and delayed by a combination of rewrites, editorial changes, holidays, and life) should be available for ordering from Tyrannosaurus Press within a week. We plan to couple this release with a contest of sorts to win a free copy of the *Forge of Faith* when it is released. Parties reading the ebook who wish to help us search out those final few flaws that made it past our small army of content and proof-readers are encouraged to do so. The first person to find and bring to our attention ten (10) typographical or grammatical errors, five (5) minor continuity errors, or one (1) serious continuity error will be sent an autographed copy of *Forge of Faith* when it's released.

Details about the rules of this "contest" will be available on the Tyrannosaurus Press website and in the pre-release ebook. Only the first person to bring an error to our attention will be awarded credit, and all errors will be logged on our website. Regardless of whether or not you want to take part in the contest, if you are tired of waiting for *Forge of Faith*, please [contact us](#) for ordering information.