

THE ILLUMINATA

QUARTERLY E-ZINE OF SPECULATIVE FICTION

*Keeping SF From Extinction
Since 2001*

*Volume 9 • Issue 2
April 2011*



Tyrannosaurus Press
Zachary, LA
www.TyrannosaurusPress.com

Good Skiffy!

By Terry Crotinger/montanasing

Skiffy? (“SciFi” phonetically.) Many versions of Skiffy abound, but the Science Fiction and Fantasy Club (University of Chicago, alas now disbanded) has royal dibs to the name, though Spider Robinson and a few other science fiction writers refer to this bastardized version of Sci Fi. Like SFLIS (Science Fiction League of Iowa Students) and S.W.A.M.P. (Sflis Wing of Anime and Manga People), Skiffy fits right in. While one just can’t go around declaring, “Holy Skiffy, Batman!”, a well-timed, “Skiffy,” turns heads.

Why Good Skiffy? Because 2011 is starting out with many Skiffy opportunities for Fandom to enjoy. Coming from the *SciFi Desert* here in Arizona, all Skiffy opportunities are welcome and appreciated.

There will always be the annual Cons (conventions) available to Fandoms. But so far this year, Fandom has a *choice* of Skiffy to do and see! Thanks to shows like *Big Bang Theory* and *The Event*, television is Fan-friendly. (Though, as Sheldon might lament, “The odds that a good Skiffy show doesn’t end with someone sleeping with your ‘so-called’ friends are minor!”) Lucky Cable subscribers have always had an advantage over basic network channels. So, Thank You, SyFy Channel and Cartoon Network (and the unofficial source of much re-watching: YouTube and Hulu).

The Science Fiction television enthusiasts gets their Skiffy fix in 2011 with: *Fringe*, *Primeval*, “V”, *Clone Wars*, *The Cape*, *Robot Chicken* (time-honored creepy fav, thank you, equally creepy and wonderfully eccentric, Seth Green), *Being Human*, honorable mention to *Castle* for its skiffy references, *Chuck* (marginally skiffy, but fun gadgets), *Star Gate Universe*, *Game of Thrones*, *Green Lantern* (animated, Fall 2011), *Eureka*, *Terra Nova*, *Merlin*, *Doctor Who* (?), *Smallville* and *True Blood*. It’s not an exhaustive list, nor in any particular order; other familiar shows return, and “vintage” shows try again.

Movie offerings include: *Paul*, *I Am Number Four*, *The Green Hornet*, *X-Men: First Class*, another *Twilight* (yawn) *Saga*, *Contagion*, *Sucker Punch*, *Hanna* (?), *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*, *Thor*, *Transformers 3*, *Battle: Los Angeles*, *Captain America*, and something called, *Cowboys and Aliens* (as per the SyFy Channel website).

However... while I love good skiffy, I abhor do-overs. Shows like *The Green Lantern*, *Thundercats* and *Captain America* (oops, strike that. I’m thinking, *Shazam!*) are wonderful throwbacks from the 70s. Must we resurrect them? Are there so few original ideas in our little part of the universe that viewers have to be subjected to the same shows again? I’d rather watch re-runs of these original television shows than suffer through an updated version. For example, the television show, *Lost in Space*, was iconic. As a movie, so-so. Dr. Smith can only be Dr. Smith if played by Jonathan Harris (R.I.P). It isn’t just the actor (though, in this case, it absolutely IS the actor), but the quality of the grainy, human-rendered production in the 70s, the culture, (yes, the fashions), the “wholesomeness” of television. We might see a short skirt in a *Star Trek* episode, but our parents didn’t have to be too concerned that little Johnny was going to be overstimulated, like he is probably today.

Other skiffy things to do are the “Cons”. Usually a major city near you has a Sci Fi/Skiffy convention. WorldCon is in Nevada (August ...and darn but I’m going to be in Oregon Just-About-That-Time... wonder if I can skip a few states over in my itinerary?) Something I learned in Iowa—the local University, College, Community College, high school campus might have a Skiffy club. Local bookstores, libraries, and game shops might know of other like-minded Skiffy People who like the same things you do.

And, there’s always printed material! Doing a “Google” for books for this year brought dizzying results, too numerous to mention. (Thank You, eReaders for the incredible selection you have brought to my attention.) An under-appreciated source of Skiffy are established magazines like *Analog*, *Magazine of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, and even newsletters like this one, *Illuminata*. Small and large publishers alike offer publications to feed the Skiffy fix—from free to very pricey.

And finally, if none of the above appeals to a Skiffy Person, there are always online chat rooms (yes, they do still exist, Snerdly), Blogs and social networking sites that contain much Skiffy-ness. Or, on a rainy day (snowy, in Wisconsin), play “Search Engine Roulette” with the word, Skiffy. There’s bound to be some interesting Skiffy in cyber-land. Good hunting; good Skiffy!

King Rat
China Mieville
Tor, 1998
ISBN: 0-312-89072-9

318 pages

Review by Danielle Parker

There aren't too many books featuring messy deaths, killer pipers from Hell, and sewer rats as stars of the show that make me burst out laughing as I read the last pages. China Mieville's book did. Now, I'm not sure the author intended to induce hilarity in his reader. On the contrary, the nostalgic Communist Pie in the Sky ending of 'King Rat' was no doubt supposed to make the reader ponder the righteous ways of Lenin. Sorry, Mieville. The image of the sewer rats celebrating their new republic just made me howl.

Mieville apparently belongs to that left-leaning strain of self-conscious British intellectualism made more notorious by his predecessors, the Cambridge Five. How charmingly retro it feels now Philby and his lot have met their destiny. And at least, unlike some of his peers in the British speculative fiction market, Mieville does not indulge in anti-American sneers and anti-religious jibes. Not in this book, anyway.

Mieville's urban fable is, in fact, unexpectedly sweet. Saul is an inarticulate and sulky son, unable to communicate with his increasingly desperate loving (and leftist) daddy. Coming home late from a camping trip, Saul doesn't want to deal with the irritating affection of Dad late at night. Saul sneaks in to guilty slumber without greeting Dad.

But in the morning, he's awakened by the police pounding on the door. Dad apparently went out the window and smashed himself, and it looks like it was an involuntary flight. Saul's bundled up and taken to the police station. His penchant for arguments and door slams comes back to haunt him. The cops finger him as the likely suspect.

But unexpected help comes to grief-stricken Saul, languishing forgotten in his cell. A peculiar shadowy person, arrogant and defensive in turn, offers to spring him from the clink. The person, who boastfully names himself 'King Rat', smells like a sewer rat indeed. Saul can't quite see his eyes. Still, the rat-man is as good as his word. He spirits Saul right out from under the heavy hand of the law.

But King Rat (who claims to be Saul's uncle) has some shocking news for Saul. Saul, too, is a rat-man. Not only that, the Evil Piper from Hell (and Hamelin) is out to get Saul. Everything and everyone dances to the Piper's tune, except for hybrid half-human, half-rat Saul. Saul's the only hope King Rat has of re-gaining the kingdom he lost when he turned tail and ran from the Piper of Hamelin. At last, he'll get those sewer rats to respect their king again.

In the course of training to become a new rat Prince, Saul learns a lot of unpleasant truths about himself, his father's death, and his self-proclaimed uncle. When the Piper abuses and uses Saul's musically inclined friends in a plot to control the world, Saul, the passive and surly son, at last seizes life with the vigor his father despaired of ever seeing in him. It's Saul's decision to honor his father that at last inspires Saul to be a hero.

Mieville's book is a modern urban fable which shines through well-drawn characters and a witty Dickens-dark atmosphere. Saul's someone the reader can sympathize with in spite of his ratty nature.

If the ending of the book is comical, well, the Down with the Monarchy, Up with the Proletariat (when the excited, newly liberated proletariat are really sewer rats) actually suits Saul's naïve spirit. When Saul tenderly clutches his little red book of Lenin to his chest, he's honoring his activist father. Ah, how sweet. Long live gentle Saul, no matter how furry, smelly, or left-leaning he grows. Enjoy!

P. S. One caveat: if frequent four-letter words bother you, don't read this one. If the characters weren't bleeping it out, the dialogue might be cut in half. Modern times: the good-hearted hero has a mouth on him.

Prince Kristian's Honor

Tod Langley

Wheatmark; 1st. edition (August 15, 2009)

ISBN-13: 978-1604943047

Review by Terry Crotinger/montanasing

The Erinia Saga begin with *Prince Kristian's Honor*, a tale encompassing Man vs. Man themes. Character traits range from silly to insane. At first, the main character, Kristian, seems a caricature of something the people from Disney would think up. Prince Kristian has a good heart, but few practical skills, a knack for bluntness, and an inability to communicate what he really means. He makes mistakes and awkward blunders as only a teenager would make. This first impression will be seen as incorrect. Kristian's inexperience, only one of his flaws, quickly endears himself to the reader as he attempts to please his father, the King of Erand, by wedding Allisia, royal daughter of King Justan the Seventh, of Duellr.

A company of the finest Erandian soldiers, the Cavaliers, escort Prince Kristian to his wedding. Mikhal Jurander is one such soldier, a loyal man of lowly birth, who through pain and dedication rose through the ranks of Erandian soldiers to become an officer in the elite Cavaliers. However, neither Mikhal or the Cavaliers are unable to stop the abduction of Princess Allisia by a beautifully horrible minion of Ferral, newly made King of Belarn.

Ferral's goal is to gain power by serving the god of Belarn, which destroys the will of Man and the foundations of the known world. He murdered his father to become King, empowering him with ghastly dark arts to control others—even the dead. Allisia's death, he is told, will give him even more power, further bending Mankind to his will.

Finally, there is the character of Cairn. His goal is to avenge the death of his own betrothed by the hands of corrupt Belarn guards. Though the atrocity was done many years before, Cairn carries the physical scars from when their village was slaughtered, but his internal madness spurs his pursuit of the killers,

Mr. Langley utilizes all the senses in his writing. His descriptions are graphic, as only pulp fiction can arouse. This book was hard to put down, though the first chapter indoctrinates the gentle reader of further brutality to come. The author occasionally uses Mikhal's character to subtly speak the overall thoughts of the group, almost like a Greek Chorus. Mikhal will have an important role to play alongside his Prince as this story unfolds in the next book of *The Erinia Saga*, *Ferral's Deathmarch Army*.

One Good Knight: A Tale of the Five Hundred Kingdoms

Mercedes Lackey

Luna Books, 2010

Mass Market Paperback, \$7.99

Review by Rachel Oliver

I am a Mercedes Lackey fan from way back, but it has been a while and I had not yet had a chance to dip into the Five Hundred Kingdoms series (I read mostly the Valdemar series), when I saw this book at the library and decided to check it out.

One of the reasons I quit reading Mercedes Lackey a few years back is that, for me, her stories began to have a bit of a predictability to them. I was bored. And I was beginning to see mistakes, the kind of mistakes that are made when there's a rush to print something without double-checking with proofreaders and copy editors at your disposal. While she still was a little predictable in this book in her new series, and there were at least three errors I caught that I thought should have been caught during the galley reviews, it was still an enjoyable story.

Like her Valdemar series, the Five Hundred Kingdoms series is firmly set in the Fantasy zone, but unlike Valdemar, the Five Hundred Kingdoms is made up of kingdoms living out the storylines from what we call fairy tales and what the people in those kingdoms call the Tradition. The Tradition is a force that, when it senses someone's life is similar to a common theme or tale, will try to make that person live out that theme, whether or not they want to. Godmothers have been set up around the kingdoms to help guide people to work around the Tradition so they can live life according to their own choices, and for the Good.

In *One Good Knight*, a young woman, Andromeda, has been pushed by the Tradition to be fed to a dragon. She's intelligent and a bit of a bookworm, so she's figured out how to save herself despite the efforts of Sir George, the Champion who has come to her rescue. But this is just the beginning the story that not only includes Dragons, Princesses and Champions, but also Unicorns, Magicians, Godmothers, Dwarves and farm-implement-wielding Peasants! And while it is a Fantasy in the High Fantasy sense of having all these elements, it also is more contemporary in its approach to the story line and character development.

It's a lot of fun and a good read, altogether, even with some of the mistakes. I even laughed out loud in some parts.

pAUL
Greg Mottola
Big Talk Productions
2011

Review by TerryCrotinger/montanasings

pAUL is hysterically inappropriate—NOT for children. The Trailer seen on television only hints at how raunchy this film is as the main character, pAUL, a typical large headed green space alien, brings a bird to life, then promptly devours it. To make sure I understood this film, I viewed it twice—popcorn and all. It was difficult, but I managed.

As foul mouthed as a movie can be (with the proper ratings warning), this was a nerd's dream. (If any take offense at the term, "nerd", my profound apologies.) It has good Skiffy—lots of Easter Eggs, in-jokes, nerd-i-ness. This film, by Greg Mottola, has everything: sex, gay/lesbian-bashing, foul language, drugs, cop-bashing, religion-bashing, disabled person-bashing, red-neck-bashing, theft, crime, foreign accents and an RV. All the things you might see at a typical Con (Science Fiction convention). Oops, forgot uppity writers, Area-51 (and Must-See sights in between), Men in Black and cuddly Ewoks, "They're 'furry 'nice!"

While I am no acting critic, the casting of these characters was outstanding. pAUL's voice (no spoilers) has Adam West overtones, especially when we first meet the pragmatic, pAUL. With two real English actors, two Saturday Night Live cast members, a veteran alien-killer, a cute dog, two real red-necks, one over-achieving Hyper-Religious Bible and Gun-toting father, cameos, a Glee renegade and great actors galore. But, for the life of me, I have no Skiffy reference of "Keith Nash"...

pAUL is trying, like our endearing, E.T., to get home. He meets a comic book writer and his illustrator friend who help him escape from The Big Man (aptly named). Everything from start to finish is pure nerdy joy. But it is NOT for children.

Did I mention that pAUL was NOT for children? I'm sure when it comes out on DVD, there will be the "original" version and a poorly dubbed version (think bad Japanese films dubbed for English) that will air on television. I will be watching them all. The language wasn't as funny the second time around, but the viewer is quickly desensitized to it, or leaves. I'm looking forward to the spoof when it airs with Science Fiction Theatre—the one with the heckling audience, a mad scientist, an alien, a nerdy guy...

IMHO: I WISH the stupid (yes, I said it) parents who ignored the ratings for this film had left their children at home. I WISH the stupid parents had REMOVED their young children after the first five minutes of the opening. I'm sure there are now idiot children cussing and getting in trouble at school because their stupid parents allowed them to watch this. pAUL would have said the same thing, had he been in the theatre.

(If any take offense at the term, "nerd", you won't like this movie.)

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.

Shift

Rachel Vincent

Mira Books, 2010

Mass Market Paperback, \$7.99

Review by Rachel Oliver

Faythe Sanders has the habit of jumping from hot water into the fry pan, and then into the fire, without much of a breath in between. Though she's been saved from being sentenced herself, her father has been impeached as leader of the Pride Council, her brother's been murdered, and her love life is more than just a little complicated as she feels pulled between Mark and Jace. That's not giving any spoilers away as that's just the opening of the book. Add to that the attempted kidnapping of the tabbies staying at the ranch by Thunderbirds and the declaration of war on the Texas Pride by not just the other prides, but also the Thunderbirds (previously thought of as purely mythological beings).

The story itself, like the other books in this series, actually takes place in just a matter of days as Rachel Vincent leads her readers on an action packed roller coaster that shows Faythe race against the clock to help save herself and her Pride from trouble, one more time.

I have to admit that when I read the first book in this series, *Stray*, I wasn't sure I wanted to follow Faythe on her journey. There were times when her choices and her viewpoint really annoyed me. But she's grown up in each successive book, and facing possible execution in *Prey* and now having to be responsible for others in *Shift* has created a sea change in her personality. Faythe has grown up. We see her have a better appreciation for her mother and father — their actions and choices — as well as a better appreciation for why Jace and Mark are the men they are. We watch as her brain clicks over and realizes now that she has to make similar decisions, why they have made the decisions they made.

While these are books that can be read on their own, I do recommend reading them as a series so you can see the changes in Faythe. I look forward to reading the series finale, *Alpha*, which came out in October 2010. For classification reasons, they have been labeled "paranormal romance" because they do have some pretty hot sex scenes in them.

Cheat the Grave: The Fifth Sign of the Zodiac

Vicki Pettersson

EOS, HarperCollins Publishers, 2010

Mass Market Paperback, \$7.99

Review by Rachel Olivier

Joanna/Olivia Archer is now officially a human. That might not seem like a huge thing, but in the last year or so she's gone from a regular rebellious twenty-something woman photographing the gritty underside of Vegas to get on her father's nerves to Comic Super Hero for the Good Guys (i.e. the Zodiac of the Light), and now back to regular human woman, a little better and worse for wear, depending on what you look at. She's still living her life out as her dead sister Olivia, but has no immortality to speak of. She knows what goes on behind the thin veil of reality, but now can do nothing about it.

Or can she?

Because she's neither Shadow nor Light, anymore, Joanna is in the unique position of being neutral, of being able to work with others who are considered neither Shadow nor Light, who are in fact, considered rogue. So, while much has been closed off to her, she's also found out how much more is opening up for her. In *Cheat the Grave*, we get to watch Joanna still play action heroine, but now as a regular human. She uses her brain because her brawn is not as dependable. We also get to watch her create a system of allies that is unheard of in the history of the Zodiac, or so it seems. In this fifth book of the Zodiac series, Joanna's life undergoes many twistings, turnings and turnbacks where we see some of Joanna's allies virtually appear out of nowhere to help save her life.

By the end of the novel I wanted to shout "Booyah!" and pump my fist into the air. I look forward to the next book in the series, where I seriously hope I get to see Joanna kick Warren's butt (he's the leader of the Troop of the Light). This series is classified as "urban fantasy" and has a little bit of romance/sexual content to fit in with the action and violence, but not as much as books classified as "paranormal romance".

The House on the Borderland

William Hope Hodgson

FrontList Books, 2003

ISBN: 1-84350-073-6

174 pages

Review by Danielle Parker

Some time back I made a resolution to read, or re-read, many of the great classics in science fiction, fantasy and horror. I had a vague and garbled memory of Hodgson's 1908 ground-breaker, *The House on the Borderland*, from so many years ago I can't say how far back it was, except I suspect I was twenty pounds lighter than I am now and still a red-head. Ouch.

Like Hodgson's *The Night Land*, lingering first impressions were powerful. Finding a recent re-issue of the book, I decided to re-acquaint myself.

H. P. Lovecraft later followed the same dead-pan this-is-real tone Hodgson first used. *The House on the Borderland* purports to be a diary found in an old Irish ruin by two vacationing fishermen. The ruin is situated in sinister abandoned orchards and gardens, perched on a lip of stone hanging over a deep chasm filled with a torrent. There is a scary lake, unexplained noises and jumpy vibes. The fishermen grab the book and make a run for it.

Let's say right here Hodgson does spooky atmosphere as well as any one, and the fact this book was first published in 1908 doesn't make a bit of difference. The scenes played out like an old black-and-white horror film, creepy music and all. And frankly, for atmosphere and creepiness, the early ones were the greats. Later film creations confused blood-and-guts for creepiness, and I can scarcely think of a modern horror film to match those early ones for atmosphere.

Everything Lovecraft did later with atmosphere and pseudo-realism started here. Forget the occasionally Victorian prose and mid-story interjection of a romantic sub-plot in Hodgson's story. No one conveys the existential loneliness of man in a vast, incomprehensible, creepy and evil universe better than Hodgson.

The diarist lives alone in the strange big house (which isn't yet ruined), with his sister and his loyal dog Pepper. One day in his workroom, he suffers a strange cosmic journey that takes him to a remote plain surrounded by mountains. There in the empty plain of his vision, he sees an identical copy of his house in Ireland (only green, and much larger). The house looks empty and is shut and barred.

Weird mythological giant god-monsters surround the house from the mountain ranges, their gazes fixed on the barricaded house. Our bodiless visitor, the diarist, finds himself drawn toward the house. He encounters a hideous pig-man, also giant in size, attempting to force entry into the house. The pig-man becomes aware of him, and the diarist barely floats away in time to return to his consciousness and own house once again.

But all's not well at home. The diarist finds a watery pit beneath a cellar trap-door. Rocks slip, the land changes inexplicably, and the little stream in a gloomy hollow outside becomes the great chasm and torrent of water later encountered by our two fishermen. Human-sized pig-men launch an assault on the house. They want in, in both dimensions. The diarist barricades himself inside, fights the pig-men off (though they don't seem able to die), and terrifies his sister, who doesn't seem to understand what's happening.

And things get weirder. Time slips, speeds up, and he watches his house decay around him, along with his own body. The inter-dimensional house takes him on more cosmic journeys. He sees the end of the solar system, dimensions that might be Heaven or Hell (did I mention Hodgson was the son of a clergyman?). In the end, he encounters the pig-men at "his" version of the house once more... and not so happily this time. The diary ends abruptly.

You won't make sense of this book. The prose is sometimes difficult. It's descriptive, not action-oriented. Doesn't matter. For weirdness, scope of imagination, and creepy atmosphere, particularly that sense of terrible isolation and loneliness so peculiar to Hodgson's works, this is the original, the seminal work. H. P. Lovecraft owes a huge debt to Hodgson, one he freely acknowledged. Download this book from Project Gutenberg and read it someday.

P. S. For another of my "classics" reviews, check out William Morris, *The Wood Beyond the World*.

Ferral's Deathmarch Army: Book Two of the Erinia Saga

Tod Langley

Wheatmark (December 15, 2010)

ISBN-13: 978-1604945218

Review by Terry Crotinger/montanasing

The Erinia Saga continues with *Ferral's Deathmarch Army* written by Tod Langley. Mr. Langley's writing style keeps the reader engaged with memorable and realistic characters, vivid detail, and it manages to pace action with thoughtful back-story. The reader can't help but hope that good triumphs, because Ferral's evil is very evil.

King Ferral has infused his power into his subjects—but only the dead ones. His subjects are terrified they will join the dead, who rise at sunset seeking life to devour, and then fall back into dead silence at sunrise. He torments Allisia, savoring her fear. But he is saving his final assault for their wedding night. This is a nasty man.

She is called Demon and is the Servant of the Dark One. It is her Master that Ferral serves. Demon knows that she was once human, but it was so far in the past... Her unexpected kindness to Allisia will allow a brief respite from Ferral and instill hope.

Mikhal dreams of the Demon. Cairn continues to search for all who slaughtered his village and his beloved. Kristian's destiny as Erand's King can only succeed with support from neighboring tribes, and *they* are sworn enemies. Will anyone survive Ferral's Deathmarch Army?

Tod Langley's use of allegory is more pronounced in Book 2 of *The Erinia Saga*. While suspected in *Prince Kristian's Honor*, underlying messages for the reader abound with *Ferral's Deathmarch Army*. Langley's style creates levels of meaning for the reader as the characters fight unwinnable battles and watch friend and foe turn into foe. The ending does not resolve itself in a tidy package, nor do Kristian's goals simply fall into place. This is a gruesome, dark tale best served with a strong stomach and patience for the next segment of *The Erinia Saga*.

SEASON OF RUST

By Charles Gramlich

Late at night the morbid thoughts creep upon me. I listen to the drums in my blood and they recall to me a fetid summer. But now it is winter, and the iron cold sweeps down with blades of icicle-sharp. I hear the whisper of dead leaves stroking my windows; I hear the scrape of an oak's barren limbs upon my roof.

Outside in the broken forest, a black horse rushes past upon the Wild Hunt. And I know who it is that rides. I sense his limbs, like sabers. From the dark, upon my face, I feel his eyes; they curve like the stings of scorpions.

Should I put on my coat of silver? Should I set my jaw for war? The hunter beckons from among his gaunt wolves, and in days past I would have joined his gathering and ridden fast to the vicious skirl of the horns.

But in those days my soul was quickened, my youth a shield. Tonight, I fear, my weakness would make me prey.

Heroes

By Kaitlin Bevis

On the television screen in front of Jerrica Enders a plane dived dangerously close to the ground, pulling itself up just in time to save itself, but devastating the world beneath it.

"Show me a hero, and I'll write you a tragedy," Jerrica quoted to herself, averting her eyes as the struggling plane crashed to the ground. "How many casualties?" she asked into her wristwatch communicator.

"Close to two-hundred." A mechanical sounding voice said tonelessly.

"All for one man!" Jerrica swore. Wincing, she looked at the door, hoping no one had heard. When it remained closed she lowered her voice. "Was he the last?"

"No, there's still that new group."

"They're not going to be good enough."

"Then I trust you can handle this?"

"Is there anyone better for the job?"

"Like you said, the life of a hero, especially a super hero tends to be tragic. Maybe you should just—a"

"If tragedie's all it takes, then I've got all the right qualifications." Jerrica snapped. "Look I've got this, why don't you go back to your coffee or whatever."

"I will be contacting that new group just in case. You know Jerrica, not too many heroes would be all that upset if *you* failed."

Jerrica yanked the communicator off her wrist, "Well it's just too bad that there all dead then, isn't it?" She said brightly. "Bye bye." She added tossing the watch into the air. With a flick of her wrist, blue energy poured out of her hand blowing the communicator up.

"Oops." Jerrica shrugged as the door swung open quickly. Jerrica sat up in interest, about time she figured out where she was.

"Hey, you're awake." Said a slightly familiar voice.

"Gambit." Jerrica said, rolling her eyes, "What am I doing here?"

"Your little sister called us when she couldn't find you. By the time we did find you, you had about already killed yourself to get to that one guy, so we brought you back here. You know Jerrica, you really should join the group. There's safety in numbers."

Jerrica laughed, "Join the 'get along gang'? No thanks; I've got better things to do. Where's my sister?"

"Downstairs." Gambit answered.

Jerrica leapt out of bed, ignoring Gambit's protests. "Crysanina, we're leaving," she called. Spotting her little sister, Jerrica grabbed Crysanina by the arm to drag her out of the compound. As she reached the door it slammed shut. "Gambit?"

"What in the world?" He muttered, approaching the door. Sheets of metal fell over every door and window. "Shoot, it's a lockdown," Gambit said annoyed, "Come with me." He led them down the hall. He pulled open the doors to the conference room, and gestured for the sisters to enter before him. Jerrica walked in, defensively eyeing the six people gathered around the table.

"What's *she* doing here?" Frost demanded, standing quickly.

"You know, I was just wondering that." Jerrica said brightly. "That, and how do I get out of here!"

"Yeah, why are we in lockdown?" Gambit asked the group.

"I'm on it." Flash responded, typing quickly.

"Did you guys hear about the plane crash?" Dillaina said, rushing into the room.

"Yeah," Ray answered, "Someone is trying to kill off all the super heroes in this town."

"And isn't it just wonderful that were all trapped in the same building." Jerrica said brightly.

"Convenient." Crysanina said softly. "Can't you guys just blast us out of here?"

"I don't think any of our powers would get us out of here without turning the defense system on." Ray replied.

"What's your defense system like?" Crysanina asked confused.

"You don't want to know." Gambit laughed. "Flash, how's it coming?"

"Ok. I just need to run to the control room and rewire things. I should have us out before tonight," he said dashing down the hall.

"I like it here." Crysanina announced happily. "Can I look around? Whatyou're your powers? I can heal or kill with fire depending on the person, and my sister—"

"Wishes people would mind their own business." Jerrica said as a warning.

"I can give you a tour." Frost offered ignoring Jerrica. "And introductions. Flash here is our resident genius. He runs super fast. Ray, our fearless leader, he shoots lasers out of his eyes, Dillaina, our trainee, she controls light, Gambit here's a psychic, and I make things freeze." Crysanina tried to memorize this, and followed Frost out of the room to explore.

"Your little sister's a neat kid. Very grown up." Gambit commented.

Jerrica shook her head, "I guess she would have to be."

"How did you break into the super hero business anyway?"

"Same way most do. My parents were tragically killed, and I randomly discovered I have powers. Not that it's any of your business."

Gambit raised an eyebrow, "What's your super hero name anyway? Ice Queen?"

"What, tell you and risk the chance that a mask and costume will keep you from recognizing my voice and build? No chance."

"Ok, let's see if I can get you fixed." Flash muttered from underneath a mess of wires.

"I can't let you do that." A warped voice said softly.

"Huh?" Flash asked sitting up quickly, "Who's there?"

A blast of icy cold wind met him in the face. "Hey Frost, knock it off; you know I'm terrified of freezing." The wind picked up, growing even colder. Shockingly cold, the wires behind him froze over beneath inches of ice instantly. "Frost!" Flash called, panicking. The door slammed, locking him in as the room grew colder. "The whole room's freezing," he realized aloud as he saw sheets of ice forming on the ceilings and walls. "No!" He yelled dashing towards the door. His foot slipped on a patch of ice, pinning him under a frozen desk. Flash watched in horror as ice began to form over his foot. "Help!" Flash screamed. The ice continued to creep up his legs. The desk had him pinned; he couldn't move!

Jerrica bolted out of her chair followed quickly by Gambit. "Someone is using a lot of energy!" She exclaimed, narrowing her dark eyes to focus on where it was coming from.

"Flash is scared." Gambit said quickly, "Ray!" He yelled, "Where's Flash!"

"The control room." Ray called from another room, "Hey guys, what's going on?"

Neither Gambit nor Jerrica took the time to answer as they dashed down the hall.

"What!" Jerrica exclaimed, slowing as they reached the frozen door to the control room. She could hear Flash screaming inside.

"Get the others." Jerrica commanded closing her eyes in heavy concentration. Gambit nodded and closed his own shouting mental commands for everyone to hurry to the control room.

"What are you—?" Jerrica shushed him, and the air around her sang. Suddenly without warning, blue energy burst from the palms of her hands, hitting the door full force.

Gambit leapt out of the way as the door flew into pieces. "Oh my..." He muttered under his breath. The whole room was frozen solid. "He's somewhere in the back!" He yelled, "Far right corner."

"What's going on?" Ray yelled skidding to a stop.

"Flash is in there." Jerrica said backing away as the rest of the group entered the area.

"In there?" Crysania said in disbelief.

"Burn it Crys, quickly, with all you've got."

Crysania nodded, and fire erupted from the palms of her hands hitting the ice at full force. Jerrica watched for a minute, then closed her eyes as blue energy burst from the palms of her own hands. Gently she hovered one hand over her little sister, feeding her energy, and forcefully she pointed the other to the room.

"Frost." Ray said through clenched teeth, "You're going to pay for this."

"But I didn't!" Frost protested as Dillaina hit the ice with light. Gambit watched all this and turned the heater on high.

"Gambit, keep control of her." Ray said, blasting the ice with his lasers.

"Stay still, Frost." Gambit said, putting her under voice control.

"Gambit don't!" Frost pleaded. "You know I wouldn't do this; he was terrified of freezing. Come on Gambit, he was my best friend. You know I wasn't behind this!"

Gambit made a motion with his hands, and immediately she went stiff, unable to move or speak. This finished, Gambit looked to see the progress on the room; they were still only about halfway through.

"Hey Jerrica, easy," Gambit said softly, "You've done enough today."

"Good luck." Crysania said her voice strained in concentration. "Pure energy is kind of hard to control. It keeps coming, even when you've run out."

"Enough, Jerrica; you're going to get yourself killed."

"Don't think *that* matters to her." Crysania said darkly.

"Jerrica stop!" Gambit said in voice command. Abruptly the energy flow ceased, and Jerrica collapsed unconscious into Gambit's arms.

"Can you heal her?" Gambit asked uneasily.

"My fire... it heals those of a pure heart, and kills those of a dark one."

Gambit looked at her, not understanding.

Crysania bit her lip before speaking hesitantly. "I don't want to hurt her."

Jerrica stirred later that day confused. "Crys?" She asked.

"She's off somewhere with Dillaina." Gambit said softly.

"Did we get to Flash?"

Gambit shook his head painfully, "No, we didn't." Gambit said biting his lip, "He's.... he's..." He stopped unable to continue.

"Dead?" Jerrica finished coldly. "What did you do to Frost?"

"Locked her up downstairs."

"What's to stop her from getting out?"

Gambit laughed bitterly, causing Jerrica to look up. She'd never heard him sound bitter, and she wasn't quite sure she liked the hollow ring to his voice. It sounded too familiar. *Too much like me?* She wondered

"Even Frost can't get out of this prison."

Frost sat huddled in a corner of her little jail cell crying. "I didn't do it." She screamed to the ceiling.

"I know." A morphed sounding voice said over the speakers to her cell.

Frost's eyes widened as she took in the implications of this voice. "You killed him." She whispered.

"I believe it's your turn." The voice said calmly.

"Gambit, help me!" She shrieked mentally, hoping he could hear. Aloud she demanded, "Why! What did we do to you! Why!"

"Did you know you're in a sealed room?" The voice said tonelessly.

Frost glanced up, wondering what that could possibly have to do with anything. Suddenly the fire sprinklers in the room went off. "Hey-owe!" Frost yelled as she realized the water was hot! Boiling hot. "No!" She yelled, freezing the water. This only sent steam up in the air, burning her. She tried again, this time aiming for the sprinklers. It froze over for a moment before breaking and sending down a full pipe of boiling water. *The room was filling up too quickly!*

"Gambit!" She yelled again, this time mentally and physically.

Jerrica doubled over in agony. "That's too much energy!" She yelled, not caring who heard her.

"Frost!" Gambit yelled tearing down the stairs. "Everyone get down to the prison *quick!*" He voice commanded racing to Frost's cell. "Ray!" He yelled. Ray dashed down there and blew the door open quickly. Both guys yelped as scalding hot water exploded from the open door.

"Oh no..." Gambit muttered, staring in horror inside the room.

Jerrica slammed the door shut, as best she could, and turned to face the group. "It's one of us, then." She said slowly, "One of us is a killer."

"I think you should help them." Crysania said as Jerrica examined the exit carefully, looking for a weak spot.

"One of them is a murderer, or have you forgotten! I'm not going to help someone who can do that—" Jerrica gestured frantically over her shoulder, "I just won't."

"It's not you, is it?" Crysania asked startling herself. "Oh, I'm sorry Jerrica, but ever since— Well, it just doesn't seem beyond you."

"That's crazy." Jerrica said angrily.

"Is it? You act like you've got nothing to live for! Nothing to lose! I'm scared to even use my powers on you, Jerrica! You're mean, and cold, and just—" Crysania broke off, trying to form words. "You're dead already. Inside. And you're so eager to get yourself killed—"

"Crys, that's enough," Jerrica broke in,

"Nothing in your life is worth dying for!" Crysania yelled, "You're living for nothing, are you going to die for nothing too! You don't believe in anything! Nothing but revenge!"

Jerrica slapped Crysania impatiently, "Crys, you can't do this right now, alright baby? Cause quite frankly dear you are worth dying for, and I intend to get you out of this." Crysania shook her head and darted away from Jerrica angrily.

Ray walked up the stairs to the highest point in the compound, his tower room. "Fool." He whispered to himself, "You should stay in a group."

"How did all this happen?" He groaned, sliding to the floor.

"Quite easily, actually." A morphed sounding voice said.

Ray never even hesitated; he shot off a laser blast straight at the voice.

"Fool." The voice chastised as the laser bounced off the steel plated windows, aiming back to Ray. Ray ducked quickly as the lasers wildly danced around the room.

"Don't you want to ask me some questions?" The voice pondered.

"Oh, so this is the part where you tell me your evil scheme?" Ray asked, "No thanks, not giving you a chance to brag." He grunted, darting forward quickly hitting the wall to his passageway.

"I'm glad I didn't save you for last then." The voice said. The passageway slowly started to swing open behind Ray, and knives began to drop into position, aiming towards him. Ray dodged another set of laser beams as they flashed behind him. The secret entrance swung all the way open as the real entrance swung shut. Ray turned to jump through, but saw a wall of knives aiming towards him and jumped back cursing. He was so shocked in fact that he didn't duck when his lasers came back for him.

"Crys!" Jerrica yelled, running down the hall.

"What's wrong?" Gambit said running out of his room.

"Crys ran off." Jerrica panted. "Have to find her."

Gambit concentrated for a moment, "She's in the back of the compound." He said, then his eyes widened, "Who is *that!*"

"I'm no hero." Crysania explained to Ray, "I don't think my sister is either, not really. Or if she is, it's the type that disturbs me. She's only in it for revenge."

"That's not Ray!" Gambit yelled dashing into the room.

"Crys get away from him!" Jerrica yelled, pushing past Ray to get to her sister. Quickly she knelt next to her, "Are you, ok?"

"Who are you? Where's the real Ray?" Gambit demanded.

"Where's Dillaina?" Jerrica asked slowly piecing something together.

Gambit frowned, "Nearby..."

Jerrica shook her head and rose slowly to her feet, glaring at Ray the entire way. "Fairest and Fallen, Greeting and Defiance as always."

Ray laughed darkly, "So you finally figured it out." He said as he morphed back into Dillaina.

"You!" Gambit yelled in fury. "How could you? We took you in!"

Dillaina blasted him with a bolt of light, and then morphed again, into her real form.

"Tall, dark, and deadly." Jerrica said wryly, "Just as I remembered you Morpheus." She narrowed her eyes and stepped in front of her sister. "Why don't we just leave these two out of it, and deal with this amongst ourselves, shall we?"

"They can't leave." Morpheus said, "I'm killing off all the super heroes in this town."

"Leaving you to take over?" Jerrica laughed, "You actually think you can do that?"

"I've done pretty good so far."

"Oh good job, killing a bunch of newbies, but can you handle me?"

"I don't have to kill you Jerrica, you're already dead. He on the other hand..." Morpheus said turning to Gambit, "is perfectly expendable." Quickly he morphed into Jerrica, throwing a steady stream of energy towards Gambit. Jerrica screamed as she felt the energy leave *her* body, and Gambit yelled in agony.

"Fry him Crys, just fry him!" Jerrica yelled.

"I can't! I might hit you!" Crysania shrieked hysterically.

"Oh come on Morpheus, leave him alone! You wanted me, well here I am! What's the matter, too frightened to battle a *real* hero?" Jerrica screamed, doubled over in agony. Morpheus simply ignored her, Jerrica tried to summon up some energy to distract him with, but he was using it all! *Fine, I'll do it the old fashioned way!* She thought defiantly. Grimacing she gathered enough strength, and tackled him.

"Now Crys, now!"

"I'll hit you!"

Jerrica landed a quick punch on Morpheus's face before he morphed back into himself.

"I don't care, just do it!"

"No!"

"Oh fine then! Heal Gambit!" Jerrica commanded.

"Foolish girl!" Morpheus yelled pinning her to the ground. "Take that!" he yelled, morphing into someone Jerrica had never seen before. Quickly he grabbed her by the shoulders. Jerrica screamed as electricity ripped its way through her body.

"Take this!" Gambit yelled pulling Morpheus off of her, "Stay still!" He shouted in voice command.

"One for my family." Crysania said, hitting him with a single stream of fire. "Two for my friends!" She yelled adding another stream of fire, "Three for the past. Four for your lies!" Morpheus screamed as a fourth finger's worth of fire hit him, "Yeah, hurts doesn't it! Feel that! That's your corruption hurting you! That's your own evil. This is for greed!" Crysania said opening her whole hand, "And this, this is power!" She yelled opening the other. Fire consumed him at full force.

"Jerrica? Jerrica, come on, hon, it'll be ok." Gambit muttered soothingly, cradling Jerrica gently. "Crys, you have to heal her."

"Are you crazy! Did you see what it did to that guy! I can't!"

"Leave it alone, Gambit." Jerrica said softly.

"Oh, you'd like that wouldn't you! Death is just what you've been asking for since your parents died. Such an easy way to give up! Such a coward's way to give in, you want escape do you? Well guess what, Jerrica I won't let you die! Heal her, Crys!"

Crysanía raised her hand shakily, and then brought it back down again, "I can't..." She cried, "I'll kill her!"

Gambit grabbed her violently by the arm and shoved her closer to Jerrica, "Do it!"

"Leave her alone!" Jerrica yelled.

"We are a team!" Gambit shouted at her, "Like it or not, I'm not *letting* you die! You can't fool me, Jerrica, I'm in your head. You're *not* responsible for all this, Crysanía being here, everyone dying, or even you're parents. It wasn't you! All you're doing now is hurting people!"

"Get out of my head!" Jerrica demanded weakly.

"Do it, Crys!" Gambit demanded. "She'll die either way! Do it!"

Crysanía closed her eyes and aimed for her sister. Whimpering in fear she blasted Jerrica with the fire.

Gambit kept hold of her while the fire consumed her. Seconds later it died down, leaving a puzzled looking Jerrica in his arms.

"Oh my gosh." Crysanía sobbed in relief, flinging her arms around Jerrica. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I was so scared! I thought you were evil. I'm so sorry!"

"Shh.... Shh." Jerrica said soothingly, "It's ok... I thought so to. It's alright honey."

Gambit breathed a shaky sigh of relief. "You're alright." He said shakily. Impulsively he leaned in to give Jerrica a hug.

Jerrica returned it looking a little surprised. "Yeah." She said shakily, "I guess I am." She looked up at Gambit pleadingly, "Can we please leave this place?"

"Yeah." Gambit said softly. "If the defense system hasn't kicked in yet, then it never will."

"But where are you going to go?" Crysanía asked.

"He's staying with us, at *our* headquarters." Jerrica said softly, "That is," she added shyly "if you don't mind."

"What's your security system like?" Gambit asked uneasily.

"Nothing so complex." Jerrica said rising to her feet. "Come on, we're a team remember?"

Gambit broke into a grin, and Crysanía nodded happily.

"Yeah, for the team." Gambit agreed.

