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Adaptation by Bret funk

Over the last decade, the number of small presses, niche houses, and independent publishers has increased dramatically. So, too, has the number of books published per year. In the U.S. alone, new titles increased from approximately 65000 in 1997 to 288,000 in 2009 (a 443% increase). In that same time frame, the number of available bookstores has decreased, as big box stores such as Barnes & Noble and Books-A-Million drove many independently-owned bookstores out of business, and they themselves are now being winnowed away by market forces, high overhead, and Internet competition. In this new world of less shelf space and more options, how can a new author or a small publishing house get their books prominently displayed in the available space?

In two words: They can't. Large book retailers have to split their space with all of the media options available to them (books, music, movies, games, ebook readers, etc.). What space they have devoted to books is primarily taken up with guaranteed best selling new releases and time-honored steady sellers. The space for the lesser-known author is small and shrinking. Online, books are lost in a sea of titles, and unless someone is specifically looking for something, the odds of a reader stumbling across a new author's book is slim. Add to that the wholesaler and bookstore friendly system of returns and discounts, and it leaves both the small press and the struggling author wondering how to compete.

In two words: They can't. With a few miraculous exceptions, a new author should not expect to find his or her books available in bookstores, especially when working through a small press. Some hard work might earn an author some space in local bookstores, but the realities of publishing and the unwillingness of some big retail bookstores (primarily Borders) to order directly from publishers or even claim as "available" any title that is ready to ship in 24-48 hours but available only Print-on-Demand all but ensures that the fight for prominent display will be a difficult one.

How to survive then? Adaptation is the key. Bookstores need to adapt to the changing world of publishing. Refusing to stock a copy of every book makes sense; refusing to sell one because the publisher refuses to print thousands of copies he doubts will ever sell does not. Being unwilling to accept a short discount (anything less than the 55% or more demanded by wholesalers) for titles that a bookstore intends to stock and sell makes sense; refusing to purchase a book PoD at a short discount when specifically requested by a customer and guaranteed available within 48 hours does not. Preferring to purchase the majority of titles through a single wholesaler or distributor makes sense; refusing to consider the possibility of ordering directly from a publisher, even if it means a bigger discount for the bookstore, does not.

But publishers cannot control what policies bookstores choose to enforce, so they, too, must adapt to the changing publishing world or risk permanent obscurity. The best way to increase sales is to, if not ignore the traditional bookstore market altogether, then at least focus efforts on non-traditional venues. Have a new cookbook? Approach the kitchen supply, specialty foods, and culinary institutes in your area. Publishing a field guide? Contact state parks, conservations societies and the like. Want to find markets for your speculative fiction? Target the sites in your area where your target readers congregate. For SF geared toward younger audiences, look to video game stores, comic book shops, a laser tag facility, or other venues where those readers might frequent. For older readers, consider offering some books to local coffee shops or cafes, either at your standard discount or even on consignment. Bold and out-of-the-box thinking can make the difference between no sales and significant sales.

Authors need to adapt too, both their expectations of what getting published means and how much effort they should be putting into selling their own work. Even back in 1997, the vast majority of published books never made a profit. No doubt that percentage is higher today. Authors, however, by and large believe that it is the publisher's duty to market and sell a book, and that once written, their job is all but done.

Such thinking is naïve, and while I will not minimize the publisher's shared role in selling a book, authors should be conscious of the fact that it is the author, not the publisher, that makes a book sell. A publisher's primary duty is to professionally design a book and to make it available to any and all markets that want it, but it is the author who forms a bond with readers, and therefore it is the author's primary mission to sell a book. If the opposite were true, then we would all line up to have our copy of *Game of Thrones* signed by executives from Random House instead of by George R. R. Martin.

First and foremost, authors need to connect with readers. The lesser known an author, the more he or she needs to connect. Start a Goodreads page. Build a community at Authorsden. If you have the ability to blog well (and not everyone does), start one, keep it updated, and work to gain followers. If you can get email addresses for your readers, follow up with them, ask them for reviews, get feedback from them, and never, ever, ever get mad if they say something you don't like. Work with your publisher to find out their policies and discount schedules for libraries and direct-to-bookstore sales, and then approach all of the appropriate traditional and non-traditional venues outlined above in the area you live... And back in your hometown... And where your grandparents live... And where you went to college... And anywhere else where more than a handful of people might know who you are. The sales generated by an author's efforts in his hometown can provide a healthy boost to early sales, which can actually make a book more likely to appear on an online search. A strong bond with an existing readership, as well as an appeal to them to help spread word of the book, can sometimes create steady sales in the long term.

In the world of evolutionary biology, there is a strong debate over which has the greater effect on evolution: random mutation or symbiosis of two existing creatures. In the world of publishing, the debate has already been solved. Individual efforts from publishers and authors can sometimes have profound effects on the success of a book, but the synergistic effects of a publisher and author working as a team almost always yields greater results. And publishers and authors who treat each other as strangers, or worse yet, develop an antagonistic relationship, will only rarely find success.

Doc Savage: The Hero Problem by Charles Gramlich

I know folks who love the Doc Savage pulps. This essay is going to tick them off. I've read about a dozen Doc novels. Most have been pretty bad. In fact, I can say comfortably that I've never been a fan of Doc Savage. Evocative titles. I'll give you that. *Red Snow*, *Quest of the Spider*, *Man of Bronze*, *The Devil's Black Rock*. The beginnings are often interesting, too, with some rather cool concepts. But I'm usually pretty bored before the end. And I think I know why.

I just don't like the character of Doc Savage. In fact, the best parts of these books are the opening sections *before* Doc Savage and his cronies get into action. As soon as they are on the scene, I start to lose interest.

A big reason is that Doc Savage is just too perfect. Don't get me wrong, I like for my heroes to be heroic. I like to root for the main character in a story, and I don't root for true anti-heroes, such as Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs*. However, I like my characters to have complexity and areas of gray. I like them at least to be "human." Or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

Conan the Cimmerian is a good example of the kind of hero I enjoy. Some call him an anti-hero, but I disagree. He certainly doesn't always follow the rules of the societies he finds himself in, but he clearly has an internal moral compass. He doesn't betray a friend. When he becomes king he indeed rules for the betterment of his people. He is also flawed. He's ambitious, not above drunkenness, and has a weakness for women. These things make him far more human than Doc Savage, and far more real.

Closer to the pulps that spawned Clark Savage, Jr, we have "The Spider." Now there's a character I can like. He's also a good guy, but he knows the taste of hatred. He's not above vengeance. He's tempted at times by human desires. Doc Savage is like 'Data' from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. He's not really human, though he carries the semblance of our form. I appreciate Data much more, though. He at least wants to be human. Doc Savage is above petty wants.

I'd personally like Doc Savage a lot more if he ever had a lazy moment, or drank too much once in a while, or had the urge just to shoot someone. And, for goodness sake, what's up with this "no women" thing? It's not that he is tempted but is able to resist for the woman's own good. He's impervious to women. I first wondered if Doc was the first gay pulp hero, but he clearly isn't attracted to men either. He's simply asexual.

A too perfect, too inhuman hero just doesn't work for me. Give me Conan, thief and slayer. Give me The Spider, a vigilante with twin .45s. Give me Tarzan, who knows the animal urge for vengeance and for a mate. Just give me someone with blood in their veins and emotion in their hearts.

You Never Know...
or How a Gospel Song and A Series of Questions Turned Into a Science Fiction Tale
by Rachel V. Olivier

One of the things I keep learning repeatedly lately (perhaps because I have a tendency to entropy, laziness and procrastination) is to pay attention, because you never know where something may lead you. And it's easier, in the long run, if you pay attention in the first place.

It works like this: You see, hear, notice something. It could be anything—a song, a phrase, an article or blog, a piece of broken furniture by the Dumpster. And this thing, that you might otherwise ignore, or not even see, is now pulling on your attention for some reason. There's something about it that just won't let you go. I believe that's when you sit down and start to write.

When I sat down to write my novella, "The G.O.D. Factor" (Sam's Dot Publishing, June 2011, sdpbookstore.com), I had a favorite gospel tune, "Turn Your Radio On" by Albert E. Brumley from the first half of the 20th Century, as an earworm. Juxtaposed to that was my attempt to begin a scifi story that I knew I wanted to set in a starship in space, possibly several hundred or even a thousand years in the future. Rather than fight that disparity, I decided to go with it. And then there she was, Monica, a young woman far in the future working on a spaceship, who had a love for things "old", "retro" or just not technologically advanced.

The contrast gave me the bounds of her character, and I had the setting, all I needed after that was to fill in the details. Why was she in space? What was she doing there? Where was she going? Was she alone or with others? How did they react to her quirky affection for knitting and gospel music? How would a young woman like this react to trouble? But most of all, I wanted to know why my brain was still hung up on that song. What was it about that song that my brain decided I needed to know?

So, I took a hard look at the lyrics, took it apart and tried to see how I could use it. And from that parsing I got Belukas, an engineer and Monica's ex-boyfriend (and direct opposite). Once I had Belukas and Monica in the story, I realized there needed to be more crew on that spaceship, but what kind of crew? And what kinds of conflicts would they run into? What was their story?

I had found the tune online at YouTube.com and had been listening to it repeatedly when I realized how listening to it over and over might drive some people crazy—and not just people.

And then, I had my story. After that it was just a matter of getting it down on the page and slowly chipping away at it until I had a clear picture of just what was going on on that spaceship out there in the middle of nowhere.

Many writers will tell you that they aren't really writing fiction. They're writing the truth about something that they themselves are slowly discovering as they sculpt away at a block of ideas and words to try to see what lies beneath. Another way I look at it is that it's like rescuing animals. The stories are out there for us to discover and rescue from the ether to share with the world before they disappear forever into oblivion.

In both cases, either as the artist or as the foster parent, if you don't pay attention you may miss it—miss the right chisel angle or the one story that peeks its nose up over the metaphorical gate and begs for a home. You may miss the opportunity of finding that story, making it beautiful and finding a home for it. You have to pay attention to those times when your awareness is snagged by something, because you just never know if it might lead you to your next story.

Hammering about Costumes and CGI of *Thor* montanasings/TerryCrotinger

Paramount Pictures graced viewers with a wide array of sets, costumes and characters this summer with their latest offering, *Thor* (Marvel Comics, 2011), directed by Kenneth Branagh. While admittedly *Thor*'s cast sported more outlandish clothing, by human standards, the viewer accepted it, as appropriate for the genre. Every character's costume accurately reflected the action and personality of the wearer. Sets and CGI was fair. Thor's Hammer did not carry enough weight.,,

It seemed the three main locations—Earth; Asgard, where Odin reigns and guards the *Casket of Ancient Winters*; and Jotunheim, where the Frost Giants reside—were assigned a designated color palette to work within. Earth has the entire spectrum of colors we humans are acquainted with, while Asgard had a militaristic regal, yet noir feel. Jotunheim's monochromatic palette certainly attempted to feel cold and lifeless, but appeared to be simply a dull-dark with accents of sparkling reflection from various surfaces. The result distracted the eye. That jagged landscape never felt cold, nor threatening; it just glared and blinded.

The main character's costuming (Thor) reflected the tone of the movie's various locations. A few were slightly "off", as in, there's-something-not-quite-right-about-this-but-can't-put-my finger-on-it kind of "off". When Thor's friends come to Earth, they look like well-dressed Cosplay participants from a SciFi Convention. The movie's resulting action is hard to believe (as in, suspending belief). However, it does create a new layer of information/plot, as well as tying up a few loose ends regarding why they were introduced into the plot to begin with.

Oscar (2007) and Tony Award (1990) winning Alexandra Byrne designed the costumes for Thor. These Period Costumes (her specialty) are believable because of attention to detail and historical accuracy. Her choice of fabrics and colors are varied, and generally, pleasing. In light of the three distinct locations, or "Periods" she worked with, the restrictions of color palette for each and the amount of individuals she created costumes for, perhaps she will gain another trophy for her collection?

A few comments about Character and Costume

Asgard Location:

Thor, God of Thunder (Chris Hemsworth): are those muscles built in to the costume?

Loki, God of Mischief (Tom Hiddleston): the high collars hide his neck; what else is he hiding? Loki's clothes have a slight reptilian quality.

Frigga, Thor's mother (Rene Russo): Her gowns are flowing and understated gold-gossamer elegance. Unfortunately, her hair spoils the glamour ; it looks plastered on her head, while long tresses tease the viewer.

Hogun (Tadanobu Asano), **Fandral** (Joshua Dallas) and **Volstagg** (Ray Stevenson), as the faithful friends of Thor. Since these are fighters and guardians, their costumes seem utilitarian, and of course, as supporting players, they should mainly support the plot or scene. True to this idea, each have few lines. A word about hair: Hogun's spiked crown is traditional Asian (popular anime style), Volstagg's curls and red beard are also traditional for the Viking-type. Fandra sports a nice side-swept look. With his chiseled jaw and partial chin beard, he carries a more contemporary, "earthy" look.

Sif, Goddess of War (Jaimie Alexander): Pale lavender is completely complementary to her body. Cut and layering of her costume, as well as the addition of a hood harmonizes with the two-toned velvet/velour eggplant/lavender fabric. The silver accessories and bracers look noble, yet lethal and give Wonder Woman overtones to the entire ensemble—but only when she's in action. Up close, the still pictures make this same attribute look flimsy and cheap. With her hair pulled back tightly, she looks ready for blood... until she's seen from the back. The large peek-a-boo bare-back is non-functional and eye-distracting.

Heimdall, Guardian of the Worlds (Idris Elba): Quite alarming. However, the position held in this fantasy would demand nothing less than bold gold. Gold eyes seem a bit much, but are understandable in light of needing intimidation factor. Notice that this helmet compliments Odin's throne?

Odin, King of Asgard (Anthony Hopkins): Understated, yet Kingly. One of his costumes leans to a darker color, like son, Loki. Another costume's gold sheen washes over him, highlighting and making his curls and beard stand out. The breastplate on Odin's armor costume *almost* seems to be made to size, as if he has lost little of his youthful prowess. With one strikingly blue eye focused on action and the other covered (by what else than gold?) with an eye-patch, Odin commands the viewer's attention and respect.

Jotunheim Location:

King Laufey (Colm Feore): Truly, this is a costume that packs a forceful image, initially. As King Laufey has only a few lines and one main scene, his attire and character quickly become overshadowed by other Frost Giant minions and action. At this time, hard data is not forthcoming for Frost Giant costumes; these sets and characters could be entirely CGI!

Earth Location:

Thor: At times, his Earth clothes hide his manly attributes. The time of year appears to be fall or winter; does mighty Thor really need a jacket? Conversely, when this man is wet and covered with mud, his ripped-ness is impressive. Without a shirt... is that real or CGI? Also impressive.

Jane Foster (Natalie Portman): It is refreshing to see clothing that is not so revealing on this woman, not that she doesn't look good in just about anything. Her "cold weather" clothing appears to be sensible American Girl-sheik-geek, without looking frumpish or unwashed.

Erik Selvig (Stellan Skarsgard): Slightly old-fogy, with a hint of New York money.

Agent Coulson (Clark Gregg): What else could be appropriate for a bad guy than the traditional tailored suit, minus the dark glasses? (Thank you, Men In Black.)

Darcy Lewis (Kat Denning): nutty and fun clothes, just like her character.

Comments regarding computer generated images (CGI)

A few scenes lack impact in this movie due to CGI effects. On Earth when the tornado is seen, it is too centered and perfect to look believable. This is also true of subsequent views of nature's wrath. The tornado in the *Wizard of Oz* looked more believable than what Paramount tried to give viewers. Certainly there is enough real footage of tornadic activity that could do as well? As CGI is an Art, either that department was not given enough time, or someone was distracted by more important matters to let this get through to the editing people.

The last large battle between Thor and Loki occurs on a bridge of gold light. As the fight intensifies, the graphics here look comic-bookish. Pulp-fiction comics would have served better than the poor CGI effects the public endured. Speeding up the camera does not conceal sloppy graphics or technique.

CGI effects for *Thor* is painfully evident where real sets stop and CGI takes over. This speaks of a need to sacrifice quality. Sadly, this movie's sets and effects are similar to the comics they came from—good story, cheap production.

One last bash concerns Thor's Hammer. This could be the cruelest aspect of the entire film as it did not look believable. Big, yes. Heavy? It looks impressive and Thor wields it well because Hemsworth is an *actor*. But looks don't carry weight and this one is not convincing.

Dreadnought
Cherie Priest
Tor, 2010, 400 pages
ISBN 978-0-7653-2578-5
Review by Danielle Parker

Being such a huge fan, as a youngster, of Mervyn Peake, Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, I thought I'd love the steampunk genre when it arrived. Being fond too of alternate history and Victorian in general, we were made for each other. So I thought in the first flush of enthusiasm. But steampunk's a genre whose time seems now not so much passé as never really here. Cherie Priest's competently written book, *Dreadnought*, exemplifies all the reasons why the sub-genre soon proved such a disappointment, at least to this reader.

In *Dreadnought*, Mercy Lynch, a newly widowed nurse working in a Confederate hospital in an alternate-history Civil War, gets a message from her long-lost, given-up-for-dead daddy. Daddy is dying. He wants to see his daughter before he expires. It won't be an easy journey for Mercy. Daddy's in Washington state, which means Mercy will have to travel via train and airship (crazy hydrogen-powered airship, no less) across a war-torn continent.

But Mercy gives up her job and embarks on her epic adventure. After her airship crashes in the front lines of battle, where giant iron men battle it out for Union and Confederacy, Mercy somehow finds herself on a special huge armored Union train, the *Dreadnought*. The *Dreadnought* is crowded with grim Union soldiers, and two of the cars in the train are in top-secret lockdown. Soon, both raiders and a speedy Confederate train, the *Shenandoah*, are in pursuit. The climactic battle happens as the two trains confront each other in the mountain passes of the Rockies.

Priest is a competent writer with an eye for believable settings and a gift for drawing secondary characters in sharp outline. But perhaps her competency only highlights the reasons steampunk soon lost my interest.

First of all, there's the tired clichés. Mad Scientist? Check, got him. Steam powered iron behemoths? Check. Zombies? Check. Climactic battle against flesh-eating zombies? Double-check. It's a shame Priest limits herself to the familiar flourishes. She's too good (though Priest's penchant for disappearing characters left this book ending flat).

You can be forgiven for forgetting, after you've encountered the umpteenth steampunk example of flesh-eating zombies, iron engines and mad scientists, how innovative and visionary H. G. Wells, Mary Shelley, and Jules Verne really were. And even now, there's nothing out there close to Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* books. (Having read every massive tome in the series, I can almost say: what a relief).

But that, I suppose, is why steampunk ultimately failed to interest me. Fun escapist stuff, but I wish they'd stop repeating those zombies. Like the corsets so often found in its alternate-history pages, the genre is strait-jacketed into its limitations. Steampunk, unlike the writing of its quoted founding fathers, is more surface than substance, more cliché than visionary. Too bad.

The Iron Witch
Karen Mahoney
Flux Books, Woodbury MN
Trade Paperback February 2011, \$9.95
Review by Rachel V. Olivier

Donna Underwood's mother was driven mad by the same attack of fey creatures that killed her father and injured her as a small child. Now a young woman, fifteen-year-old Donna is trying to find out how much what she remembers and what her aunt and the other adults in her life have told her is true. But, she's also trying to be a regular teenage girl, despite being kicked out of school and needing to be homeschooled, and her strange tattoos, and her superhuman strength. And then there's the cute new boy she met, and the increasing fey attacks on her, her new friend, and her best friend.

And she'd love nothing better than to pour all her troubles into her best friend's ear, but she's not allowed to. She promised her aunt and all those adults who are supposedly looking out for her best interests. Or are they? Donna, like many other young adults, has to learn to think critically, learn to figure out who to trust and how to make judgments and choices on her own.

This is Karen Mahoney's first published novel, and the first in the YA Iron Witch series, which according to the School Library Journal is good for eighth grade and up. I think that's a good assessment of its reading level, and a good series for teenaged readers ready to gobble down more urban fantasy.

I enjoyed learning about Donna and how her world had changed her life, but it almost felt as if just as the story was taking off, it ended. There were many story threads brought up with only hints as to where they led, not all of them happy, so I was glad to hear there was more coming. I will be excited to see what happens next in Donna's world to she and her friends, and how they handle it.

The Engine's Child

Holly Phillips

Del Rey, 2008

ISBN 978-0-345-40065-3

386 Pages

Review by Danielle Parker

I ordered a collection of "new to me" authors recently, and Holly Phillip's "The Engine's Child" was one of them. I closed the finished book with that peculiar sense of having admired but not loved it. "The Engine's Child" has virtues weighed down by a single fault so significant I'm not inspired to look for more of the author's work.

For virtues, let's say up front "*The Engine's Child*" was an original in a genre far too freighted with unoriginality. I point to C. J. Cherryh's dense works of politics on alien worlds as its closest cousin. Thank goodness, no Tolkien cast-offs or pseudo-Middle Ages swords and sorcery here.

We begin with a watery world where humanity crowds on minuscule footprints of land, threatened by endless rains. The desperate in this hierarchical, Hindu-inspired society live on filthy tidal flats, specifically forbidden the comforts of technology. The elite houses inhabit great towers made livable by the electricity and running water denied the mud-rats. Others inhabit skimpy scraps of land that pass for country, taxed to death to support the tower-dwelling upper crust. The priest-scholars of the many gods form another group, providing the secondary virtue of celibacy in this hugely overpopulated world.

The young protagonist Moth has, alas, failed her priestly vows of celibacy. If only that was her worst sin. Unfortunately, she's up to her ears in schemes, betrayals, double-dealing and ambitions.

Raised up from the tidal flats to an acolyte's position by Lady Vashmarna, she's become the great lady's secret agent. Vashmarna's engineers operate the electrical plant and technology that provide life to this flooded world.

Vashmarna has ambitions. She wants to build a great ship to search out new land. She's building the engine for that ship secretly in the tidal flats, because the conservative ruler, the *shaudah*, distrusts such ambitions. So, too, does Lord Ghar, who belongs to another secret society. The Society of Doors schemes to return through a magic door to the world humanity left behind (or fled from).

Both Vashmarna's engine and Ghar's door depend on shaping a world-energy called *mundab*. Moth alone has the gift to shape this energy into the magic engine Vashmarna and Moth's desperate compatriots desire. Is Moth building the engine for Lady Vashmarna, or for her fellow tidal mud-rats, who long to escape in the hijacked ship, or for Moth's own ambitions?

Phillips shapes a cohesive, original and believable world. But now I mention the fatal flaw. Moth, the chief protagonist, is a brat, a constant liar, and an arrogant schemer. She shafts everyone, including her conscientious and far too gullible lover. She's unpleasant, willful and spoiled. And you'd probably prefer not to know just about everyone else in this book, too, except for that poor shafted lover.

So read this book if you enjoy a politically dense, original fantasy written in poetic prose. If you prefer to bond with likeable characters, forget it. I wasn't rooting for anyone except the clueless lover, who pays the price of loyalty and dies, of course. Try this again, Ms. Phillips, with a protagonist we want to spend time with.

The Neon Graveyard

Vicki Pettersson

Harper/Voyager Fiction, New York NY

Mass Market Paperback June 2011, \$7.99

Review by Rachel V. Olivier

Joanne Archer has had one helluva year and a half, In the last five Zodiac books she's died, received a new identity, discovered who her real father was, figured out the superhero world, lost a boyfriend, gained a boyfriend, lost a boyfriend again, found family, lost family, gone to the underworld and back, and more. All within the confines of her hometown, Las Vegas, Nevada.

This final book in the Zodiac series is no less of a ride. Joanne's life journey has definitely turned a corner and because of some changes that occurred or were found out at the end of book five (Cheat the Grave), there's probably no going back. Joanne figures she's either going to be singing her Swan Song or... well she's not sure what else might be before her. She's still working with the rogue agents for now, but has her own agenda separate from theirs. She has learned what her strengths and weaknesses are enough to still take the bad guys by surprise, but she's also still learning.

When I read the end of book five I whooped and hollered, because I loved how Joanne's world had changed and how Pettersson set things up for book six. I wasn't sure how things were going to go in book six, but I loved the set up. As Neon Graveyard progressed (and late night turned into early morning), I was impatient to see where Joanne was going. The action rarely paused for Joanne or the book itself. And I wasn't sure how Joanne was going to pull things off with all the different threads of her story basically snarling together. But that's just when things get interesting.

This is a full and complex read and encompasses not only kick ass fights and violence, but some pretty hot sex scenes as well. Pettersson is one of those writers who are able to incorporate detail with fast paced scenes so you know exactly where you are and what it looks and feels like, but without losing interest in the story. This is a fine ending to a great series. BUT, I can definitely see where she leaves it open for other stories in the Zodiac world, should she choose to write about it again. I hope she does.

Dark Shadows

1966-1971

Jonathan Frid, Grayson Hall

Review by Joe Vadalma

One of my all time favorite TV series is Dark Shadows. Originally it was on TV as a soap opera in the late nineteen sixties and early seventies. I first started watching in the nineties when the SciFi Channel (since changed to SyFy for some reason) aired it. Now-a-days it would be termed Urban Fantasy or Paranormal Fiction. It is about a wealthy family, the Collins, who are plagued by various ghosts, vampires, werewolves, witches and other things that go bump in the night. It is quite unique. There has never been another TV show or series quite like it. Each episode was a new adventure with great characters.

It has been criticized for the many flubs such as tilting props, flubbed lines, and boom mikes appearing. But it was recorded live with no reshoots. It also had some bad acting. On the other hand, it also had some very good acting. Nonetheless, the stories were great and included scenes that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth century as well as the present (1960s) and parallel time. Also, for the time, the special effects (done without green screen or computers) were quite good.

In the stories that took place in the present the main characters in order of importance were Barnabas Collins, a vampire; Julia Hoffman, a doctor who runs a psychiatric institution and tries to cure Barnabas of his vampirism; Angelique Collins, a witch who is the main villain of the series; Victoria Winters, the nanny who most of the first few seasons revolved around; the members of the Collins family; and Maggie Evans, a town girl. There are many other interesting characters too numerous to mention. Many of which are morphed into other characters during the flashbacks and sidebacks.

Some of the stories involved bringing a Frankenstein-like monster to life, using the I-Ching to travel through time, a dream curse, witchcraft, a witch trial, a mysterious Cthulu type of monster who sometimes morphs into a man, and so many more interesting plots.

In addition to the original series, two movies were made, another TV series which failed, and coming soon to a theater near you in 2012, a new movie starring Johnny Depp as Barnabas. Can't wait to see that one.

Child of Fire
Harry Connolly
2009, Del Rey
ISBN 978-0-345-50889-8
343 Pages
Review by Danielle Parker

If you buy even one urban fantasy on Amazon, you're in trouble. For at least the next four years, the eager vendor hits you with recommendations for hundreds of urban fantasy authors you've never heard of. Every time you sign on, there's more. Most of these stories feature vampires or other supernatural creatures. Most feature kick-butt fantasy women who exude attitude and weapons. The motorcycle, beer-swiggling, tougher-than-the-boys kind of gals, at least in spirit. Usually with superpowers, and usually with angst.

Of course, we know an awful lot of these metaphorically leather-pant-clad ladies eventually melt in the arms of their bad-boy lovers, since most urban fantasies are thinly disguised romance stereotypes. Alas, I only read romances when I'm really, really depressed. (Make what you want of that, Freud). So I keep turning Amazon down. Mostly, that is.

So it's refreshing, really refreshing, to read something different. Harry Connolly's Twenty Palaces books now form my favorite urban fantasy series. That the books are set in my home state of Washington is a bonus. We're not into romance stereotypes in this series. We've got real suspense and intriguing magic. Actual good writing, in fact. And a realistic hero whose flaws I can believe in.

In the opening book, 'Child of Fire', Ray Lilly just got out of prison. He's penniless, and his new boss, from the mysterious occult enforcer society Twenty Palaces, hates him. Raymond is scared to death of the utterly ruthless Annalise (and the reader will be, too). Ray is Annalise's 'wooden man': an expendable decoy with the life expectancy of a May fly.

But Ray doesn't have much choice in the matter. After using an illegal spell book, Ray is lucky the society left him alive. And of course, Annalise has the pocket book the jobless Ray desperately needs. (A hero with genuine real-life troubles, including lack of money, is one of the more refreshing aspects of this story).

Something is badly wrong in the Olympic peninsula town of Hammer Bay. En route to investigate, Annalise and Ray encounter a fleeing family. The family's little boy explodes in flames before their eyes. But the parents are magically constrained from remembering what happened. There's a predator out there, the alien invaders the Twenty Palace Society exists to destroy. And when Annalise is critically injured, barely-clued-in Raymond has to face the monster on his own.

This book has genuine suspense and a troubled real-life hero. I like the Jim Butcher 'Dresden File' series, though Mr. Butcher struggles to keep the ever-lengthening series fresh in its latest releases. Fans of that series will love Connolly's, too.

But frankly, I prefer Connolly's Twenty Palaces books. Start with 'Child of Fire', go on to 'Game of Cages', and look in August for the latest, 'Circle of Enemies'. Have fun!

The Bogie Woods and Other Tales of Conor Manahan

Laura J. Underwood

Yard Dog Press, Alma AR

Staple paperback, March 2001, \$6.00

Review by Rachel V. Olivier

Many cycles of moons ago, when the earth was flat and dinosaurs roamed the earth and I was in my 20s, I discovered the *Sword and Sorceress* anthology series edited by Marion Zimmer Bradley. Within that series I fell in love with many authors that I haven't seen anywhere since until just recently when I stumbled upon Laura J. Underwood on Facebook, which led me to her website, and hence to her collection of books being sold on the internet in various small press publishing companies. (I don't know why her work has never taken off in the major publishing houses, but I'm so glad the small presses kept hold of her.)

I didn't know where to begin, so I bought two books, one a novel that is part of a series (not yet read) and another an anthology (you know how I love my anthologies) of stories within that same world. According to the description, the anthology, "The Bogie Woods and Other Tales of Conor Manahan" gives some background to characters in her novel length works that people might not otherwise know. I thought that this was a good place to begin myself, since I wasn't sure the novel I had purchased was actually beginning at the beginning.

I'm glad I started with the anthology, which is four stories about Rhoyd, Conor and Eithne as they travel through Keltora and the surrounding land and encounter bandits and magical beings. Between Conor's fighting skills, Eithne's healing and wisdom and Rhoyd's young magical talent, they make their way through many dangerous encounters.

Yet, while the basic stories are tales of heroes and heroines against beasties and bad guys, the deeper story is how these three are a family and how being a family is what keeps them safe, keeps them going, and keeps them happy despite their hardships.

The prose is clean and clear and a delight to read, even with the lilt of dialect added in. Good storytelling and probably accessible for anyone ages 10 to 12 and up.

The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus (2009), PG-13
Davis Films, Infinity Features Entertainment,
Poo Poo Pictures, Parnassus Productions
Directed by Terry Gilliam
Written by Terry Gilliam and Charles McKeown
Starring Christopher Plummer, Heath Ledger, Lily Cole
Review by Rachel V. Olivier

As with any Terry Gilliam film (the Monty Python series, Brazil, The Fisher King, Brothers Grimm among others), the best thing to do is just to hold on and enjoy the ride. No expectations. Don't try to use your matrix or idea of what a plot or storyline includes as a guide to his world. Like Tim Burton and William Shakespeare and other great storytellers, it's best not to guess what's coming next.

If you listen carefully at the beginning, in fact, one of the characters makes a small speech on the importance of stories. That is the viewer's first clue.

One of the first ideas to discard when watching The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus is time. Since the Doctor is immortal, there is a sense of timelessness throughout the entire picture (reminded me of some of Ray Bradbury's tales). It may give the feel of being placed in the late 19th century or early 20th century, but the audience soon finds out that, as one of the characters says, the imaginarium is geographically in the northern hemisphere, socially on the margins and narratively - with a ways to go. However, physically, the imaginarium is currently traveling through the 21st century. When the characters come out of their own private drama enough to perform there are cell phones, malls, cars and shiny skyscrapers.

But the other idea to discard is that this is a single story. Gilliam is much more complex than that, as you might know if you've ever watched any of his other work. This is a story, within a story. Or maybe it's more accurate to say it's a Venn Diagram of overlapping/integrated/entwined stories. There's the story of a father's relationship with his daughter. The story of a monk who keeps making deals with the devil. There is the story of true love. And there's the story of (possible) redemption.

And then there are the many mini stories that Gilliam tells in regards to the choices, both large and small, that we all make. Some choices take us closer to heaven and some closer to hell. But we are constantly making choices that determine where we are headed. The trick is to be aware that we are making those choices so that we can make the right choices. In the end, it doesn't really matter how we make them, but that we make them.

None of this tells you what the story is, of course. If I were to plot it out for you, I'd have to say a man's clock is running down on his deal with the devil and he's trying to do everything he can to not lose his most prized treasure. But it is much more than that. The visuals of the movie should be seen on a big screen if possible. Plus, this is a movie that has been blocked out like a good stage play put on by the best Shakespearean actors, so it's best to treat it as such. A child asks one of the characters if the show they're putting on is guaranteed a happy ending, to which the reply is, of course, that there are no guarantees.

In regards to the rating, there are adult ideas running throughout. While there are no real violent or sexual scenes, there are implications of violence and sex, and at least one scene of a person being hanged. Nonetheless, I enjoyed this movie a lot.

Caprica
2009-2010
Eric Stolz, Esai Morales
SyFy Channel
Review by Joe Vadalma

I was terribly disappointed when the SyFy (does this stand for Silly Foully?) cancelled Caprica. This science fiction TV series was one of the best genre series to ever appear on the boob tube. I guess that was its problem. It was so much better than most of the stuff that appears these days that the kind of people who enjoy all the "reality" crap that is on just don't get anything that makes you think.

In case you missed it, Caprica is a city of the future where, although the manners and mores are similar to a modern day American city. The plot centers around an inventor and entrepreneur who has built a humanoid robot which is about seven foot tall and very strong for use by the military and his family. His daughter spends a lot of time in a virtual world in which one can become completely immersed so that once into it, it becomes like reality. In addition, there is a fanatical religious group which performs acts of terrorism. The daughter's boy friend is one of these terrorists and early in the series blows up a subway train, killing the daughter and several other people. Although the daughter is dead, her avatar lives in the virtual world. The father downloads her into the prototype of the massive humanoid robot. Things get complicated after that as a gangster type gets involved when his own daughter is one of the victims of the terrorist bombing. The plot from that point is complex with various subplots going on.

The acting and special effects are awesome. There is an especially good scene when the father's lab assistant put on music and the cylon (the shows name of the humanoid robot), with a copy of the daughter's avatar loaded into it, dances. Maybe some smart producer will realize what a gem this show is and resurrect it.