

The Drink Tank 420



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Crime Writers

by Chuck Serface



Reading in the Time of COVID-19

The Drink Tank 420

Chris Garcia ~ Alissa McKersie ~ Chuck Serface

Cover by Vanessa Applegate

I write a lot more than I read.

This is not an entirely new thing, as it's been true since at least the birth of the boys. Well, probably since I got married. Well, certainly since 2007 or so. Anyhow, I write more than I read, and though we're home with the boys now, there's a bit more time for doing stuff, which means there's actually a little time for writing, and a little time to actually read.

Well, mostly. I actually listen.

Vanessa got into audiobooks when we were living in Lucile Packard's Children's Hospital at Stanford, and we've listened to hundreds of books of all types. I got myself an Audible account, and at exactly the same time, we started thinking about doing another issue of *Journey Planet* about the legendary Flann O'Brien. I listened to *The Third Policeman*, which was a trip I knew I would be taking the minute I started listening to it. It was basically a mindfuck of a novel, surrealist in approach, but straight-up mystery in its genre. That being said, it's a mystery where we know the answer, at least kind of.

That I finished before the lockdown, but I didn't get back into the Audible thing until after I had started yet ANOTHER fanzine, *Wide Unclasp'd*. This was dedicated to the Winchester Mystery House, and thus I wanted to read the various books that were set in the House, and I found one by my favorite author, Tim Powers. I had never gotten around to *Earthquake Weather*, but I kind of knew that it was set at the House, and I really wanted to review it, so I picked it up so that I could read AND write at the same time.

What I did not know was that it was read by Bronson Pinchot.

Those of you unfamiliar with the Pinchot oeuvre, you may know him from the film *Beverly Hills Cop*, where he played Serge. You more than likely remember him from the show *Perfect Strangers*, where he played Balki Bartokomous. These were both comedy roles, but what he's actually one of the best in the

world at is voice acting, and particularly reading audiobooks. He did *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, which I'm on next, but most importantly, he reads most of Tim Powers' books. He won an award for reading *The Anubis Gates*, but most importantly, he read *Earthquake Weather*.

To say he is nothing like Balki in his reading would be an understatement. His voice is deep, weathered, intense, and flowing. I've heard a lot of other readers, but few can intone the words like Bronson, and it was a pleasure to listen to. There's absolute weight to the way he delivers everything.

The fact that it's a novel that deals with the Winchester isn't what really sold me on it. It was the way Tim Powers puts his plots into strange new worlds. I've been lucky enough to sit down with Tim a few times, and he's an absolute gem of a human being, and the way he writes is so contrary to that if you're one of his characters. Most of them are Jobs dealing with a vengeful God, but others are Job during his downtimes. It's impressive that his heroes and his villains all suffer in so many ways, and that alone helps me get into him. Plus, every word is simply too perfect, his timing amazing, and his ability to draw out the sadly inevitable keeps you going.

That was the majority of my reading until I came to a realization – I didn't have to drive to work anymore.

I have been listening to the Podcast *Last Podcast on the Left* since 2016 or so. It's been a major favorite for much of that time, and its particular blend of comedy, absurdity, and research is just about the most me thing I can think of. I love the way that the team members – Marcus Park, Ben Kissell, and Henry Zebrowski – work off of each other and present a darkly comical take on crime and the paranormal. Now, podcasters releasing books has been a thing for a while, but alas, my ability to buy these books, because of costs, has been quite low. I haven't been able to buy *Stay Sexy, and Don't Get Murdered* by the team from *My Favorite Murder*, though that's on my Christmas list, though likely I'll get it on Audible. *The Last Podcast* guys had been hyping their book, *Last Book on the Left*, for more than a year, and it's a hard cover and was like 26 books, which happens to be roughly the same amount I spend every time I go to fill up my gas tank . . .

. . . a gas tank that would only need to be filled every three weeks instead of two or three times a week.

Thus, I splurged and got the book. It's about serial killers, and it's presented in a way that is totally the way the podcast goes. It's half-graphic novel, half-true crime book. Marcus wrote the vast majority of the work, and the guys went through and added asides which are illustrated by Tom Neeley. The effect is like reading an episode of the podcast, through it's a little more engaging because it's significantly shorter. The result? Fantastic reading!

I was then confronted with something else – a MASSIVE backlog of comics reading. Chuck Serface, co-editor and King of Men, has given me so many comics over the years that's it's a long time coming to get to read them, and with our August issue dedicated to superhero teams, I needed to crack some of those books, starting with *Doom Patrol*.

I love *Doom Patrol*.

Now, the comic was sort of a response to *The Uncanny X-Men*, but at the same time, it was so much more interesting. The characters of the first run of *X-Men* were dull, dull, dull, but Robotman, Negative Man and Elasti-Girl were awesome, and the stories were so much smarter! There have been at least three very good relaunches, with Grant Morrison and John Byrne being my two favorites. The New 52 version was also pretty good. Reading through the issues, they were a great team, and I really want to watch the TV show with the team.

This is more reading than I've done in years. Basically, I'm feeling hella guilty. This lockdown has freed up so much time, made it so much easier to actually do things, to record things, and to read things. Sustainable? Probably not, but work's getting down, I'm still employed, and the kids are alive and fairly well. I know so many people are struggling against the shelter-in-place orders, and as I write this the Wisconsin Supreme Court just declared the Governor's decree of stay in place unconstitutional, but we need it, and because of it, I'm doing better than ever. This, sadly, will not last, but I will enjoy it while I have it.

“Be kind to yourself,” a friend said. What does that even feel like? The writers in my Twitter feed were having similar issues. That made me feel better, like the struggle is real, and I’m part of a tribe going through it together. I did what I knew to do, get up every day and take a step.

Some days were setting to work for my day job and thinking a lot about what I wanted to write, what I thought I should write, and why I wasn’t. While the why didn’t resolve itself, what did come to me was it didn’t matter. My confidence never wavered that I would pick it all up again.

Another friend suggested I try creating in ways that were other than writing. See if that would free something up. The camera didn’t come out but what did was setting all the oh-so-serious reading and writing

I thought I should be doing and dove into something lighter.

Another boundary shifted. The idea was to read without thinking deeply, and then to write whatever came to mind. At the end of each novella in the compendium, I would write a few paragraphs. For years I’ve been taking notes as I read, and now I wasn’t. It felt odd at first but then liberating. I was back to writing and that’s what mattered.

Deadlines loom and I’m good with that. Each boundary shift in this “new normal” is an opportunity to do things differently. Working from home allows me the space to think about my long-held boundaries and adjust. In my mind, it’s never bad to examine my life and jettison what isn’t working, and sometimes that means learning a work around for something which can’t be jettisoned.

I’m not looking forward to going back into the office. When the time comes, that will be another shift in boundaries. But I draw the line at talk about potty-training, regression sleeping, and the quality of toilet paper.

Stay distant, stay well, and reset boundaries as necessary. Oh, and wash your hands!





A Little Order in Chaotic Times

by España Sheriff

Even though I was working from home during the first few weeks of lockdown here in the UK, I was busier than ever. I doubt I was reading much more than a page or two of the guilt pile on my bedside table (sorry *Fourth Mansions*, I'm trying my best) and bits and pieces of various fanzines.

Then, just around the time work started slowing down (or at least started having a few quiet days in between the full-on periods) the Hugo Awards finalists were announced, and talk about your perfect timing.

Because the nice thing about the Hugo list is that, well it's a list, isn't it? And lists are perfect for when you need direction and focus. Lists imply some sort of order, a place to start, and a finish line to cross. Completing a list makes you feel accomplished, virtuous even, regardless of how arbitrary the contents may be.

But the Hugo ballot is also more than a list, it's something I care about. It's an enduring connection to my community, the thing the larger fannish year turns on. As the holiday decorations start to go up, so do the blog posts and podcast episodes rounding up the year's best offerings. It becomes time to pay attention to what names and titles friends are gushing about, and to excitedly share your own recommendations, sometimes leading to that great moment when you get to squee in unison after finding out a friend also loved that book you're gushing about.

My reading switches to new books around this time, the library and its trusty app hopefully coming through with some of the titles that most piqued my interest. I revise my Christmas wish list, ruthlessly knocking off whatever was the hotness last year and replacing it with the new hopefuls. With the holidays at one end and the nomination deadline at the other, this is definitely the time of year I get the most reading done. Then the nomination period closes, and there's the wait for the finalist announcement at Easter, when I get to see if whether my finger is on the pulse this year or not.

Most years at least a couple of the fiction finalists were on my ballot, which is always pleasing. This year my only hit is *The Ten Thousand Doors of January*, which is a very good example of exactly the sort of thing I want to be reading during this pandemic. Which is to say, I actually read it back in November, but I would happily reread it right now, and I cannot wait for Harrow's next novel, which comes out in October.

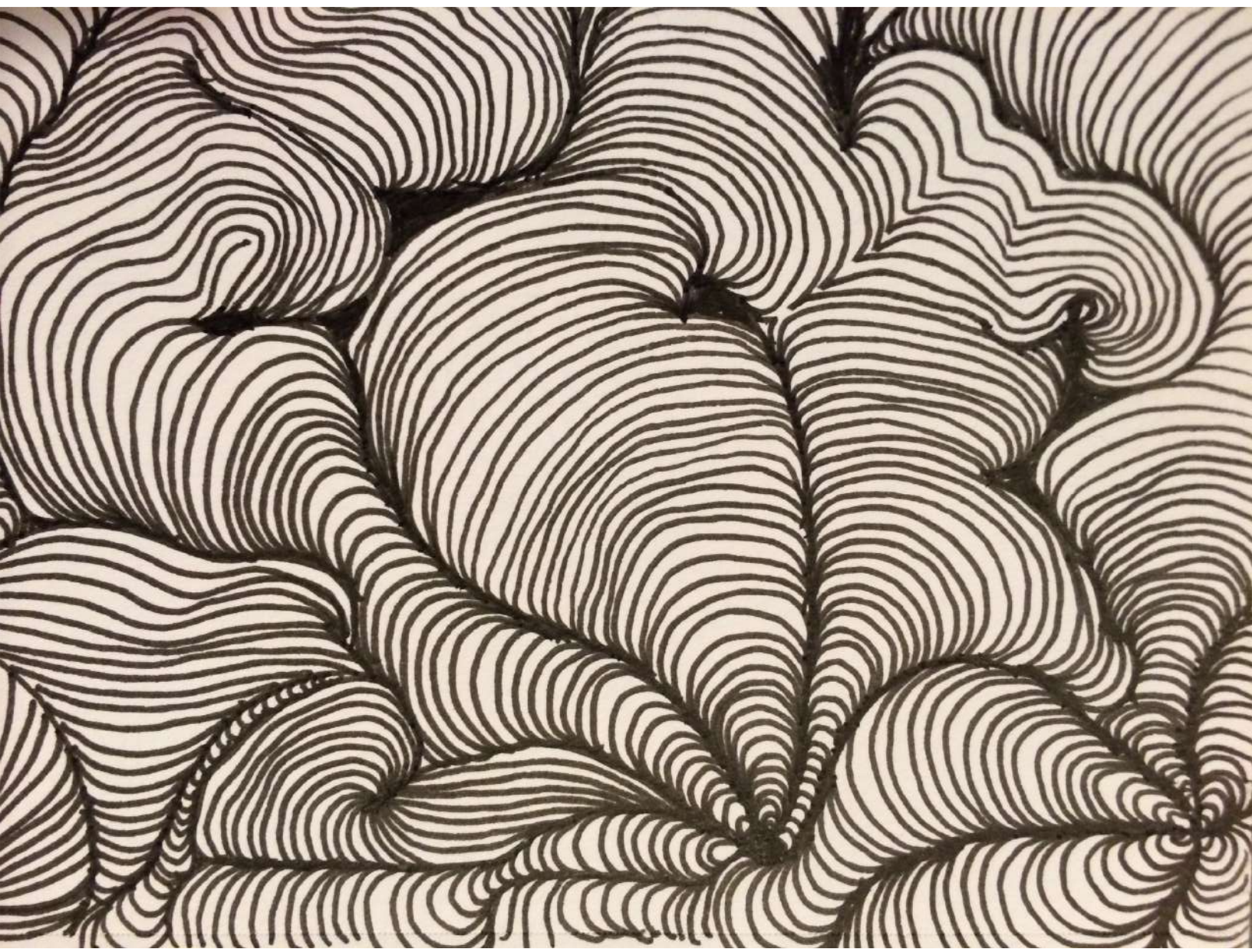
One of the other novels on the ballot I returned to the library unfinished pre-lockdown, so that's going to be tricky, but I'll give it a second try. *The Light Brigades*, on the other hand, is so exactly not what I want in my head at this moment in time that it's not even funny. I'm not much for grimdark, and military SF is fine but not my usual go-to, so the odds were against it, but boy howdy is the timing wrong for that one. The one I am looking forward to though, is *The City in the Middle of the Night*. I suspect Anders's particular perspective is going to be right up my alley just about now.

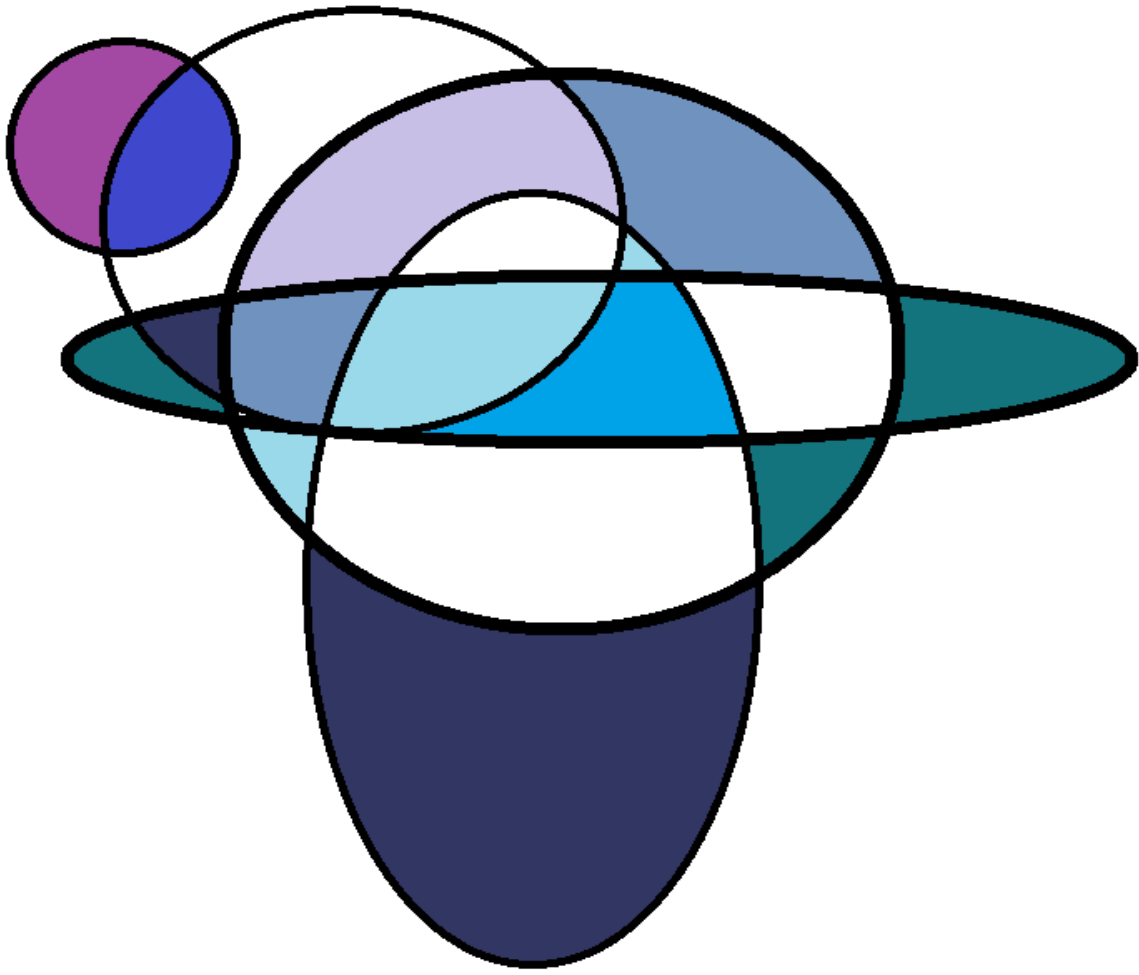
Meanwhile, *The Haunting of Tram Car 015* hit just the right spot. P. Djèlí Clark was on the ballot twice last year, but I only managed to read the short story, which was good but very different in structure, tone, and subject matter. I was not expecting a supernatural adventure in steampunk alternate Egypt, but I was delighted when I got one. Also great was finding out that there are more stories in the same universe, all now on my to-be-read list.

For some reason, this is the year that the best related category has captured my attention. I'd been wanting to read *The Lady from the Black Lagoon* for a while, I can't remember how I heard about it, probably on *File 770* or *Whatever*, but it was the first thing I read after the list came out. It's a good fit for lockdown; a mystery to pull you in, some righteous anger to keep you going, and a frosting of Hollywood glamour to keep things fun. It's not perfect, but I blazed through it pretty quickly. And then I picked up *Becoming Superman*.

Man, oh man, I had no idea about Straczynsky's childhood, if you haven't read the book yet just take this as a broad trigger warning for just about everything. But here's the thing, I'm also blazing through this one. I guess it helps knowing there is a happy ending, or at least that he is alive and successful, and someone I generally admire. And the writing is good, obviously. But where a certain part in *The Light Brigade* made me put it down, a corresponding event in *Becoming Superman* was upsetting, but didn't make me want to stop reading. I guess it's the grim rather than the dark that's the real problem for me.

So that's where I am now; stuck in my house during a global pandemic reading about just about the shittiest childhood imaginable. It's a strange old world.





COVID and Book Clubs and Blurbs, Oh My!

by Isabel Schechter

Are we done yet? Wait, who was that again? Hold up, I thought this was supposed to be about magic, but it's actually about aliens! I hate my book club. I hate my other book club. WTF was the person who wrote the blurb smoking when they said this author was amazing? These are just some of the things running through my head as I've been trying to read books while the world is in lockdown.

Life in quarantine has affected my reading habits, but not like I expected. Just like Harry Bemis in *Twilight Zone*'s "Time Enough at Last," now that the apocalypse has arrived, I was looking forward to finally having time to read all the books I want. However, similar to Harry's situation, things didn't work out how I expected. Or more accurately, I didn't work out like I expected.

I've always been an avid reader. I read on the couch, in the bed, on planes and trains, while waiting in line, and even while walking. I own far more books than I will ever read yet I continue to buy more. I volunteer at my library's used book sale, so I can introduce people to new authors. All my best friends are readers.

So why am I having so much difficulty reading during this pandemic?

When I first self-quarantined, I planned to read my book-club books well before our monthly (virtual) meetings, instead of my usual scramble at the last minute. Unfortunately, I did read them in time. I read them and then had a week or two, or even three, to obsess about how much I hated them.

I belong to two book clubs, so I figured if one group's selection sucked, at least I had one more shot at a good reading experience. Sadly, that second selection was generally not much better. One month we read a retelling of a well-known myth with a modern twist. I didn't like the protagonist and didn't think the twist was all that great. Another book was about a YA superhero that was so stupid that someone five years younger should have known better than to do such ridiculous things.

Where I've suffered the greatest disappointment, though, is with descriptions and blurbs on the back of books. Do the people that write them even read the book? The one that said it was a "female revenge fantasy?" Most of us in the book club had trouble stating definitively that what happened could be called revenge-worthy. The one that claimed a "spell-binding narrative?" This one made me realize that I need to take choosing our monthly selections into my own hands so I don't have to suffer through another book as boring and uninteresting as this one.

COVID Virus Ready

For the first time in my life, I find reading unenjoyable. I've tried several books from authors I love, writers of fantasy, horror, mystery, alternate history, and comedy. Everything is flat and one dimensional. Characters lack compelling urgency as the world is upside down. Will the walls come tumbling down? I no longer have the confidence to say no.

~Bradley Cozzens

The absolute worst, though, was the blurb for one book that claimed the author was just like so-and-so author (names anonymized so I don't hurt anyone's feelings). So-and-so author is an amazing writer; they have been around for decades, won awards, and been universally recognized as one of the best writers in the genre, so for someone to claim that this other author was even close to being in the same league was insulting. I will never trust reviewers and blurbs again.

This week, several of my friends have been taking part in a Facebook Ten Book Challenge, posting the covers of books that have influenced them. Some of the books they've posted that were also influential in my life, some make me wonder just what kind of influence they had on my friends. I've never heard of some of the books and am tempted to read them, but then I remember that I have to read next month's book club selections, Hugo finalists, books by friends, and maybe even some research for a project I'm working on.

Having and wanting to read this many books isn't really any different now than before quarantine. Just as I've become unable to connect to people because of social distancing, it seems I've also become unable to connect to books. Nothing ends up being what I expect, I hate all the protagonists, I don't remember who all the characters are, I keep missing key plot points that I have to go back and search for, and everything is too many pages! I don't wanna read nothin'! [Stomps foot while whining.]

Um, okay, maybe this whole lockdown thing is starting to get to me more than I thought. Perhaps I should go for a long, socially distanced, mask-wearing walk. Nah, I'll skip the walk; I have to get back to my TBR pile.



COVID Reading by Helena Nash

Since I haven't been driving to and from work, I've been missing out on my daily hour and half of audiobook in the car. Instead, I have been hauling the paving slab-sized *Dungeons and Dragons Art and Arcana: A Visual History* out into my back garden every lunchtime, just to get myself away from the laptop for half an hour. It's a beautiful thoroughly-researched book by people who not only know and love *D&D* in all its incarnations from the early 70s to the modern day, but also went through the hassle of securing the rights to reproduce all of the artwork from the tangled web of publishers and artists who've worked on *D&D*. As a bonus, the weight of the thing means that carrying it around also counts as my daily exercise.

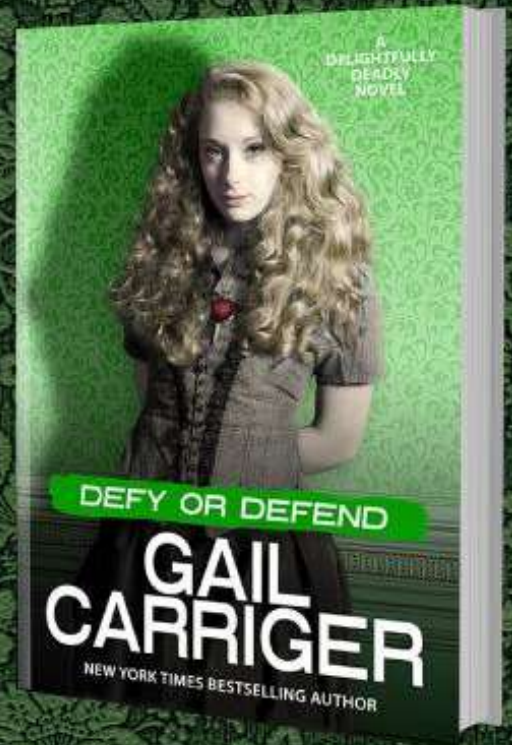
Now that I've finished the *D&D* book, I've moved on to Kim Newman's *Daikajju*, one of his recent *Anno Dracula* books. It's basically, *Die Hard* in Japan, with vampires and Y2K. It is very bitty and slow for the first half, with rather too many characters to keep track of, but the second half has tightened up as the cast gets whittled down and the heroes have begun to distinguish themselves from the rotten baddies. My favourite character is Nezumi, the 1,000-year old girl samurai.

Bedtime reading is currently *Eisenhorn: Xenos* by Dan Abnett, one of the many, many *Warhammer 40,000* books. I am consuming this in audiobook format, but since narrator Toby Longworth has such a nice soothing voice, I tend to fall asleep 5 minutes in. Thus far I am up to chapter 18 but have probably only actually listened to 10% of the story, which makes for a strangely abridged reading experience.

A book I have not yet been able to bring myself to crack open is Alan Moore's magnum opus *Jerusalem*, closing in at 600,000 words. It's been squatting heavily on my bedside shelf for a couple of years now, daring me to read it. Thus far I remain intimidated by its size and passing remarks of impenetrability from previous readers. But it's starting to cause the house to sink down on one side, so I'd better have a go, or just hire a team of movers to get it out the house.

"She hated it when
men got complicated.
They were so very bad
at it."

~ Dimity



Reviewed—*Defy or Defend* by Debbie Bretschneider

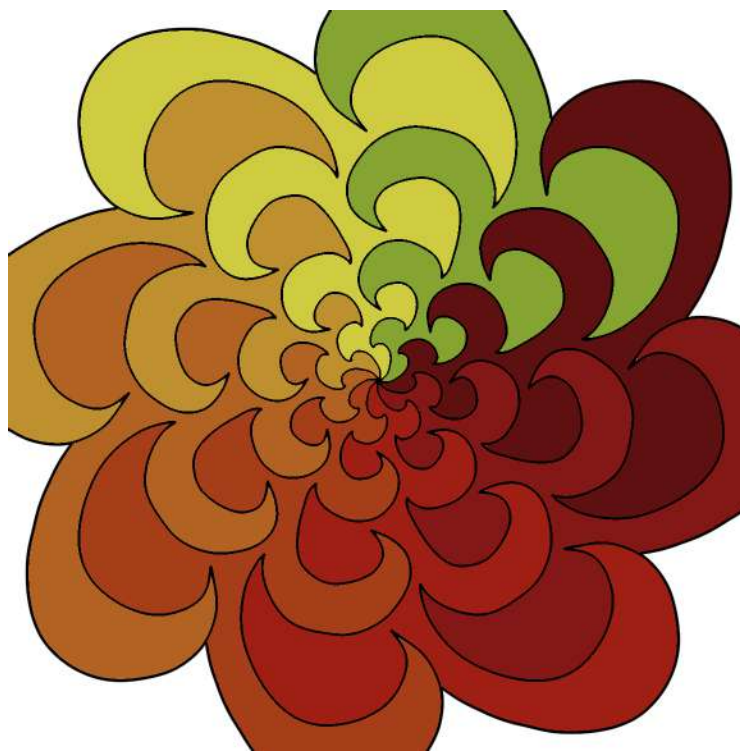
When the world feels uncertain, I love to re-read favorite books. Since 2009 my very favorite author has been Gail Carriger. In 2009, the first book in the *Parasol Protectorate* series, *Soulless*, was published. There are five books in this series -- a series full of Victorian England, steampunk, science, snark, romance, vampires, and werewolves in 1873. Oh, and these are sophisticated vampires and werewolves at the top of the social echelon! The most stylish rove vampire Lord Akeldama is a highlight of any of the novels he graces with his presence. I loved this series and was so sad when the fifth book was finished.

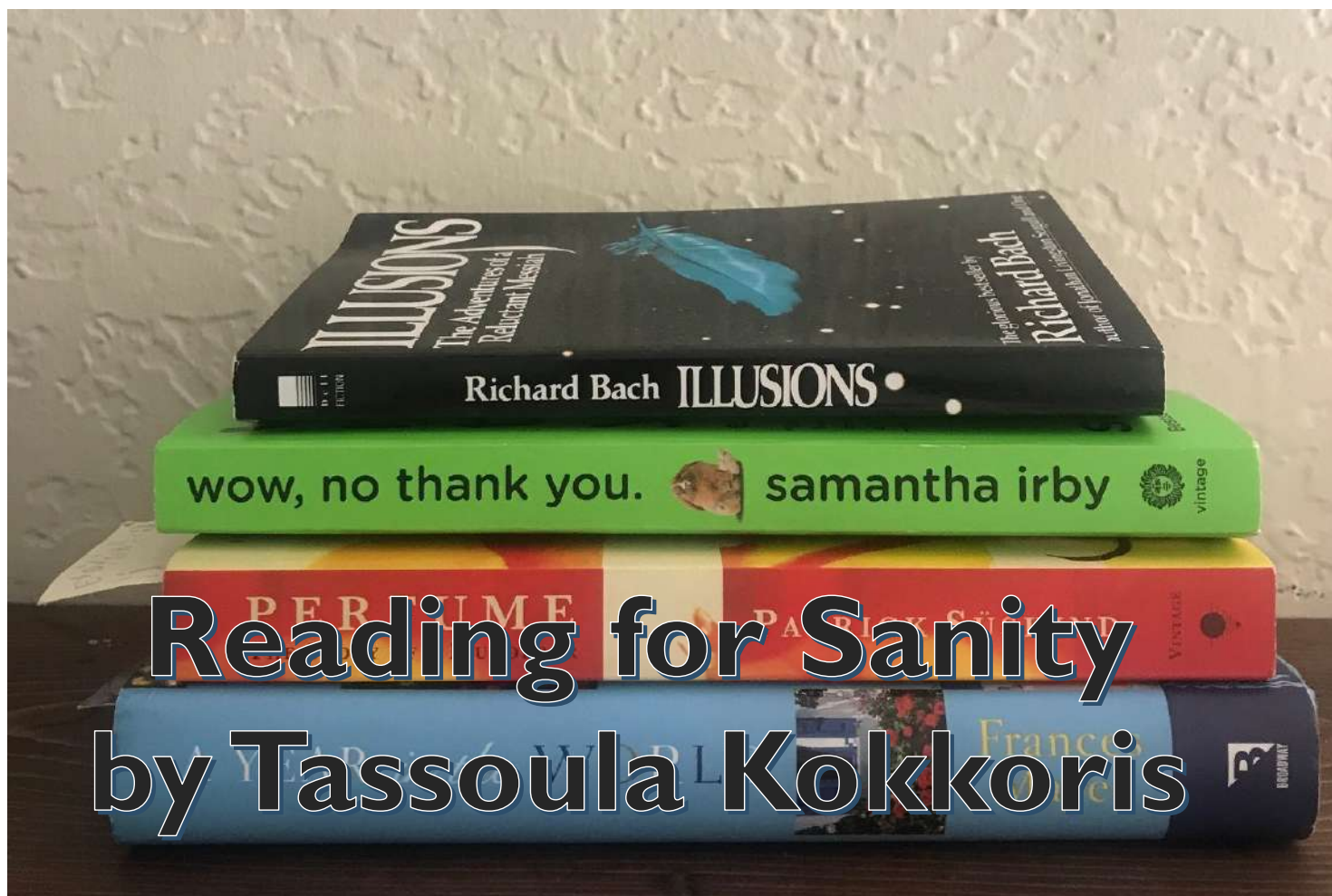
But in 2013, Gail came out with the *Finishing School* series, which is supposedly young-adult reading. But the characters are so well written you won't care about that! This series is in the same world, but takes place starting in 1851 with mostly new characters. We grow to learn about these characters and care about them, which is the magic of Gail's writing! In Victorian England, young girls were often sent to boarding schools for finishing –learning social graces, latest dances, how to use a fan. But in *Etiquette & Espionage*, girls are sent to a finishing school aboard a giant floating dirigible where the girls learn how to assassinate, learn espionage, AND learn how to use a fan for both. We meet Sophronia, Dimity, Agatha, and Sidheag who become best friends. And then more sadness for me when this series ended.

But wait, our author had more tricks up her sleeve! She came out with the *Delightfully Deadly* novellas, which took our friends from the finishing school and wrote about them after the school had declared them finished. Well, the first book was about a protagonist of the friends, Preshea in *Poison or Protect*. Preshea had always wanted to kill her first husband and by the time we meet her again she has finished off four husbands! But she gets a good ending and final husband.

And in May 2020, *Defy or Defend* came out. OMG, I was so looking forward to this book! In Northern California we had gone into shelter-in-place due to the pandemic on March 16, 2020 and it is still going until May 31, 2020 at least. Gail has a lovely Facebook group, *The Parasol Protectorate*, so we all knew the book was coming out for months before it did. So, I re-read the last two *Finishing Series* Books, *Waistcoats & Weaponry* and *Manners & Mutiny*. And then re-read *Poison or Protect* just before *Defy or Defend* came out. (just last year Gail led us through re-reading all the books in order, so I haven't re-read all of them this year)

Defy or Defend is made for these uncertain times! It "Sparkles" as we find out how Dimity has fared after espionage school. We get a cameo by Lord Akeldama and Dimity's brother, Pillover. It has romance, espionage, and vampires in high society as Dimity sorts out a vampire hive in trouble. Dimity receives her happy ending. This book is completely delightful and just the type of warm fluff we need right now! We all need to decide if we are going to defy or defend in this time of pandemic.





Growing up I never understood the term “reading for pleasure,” as reading for me was *always* a pleasure. Sure, I didn’t love every assignment I received in school and found certain topics could bore me to tears, but the act of burying myself in words was never a chore. It still isn’t.

As a resident of King County in Washington state, I was among the first wave of people to get sufficiently freaked out by the announcement of the coronavirus. One day it was a thirty-second news clip, deep within the broadcast; the next a press conference featuring our governor. A few days later it was a regular occurrence complete with daily death tolls, with many of the departed just a few miles away from my home. The press conferences, as of this writing, unfortunately continue to air. Although I’ve become desensitized to much of the pandemic coverage, I do value the updates from our community, as I trust the information I’m getting from our local officials is sound.

Like many, I’m not in an ideal situation for lockdown (not that anyone truly is) — I live alone, I have no family in my state, and I’m without a full-time job or health insurance. It’s too risky to join my seventy-nine-year-old mother in Oregon, or my sister and her family on the east coast for fear I’ve been exposed. So, things can get a bit lonely.

For the most part, I think my positive attitude has kept me from having a total meltdown, but I also credit my determination to stay busy. My days are spent looking for work, immersing myself in volunteer projects, taking long walks in nature (when permitted) and devouring as many books as possible.

Though I have a great love for film and television, my attention span has not been the greatest when it comes to finding focus for new shows or movies. I either default back to tried-and-true favorites I can stream, or watch bits and pieces of new material then go back to it later to process what I missed. But my focus while reading has thankfully remained unharmed.

The ritual of sitting in my backyard when the sun shines or lying in my bed, buried under a quilt made from old T-shirts to embark on a new journey through story is always inviting. I like the way that the crisp pages of a new paperback smell; I love the history I can feel from picking up a well-worn used title that's been enjoyed before me. I also often have a hot mug of tea next to me, which goes cold before I finish it if the book is really good.

Though my process for reading hasn't changed since COVID-19 surfaced, my selection of content most certainly has. Before, I had a very pedantic list of titles that I worked my way through either because of recommendations, gifts I'd been given, or to specifically educate myself about a current obsession. Now that methodology has gone completely out the window. Now I want escapes, I want meaning-of-life revelations, I want to feel like I'm not sitting in a house in Seattle, claustrophobic for being cooped up. I want to laugh.

The four most recent titles I've picked up perfectly satisfy one or more of the prerequisites I just mentioned.

With *A Year in the World* by Frances Mayes, I'm transported along with the author and her husband to places I've never visited, like Morocco and Portugal, to examine historical sites, absorb art and sample local cuisine that I can almost taste. In this non-fiction travelogue, each essay captures a different location Mayes spends time in and how it feels to be there. Even as she discusses places where I've been, such as Spain, I enjoy her frank commentary, which almost always jolts me back to my time there:

We arrive late. From the hotel window, the snowy mountain-ringed city below spreads into endless lights and the wavy slush of traffic noise. To compound our first impression, we face a greasy dinner in the small restaurant recommended by the hotel's concierge. Ten o'clock and the place is empty except for a silent couple having tapas at the bar.

The last international flight I took prior to the pandemic was to Brisbane, Australia for a quick vacation to see a U2 concert and to visit a dear friend. Because I flew on an Australian airline, one of the entertainment offerings was the film *Mystify: Michael Hutchence*. As an INXS fan who still feels sick to her stomach at the realization Hutchence is gone, I felt compelled to watch it twice on the trip, sobbing throughout much to the dismay of my seat-mates. One takeaway from the film that I shared with a few of my girlfriends who had seen the documentary in a theater, was curiosity about the book Hutchence seemed taken with in the film, *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* by Patrick Süskind. We all agreed to purchase the book and are now treating it as an ad-hoc book club topic on our weekly Zoom Happy Hours. What I love about this selection so far, about an 18th-century orphan in Paris, is the writer's ability to introduce every character in a vivid way, free of pretense:

Father Terrier was an easygoing man. Among his duties was the administration of the cloister's charities, the distribution of its moneys to the poor and needy. And for that he expected a thank-you and that he not be bothered further. He despised technical details, because details meant difficulties and difficulties meant ruffling his composure, and he simply would not put up with that.

My best local friend who lives just a ferry ride away from me on a neighboring island (yet still unable to visit because of the quarantine) texted me out of the blue, asking if I'd read, *Wow, No Thank You: Essays* by Samantha Irby because she was currently in hysterics reading it herself. I had not so she promptly sent a copy to my doorstep via a local indie bookseller. The essays within were an absolutely pleasant surprise. Like my friend, I found myself laughing out loud as I related somewhat painfully to much of what the author wrote about. For example, she asks many of the questions I've often asked myself:

Who are these people who somehow get the correct servings of carrots every day? Where do these positive bodies find time for all that sauerkraut and avocado? I know I have the same number of hours in my day as Beyoncé, but do I really have the same number as a person who manages to consume both a beneficial number of almonds and perform an adequate amount of cardiovascular exercise? I don't believe I do!

On a deeper note, when any type of trauma takes shape in my life I almost always seek spiritual answers. Though I had read earlier works by the same author, until a friend posted some quotes to his social media page from *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah* by Richard Bach, I'd never picked this title up. I figured quarantine was the perfect time to explore its themes of manifestations and parable-laden philosophies of life as an illusion, and I was right. It was just what I needed:

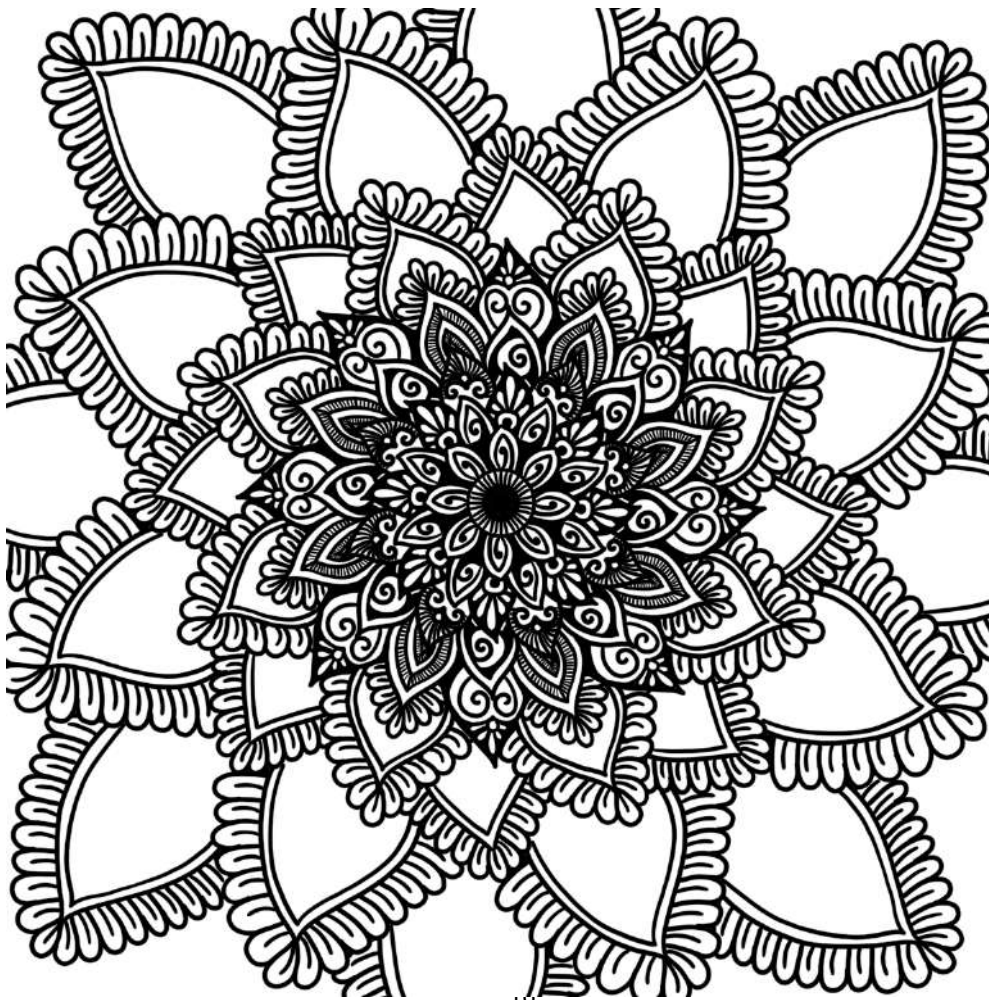
You are led through your lifetime by the inner learning creature, the playful spiritual being that is your real self. Don't turn away from possible futures before you're certain you don't have anything to learn from them. You're always free to change your mind and choose a different future, or a different past.

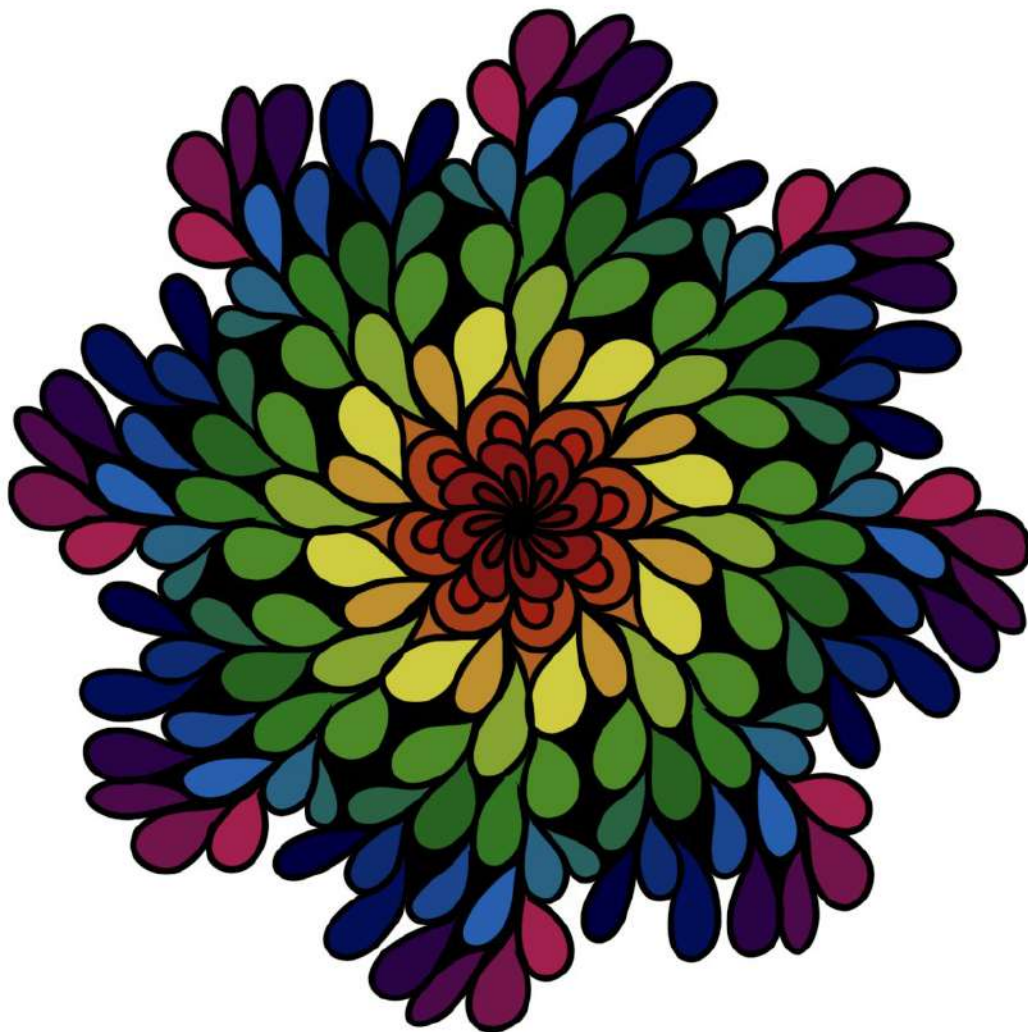
Right now, choosing a different future, free of the memory of our collective global pandemic nightmare, sounds pretty good to me.

Thank goodness for the benefit of a fresh perspective. Thank goodness for good literature.

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**Tassoula E. Kokkoris** is a Seattle-based freelance writer with a passion for pop culture. She has entertainment bylines in a variety of publications and websites including *Hotpress Magazine*, the *Sunset Marquis Blog* and *U2.com*. In a former life, she was also the co-host and producer of the film podcast, *Cinebanter*.





## Crisis-Management Entertainment by Kim May

I remember talking with a customer at the indie bookstore that I co-manage days before the governor issued the stay-at-home order that temporarily has shut us down. The customer and I knew it was coming, and we'd known each other long enough to feel comfortable speaking plainly about it. They wanted to know what I was going to do during the shutdown. If I was going to find a job elsewhere or catch up on my reading. I told her about some of my upcoming writing deadlines, but I was definitely going to spend a good amount of time reading. While I have succeeded on meeting my writing deadlines, the reading . . . not so much.

It's not that I don't want to read or that I've been too busy standing in line for toilet paper. I have been reading but it's not the reading that I expected to do or even the books that I'd planned on reading. Yes, I had a pre-planned reading schedule.

Because I work at a bookstore, I have a ridiculous number of books waiting to be read in my personal collection, in my lunch break reading stack, and there's also the half ton of review copies that publishers send the store every month. I can't read them all so I make a list of eight books that I'm going to read by the end of the month. If I read them one by one I'd never get through them all so I'll start another before I've finished one. Normally I'm in the middle of reading four or five books – one or two at work and two or three at



home – and I never have trouble keeping the plots straight in my head. My brain is just weird like that.

Right now, I'm in the middle of reading twelve books. Yes, I'm still able to keep track of what's going on in each one.

Free time is not why I'm reading so many books at once. It's because I'm having trouble concentrating for more than an hour on any given task. I don't have ADD or any similar focus impairment. I can't even blame the books! Even when I was engrossed in the story after an hour my brain homed in on the nearest distraction like a patriot missile. When the distraction was gone I no longer had any desire to read that book anymore so I picked up the next, and the next, and the next...

I'm not an expert, but I suspect that my inability to pay attention is because during the last week the bookstore was open I was in crisis-management mode the entire time. I was making sure customers were social distancing, that surfaces were disinfected often enough, that staff were washing their hands frequently, and a dozen other things in addition to my regular managerial responsibilities. After we shut down I don't think my mind left that state. Even though I don't feel anywhere near as stressed as I was that week, the way my mind is bouncing around from book to book makes me believe that part of my mind is still searching for a crisis that needs to be managed.

So, if only part of my mind is searching for a crisis what is the rest of it doing? Doing everything possible to avoid it. I tried reading a review copy of a highly-anticipated release. As much as I love their writing and no matter how excited I was to read this book, the second it registered in my brain that it was going to be dark, peculiar, and filled with conflicts of varying sizes my brain refused to let me focus on it. Despite the fact that the first chapter alone had everything that I love in a novel, and the prose was lovely, I still couldn't read more than a paragraph or two before my mind darted away. I had to pass the book on to someone else to review.

It's a very strange dichotomy to have, wanting conflict and yet desperately wanting to avoid it. Though, considering the lead in to my current situation and the general stressed state of the world it's not surprising. I just wish I knew how to resolve my inner conflict so I can read something more complex than a romance novel. Now I'm not trying to diss romances. I love a good romance novel. In fact, that's why nine of the twelve books I'm currently reading are romances. They always have a happy ending and the biggest conflict is how long it's going to take for the heroine to admit she loves the hero so they can reenact the *National Geographic* mating season episode. That's a conflict that the avoidance side of my brain is willing to stick around for but my conflict seeking side isn't pleased – hence why I'm halfway through nine romance novels.

As annoying as it is, I'm still looking on the bright side. I'm not trapped in the Twilight Zone. My glasses aren't broken, and at least I've figured out how to cope with my dichotomizing brain.

At work I tell the customers who are embarrassed that they're buying romances that they're brain candy. Sometimes life is hard and you need something sweet and fluffy to give you a much-needed break from the real world. Apparently, this time I'm the one who needs the brain candy.



## Reading in the Time of COVID-19 by Bob Hole

**F**or various reasons, my life has not changed a whole lot between March and May 2020.

In the Before Time, I worked mostly from home, and went out to pick up things like groceries, and once or twice a month was heading in to my volunteer job at a local small museum.

Today, I'm work mostly from home, having groceries delivered, and will be going once or twice a month to my volunteer job, which is always closed for the summer anyway. I do still go out. One of the jobs I'm doing for my volunteer position is taking photographs of rocks and mountains. I can still do that without running afoul of sheltering guidelines.

My reading, though, has changed. I'm avoiding dystopia more than I used to. I'm reading more light-hearted fiction. I just finished the delightful Lawrence Schoen series of *Buffalito* stories.

But my main reading has been non-fiction books on how to bring classes and exhibits online. I read some of that before, it's an interest of mine, but now I'm working to learn in earnest. Of course, I'm practicing what I'm learning – putting it to rapid use, so I don't have as much time to read, because I'm working so hard at implementing.



The one exception to all of that is that I've read a book to provide a review for my local public library. The book I read is *The Calculating Stars* (2018) by Mary Robinette Kowal. I'm not sure it was a good book to read in this time. It's a good book, don't get me wrong. It's the first of a trilogy, which is now out. If you can, I can recommend reading it.

But it's a slightly dystopic novel. The book is a cross between *Hidden Figures* (2016) and *Lucifer's Hammer* (1977). It's an alternate history story of the 1950s, revolving around a space agency. There are quite a few trigger warnings that should go with it: the book contains sexism, racism, and anti-Semitism. There's also government stupidity and some minor nefarious doings (as in *Hidden Figures*).

But there's also scenes of quarantine and isolation, not subjects I really wanted in my escapist literature right now.

So now, I'm returning to my non-fiction, which going forward will be including all the same things, but I'll be adding more geology. And I need some light-hearted fiction too. I've started *The Count of Monte Cristo* for that.





## Shelter-in-Place Book Reviews by Johnston Smith

### ***Crownbreaker* by Sebastien de Castell**

This is the sixth and the final book in the *Spellslinger* series and is the book I came into as a beginner of Mr. de Castell's work. While I am sure the five books before this one would only add to the story, I found that this could also be a stand-alone book. The writing is authentic and genuine, and, very well done. The main characters are well-defined and interesting. I kept thinking, "Why is this story so familiar?" That question still bothers me.

I am not sure how many spoilers will come forward in this review so I will not name names and try to be vague as to location. The story centers around a young man who everyone is trying to kill. A bounty is placed on him because of his rebellious nature. He must convince a group that follow the same calling to lead them, with the added complication that they are all fiercely independent. Added to this, his father, a mighty and powerful leader will either bend him to his will or kill him. Finally, will his equally powerful sister save the day?

I believe this is a good YA series. If you find yourself with time on your hands, you should explore the series as, based on my reading of the sixth book, it's well worth the investment.

### ***Shadow Stitcher: An Everland Mystery* by Misha Handman**

I have always enjoyed a good detective novel, especially when woven into another genre I read (space opera, military SF, and the like). This is a well-thought-out book about one such detective solving a crime in the last place on "Earth" you would expect.

Neverland.

The writing is well done and leaves just enough suspense to keep you engaged throughout the book. Our main protagonist and antagonist are not who you think they are. In fact, the surprise alone was enough to keep me riveted to the book.

A well-written book with good descriptions and a real sense of the atmosphere of the place.  
Well worth the read.





# Reading in the Time of Coronavirus:

## The Fisher King

by Steven H Silver

While staying in the house due to the pandemic, lock-down, and need for social distancing, I've been finding my thoughts turning to a work I first read when I was in graduate school studying Medieval history. I was taking a class in Arthurian literature and we were reading many of the classics, from Wace's *Roman de Brut* to Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. During the course, we also did a comparison between Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal* and Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, both of which related the story of the search for the Holy Grail.

One of the characters who appears in both versions is the Fisher King, named Anfortas by Wulfram. The Fisher King suffers from a devastating wound, a spear through his thighs in de Troyes' version of the story, that has brought impotence upon him and, unable to walk, he spends his days sitting in a boat fishing on a river near his castle. Part of Perceval's mission, which he fails to accomplish, is to ask the Fisher King a simple question which would lead to the Fisher King's recovery.

While Perceval is in the Fisher King's presence, he sees a parade of servants carried magical treasures: plates, candelabra, a lance, and a grail. The king's treasurers are shown multiple times throughout the course of the meal Perceval takes with the Fisher King, indicating the king's great wealth despite his wounds.

The impact of the Fisher King's injury was far more wide-ranging, however, than just causing a minor monarch to spend his days fishing. There was a belief throughout much of ancient and medieval history that the health of the kingdom was tied to the health of the king.

If the monarch is impotent, as is the case with Anfortas, the kingdom will suffer from drought, famine,



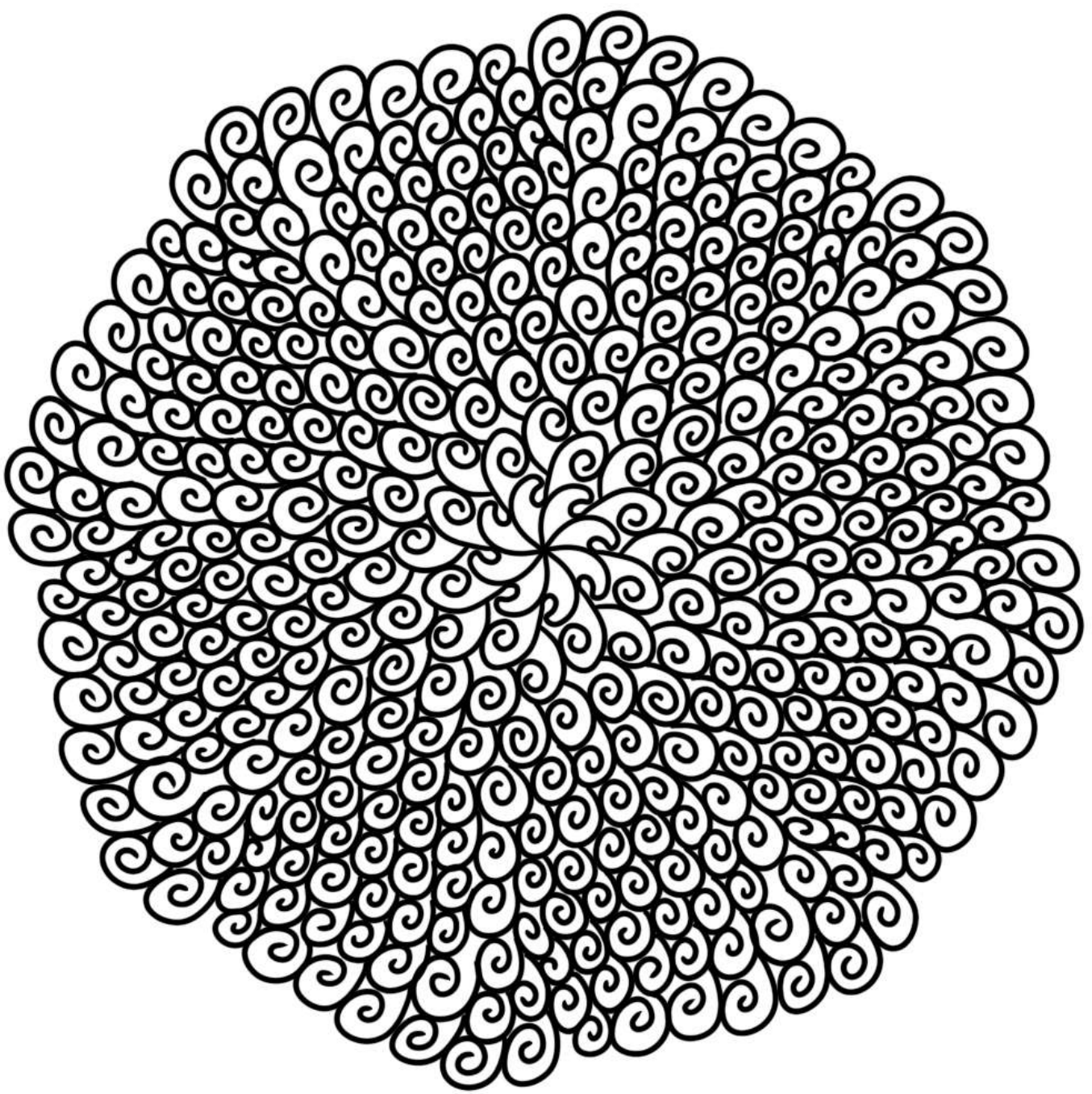
blight, and other related catastrophes. The only way to bring about an end to the suffering would be to cure the monarch.

There is a comfort in believing that the health of a kingdom is tied to its monarch's health. Rather than plagues and famines, droughts and floods being random acts of nature, they have a source, the presence of the monarch, who is also a father figure and the chosen of the deity. The linkage takes randomness out of the equation and also offers the prospect that all that is necessary to heal the kingdom is to cure one individual.

In 2020, the United States, and in fact the world, is suffering from a massive pandemic, the like of which hasn't been seen in almost exactly a century. Although we have a much deeper understanding of virology and epidemiology, it is also clear that a large, or at least vocal, percentage of the population is just as likely to believe myths or wishful thinking. From that point of view, the concept of the Fisher King, no matter which country you live in, has a certain (false) attraction to it.







## Love in the Time of COVID by Howeird

**T**ruth: the plague hardly has changed my reading habits at all. They had been changed about mid-2019 when it was clear I was not going to find another job in Silicon Valley, switched my LinkedIn tag to “retired” and substituted my work-time habit of reading at lunchtime to spending that time in my Lay-Z-Boy watching whatever trash was recorded the night before on my TiVo. But I still tried to read for half an hour (or a chapter, whichever came first) in bed.

I moved from Sunnyvale, California to Las Vegas, Nevada on March 9. Nevada was shut down on March 16. But that had no effect on my reading, because I don't buy paper books. I read from the Kindle app on a tablet. And on the tablet for several months:

### ***Rogue Stars: 7 Novels of Space Exploration and Adventure (Kindle Edition)***

It was free, and you can just imagine the quality of writing in a book which is one of seven in a free bundle.

Yeah.

### ***Archangel Down by C. Gockel***

*Commander Noa Sato doesn't believe in aliens. She's wrong. In the face of genocide, she must hatch a daring plan with a ragtag crew to save the lives of millions—and her own. Every step of the way she is haunted by the final words of a secret transmission: The archangel is down.*

Awkwardly, Gockel tries so hard to not give away the identity of the narrator that the reader has no idea what is actually going on. Somewhere in the final chapters we discover who the narrator probably is, and much of the plot starts to almost make sense. Characters are shallow and sketchy, but we do get a pretty good idea of the world's politics. Worth full price.

### ***2. Betrayal by Pippa DaCosta***

*She is programmed to kill. He'll do anything to survive. In a world where only one thousand synthetics were built, synthetic #1001 should not exist. She is no ordinary synth and the memories locked inside her code could bring the entire Nine systems, an ex-con Captain Caleb Shepperd, to their knees.*

This one is well written, actually. The main characters are fleshed out – a bad pun, because one main character is a human-like android – and DaCosta maintains the flow of the plot until the end, when it falls apart completely. Caleb is a boilerplate bad guy turned good, sort of. And we are told early and often that in a world where there is a limit of 1,000 androids, #1001 was built for nefarious purposes by a person or corporation with huge financial and political powers. The only thing we really know about her is she is not a sex bot, so what's the point? Worth \$4.99.

### ***3. Quantum Tangle by Chris Reher***

*A deep cover agent fights to keep the enemy as well as his own people from taking control of a strange alien that has invaded his ship, his mind and his life. It's high adventure in deep space where the voices inside your head are all too real.*

The voices in my head said, "If this was a paper book it would have been thrown across the room?" Worth deleting.

### ***4. Starshine by G. S. Jennsen***

*Space is vast and untamed, and it holds many secrets. Now two individuals from opposite ends of settled space are on a collision course with the darkest of those secrets, even as the world threatens to explode around them.*



Jennsen's writing is vastly untamed, but it has its moments. This is a ginormous work. I am only at Part I, Chapter 13. There are seventeen chapters in Part I. Part II is chapters 18-34, Part III 35-57, and Part IV 58-85. I expect by the time I am done, a chapter a night, the plague will have been long forgotten and the Las Vegas Raiders will be in the Superbowl and the Las Vegas NBA team will have played its first losing season.

Eventually I may get to the other books in the collection:

### **5. *Hard Duty* by Mark E. Cooper**

*In the far future, nanotechnology will be all that keeps us alive in a brutal war with the Merkiaari. Into this war-torn galaxy a courageous Marine, an alien geneticist, and a broken hero will unite in common cause to oppose the coming onslaught.*

### **6. *Ambassador I* by Patty Jansen**

*In Coldi society, you can get killed for looking a superior in the eye. Never mind accusing him of murder.*

### **7. *Lunar Discovery* by Salvador Mercer**

*Alien technology has been discovered on the moon, and NASA scientist, Richard "Rock" Crandon must lead a desperate race to get there before America's rivals. But it isn't just the fate of Earth that is at stake in this exciting adventure.*

The collection is still free for Kindle users: [https://smile.amazon.com/gp/product/B07BMBSZ6G/ref=ppx\\_yo\\_dt\\_b\\_d\\_asin\\_title\\_o05?ie=UTF8&psc=1](https://smile.amazon.com/gp/product/B07BMBSZ6G/ref=ppx_yo_dt_b_d_asin_title_o05?ie=UTF8&psc=1)

Obligatory disclaimer: I have not been sheltering in place. Las Vegas is almost as open as it is in real life. Casinos are shuttered, but restaurants are starting to open with anti-social distancing paranoia in place. As of May 15, one can get a manicure or a haircut if one wears a mask. All the supermarkets have been open during the day all through the scare. But I still have to get by with my California driver's license and license plates because [WTF?] the DMV is not considered an essential service and was shut down just in time for my March 18<sup>th</sup> appointment.



**R**elease Date: August 25, 2020

*Where Dreams Descend* by Janella Angeles took me by surprise. The back cover of the review copy I have calls it a mix of *Phantom of the Opera* and *Moulin Rouge* and I could instantly see why. Kallia, the main character, is the star of an amazing Hellfire Club and a talented magician that could put Harry Potter through his paces. She leaves the club to compete in a magic tournament but her fellow contestants keep mysteriously disappearing. There's also a malevolent unnatural force trying to kill her and her former boss keeps trying to force her to come back to the club.

Though I found it to be less *Phantom* and more *Moulin* with a heavy dose of *The Night Circus* thrown in for fun, it's a beautifully written novel. I had a difficult time putting it down. The characters are relatable, even the villains, and I fell in love with pretty much all of them. (Yes, even the villain.) My only gripe is that it's being marketed as a YA novel. Kallia is the right age for YA but that's pretty much it. The way it's written made it feel more like an adult novel. Plus, the former boss is too Christian Gray for a YA novel. Granted, it's that aspect that I love most about him, but it's definitely not YA. (There are no sex scenes in the book but there are other Dominant aspects.)

If you liked *The Night Circus* or *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* then you should definitely read this. *Where Dreams Descend* deserves to be in that esteemed company. It's an astonishingly good debut novel.





# The Mysterious Agatha Christie

## by Michele Wilson

Agatha Christie was born on September 15, 1890 and died on January 12, 1976. She was the author of sixty-six detective novels and fourteen short story collections, most of them starring Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. While the books are still good mysteries, they are somewhat marred by her cringe-worthy use of epithets showing her extreme prejudice against Blacks, Asians, Greeks, Turks, and Middle Eastern people.

Agatha Christie is considered the Queen of Cozy mysteries, a subgenre of crime fiction in which sex and violence occur offstage, the detective is an amateur sleuth, and the crime and detection take place in a small, socially intimate community.

Hercule Poirot is her most famous sleuth. He is Belgian and has to constantly correct people that he is not French. He is small in stature, at 5'4", and starting on the path to being rotund. He is inordinately proud of his mustache. He first appeared in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* and last appeared in *Curtain*.

Poirot is a brilliant detective and makes sure everyone is aware of that fact. He believes everyone should know his name and reputation and does get a bit sulky if they don't. His method is the use of the "little gray cells" or in other words use your head and don't bother grubbing around for clues.

Miss Jane Marple is an elderly lady and a throwback to a more genteel age. She is of the school of wearing a hat and gloves when going out. She does not approve of obscene language or blatant descriptions of sex. She exemplifies the word prissy. While Poirot will actually look for clues, Miss Marple only uses her power of observation of people to solve mysteries and then turning her insights over to the police.

Agatha Christie is at her best is when she steps outside of Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple. *The Mysterious Mr. Quin* is a series of short stories with little Mr. Satterthwaite, an observer of life at a house party. It was your typical dark and stormy night with a dark stranger knocking at the door. The first story introduces the theme of both death and lovers. In a later story, Mr. Quin actually says that he is the Advocate for the Dead and for Lovers. Mr. Satterthwaite becomes our human guide to the mysterious world of Harley Quin.



Who is Mr. Quin? Where does he come from? Is he human? Is he real? As the stories continue, they lean increasingly toward the mysterious. Your questions will be unanswered, leaving you to figure out what you believe. The stories become more and more supernatural.

One of Christie's most famous books is *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Hercule Poirot appears in this early book. The book is written in the first person and the narrator becomes Poirot's assistant. The book starts off as any good mystery does as the detectives follow the clues. It isn't until the end that Agatha Christie delivers her sucker punch.



One of the eeriest Agatha Christie books is *And Then There Were None*. Ten people were lured to a mysterious island. One by one they are killed. Who is behind it? Why are these people being targeted? Can the survivors discover their perpetrator in time before they become the next victim?

Perhaps the most famous of Christie's books is *Murder on the Orient Express*. A train is caught in a snowstorm. All the cars are filled with people who seem to be strangers or are they? It is up to Poirot to make his way through the lies to try and discover the identity of the murderer of a man who deserves death.

*The Man in the Brown Suit* is chock full of little mysteries. Why was a man so terrified that he stumbled onto the train track? Who was the doctor wearing a brown suit who pronounced him dead at the scene only to disappear?

In *Endless Night*, an old gypsy woman warns a young couple to stay away from Gipsy's Acre. Why the warning? Why was the mansion abandoned to deteriorate? What? That last one will be what you say when the ending is revealed.

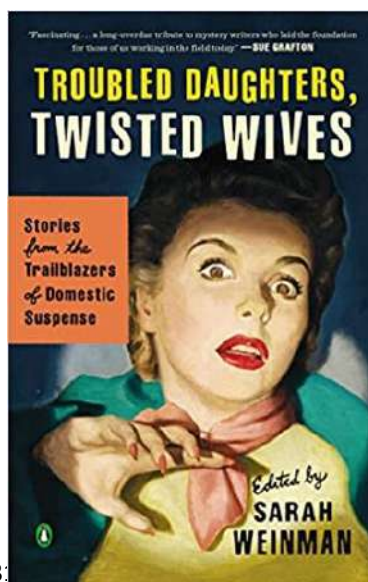
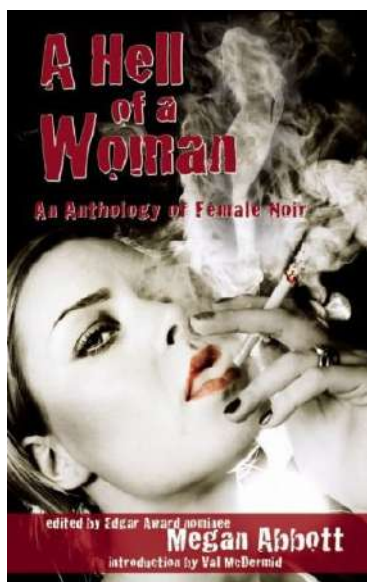
In *The Pale Horse*, a priest is called to administer to a dying patient. As he is returning home he is killed and the clothes savagely ripped open. A list of names is discovered and a couple of amateurs set out to solve the mystery. The Pale Horse is the name of a large house inhabited by three very strange sisters. Are they involved in the deaths? Are they camouflaged to cover the real villain?

*The Clocks* is one of my favorite mysteries. It stars a weary detective, a spy with a degree in marine biology, a for-hire typist who is also a world class liar, and a blind woman who is not what she seems.

Agatha Christie is one of my favorite authors to read at night before going to sleep. They are a throwback to what many think of as gentler times. She is great about throwing so many red herrings at you that when the resolution comes you are relieved. My cat Pixie likes to cuddle next to me when I read. According

# Mid-Twentieth Century Women Crime Writers by Chuck Serface

Recently, I came across two anthologies, *A Hell of a Woman: An Anthology of Female Noir* edited by Megan Abbott (2007) and *Troubled Wives, Twisted Daughters: Stories from the Trailblazers of Domestic Suspense* edited by Sarah Weinman (2013). I've been a fan of Abbott's since reading *Die a Little* (2005), a harkening back to crime fiction from the mid-twentieth century. Abbott and others – Laura Lippman, Christa Faust, and Gillian Flynn, for example – have tipped their hats toward hard-boiled male writers whose works enjoyed a renaissance during the 1980s and 1990s, such as James M. Cain, Jim Thompson, and Charles Willeford. I remember picking up titles from Vintage Crime/Black Lizard celebrating these and other figures from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, with Patricia Highsmith being the only woman I can remember. Abbott and peers have addressed this imbalance, drawing attention to other more important inspirations, the mid-twentieth century women who like Highsmith produced psychological crime pulp that strayed well away from the drawing rooms, cozy themes, and genteel detectives of Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, proving that women could play mean just like their male counterparts. Some even went for a different level of grit, domestic situations and anxieties related to traditional feminine roles.





Abbott and Weinman's anthologies piqued my curiosity about these long-neglected names. Thankfully, the Feminist Press's *Femmes Fatales* and New York Review of Books lines have been releasing newly repackaged editions. The Library of America has joined these renewal efforts as well. I've digested a few during the Great COVID Pause. Kind of a grim genre for such a harrowing period, you might say? Well, I gain much solace from twisted minds and existential themes. I hope you will too.

## Dorothy B. Hughes



I first read Dorothy B. Hughes's *Ride the Pink Horse* (1946) years ago after having found it at San Francisco's City Lights Bookstore. The plot involves three men: (1) Sailor, a crook from Chicago; (2) Sen, a senator and Sailor's former boss; and (3) Mac, a police officer on the hunt for both men after Sen apparently murders his wealthy wife. The three characters meet in a New Mexican desert town during Fiesta, and much tension flows from their relationships, especially since Sailor and Mac come from the same Chicago neighborhood, although each has followed different life paths. Mac's certain that Sailor can help him to nail Sen. Character-driven crime fiction can't get any better, I'd thought. Then last month, I re-encountered Hughes through an even greater novel, *In a Lonely Place* (1947). I'm still breathless from the experience.

Megan Abbott agrees with me, sparing no energy when praising Hughes's story about a serial killer:

Reading Dorothy B. Hughes's novel *In a Lonely Place* for the first time is like finding the long-lost final piece to an enormous puzzle. Within its Spanish bungalows, its eucalyptus-scented shadows, you feel as though you've discovered a delicious and dark secret, a tantalizing page-turner with sneakily subversive undercurrents. While only intermittently in print for much of the last half century, its influence on crime fiction is unsung yet unescapable. From Patricia Highsmith and Jim Thompson to Bret Easton Ellis and Thomas Harris, nearly every "serial killer" tale of the last seventy years bears its imprint – both in terms of its sleek, relentless style and its claustrophobic "mind of the serial killer" perspective.

Hughes is more than a match for Cain, Goodis, and company. Both *Ride a Pink Horse* and *In a Lonely Place* made it to the silver screen. Hughes herself netted many awards, and I'm looking forward to reading *The Blackbird* (1943) and her final effort, *The Expendable Man* (1963). Several others by her are available through e-formats, but I'm an old-school print reader.





I can't fathom why Caspary has all but vanished from our literary view until relatively recently. What an interesting life she led. At one point, after having earned \$2,000 from Paramount for a 40-page script, she moved to Hollywood and joined the Communist Party. She never really took to it, however, but did manage in 1939 to visit Russia before returning home to attempt quitting that organization. This boldness went into her novels, particularly *Laura* (1941), the murder story later transformed into the silver-screen legend starring Gene Tierney and Clifton Webb. To this day, *Laura* the film features prominently on "best of film noir" lists, even if many forget the original novel and the powerhouse storyteller behind it.

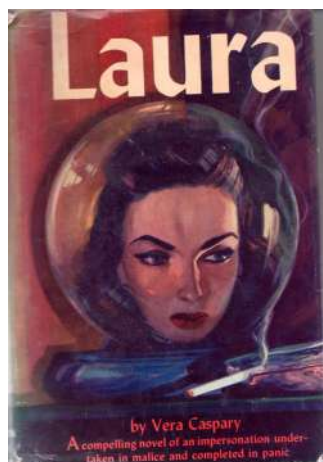
About that film: Caspary was not happy with changes director Otto Preminger instituted for the movie. Preminger felt *Laura* without character, so to repair this he removed most of the character's professional standing while altering her pragmatic nature. Of course, Caspary had modeled

*Laura* after herself which partially explains her ire. I was amazed to learn that Caspary hated writing mysteries, so if she were going to write one, she'd do so differently, outside the usual formula. Michelle Dean of *The New Yorker* lays out Caspary's process for seeking inspiration and for creating *Laura*'s mentor, the arrogant and unlikable Waldo Lydecker:

But there is another source for the character. The writing of "Laura" was a kind of accident, done for money. Caspary did not like murder mysteries herself, and she saw in them a structural flaw. "The murderer, the most interesting character," she wrote, "has always to be on the periphery of action lest he give away the secret that can be revealed only in the final pages." If she was going to write one, she decided she needed to do it differently.

A friend suggested she read Wilkie Collins's "The Woman in White" and try out his manner of using the voices of several characters to weave the story. It worked, not least because she found inspiration for Lydecker's type in Collins's villainous, obese Count Fosco. "Crime is in this country what crime is in other countries—a good friend to a man and to those about him, as often as it is his enemy," Fosco declares in that book.

Other works by Caspary have begun resurfacing, most notably *Bedelia* (1945). May they all rise to Parnassian heights.





## Margaret Millar

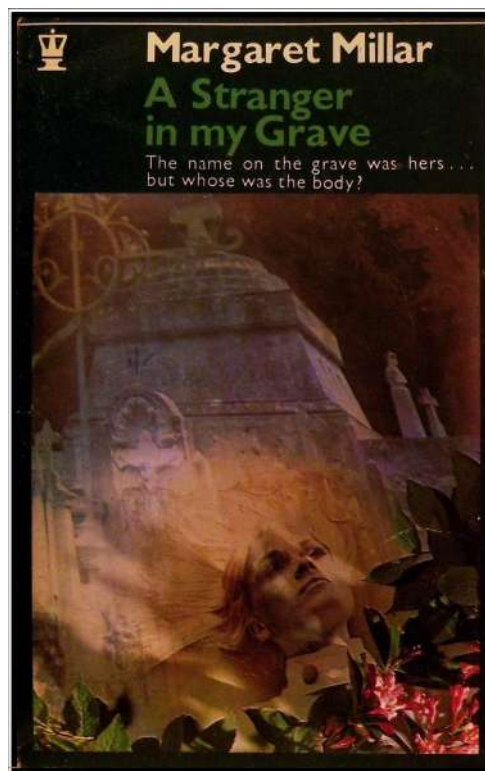
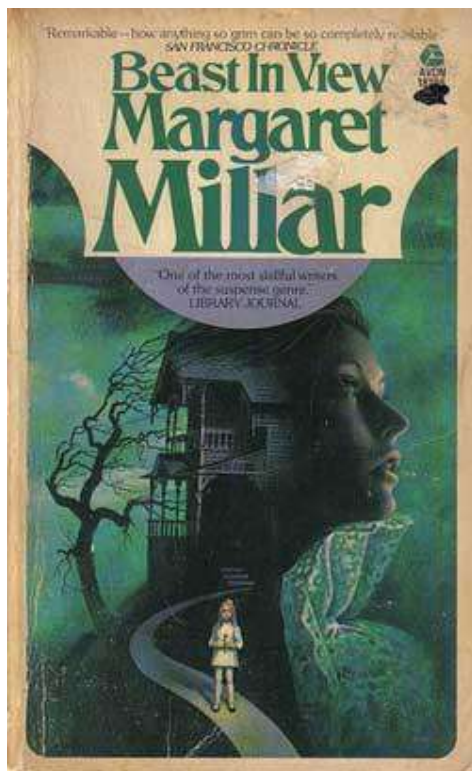


Margaret Millar, born Margaret Ellis Sturm in 1915, first met her husband Kenneth, better known to the world as Ross MacDonald, at the Kitchener-Waterloo Collegiate where they both were members of the debate team but remained acquaintances only. They'd reconnect while Margaret was at the University of Toronto, and years later after they were married, Kenneth quipped that he adopted a writing alias to avoid being eclipsed by his wife.

While reading Millar's *Beast in View* (1955), I wondered if she'd contributed any screenwriting for Alfred Hitchcock, because her character-driven, psychological style resonate similarly. Apparently not, since we know nothing about which screenplays she might have worked on or completed while under contract with Warner Brothers just after World War II. I defy any reader to not think either of Robert Bloch's *Psycho* (1959) or Hitchcock's film of the same name (1960) while reading *Beast in View*, for which Millar won the Edgar Award for Best Novel.

Equally loaded with plot twists is *A Stranger in My Grave* (1960). Not only do readers encounter crime and suspense, but a deep analysis of the family dynamics that have led to the central character's predicament. Millar peels back not only illusions of household and familial bliss, but of the Golden State as well. How happy her publishers and public were that Millar moved beyond copywriting for her husband and into the literary limelight herself.

Kathleen Sharp describes Millar's protagonists as "smart, difficult, and sometimes threatening. They were women who shared a quietly desperate view of a hard-boiled world," quite counter to the manly men or passive women featured in many mysteries and crime novels of that period. Desperate and stifled within traditional feminine roles, her characters were strong enough to challenge the male-dominated orthodoxy of our society, and thus Millar became a foundational author of what's now called the domestic thriller, her themes a commentary on the frustration not only of her own situation, but the situation of women everywhere.



## Patricia Highsmith

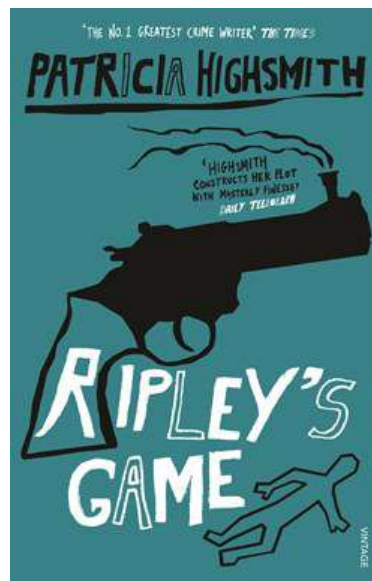
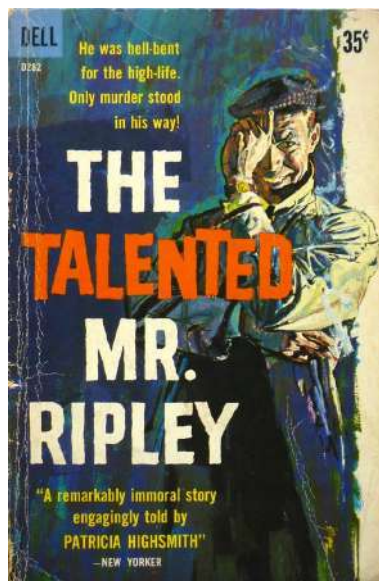


Quoted by Edward Helmore for an article in *The Guardian* about Patricia Highsmith's diaries, biographer Andrew Wilson notes:

[Highsmith] had an obsession about detailing absolutely everything in her life, very much like Sylvia Plath. And she drew on [her] diaries for her novels, which explore the notion of obsession, guilt and murder, and reject rationality and logic for the darker elements of human personality.

Her diaries also reveal a deep interest in existentialists, Albert Camus and others according to Wilson, who goes on to describe Highsmith as a “lesbian who hated women, totally politically incorrect in many ways, and certainly not a poster girl for the feminist movement.” To make sure we really get it, he adds, “She could be a monstrous, violent and quite unpleasant woman. She hated black people, she hated Jews, and she hated women.” Her diaries and other individuals have verified all these attributes.

Nonetheless, Highsmith's easily the most legendary writer among this group, and for good reason. *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) spawned a series containing five novels. Back when I read these books, I encountered a critic who dinged Highsmith for abandoning the “gay agenda” she'd introduced in the first novel, given that Highsmith herself was a lesbian. At the beginning of the second novel, we find that Ripley has married a woman, settles into the south of France, and embarks in episodes that center around his complete amorality. That's what this critic missed -- how Highsmith crafted the ultimate conman, a criminal psychopath who was whoever or whatever was required to attain his goals. Gay? Bisexual? Pansexual? Perhaps, but I posit a better identifier is straight-out opportunist. Highsmith employed her understanding of this mindset through twenty-two novels. I've not read them all, but I'm deeply satisfied with what I've experienced so far.

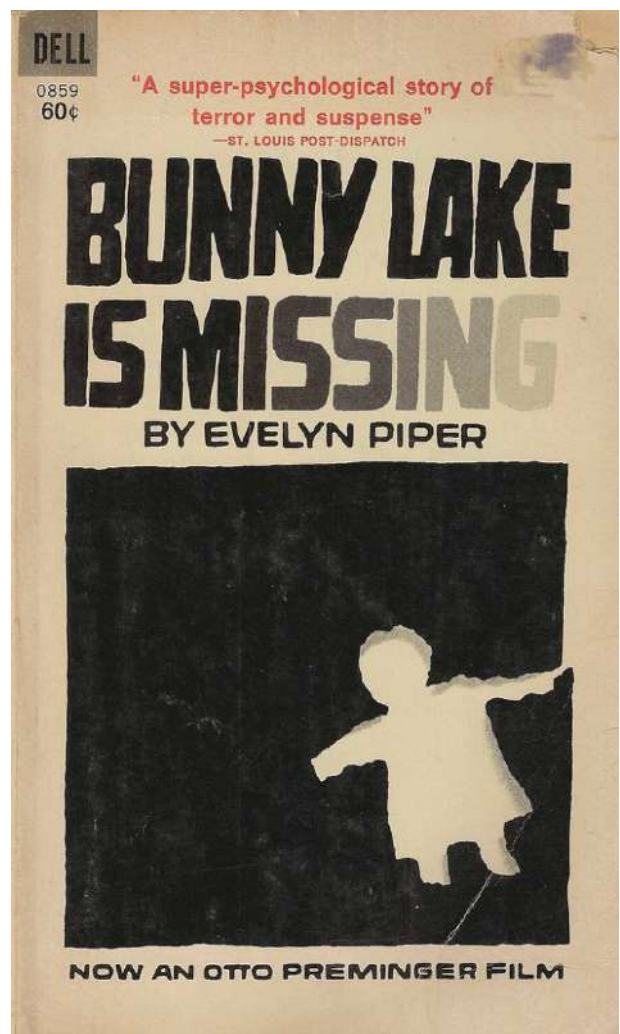
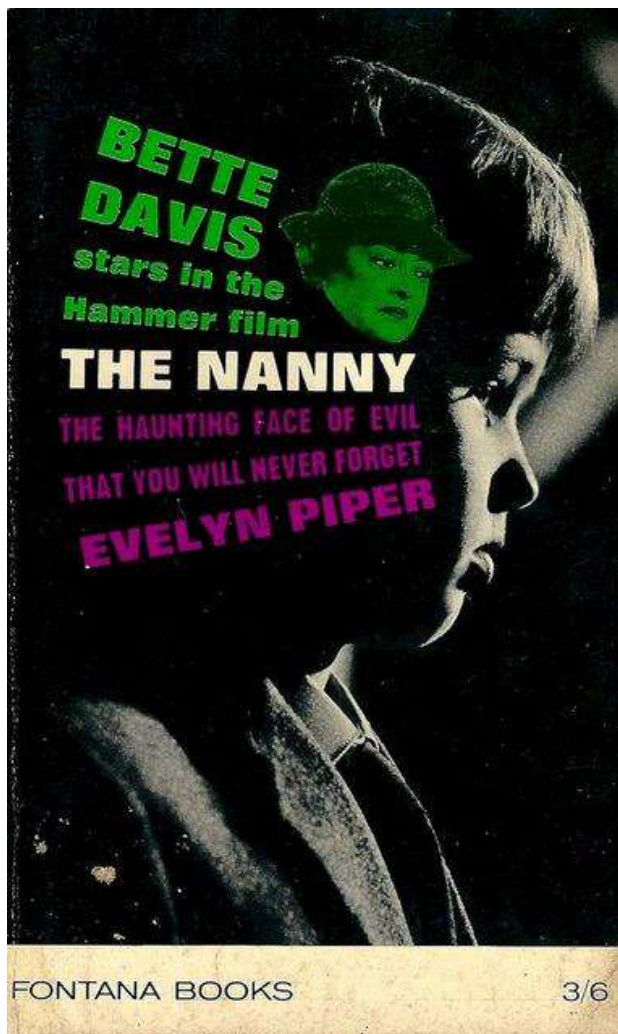




## Evelyn Piper



Merriam Modell published several short stories that appeared in *The New Yorker*, and two novels, all examining women and the angst surrounding domestic situations. Then under the pseudonym Evelyn Piper, she began publishing pulp thrillers that gained her the title Queen of Domestic Suspense. Her first novel as Evelyn Piper, *The Innocent* (1949), was a finalist for the Edgar Award, but she's most famous for *Bunny Lake Is Missing* (1957). Otto Preminger directed the 1965 film starring Carol Lynley and Laurence Olivier with Noel Coward playing the creepiest landlord imaginable. While retaining the central plot, Preminger instilled massive changes to character motivations, story location, even radically altering how the resolution plays out. I highly recommend both the novel and film. Students should never think they're taking shortcuts by watching the film only. Their instructors will have no trouble knowing.



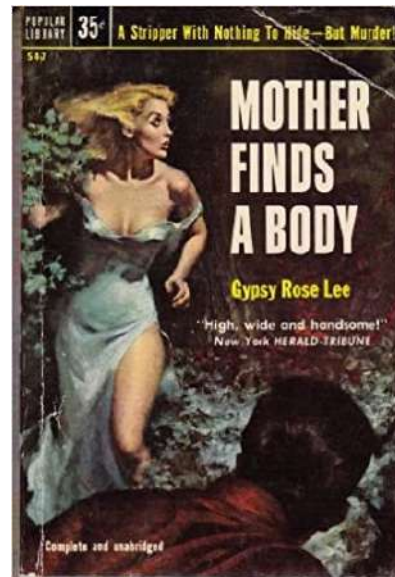
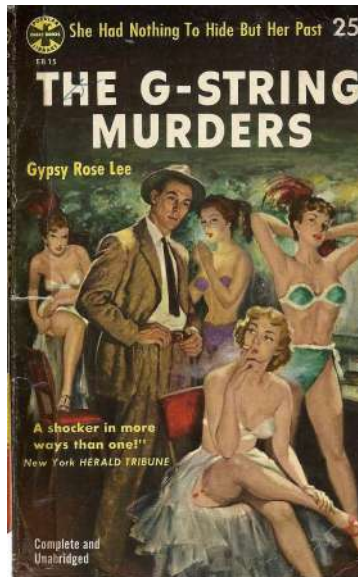
## Gypsy Rose Lee



Yes, *that* Gypsy Rose Lee, the famous strip-tease artist, born Rose Louise Hovick, who wrote two mystery novels, *The G-String Murders* (1941) and *Mother Finds a Body* (1942). And why not? Lee was known as much for her wit as she was for her dancing, and she possessed enormous talent for publicity. Today, fans would consider her novels media tie-ins that both supported her burlesque endeavors while introducing curious new fans into the fold. After reading *The G-String Murders*, I'm left with no doubt that Lee was an astute observer that well understood the ways and language of her professional environment.

Not everyone felt so positively about her efforts, however. In her afterword for the Femmes Fatales edition of *The G-String Murders*, Rachel Shteir discusses how Lee received unfair treatment from critics. *The New York Times* panned the novel, even if others had dubbed Lee a "strip-tease intellectual." Shteir sums the situation up as follows: "From the beginning, journalists cast doubt on whether Gypsy had actually written the book or not. Some of the early press alluded to the idea that a stripper, even an intellectual one, could not possibly have written anything."

Critics have theorized that the popular writer Craig Rice (born Georgiana Ann Randolph Craig) ghostwrote Lee's novels, but I'm with those who disagree. Surely, Lee corresponded with Rice, the more experienced scribe, and I'm willing to allow for Rice perhaps offering feedback, and suggestions for edits much like Truman Capote provided for Harper Lee, or Harper Lee for Truman Capote, or any number of reciprocal writing relationships that come to mind. Lee deserves full authorial credit. To assume otherwise was knee-jerk sexism and classism on the part of early critics.



I've barely dented the stack here. But give me time.