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## WSFA Starts New Year Still Remote Via Zoom

1/1/2021 - Sam S. reminded people to pay memberships \$20 to [Capclave@yahoo.com](mailto:Capclave@yahoo.com), use Paypal's Friends and Family rate.



“Alright folks,” said Bob, trying to start the meeting. “It’s meeting time. Welcome to 2021. First Friday of the first month.” Sam L. read minutes. Sam S. gave the treasury report. Current total of \$\$\$ with a year over year of \$\$\$\$\$. Pay dues so can nominate and vote for WSFA small press. You can write a check and mail them, use Paypal to [Capclave@yahoo.com](mailto:Capclave@yahoo.com) (Friends and Family) or call and give a credit card number through square (costs us the most in fee). WSFA Press did gangbusters. When we started WSFA Press, we agreed to give WSFA Press \$10,000 a year. This year moved \$\$\$\$ out of Press account so made a profit.

Capclave Present: George said to Paul that we need to put up a list of paid members because might not remember. Boskone, turnaround too tight, never heard back about ad swap. Someone asked where are we on rebuild of site for 2021? Paul said about a week ago, poured hot chocolate on computer. It did not react well. So didn’t get registration page up and need names from Sam. Need new Zambia and no one contacted me about Zambia. George said this would be Rodger and Zenlizard. Zen said he had some training and could use more. George said need to send email to Bjorn. Logistical stuff needs to get done. Need to do backup of ad with Cathy. Rodger was not here for Capclave Future.

Paul said, he ran a report of books sold from Amazon that goes to my account so \$\$\$\$ needs to go to WSFA. We owe Subterranean Books a huge thank you. I’ll get the registration page and registration list up this weekend. Much apologies.



Trustees: Elizabeth said consider paying dues. Courni said that we will probably be virtual for the election, need to start thinking about how we will do it. There was a discussion about the voting system. Paul said his system has never been used. Bob reminded trustees that they need a slate by April.

Small Press award. Cathy said Paul’s update to the website with new dates, rules stay the same. Cathy is updating the database. Delayed press release until after New Year’s so it will go out Monday. Carolyn said no one has submitted anything yet.

For the Committee to Discuss SF. Sam gave a schedule. Sam L. said he was behind in *Journals* [Hah, little did I know then]. Will have a *Journal* by the end of the month. Sarah said social media is social so interact. Dodos had pie and ice cream. All meetings are updated with Zoom.

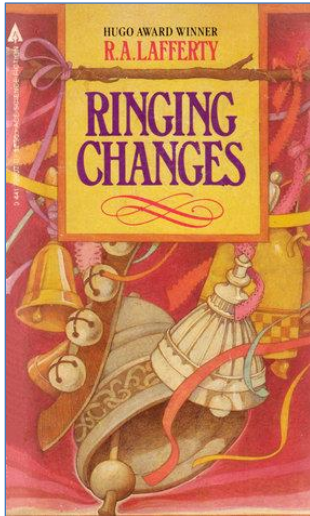
Old business: Fifth Friday Zoom party. The New Year’s party was a success. New business:None

New People: Andy Morrison. First meeting. Made a New Year’s Resolution to connect with others. Natasha Butler found us on Meetup. She read Kim Hargan’s book.

There was a discussion of when we could have an in person meeting [longer than anyone would have dreamed then]. Announcements: Sam L. said WSFA members can nominate for BSFS’s Compton Crook Award. Bill said Discon3 got over ### new memberships. Think about nominations for Hugos. Meeting adjourned at 9:47 at what passes for unanimous.

Attendance: Elizabeth Flack, Sam S., Dragon Nydhogg, Aaron & Angela Pound, Mark Roth, Bill Lawhorn, Sarah Mitchell, Greg Key, Frances Holland, Carolyn Frank, Judy Newton, George Shaner, Michael I, Andrew Morrison, Zenlizard, Elizabeth Twitchell, Alex Wallace, Cathy Green, Fabrice Guerrier, Gayle Surette, Kim Hargan, Courni, Bob MacIntosh, Sam Pierce, Kathi Oveton. Natasha Butler, Paul Haggerty, and Sam Lubell

### (Mostly) Forgotten Author: R.A. Lafferty

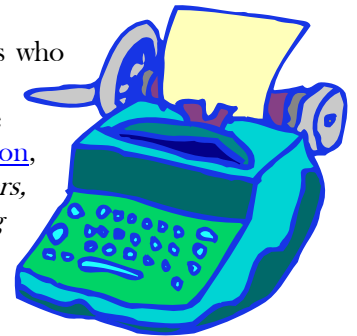


R.A. Lafferty is not quite a forgotten author. But nearly all of his writing is out of print. The Library of America has published his *Past Master* in their *American Science Fiction: Four Classic Novels 1968-1969* set. A *Best of* collection is available in England and will be published in the U.S. in 2021 as a Tor Essential. Centipede Press has published a Lafferty Library as collectors' limited editions, but these sold out despite a \$50 price tag.

Lafferty always was a writer's writer (it is not by chance that each story in the *Best of* collection is introduced by a different big name author who loves Lafferty including Neil Gaiman, Harlan Ellison, Connie Willis, Jeff VanderMeer, Robert Silverberg, and Michael Swanwick). Even in his lifetime publishers would publish him because his work is so good, but stop because his work just did not sell. His later works tended to appear in chapbooks and fan publications. Lafferty was a stylist who wrote in a language that had more to do with Irish tall tales than the plain transparent style sf readers tend to prefer. Many readers found his work challenging and missed most of the humor. They did not understand that this was what made reading him so rewarding.

Raphael Aloysius Lafferty didn't start writing until he was in his 40s (in 1960) and largely stopped after age 70, although previously written works continued to appear. He specialized in writing about strange doings with a roundabout style. For Lafferty, the plot was just an excuse for the writing. Even though he wrote 23 novels in multiple genres, Lafferty is best remembered for his SF short stories. His best known novels are *Past Master* and the historical *Okla Hannali*.

He may not have had many readers, but those who did read him are devoted fans who kept his work alive. One of them, a writer named Neil Gaiman, who probably will never be the subject of a forgotten writer's column, convinced the Locus Magazine Foundation to buy the rights to his literary estate. There is even a [convention, Laffcon](#), dedicated solely to Lafferty. Collections include: *Nine Hundred Grandmothers*, *Strange Doings*, *Does Anyone Else Have Something Further to Add?*, *Ringling Changes*, and *Lafferty in Orbit*



If you've not read him, a number of his stories are available in the public domain from [Gutenberg.org](#) and [ralafferty.com](#). And keep an eye out for the *Best of* collection as a Tor Essential in 2021.

### Discon3 is Not a WSFA Activity

Before the 1/15/21 WSFA Meeting Mark Roth said he was ready for a coup. Rodger said, that unlike the capital police, he has an eject button and is not afraid to use it.

Kim Hargan chaired the meeting. George Shaner said he had not been active this week so everything is the same as last meeting. He asked Rodger if he was in touch with a 1632 person. Rodger said he hadn't.

Needs to talk to Bjorn to see if Flint has preferred boilerplate language. Asked Paul about the Word Count. Paul said to keep bios shorter than *War and Peace*. It is effectively unlimited. For Capclave Future Rodger wants to talk to WSFA Publishing committee about outreach for a future possible GOH book.

Trustees. Elizabeth said if interested in an office speak to trustees. Sam Lubell said they needed to find a new person for secretary.



Carolyn, for the Small Press Award Committee said she received the first story on Jan 4<sup>th</sup> followed by many more. She has sent ## to Paul already. “This is too many. The Australians are back. I have one pandemic story. Stories are the normal range of good fun to I fell sleep reading them. We are out there and getting stories. There are four new small presses. In January I normally get a third of stories but we are only halfway through Jan and I already have ###. It would be nice to have stories nominated by WSFAAns.” There was discussion of the goodies for nominations. “I think the work of those who nominated should not be overlooked,” said Rodger. “For 2021, if people nominate I will arrange for individual cookie packets. If six nominate, I will bake for WSFA should we ever meet again.” Paul said he put those stories up. Sam L. gave the schedule for the committee to discuss SF.

Social Media. Sarah put out stuff for small press award and will do periodic reminders. Social media is social so like, share, and interact. Sharing social media will make the Dodos happy. Webmaster Paul said he has nothing with WSFA Press but looks forward to doing another book. “Show WSFA pride and get books out of my basement.” Courtni wants copies for her archives.

Entertivities discussed Arisia. Discussion of Zoom sword fights. Elizabeth took the Tik Tok sea chanty challenge. Air and Space Museum is having sf events this weekend. There was discussion of Wonder Woman’s Invisible Jet. No other committees.

Old Business. There is a Fifth Friday this month. Sam L. will organize a Fifth Friday. Sam Pierce asked about Discon3, this was ruled not a WSFA Activity. No new business.

New people: Andrew Morrison here for his second time. Wayne Fuerguson for his second meeting. Announcements: Capclave. Discord fan table. Buy Capclave memberships. Discussion about Discon 3. Various medical problems. Adjourned 10 PM.

Attendance: Sam Lubell, Carolyn Frank, Dragon Nydhogg, Michael I, Rodger Burns, Mark Roth, Frances Holland, Aaron Pound, Judy Newton, Greg Key, Mike Taylor, Sarah Mitchell, Bill Lawhorn, Judy Kindell, Wayne, Sam Pierce, Gayle Surrette, Paul Haggerty, Elizabeth Twitchell, Andrew Morrison, George Shaw, Courtni Burleson, Kim Hargan, Ale Wallace, Deidre, and Cathy Green.

## **Cancel Culture and SF** By Sam Lubell

The estate of Dr. Seuss (yes he counts as a science fiction/fantasy writer) has withdrawn six of his books, including his first book, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* saying “These books portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong.” This year’s Worldcon has disinvented its publisher Guest of Honor, Toni Weiskopf (of Baen Books) after a blogger accused Baen Books’ online forum of advocating (or at least tolerating) racism, sexism, and promotion of

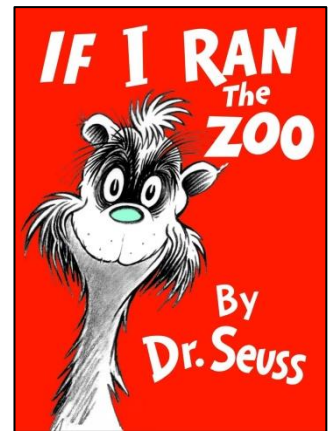
violence. Although Weisskopf shut down these forums, some people said it was not enough and Discon3 removed her from being a Guest of Honor. (Note: although I am a member of the organization sponsoring the Worldcon and am on the convention's staff I was not involved in this decision.) Disney removed actress Gina Carano from her role in *Star Wars: The Mandalorian* due to her social media posts comparing conservatives to victims of the Holocaust, among others.



Conservatives have accused liberals of trying to silence conservative voices and imposing a cancel culture on those insufficiently “woke.” But at the same time they are ignoring their own long history of conservatives trying to censor liberal content such as children’s books with gay couples and nontraditional gender role, even a picture book, *And Tango Makes Three*, about two male penguins in a zoo who adopted an egg. There was a fairly large movement in the comic book community objecting to the increasing number of minority and female superheroes. Gamergate attacked women in the gaming community. And of course no football team has been willing to hire football star Colin Kaepernick after conservatives attacked him for kneeling during the national anthem. So conservatives are being completely hypocritical when they attack liberals for doing the same thing.

Of course two wrongs do not make a right and saying the other side does it too is hardly a valid defense. But note that much of the so-called cancel culture is people adapting their own content. For instance it was the copyright owners that discontinued the Dr. Seuss books. And Disney, as the owners of Lucasfilm, decides who can appear in their movies and TV shows. And certainly movie studios are reluctant to hire actors and actresses whose personal notoriety (for whatever reason) overshadows the roles they play.

This is not an issue of free speech, which only applies to the government. People naturally form their own opinions of others based on what they say and with whom they associate. And as society changes what is acceptable behavior also changes. We should acknowledge that the past was different from today without locking the present into the mold of the past. So while museums and history books need to show what happened in the past; this can be done without lionizing past figures whose behavior is now unacceptable by present day standards. Also, tastes and styles change and popular entertainment changes to match the times. For instance, look at the Batman of the 1960s TV show compared to the Batman of *The Dark Knight*.



Similarly, science fiction has grown and changed. For instance the work of much of early science fiction would not be publishable today due to the flat characterization and lack of literary polish. Science fiction has grown and evolved past this base. Even works of hard science fiction and space opera need strong characters and inspiring writing, not just intriguing ideas.

### Comfortably Boring

Prez Bob welcomed everyone to the 2/5/21 First Friday in February. Sam L read the minutes. Treasurer’s report was \$\$\$\$ up a thousand from last year. Pay dues.

Cap present, nothing significant to report. Program chair will talk to me after the meeting. Cap Future, Rodger apologized for not following up on Press.

Trustees: Courtni said to pay dues and think about running for office. Bob said the slate is due by the April meeting. Carolyn for small press said there were ## stories in January. We are on the way to close

to ###. ## nominated by authors. The rest from publishers including ## new publishers. Two stories were pandemic-influenced. Few long stories. WSFAns have not nominated any stories. Stories are due by the end of March. Don't wait until the last week of March. Follow directions on the WSFA Small Press Award page. We have ## stories online.

Paul said WSFA Press and web page are comfortably boring. Sam L said we would be discussing Asimov's. Entertivities spoke on upcoming conventions. Judy said Arlington Cemetery scheduled Barry's Funeral for March 10<sup>th</sup>. There is a max of 100 people allowed. For social media Sarah said to interact with social media, like and retweet.



Old business. Fifth Friday had 7 or 8 people on Zoom. No other old business. For new business the Scheiners have decided they no longer wish to host. The Pounds put their name in the hat. One more meeting for people to volunteer. Otherwise, we will make the Pounds the hosts. Andrew Morrison was here for his third meeting. He can now pay dues.

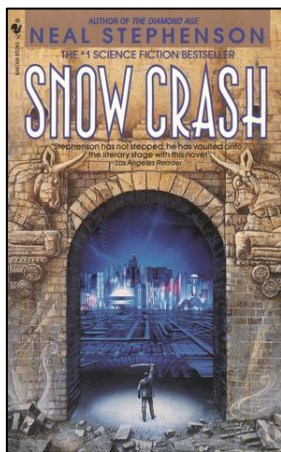
Announcements: Carolyn celebrated her trip to Hobbit-land. Mark Roth has a book contract with Ring of Fire Press. Courtni said Fabrice led a discussion on YouTube on Afrofuturism. Elizabeth said Capclave ahead of many professional online conventions with fulltime professional staff. Go WSFA! Cathy Green said the Oregon State provost lecture featured Doctor Mary Jemison, former astronaut, speaking on the 100 year starship project. Meeting adjourned 9:43 with what passes for unanimous.

Attendance: Fabrice Guerrier, Carolyn Frank, Jim Thomas, Michael Ikeda, Angela & Aaron Pound, Cathy Green, Mark Roth, Elizabeth Twitchell, Bob Macintosh, Sarah Mitchell, Sam Scheiner, Zenlizard, Roger Burns, Frances Holland, Courtni Burleson, Madeline Yeh, Paul Haggerty, Gayle Surrette, Judith Newton, Andrew Morris, George Shaner, Kim Hargan, Sam Lubell, Bill Lawhorn, and Alex Wallace.

## Here Are a Few of My Favorite Books

by Sam Lubell

I read a lot of books, but every once in a while I return to an old favorite. Here are some of my most loved books.



Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* is superb. It starts with cyberpunk and virtual reality, adds a very developed background world, an exciting plot, and even characters that are not quite cardboard (I'll admit the characters are the weakest part of his writing.) The main character, called Hiro Protagonist just so the reader isn't confused for a second as to who the book is about, loses his job delivering pizza for the Godfather literally in the first chapter, which must be the most exciting pizza delivery in print. Fortunately the pizza is actually delivered, by a skateboarding Kourier named YT (for Yours' Truly) and the two form a partnership to discover some of the weird happenings.

One of these is a mysterious drug, Snow Crash, that affects people even in the virtual reality world for which Hiro programmed the sword fighting routines. Another is the mysterious motorcycle rider / killer called Raven who is protected by the police for a very rational reason. And then there is the Godfather's special interest in YT, a link back to the tower of Babel, Babylonian mythology, the notion of religion as a virus spread by temple prostitutes and the possibility that humans themselves can be programmed biologically.

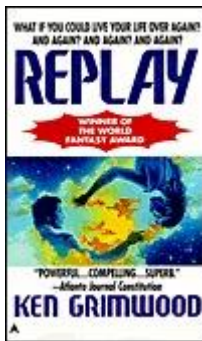
Equally fascinating is the background world. The United States is essentially dead, defeated by the libertarians who have allowed different regions to be virtually independent from each other.

So there are lots of borders and separate jurisdictions for police and even the courts. Similarly, the virtually reality world is not an anything goes place but has rigid rules and limitations.

The language is loose and colloquial; not quite Hemingway but close in spirit. The entire book is written in the present tense:

“Well, since you put it that way,’ YT says, and grabs the mask. It’s a big rubber-and-canvas number that covers her whole head and neck. Feels heavy and awkward at first, but whoever designed it had the right idea, all the weight rests in the right places. There’s also a pair of heavy gloves that she hauls on. They are way too big. Like the people at the glove factory never dreamed that an actual female could wear gloves.”

Critics have charged that Stephenson has problems ending his novel. However, while the ending section is not quite as good as the preceding 400 pages, it ties up everything and ends with a bang. I did find the sections with the electronic librarian summarizing Sumerian/Babylonian culture to be wearing and wish the author had not summarized his research so blatantly. Still, this is a small quibble in an excellent book. This is one you will re-read and discover more in it.



*Replay* by Ken Grimwood is a very intriguing twist on the time travel story. The central character dies in the opening sentence and then finds himself back in college, as a young man with all his memories of his older self, but no idea where this younger self left his car. He does the sort of thing a SF reader expects a time traveler to do, try to prevent the assassination of JFK, place bets at sporting events, buy stock in the right companies to become a multi-millionaire. But the woman he loves, his wife in his past life, refuses to have anything to do with him and he ends up marrying unhappily. Then, at exactly the same age as before, he dies again and wakes up back in college. He is literally a replayer and nothing he does can have any meaning since, come October 1988 he dies again and reverts back to square one.

The author manages to vary these lives considerably, and shows Jeff’s anger at the meaninglessness of it all. Then, midway through the book, after several of these repeating lifetimes, he sees a blockbuster movie which he had never even heard existed, because it hadn’t. There is another replayer, a woman, who also can remember these repeating existences, allowing a continuing relationship. There is also a new threat, the two realize that they don’t go back to the exact same day. When they die and restart their life each time, they restart their life a little closer to the day they die. The remainder of the book is their efforts to find other replayers, to find a cause/cure for their repeating, and to find a way of ending their slow loops towards a final death.

There are several philosophical points that are brought up as to what happens with these worlds the replayers have changed once they die and return back to their earlier lives, making new changes in the world. There is also the question as to the responsibility that comes from knowing about future disasters, serial killers etc.

The author does a successful job with the non-linear nature of the book’s central idea and throws in enough surprises that the reader doesn’t think he is reading the same story over and over. There is a slight flaw, at one point it appears that Jeff cannot make major changes in history (the idea that history corrects itself) but in another life he radically alters the future of the world. There’s also the unanswered question as to why this is happening, although the



characters do meet someone with his own, unusual, theories.

Is this fantasy or science fiction? Either way I highly recommended this book to anyone who likes time-travel books and does not insist on strict plausibility and hard science fiction.



Tim Powers is known for his everything but the kitchen sink fantasies and *The Anubis Gates* is my favorite of his works. This book manages to combine Egyptian magic, 19th century poets (including a brainwashed Lord Byron), gypsies, clowns, thieves, a bodysnatcher, a fake Hindu whose other identity is still a disguise, a magician who has to be tied down to prevent him from flying off to the moon, and time travel. This is one of those books that goes nonstop and that, even after reading a few times, you still aren't sure you understand everything.

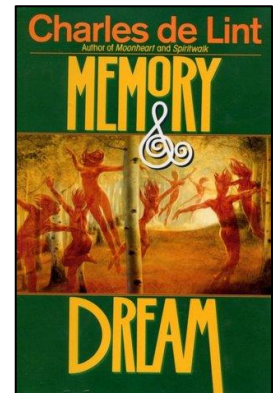
Brendan Doyle, an academic expert on the poets Samuel Coleridge and William Ashbless, is invited to participate in lecture by Coleridge, traveling by the means of mysterious gaps in time discovered by a millionaire with cancer. While in the 19th century he is attacked and left behind. He then discovers that none of his skills can help him buy food except by joining an alliance of beggars and thieves. Ashbless is missing and the clown who rules the beggars thinks Doyle knows magical secrets. Worse of all, someone is whistling old Beatles tunes, a hundred years before they are written. Doyle finds himself being chased by three different groups, he even finds out that he himself is not who he thought he was, at least, not anymore.

There's no way the reader can predict what will happen next in this novel, but the ride is always worth it. It is exciting, speculative, and enjoyable. This is a fun book that is nearly impossible to put down. Make some popcorn, clear your schedule, and just start reading. Highly recommended.

I like *Memory and Dream* so much that I bought the hardcover (admittedly remaindered) despite already owning the paperback. While some people think that *The Little Country* is de Lint's best novel, I greatly prefer this one. (However, he excels at the short story and *Dreams Underfoot* is probably his best collection if you don't count the SFBC omnibus *Newford Stories* collection.) This book is quite different from *The Anubis Gates'* nonstop rollercoaster. There is less action and deeper characters. The story is as much about the heroine taking charge of her own life and confronting her past as it is about the magic and defeating the villain.

The artist heroine starts the book by receiving a letter from a long dead author friend and is then asked to illustrate her stories. For years, Isabelle Copley has only painted abstract art and has literally been afraid to use the techniques taught to her by the strange genius Vincent Rushkin, who could create art that could come alive literally. The story alternates between this present and her artistic training 20 year earlier. Rushkin is a strange ugly man, prone to fits of violence and very strange demands. But as they work together he seems to grow taller and stronger while her art becomes better and better. Then, as she reads a story her friend wrote, she recognizes its main character as a figure she had painted from imagination, but which her friend claims to have seen. Then she meets an Indian who could be the model for one of her early paintings, one of those that Rushkin says has a soul, except that the painting was finished before she even met the man.

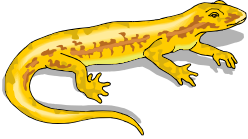
The story of what is going on in this novel, and the resolution of the story started in the past through the events in the present is part of the fun of the novel. The other part is the quality of the characters. De Lint has a knack for making interesting street people, artists, writers, and others at the margin of society. If you read too much of his work at once, you begin to notice that he never almost writes about any other type of people, but in small doses this is not a





problem. It is worth mentioning that *Memory and Dream* takes place in Newford, the imaginary city where many of de Lint's stories take place and so some of the minor characters who appear in this book, have their own stories in *Dreams Underfoot* and other collections. I find that this adds to fun, creating a bigger world than a single novel alone can do. It is not necessary to read any of these stories before reading *Memory and Dream*.

### Stating to Act Like Running Things



Since there are too many Sams here, Zenlizard is not identifying as a Sam.

Prez Bob MacIntosh tried to call the 2/19 meeting to order but failed to get attention. "This commences the third Friday meeting in February." Sam L summarized the minutes from last meeting. Sam S reminded people to pay dues using [Capclave@yahoo.com](mailto:Capclave@yahoo.com). Use the send money to friends function on PayPal.

For Capclave present George said he is starting to act like running things. Contracted Eric for bio. See how the next 2 weeks go. Needs to contact special guests to see how many will show up. Thinking of things need to do. See where Troy and guests stand. Get head count. Rodger for Cap Future had nothing to report.

Angela for Trustees said that if you have a role and no longer want to do it contact us. If you don't have a role and one contact us. Sam L. is temporarily retiring from Secretary position. Sam the dodo cannot apply. Elizabeth said old secretaries are welcome to apply. Sam L. gave the Talk SF schedule.

For small press, Carolyn said we have ## stories. This is not good. By the end of February we normally have half of the stories, which means we will have a whole raft of stories this year. The general theme is pirates. A third of the stories are from individuals but most of our usual publishers have not come in yet. ## WSFAn has nominated. It would be nice if more would nominate before the last week. We have not heard from the usual suspects. COVID-19 had had an effect. The output of publishers who don't do webzines have dropped. Still sending us stories. Rodger will do a cookie care package for those who nominate. If six WSFAns nominate he will bring cookies when we meet in person. The deadline is the end of March.



For Entertivities, Kim said *The Watch* on BC America is set on Pratchett's Discworld. Mike said the National Gallery of Art opened. Other museums open in March. For Social Media, Sarah said to Interact.

Old Business: Future Home for 1<sup>st</sup> Friday. No other people volunteered other than the Pounds. Eva said she is disabled so meeting in private homes locks out some members of our community. She wants us to investigate other options. Cathy Green said the last time Ernest Lily looked at options there was no place in Arlington that didn't cost money. Angela said there are stairs at her place but if someone called in advance, they could let people in through the storage room. There is no handicapped parking. Angela said she is hosting because has a three-year-old so her home would be comfortable for her. Eva said her building has a community room that would be open for us to use. Bob said that our meetings alternate Maryland and Virginia and Mark & Ellen are our Maryland hosts.



Sam L. made a motion to accept the Pounds' offer of hosting First Friday. Elizabeth said we may in the future want to investigate renting a party room post-Covid even if it means raising dues. Mark Roth said PSFS meets in a rented room at the University of Pennsylvania <but I thought they had their own building with PSFS in glowing lights outside>. Something similar should be fairly cheap. Eva said pre-1978 the club met Sunday Afternoon. There was a vote and the Ayes had it. Bob said that when we go back to in-person meetings, the Pounds will be the first Friday hosts.

Announcements: Sam L. called for contributes to the Journal. Wondercon will be virtual. Fairpoint is this weekend. The Gaithersburg Book festival is online. Cathy said she went to virtual Boskone. Alex is doing an alternate history of Israel and Palestine. Meeting adjourned at 9:55 unanimously.

Attendance: Rodger Burns, Aaron Pound, Jim Thomas, Sarah Mitchell, Greg Key, Mike Ikeda, Angela Pound, Sam Pierce, Frances Holland, George Shaner, Cathy Green, Carolyn Frank, Mark Roth, Fabrice Guerrier, Ellen, Sam Scheiner, Courtni Burleson, Ann-Marie Rudolph, Andrew Morrison, Bob Macintosh, Room Perserverance, Eva Whitley, Judy Newton, Zenlizard, Madeleine Yeh, Elizabeth Twitchell, and Kim Hargan.

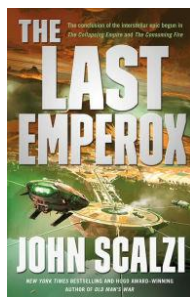
## F&SF READING LIST – 2020 (Part II)

By George Shaner

As promised, here is the second part of George's 2020 reading list:

25: Cipri, Nino. "Finna" (SF/Weird).

One has here a novella about exasperating couples, portals between worlds, big-box stores as centers of cosmic horror, and the notion that the pursuit of meaning might be more important than meaning itself. I enjoyed it but I can see where some folks might find it a one-gag throwaway.



24: Scalzi, John. "The Last Emperox" (SF).

Although this trilogy does not represent Scalzi's best work, considering the hash that he started with in "The Collapsing Empire," he managed quite a turnaround to get to a resolution that's satisfactory. Whatever else you want to say about the scenario, and the deck making up this trilogy had to be seriously stacked, the man still has the ability to create sympathetic characters with a few deft touches. I will say that the change-up that Scalzi pulls in the last third of the book I did not see coming. When it's all said and done I'm surprised that I rated it as high as I did; two cheers for basic commercial competence.

23: Jemisin, N.K. "The Obelisk Gate" (Fantasy).

To put it simply I must admit that the middle volume of this trilogy felt very much like marking time to me. Though the woman now known as Essun learns more about how her world descended into the abyss it currently occupies, this portion of her story wasn't that gripping to me. More of the drama comes from the portion of the book which follows the journey of Essun's daughter Nassun, as her father

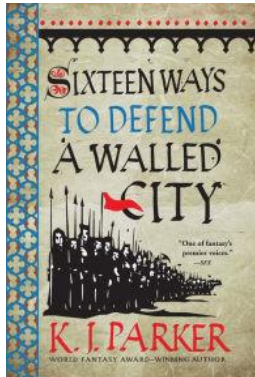
is trying to drag her off to a refuge that will, he hopes, purge his little girl of magic; you can imagine how well that works out.

22: Hoffmann, Ada. "The Outside" (SF).

As with some other reviews that I've read, I think that there are issues here regarding pacing and exposition with this exercise in "Lovecraft subversions," but Hoffmann sufficiently sticks the landing that I really have no problem giving this novel a solid "A;" I know, generous of me. It is a first novel after all. One comment that Hoffman made in her acknowledgements that stuck with me is that Yasira Shien's (the main POV character) antagonist, Akavi Averis, was actually the seed crystal of this story, and the main struggle of writing this book was turning Yasira into a believable character. There is sometimes an awkward tension between Yasira's journey of self-discovery and the tautness you might expect in a thriller. There's a second book coming in 2021 and I'm looking forward to it.

21: Bennett, Robert Jackson. "Foundryside" (Fantasy).

Having adored Bennett's "Divine Cities" trilogy, I'll admit that I had some mixed feelings regarding this series. While it's great to have a new work from Bennett, I'll also note that I expected to be impressed. Was I impressed? For the most part, yes. Starting with "peak" Venice as one's model there are certain expectations, and certain clichés to be transcended. If I have a particular issue it's that the prime characters do seem to serve the plot in a, dare I say it, mechanistic kind of way. However, just about all those characters are going to have their fortunes dramatically transformed in the course of this novel, and very little is as it appears.



20: Parker, K.J. "Sixteen Ways to Defend a Walled City" (Fantasy).

While I have some familiarity with Parker under his given name of Tom Holt, this is the first time that I've dipped into his more grimdark alter-ego, where we have an officer in a quasi-Byzantine reality who finds himself stuck with the mission of defending the imperial capital when all is falling apart. Mordant and ironic, Colonel Orhan proclaims at the start that he owes more to his enemies than his friends, and how that personal reality plays out is much of the thrust of the plot. I expect that I'll be reading more of "Parker" in the future.

19: Bodard, Aliette de. "The House of Shattered Wings" (Fantasy).

While I'm impressed with my first exposure to Bodard's fiction, I have my reservations; mostly relating to how I'm not totally in love with the notion of fallen angels as a trope, in as much as they have the threat of being the next sparkly vampires.

So, the good: I could relate to the POV characters, the plot does ramp up in an appropriate way with a satisfying payoff and there is no shortage of grim-dark atmosphere. If you're looking for a gothic story verging on horror you could do a lot worse than this novel.

As for the less-than-good, well, I came away thinking that I really wanted some more world-building. There is much to be said for just throwing the reader into a given milieu and letting them sink or swim, but I found myself thinking that there was a real "Potemkin Village" flavor to the world on offer and I didn't find enough meat on the bones to allow me to really suspend disbelief; call it logistics rearing its ugly head. Also, maybe this is just me being a semi-lapsed Catholic, but since one is dealing with an at least para-Catholic reality, complete with priests, I'd have expected a lot more theology as to why the rebellious angels were sent to Earth. Maybe I just think about this stuff too much.

In any case, I will be continuing with the trilogy.

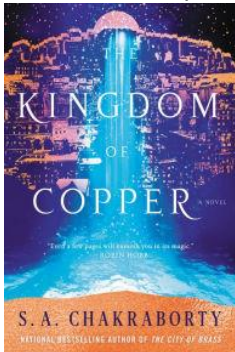
18: Stross, Charles. "Dead Lies Dreaming" (Weird/Horror).

It was probably inevitable that "The Labyrinth Index" was going to see the series end up in a state of entropic nihilism, as all real hope was apparently lost in the Strossian "Laundry" universe. However, that doesn't mean we've reached the end of the road with this exercise. Whether Stross would have turned the satire up to "11" without Brexit, and the follies of the current British government is another question, but in this novel we have assorted teams of dubious people trying to get their mitts on a very special book, with a plot where various cozy chunks of British culture have been thrown on a roaring bonfire. The real theme is that just because the avatar of one mad god has wound up in control of the British government, this doesn't mean that the devotees of other mad gods have thrown in the towel. This is a long-winded way of saying that I liked this book more than I thought I would (without giving away any of the plot) and if you've enjoyed the "Laundry" stories to this point there is no reason not to continue.

17: Asher, Neal. "The Warship" (SF).

For years now, Neal Asher has teased the concept of the Jain; a dead race whose remnant technology is a lethal threat to all that meddle with it. With this sub-series of his sprawling "Polity" universe Asher is finally putting some meat on the bones of this particular monster and I must say that the wait has been worth it, as Asher's long-term readers are going to be wondering how his cast of characters are going to get out from under this doom. The only real problem here is that while those folks familiar with Asher's concoctions of super science, political intrigue, body horror, and that aura which can only be called the Post-Human Blues, will eat this up, this novel will be totally impervious to the new reader. Those folks should start with the "Transformation" trilogy, which works well as an introduction to Asher, and I still think is probably the man's best writing to date.

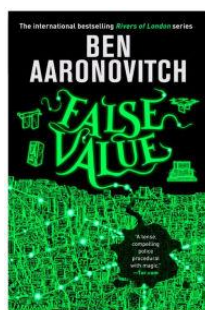
16: Chakraborty, S.A. "The Kingdom of Copper" (Fantasy).



With the first book in this trilogy I probably damned it a little bit with faint praise by calling it "pretty damn good but not great," on the basis that it seemed to be afflicted with a few too many data dumps. In the middle book the question is how the main characters are going to fare with the churn of social and political conflict that is Daevabad, as the stresses seem to constantly increase with almost no hope in sight. Rest assured, Ms. Chakraborty detonates the explosion in the climax of this book. If you enjoyed the first book there is no reason for you not to enjoy this one. I would probably have rated it higher if I could have spent a bit more time with it (the downside of having a forced-march reading plan for the year).

15: "Rowland, Alexandra. A Conspiracy of Truths" (Fantasy).

I'm not sure that I loved this book as much as some folks did, but the tale of a wandering storyteller, who turns provocateur when imprisoned in a society close to imploding, is certainly rather different from your run-of-the-mill second-world fantasy. Rowland is another writer who I'm going to be keeping track of in the future.



14: Aaronovitch, Ben. "False Value" (Fantasy/Weird).

When I started this episode in the continuing adventures of Peter Grant I was prepared to be a bit underwhelmed as, since the demise of Martin "The Faceless Man" Chormley, Aaronovitch seemed like he was marking time and I was wondering what the way forward might be. By the time I was done with this novel I had a big

grin on my face and while I might be more impressed than I should be Aaronovitch has found a way forward; I look forward to seeing how it plays out. One does wonder if Aaronovitch is another British author who has been buying himself some time until Brexit plays out one way, or another. That I rate this pot-boiler serial as high as I do is a commentary on how Aaronovitch keeps advancing the development of his characters.

13: Boroson, M.H. "The Girl with No Face" (Fantasy/Weird).

Returning to the world of "The Girl with Ghost Eyes," Boroson pretty much picks up right where he left off, as Xian Li-Lin, San Francisco's resident Daoist priestess, is presented with the corpse of a girl who was suffocated by a plant growing out of her. From there the plot moves out fairly briskly, as Li-Lin and, eventually, her embittered father, are drawn into a grand plot to wield supernatural power. If you liked the first book you will like this one even better, as there was some clunky writing in what was apparently Boroson's first novel. I do wonder where Boroson is ultimately going to take this series (now described as a chronicle), as I do get some sense that Li-Lin is already getting over-powered rather quickly, a chronic problem of urban fantasy protagonists in general.

12: Gailey, Sarah. "Magic for Liars" (Fantasy).

The best way to relate to this book is less as a fantasy, or as a mystery, but as a novel of character. There is less magic than there might have been, though magic is at the base of the apparent crime. And as a "whodunit" the plot narrows down very quickly to two suspects. What one really has here is a personality study of Ivy Gamble, the private investigator brought in to sift the ashes, as in the course of the plot she's going to have to come to grips with a lot of things about her own life and character that she has been denying. I kind of hope that there isn't a sequel, in as much as this story is complete in and of itself.

11: El-Mohtar, Amal & Max Gladstone. "This Is How You Lose the Time War" (SF).

So, how DO you lose the time war? Essentially, over time (cough, cough), you alienate your two best agents so that they are more invested in each other than the greater cause and politics they supposedly serve. That is a very bland description of a downright delirious reading experience, as in the course of their missions "Red" and "Blue" poke and prod and dare and, essentially, court each other; until matters come to a head. As for the resolution, read the story yourself! I really have no complaints but those who find the situation of two servants of states waging all-out war coming to fawn over each other so ostentatiously (always via "letter" (these are letters indistinguishable from magic)) probably have a point; I was still charmed though and really don't care.

For George's Top Ten of 2020, see next issue