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Fiction Pocket Book Reviews

A quick note: A few of the reviews presented below were originally a bit harsher than they are now. After some soul-searching, I decided to amend the reviews -- not because what I said was wrong, but because how I said it could have been done with more finesse. I am passionate about science fiction, and while a powerful tool, that passion needs to be balanced with perspective.

WARNING: Here be SPOILERS!!!

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- Greene, Simon: *Deathstalker* (1995)
- Hamilton, Peter: *The Confederation Handbook: A Vital Guide to the "Night's Dawn Trilogy"* (2000)

- Hamilton, Peter: *The Night's Dawn Trilogy -- The Reality Dysfunction* (1996), *The Neutronium Alchemist* (1997), and *The Naked God* (1999)
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- McCollum, Michael: *Life Probe* (1983) and *Procyon's Promise* (1985)
- McDevitt, Jack: *A Talent for War* (1989)
- Miller, Steve & Lee, Sharon: *The Liaden series -- Conflict of Honors* (1988), *Agent of Change* (1988), and *Carpe Diem* (1989)
- Modesitt, L.E.: *Adiamante* (1996)
- Norwood, Warren: *The Double Spiral War* trilogy (1984–1986)
- Pulver, David: *GURPS Reign of Steel* (1997)
- Saberhagen, Fred: *Berserker Fury* (1997) and *Shiva in Steel* (1998)
- Scott, Melissa: *The Game Beyond* (1984)
- Sheffield, Charles: *Cold As Ice* (1992)
- Smith, Sherwood & Trowbridge, Dave: *The Exordium Series* (1993–1997)
- Steakley, John: *Vampire\$* (1990)
- Tedford, William: *Silent Galaxy* (1981)
- Weber, David: *In Fury Born* (2006)
- Weber, David: *Path of the Fury* (1992)
- Williams, Walter Jon: *Aristoi* (1992)
- Wiseman et al, Loren: *GURPS Traveller* (1998)
- Wren, M. K.: *The Phoenix Legacy* (1981)

Askegren, Pierce: *Gateway to the Stars* (1998)

I've been a fan of the *Traveller* roleplaying since the early 1990s. I don't actually play it, mind you -- I don't do any roleplaying these days -- but I really enjoy reading the background material. I also very much enjoyed the two *Traveller: The New Era* novels, *The Death of Wisdom* and *To Dream of Chaos*. It is therefore with a great deal of anticipation that I noticed Pierce Akegren's *Gateway to the Stars*, a novel set in the time period of the fourth

incarnation of the game, *Marc Miller's Traveller* (or *T4* as it was known).

Alas, my enthusiasm was misplaced, for *Gateway* is an imminently forgettable book. The writing itself is serviceable, but it is coupled with an omniscient narrator approach in which the author spoon feeds us bits of information, for no real effect; the bits are simply presented, dropping out of the sky like manna from heaven, e.g., page 188: "Redling [the protagonist] was a professional criminal." (If this spoiler causes you to not read the book because I gave it away, then you owe me dinner. Really.)

An unsympathetic professional criminal, and not just any professional criminal, no. He is a master criminal (How do we know? It says so, right in the book!), intent on some nefarious plot, and willing to kill anyone who stands in his way. In his current guise of a starship captain, he becomes involved with some other mysterious (and largely unsympathetic) folks, who are Not What They Appear, except for the immature idiot kid, who really is an immature idiot kid. (In this way, I suppose, the novel calls back to its Classic *Traveller* roots, as that version was often criticized for emphasizing criminals and miscreants as player characters.) They have some relatively mild misadventures, which basically involve the master criminal walking around being invulnerable, due to his superior intelligence and skills.

Yet, despite his obvious intelligence ("obvious" only because the author points it out to us), I couldn't help thinking that the protagonist was a dolt, as was at least one of his mysterious crew. They both spend a lot of time doing stupid things which the omniscient narrator then explains away as "testing" each other. Yeah, right.

Overall, the book reads like a bad roleplaying campaign; it may have been fun to have played in, but it's boring to read. My time would have been better spent rereading an old *Traveller* sourcebook. (Or rereading Sherwood Smith and Dave Trowbridge's [Exordium](#) series.)

Austen, Jane: *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)

My (ex-)wife convinced me to watch the 5-hour 1995 BBC/A&E version of Jane Austen's classic, starring Jennifer Ehle and Colin

Firth, and I must say that I enjoyed it so much that I have watched it several times since then. Not only is the acting superb, I was quite surprised that I liked the story as well. The video boxed set came with a copy of the novel, so decided to take advantage of the free book.

The novel also was very enjoyable, although I must say that I like the BBC version a bit better. It was a nice change of pace from what I usually read, and gives me an even greater respect for the BBC's faithfulness to the original.

Incidentally, Sherwood Smith, the co-author of one of my favorite series, *Exordium*, is a big Jane Austen fan, as you can see from her webpage.

Barnes, John: *The Man Who Pulled Down the Sky* (1986)

Unlikely Barnes's later work, which I am very fond of, I have mixed feelings about this book. It's the story of an agent from the Solar System Confederation who is sent to Earth to start a revolution there, so that the Orbital Republics -- Earth's not-particularly-enlightened masters -- will be forced to send down its reserve forces, thereby increasing the chance of success for the Confederation's upcoming sneak attack. The morality of this plan isn't what leaves me ambivalent, as the ORs are pretty nasty, and the Confederation's only attacking because the OR's are doing their best to strangle the Confederation economically, by constraining the availability of life-sustaining volatiles. No, the part that leaves me ambivalent is that the entire volatile shortage is due to issues involving *financing* the volatile shipments. The book was well-written, but it just didn't grab me.

I plan on rereading it again at some future date. Maybe I just wasn't in the right mood for this one...

Barton, William: *When Heaven Fell* (1995)

When Heaven Fell takes place about twenty years or so after Earth has been conquered by a machine civilization that enslaves biological lifeforms for use as mercenaries -- for what reason, we don't really know, although there are hints towards the end. As part of the background, it is explained that a scout ship of the Master Race had discovered Earth shortly after Earth discovered

FTL and rather than going back for help, had tried to conquer the planet by itself. It almost succeeded.

Earth then had 40 years (IIRC) to prepare for the inevitable attack. As a result, we managed to actually kill a few of the invading troops (who were of another slave race), and held down our casualties to eight billion. Or increased them -- without all the preparation time, it would have been impossible for us to resist, not merely difficult, and sometimes more powerful races are simply wiped out. Our spunky defense, incidently, had the advantage of increasing the respect given to us by the other slave races.

The Master Race controls all space flight, whereas the slave races form the ground forces. Technology is strictly controlled -- the mercenary forces are issued weapons sufficient for the job at hand; when they encounter a more powerful foe, they are issued more powerful weapons.

The protagonist, Athol Morrison, is a human mercenary employed by the Master Race in its continuing program of conquest. Throughout the book, Morrison sees action on many fronts, rising through the ranks as he becomes more and more estranged from those he has left behind on Earth. And as he rises, more and more questions arise: Where do the Master's really come from? Why this program of conquest?

I have read one other book by Barton, 1992's *Dark Sky Legion*. He does not write books with easily identifiable "good guys," let alone books where the good guys always win. He does, however, write really good books that are well worth reading.

Bayley, Barrington J.: *Eye of Terror* (1999)

Warhammer 40K novels can be really good, really bad, or anywhere in between. This one was really bad. It started strong -- for the first 20 pages or so -- and I kept reading, hoping it would finish strong. I shouldn't have wasted my time. But I should re-read it at some point.

Bujold, Lois McMaster: *The Vorkosigan Series* (1986–present)

See

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lois_McMaster_Bujold#The_Vorkosigan_Saga
for a list of the books.

As a first approximation, one of the best ways of determining the quality of an author you have never read is to check out a used bookstore. If the shelf is brimming with copies of their work, it's a fairly good sign that a number of people were disappointed enough to not want to reread their work. This isn't always the case, of course; some authors are so prolific and have sold so many copies (e.g., Isaac Asimov) that they have substantial UBS sections even if 99% of their readers decided to have the books gold-plated and mounted. If the author has written a good number of books yet his or her section is bare, though, it's a pretty good sign that most readers are satisfied.

With that in mind, it is very difficult to find any books by Lois McMaster Bujold at your average used bookstore, and after reading them, I can understand why. Take, for example, her continuing series (eleven books so far, if I'm counting correctly) about Aral and Cordelia Vorkosigan and their son Miles. Aral and Cordelia meet under somewhat trying circumstances (on opposite sides of an interstellar war), somehow manage to end up together, and then settle on Aral's feudalistic homeworld Barrayar, where he is appointed Regent to the child Emperor Gregor. Cordelia at best tolerates her new home, regarding Barrayar society as at best backward and at worst psychopathic, but stays mainly in the shadows. She's no shrinking violet, though, and when civil war threatens her family, she proves that she can carve a bloody swath -- literally -- with the best Barrayaran militarist.

How do you top a character like that? Mom's a tough act to follow, but son Miles somehow does it. Crippled before birth from a poison gas attack on his parents, Miles is born deformed, a severe problem in a society which only recently -- and with some reluctance -- outlawed infanticide in such cases. As only son of Aral, ruling class Vor nobleman and Regent, and playmate to the Emperor Gregor, it is assumed by many that Miles's accomplishments are the result of nepotism. They are wrong, for Miles is intelligent, resourceful, and savvy. He would have to be, to get into as much trouble as he does.

Bujold writes with warmth and humor about characters strong in spirit (if not always in body) who blunder from one crisis to the

next, usually winning in the end, but never underestimating the cost in the process. While Miles's antics sometimes strain credibility to the breaking point, her books are light and enjoyable, and well worth the effort. As a result, Bujold is now on my "buy on sight" list.

Cherryh, C. J.: *Downbelow Station* (1981)

This book in Cherryh's Alliance/Union future history series is one of my all-time favorites. It tells the story of the defection of Captain Mallory and the ECS Norway from Mazian's fleet, the end of the Company War and the formation of the Merchanter's Alliance. It also served as the inspiration for Mayfair's *The Company War* boardgame.

Cherryh writes great stories involving believable (if somewhat tense) characters, "hard" technology (not flawless, but pretty darn good for someone trained as an archaeologist) and incredible action scenes. I have heard some criticize her works for having long slow parts, and I must admit that the criticism is not unfair. These portions are usually a detailed character-building exercise, though, and they do contribute a great deal to the overall story. Even more importantly, I have never finished one of her books and felt that it wasn't completely worth the effort; Cherryh is, quite simply, one of the most talented writers I have ever read, and perhaps the only writer today who could pull off a cargo transfer as the big climax to a book. (That book was *Tripoint*.) I'm waiting for her to write a book where the climax is the main character getting coffee from a vending machine. And by God it will be the most finger-nail biting, nerve-wracking vending machine that anyone ever spent twenty pages describing. And I am entirely sincere when I say I WANT to read the climax-at-the-coffee-vending-machine scene.

She also maintains her own website, at www.cherryh.com.

Clarke, Arthur C.: *The Songs of Distant Earth* (1986)

Thalassa is a watery paradise, just a few islands in a planetwide ocean, and home to a small colony founded by robot seedships centuries before. The book tells the story of a visit by the starship Magellan, carrying one million refugees in suspended animation from the final days of Earth on their journey to a harsh world light-years away. The plan is for the small crew of the Magellan to

rebuild the great ice shield which protects the ship on it journey. Some members of the crew, however, aren't satisfied with prospect of leaving paradise...

As Clarke explains in the Author's Note, this novel is an extensive reworking and expansion of a short story originally published decades ago. I know that I read it as a kid, but I can't say that it made any particular impression on me at the time. This version is typical Clarke -- a serviceable story, worth the time and effort to read it, but not the sort of book that penetrates to the core of your being. It's good and enjoyable, but not great. (Mike Oldfield's album of the same name, inspired by the book and approved by Clarke, is another story; I listen to it about once a week.)

Cook, Glen: *The Dragon Never Sleeps* (1988)

An all-time favorite. See my *Dragon Never Sleeps* page for details.

David, Peter: *Babylon 5: In the Beginning* (1997)

Well-written novelization of the first TNT *Babylon 5* TV movie, from the perspective of Londo telling the story of Babylon 5 to a couple of children. The plot itself was somewhat disappointing, but the book was still worth the effort. This differentiates it from the other *Babylon 5* books to date, which have ranged from infantile (the books by John Vornholt -- someone should explain to him the difference between Celcius and Kelvin) to merely stupid. Note that I haven't read all the *Babylon 5* novels, only the first five or so. I specifically haven't read the book written by S.M. Stirling, which I expect to be of higher quality. Stirling won't, I am confident, make stupid mistakes like getting the temperature of Mars wrong by 200-plus degrees.

DiMercurio, Michael: The Michael "Patch" Pacino series -- *Voyage of the Devilfish* (1992), etc..

As of 2000, this series consisted of six books -- *Voyage of the Devilfish* (1992), *Attack of the Seawolf* (1993), *Phoenix Sub Zero* (1994), *Barracuda Final Bearing* (1996), *Piranha Firing Point* (1999), and *Threat Vector* (2000) -- with more to come. I must admit that so far I have only read the first three books. They were excellent, though, and I frankly think DiMercurio is the standard against which all other submarine techno-thrillers should be measured.

The first book was noticeably a first novel, but DiMercurio made up for it in his knowledge of the subject matter; he is former Chief Propulsion Officer on a 637-class boat, and it shows in his understanding of sonar and other details. (Note that there are some details that have been changed for dramatic effect -- the 688s don't really have fiberglass sails, for instance.) As a knowledgeable friend once told me, you can learn more about submarine operations from one DiMercurio book than from most nonfiction sources.

I look forward to reading the rest of the series, and updating this review.

Dream Pod 9: *The Jovian Chronicles* (1997-present)

After doing products for R. Talsorian's *Mekton II* game, Dream Pod 9 has struck out on their own. Their first new product line, *Heavy Gear*, introduced the Silhouette game engine to critical acclaim and strong sales. *Jovian Chronicles* is their second product line using Silhouette, and returns to the universe of their highly successful *Mekton II* supplements, *Jovian Chronicles* and *Europa Incident*.

It's probably good to preface my comments by stating that this is not a review of the game *per se*; while I think the Silhouette game engine looks very interesting, I read this more with an eye to the setting and technical background than an interest in playing the game.

The year 2210, a few years after the events of the original *Mekton II* supplement. The current state of the solar system is vaguely reminiscent of Piers Anthony's *Bio of a Space Tyrant* series, with a cold war existing between the Jovian Confederation and the government of a (mostly) united Earth. A couple of mutually-antagonistic Martian governments, the Venusian Bank, the Mercurian Merchants Guild and a terrorist organization called STRIKE round out the list of major players. The background is interesting, the illustrations are detailed, and the physics well thought through (and complete with vector based space combat!). Overall, I would recommend it even to folks who usually don't go for anime-based backgrounds.

This is not to say, however, that there aren't a few problems. Overall, I prefer the format of the original "green book" *Jovian*

Chronicles products; the larger type is much easier to read. There are a few things in the original which were not carried over -- some of the original artwork and explanations were very good, for example, and covered points not documented in the new version. The spacecraft designs were almost completely reworked, most for the better, some not. Some people on the Internet have calculated that some of the designs are incorrectly documented, although I must admit that I haven't independently verified the claim. Finally, the Dragonstriker mecha is mentioned all over the new books, but the illustrations from the original books didn't make it into the new books.

These are, however, very minor points. The artwork of the new books -- the *Ships of the Fleet* books especially -- is simply incredible, probably the the best in the gaming industry. [Take a look at DP9's website, www.dp9.com, for examples.] The writing is tight and fun to read. And, perhaps most importantly, the background is both very interesting and detailed -- because each ship is highly modified, the Ships books, for example, list all of the ships in a class, and show as many individual ships as possible. They even have detailed explanations of when ships went into drydock, complete with "before" and "after" illustrations. All in all, a gearhead's delight, so much so that I found it relatively easy to ignore all of the giant robot stuff.

Overall, I feel I got my money's worth (and then some!), and future products in this universe are on my "must buy" list. And before you ask, no, I don't have any plans to get rid of the *Mekton II* "green book" supplements.

Ellis, Mark: *Death Hawk: The Soulworm Saga -- Volume One* (2007).

An amusing little graphic novel, worth the read but faintly disappointing. The stories all seem to end just as they are getting started, and Death Hawk himself really seems to have too easy a time of it. Incidentally, anyone looking for the much-ballyhooed "inspiration" for Joss Whedon's *Firefly* will be sorely disappointed, as the similarities are pretty slim: Death Hawk is a loner survivor on the outs with the law who wears a longish coat and has his own ship, and has adventures with a female con artist with red hair. But Death Hawk goes after authority, rather than runs from it. Frankly, early Han Solo seems to be a better model for Mal Reynolds than

Death Hawk.

Gear, W. Michael: *The Artifact* (1990)

This is a novel which has it all: an dangerous alien device left over from the early days of the universe, a fragmenting human polity on the verge of civil war, and the Freemasons. What more could you ask for?

Two- or three-dimensional villians, perhaps: the bad guys are fairly colorless, and spend the majority of their off duty hours reveling in how evil they are. The good guys occasionally have have a tendency to pontificate, too, but at least they have some weaknesses. This is not to say that I didn't enjoy this book; this was my second reading, and while I didn't enjoy it quite as much the second time around, I do hope that Gear returns to this universe, as the idea of the Freemasons as the preservers of knowledge during the long dark days of the Soviet interstellar dictatorship has a lot of room for more stories.

Gascoigne, Marc & Jones, Andy: *Into the Maelstrom* (1999)

A collection of generally inferior *Warhammer 40K* stories. The only standout is Gav Thorpe's "Acceptable Losses," about an attack squadron in search of itself. Well, Simon Jewett's "Hell in a Bottle" is a favorite also, but only because it shows exactly how stupid Space Marines act in the 40K universe. Jeez, guys, devotion to the Emperor is one thing, but if the best the Imperium has to offer are so stupid, is it any wonder they constantly seem to be losing?

Godwin, Parke: *Limbo Search* (1995)

The story involves a group of UN military signals intelligence personnel tasked with protecting undeveloped star systems from rogue corporations (who, of course, are meaner, better equipped, etc.). Things get complicated, however, when one of the signals turns out to be of alien origin.

I found this one somewhat disappointing. I have previously read Godwin's excellent *Firelord* (1980), a historical novel of King Arthur. Unlike that earlier work, *Limbo Search* never quite comes together. I think part of the problem may be that Godwin is strong on characterization but weak on both plot development and

technical "feel"; as a result, characters would be in believable situations (from an interpersonal standpoint), and then something of dubious technical credibility would occur, spoiling the effect. For example, after finishing the book I still don't have the slightest idea of the range of the sensors used, the speed of the ships, the distances involved, etc. Now, I'm certainly not saying that Godwin should follow the Tom Clancy approach and spend 30 pages explaining how the fuel gets from the fuel tank to the combustion chamber when the pilot moves the throttles forward, but I came away feeling that none of the numbers were consistent and everything was, at best, not thought through and, at worst, based solely on the requirements of the scene. [You know, like how one week on *Star Trek* the sensors would have a range of light years, and the following week they couldn't see over the fence into the neighbor's yard.] Overall, I wouldn't go so far as to say that it was a waste of time, but it certainly isn't on the list of books to reread any time soon.

Greene, Simon: *Deathstalker* (1995)

I stopped reading after 30 pages. Your mileage may vary.

That having been said, I intend to try it again. At least one person has emailed me to say that it gets better. (For the record, I didn't simply read 30 pages and put the book down -- I also browsed through the rest of the book, and the others in the series as well, and in all honesty I saw nothing to indicate that it got better.) I will pick it up again at some point, though, and try again, as it may have been one of those books that I have to be in the mood for. [Danger -- Dangling preposition!]

Hamilton, Peter: *The Confederation Handbook: A Vital Guide to the "Night's Dawn Trilogy"* (2000)

Hamilton's *Nights Dawn Trilogy* is one of the best things I have read in recent memory, in part because of the interesting political and technological background. *The Confederation Handbook* is a collection of essays that further explores those background issues in a competent manner. While I am glad I spent the money (including shipping from the UK, since it hasn't been published in the States yet), it's a little leaner than I would like -- it's only 240 pages, and the type is, well, not small. Some of the entries are also a little sparse. The section on nanonics, for instance, is only two

pages long, and there are no maps or illustrations.

Overall, I think I would have preferred more of an encyclopedia approach, like Willis McNelly's *The Dune Encyclopedia*, which had several individual entries that were of a length comparable to the essays in the *The Confederation Handbook*.

It's a good book. Doubling or tripling the size would have made it a great book.

Hamilton, Peter: *The Night's Dawn Trilogy -- The Reality Dysfunction* (1996), *The Neutronium Alchemist* (1997), and *The Naked God* (1999)

This series is based on the premise that an accidental rift in the space-time continuum is allowing the souls of the dead to come back and possess the living. Most of you are probably losing interest right about now, and I understand that -- it took a LOT of urging by a lot of people before I finally decided to pick it up and give it a try.

Boy, am I glad I did. First, the universe that Hamilton has created, where both Adamists (those who use mechanical technology) and Edenists (who use biotechnology, generically called "bitek") live in an uneasy truce, is superbly detailed. In my mind, the books are worth reading just for the background. Second, the plot works surprisingly well. It sounds corny (did I mention Al Capone? how about Fletcher Christian?) and I was initially very skeptical, but Hamilton is able to pull it off, to such a degree that I have both ordered the books in hardcover and added Hamilton's other books to my "must buy" list.

Three words of warning, though. First, these books are long, so long that the US paperback editions come in two volumes, each of almost 600 pages. They are clearly marked, though -- just make sure you have both part 1 and part 2.

Second, I found it took me almost the entire first half of *The Reality Dysfunction* (i.e., about 500 pages, or almost all of the first paperback) to get into the story. Stick it out; while some of it may appear superfluous, it isn't, and the long lead-in also serves to familiarize the reader with the technology, to the point where it becomes natural. This acclimatization is important later on, when

the stuff that the characters think is weird starts happening.

Hamilton, Peter: *A Second Chance at Eden* (1999)

This is a collection of short-stories set in the same universe as Hamilton's *Night's Dawn* trilogy, focusing on bitek and the Edenists. Not as engaging as that series, it does shed some interesting light on how bitek works and how things got going. An interesting little jaunt.

Heinlein, Robert: *Starship Troopers* (1959)

One of my all-time favorites. Paul Verhoeven didn't think that he needed to read the novel before shooting the movie; his loss, as this is one of the best books I have ever read. Not without it's flaws, of course, but I think the books is a though-provoking exmination of the relationship between the rights and duties of being a citizen.

See my *Starship Troopers* page for more details.

***Homeworld* (game): *Homeworld: Historical and Technical Briefing* (1999)**

I've always been fascinated with the background of the *Homeworld* game series, and have been disappointed they have not been supported with tie-in novels. Some science fiction fans despise such media tie-in works; I believe that if the work can stand on it's own, the provenance is unimportant. In the case of *Homeworld*, we have a rich background, some interesting plotting, and enough tactical and strategic thinking to please my analyst mind.

It's a good little read, although it's now supplanted (and expanded) by the great variety of online sources. I have only two complaints, first that there is nothing in the rules about the Taiidan adversaries, and second that it never bothers to tell you that the people of Kharak are the Kushan people, which can lead to a moment of confusion in the "Ship Data" section.

Joseph, Mark: *To Kill the Potemkin* (1986)

If you really study submarines for a while, you realize that most submarine novels get it wrong. This novel is no exception, but it doesn't get it wrong as much as many others

do. So, if you have already read all of Michael DiMercurio's books but still need a submarine fix, this one isn't that bad. If you haven't read DiMercurio's books, you might want to start here, as you're likely to be disappointed if you go the other way.

McCollum, Michael: The *Antares* trilogy -- *Antares Dawn* (1986), *Antares Passage* (1987), and *Antares Victory* (2002)

A century ago, the star Antares went supernova, in the process destroying the foldpoints linking the Altan system with the rest of human space. In *Antares Dawn*, the Altans discover that the warp points are once again navigable when a severely damaged Terran battleship suddenly drops in system. Its crew dead, the presence of battleship means two things: Earth was at war, and whomever had beaten a battleship more powerful than the entire Altan Space Navy combined might be on the other side of the foldpoint. The Altans decide to mount an expedition through the foldpoint, eventually making contact with other human governments, and finally Earth herself. They learn that earth is at war with the Ryall, a race of centaur-like creatures whose own pre-history has taught them the lesson that other sentient species are a threat and must be exterminated. The humans have found a back door into Ryall space, however, and with luck may be able to prevent the Ryall from having their way. (I won't give away the end of the story, although I suppose one could infer something from the title of the third book.)

I enjoyed this series a great deal. Technologically, it is somewhat reminiscent of Niven and Pournelle's *The Mote in God's Eye* in that the technology is very similar. I've always liked stories with FTL drives that are limited to connected well-defined points in space -- they give space a geometry that is often lacking in settings like Star Trek. It's well thought-through, a hallmark of McCollum's work, and his writing seems to have gotten better now that his work is no longer edited by Del Rey. (Hmmm, maybe that says something....)

Ten or more years after they were published by Del Rey, they still hold up fairly well. An early ebook pioneer, McCollum is selling them electronically through his online bookstore, Sci Fi Arizona. He also has some cool "Writer's Workshop" articles -- the articles for February of 1997, for example, are "Anchors In Reality", "Astronomy for Science Fiction Writers: Practical Astrogation", "The Sci Fi - Arizona Astrogator's Handbook."

McCollum, Michael: *Life Probe* (1983) and *Procyon's Promise* (1985)

Life Probe is the story of a sublight star probe which detects the signs of a technological civilization on a small planet orbiting an insignificant yellow star. Its creators, known only as The Makers, had launched it millenia before as part of a civilization-wide program of information collection. The Makers seek the secret of FTL travel -- unable to discover it themselves, they send probes out to ask other civilizations for the secret, trading their vast collected information in the process. Humankind has never been particularly trusting, however, and the probe is mostly destroyed -- "mostly" meaning that a small computer processor dedicated to human interaction survives.

Years later, mankind launches a multi-generation expedition to the nearby star Procyon, from which the characteristic wake of an FTL starship has been detected.

Procyon's Promise begins with the return of the first human FTL ship from the Procyon system. The expedition to Procyon was a partial success -- while the expedition did discover the remains of an alien base, the inhabitants were long gone. Fortunately, though, they left their garbage, which included the necessary technical documents to build (although not necessarily understand) an FTL drive. The first step in fulfilling the Promise -- finding an FTL drive -- has been achieved; now all they have to do is find The Makers.

Ten or more years after they were published by Del Rey, they still hold up fairly well. An early ebook pioneer, McCollum is selling them electronically through his online bookstore, Sci Fi Arizona. He also has some cool "Writer's Workshop" articles -- the articles for February of 1997, for example, are "Anchors In Reality", "Astronomy for Science Fiction Writers: Practical Astrogation", "The Sci Fi - Arizona Astrogator's Handbook."

McDevitt, Jack: *A Talent for War* (1989)

Two centuries ago, Christopher Sim and a handful of Dellacondan ships held back the might of the alien Ashiyyur long enough for his brother to organize the disparate human governments into a Confederacy capable of defending human space. Now, with the

stability of the Confederacy in question, Alex Benedict has stumbled upon evidence that the Sim legend has a few holes. Others, though, are also on the trail of the truth, and someone has decided that preserving the legend of Christopher Sim is more important than the life of a simple archaeologist.

This is a great book -- one of my all-time favorites. It is rich with detail; operas named after the navigator who abandoned Sim the night before combat, memoirs of those opposed to the war, legends of rogues who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time -- and thus became heroes. This is one of the books that I buy extra copies of, to give to my friends.

Here is a brief excerpt, from a scene where Alex is examining the journal of a contemporary of Sim:

A few weeks later, she records her resignation, and makes her final entry. It is a single word: Millenium! Millenium: it was Sim's first ally. The world that sent its ships to [the battles of] Chippewa and Grand Salinas and Rigel. The arsenal of the Confederacy during the great days of the Dellacondans. It was to Millenium that Sim took the refugees after his celebrated evacuation of Ilyanda. So great is the affection on that world for Christopher Sim that the Corsarius is still carried on the rolls as an active warship. All fleet communications show her call sign.

It took a while, but McDevitt has publishd two sequels -- *Polaris* and *Seeker*.

Miller, Steve & Lee, Sharon: The *Liaden* series -- *Conflict of Honors* (1988), *Agent of Change* (1988), and *Carpe Diem* (1989)

While re-reading these books recently, I was reminded of the major problem these books have: they cause insomnia. Severe insomnia, as in "I was only going to read to read ten pages before going to sleep, but next thing I knew it was 2 am."

Agent of Change is chronological the second book in the series, although it was written and published first. It is the story of Val Con yos'Phellium, future head of Clan Korval, one of the most powerful of the extended families of the planet Liad. Val Con is

currently a Scout on detached duty to the Department of the Interior, a Liaden governmental agency seeking to protect Liaden interests throughout space and ensure Liaden dominance over the other two human races (Terran and Yxtrang) -- with the Department running things, of course. As an Agent of Change for the department, Val Con is sent to assassinate a racist Terran politico on the planet Lufkit. He's successful (on page 5 -- I'm not giving anything away here), but during his escape he meets up with Miri Robertson, an ex-mercenary on the run from a crime cartel. They soon link up with a group of giant Clutch Turtles led by The Edger, who had adopted Val Con into his clutch during the latter's Scout mission to the Clutch homeworld.

Doesn't sound like much so far, does it? I didn't think so either, but I was wrong -- very wrong. Miller and Lee write with real skill and wit as Val Con and Miri run from one disaster to another, the implacable Edger and his group doing their best to understand human ways. (The scene where the two humans meet up with the turtles is priceless -- Val Con and Miri have set a building on fire in order to escape from the henchmen of the guy assassinated on page 5, and the turtles think that the resulting cacophony of shouts, sirens, flashing lights, etc., is a concert -- and a very good one, at that.)

The second book, *Conflict of Honors*, chronologically takes place a few years earlier, and details the adoption into Clan Korval of Priscilla Mendoza, an outcast Terran destined to become the mate of Val Con's brother Shan, captain of Dutiful Passage, Korval's flagship. In *Conflict* we learn that, although it is the olders and most powerful of the Liaden Clans, Korval has enemies -- powerful enemies -- that will stop at nothing to see the Clan ruined.

The third book in the series, *Carpe Diem*, is the direct sequel to *Agent of Change*, and concerns itself with the further adventures of Val Con and Miri, now stranded on a backwater world, as the Department of the Interior prepares to launch a full scale attack on Korval. The book ends with the clan implementing it's worst case plan of action -- Plan B -- scattering to the four winds and preparing for war against the Department.

For information, please see the Liaden Universe webpage.

Modesitt, L.E.: *Adiamante* (1996)

In the far future, a military task force of humans from the Vereal Union returns to Earth in a fleet of adiamate-hulled starships. Composed of cybernetically-enhanced humans, the Union has not forgotten that day millenia-past when the psychically-enhanced Demis ejected them from Earth. The Demis, along with the non-enhanced Draffs, live in peaceful harmony, working at the task of cleansing the Earth the poisons of centuries of human habitation. Should be a walkover for the Cybs, right?

Modesitt takes a very interesting tack with this book; you know that the Demis, who are clearly the good guys, are going to win. You know this not only because the good guys usually win, but because the narrator gives you glimpses of the Demis hidden abilities -- the question is, at what price? Combined with an interesting social structure where the privilege of wielding political power must be paid for in comp time (the emergency leader of the Demis figures he'll be working full-time for the rest of his life), and a people who are genetically incapable of striking first, Modesitt has crafted a very fine book. Well worth the effort.

Norwood, Warren: *The Double Spiral War* trilogy (1984-1986)

This trilogy consists of three books (duh!), *Midway Between* (1984), *Polar Fleet* (1985), and *Final Command* (1986). I've read it three times, and I must admit that the last reading did not hold up nearly as well as the previous two. Part of the problem is that this series really wants to be an epic (think "Winds of War in space"), but can't quite pull it off, for a couple of reasons.

First, it has some believability problems that are common to the genre. Some are failings of logic. The war supposedly involves the entire galaxy, for example, yet there seem to be only a handful of ships and places. Certain systems, such as the Matthews system, supposedly have a key strategic position, yet why is not really explained, or at least not believably -- even accepting the explanation that "forces based there could harrass twenty other systems" at face value doesn't explain why, in a galaxy-wide war, this one system or the twenty other systems are worth a second thought, especially since FTL travel appears to be a trivial exercise. One of the combattants, Sondak, needs vast quantities of methane for her fighters, the only (!) source of which is the neutral planet of Cloise -- apparently no one in the Sondak high command bothered to look at an intro astronomy textbook, where it would be

noted that methane is common in gas giants. Overall, the series feels contrived. [Since the galaxy-wide scope of the conflict isn't really necessary for the story, I have found the best way to look at it is to mentally convert it into a star cluster of a hundred or so stars, at which point the story is a lot more (if not totally) plausible.]

Other believability problems are due to a failure to develop the background sufficiently. For example, the aggressor in this war, the United Central Systems, is seeking revenge for defeat in the last war, but all we know about that war is that Sondak struck first -- as a result, all the Ukes run around, seething with hate, but we don't really understand why.

The second problem it has is that characters just walk on and off stage. Some of the characters have a little more depth (e.g., Henley Stanmorton, the combat reporter) but we find epic characters being killed off in decidedly non-epic ways. Now, ordinarily I wouldn't consider this a problem, as in the Real World (tm), people are certainly capable of dying in "decidedly non-epic ways", but given this series' other problems, sticking to the form would probably have been superior.

A third problem is probably also a believability problem of the type mentioned above, but it's a pet peeve of mine, so I'll list it separately. I came away feeling that the author was attempting to capture the spirit of WW2 in space, and as a consequence, didn't really spend a whole lot of time thinking about naval doctrine. As a result, we have hunter-killers (that act just like submarines), fighters, carriers, cruisers, the whole bit. What we don't have, though, is a good feel for the various strengths and weaknesses of these platforms, and hence why they are best at their intended missions. There is a tendency in science fiction, both written and gaming, to simply include every type of naval vessel with the mission statement of that vessel type at its heyday. Doing so ignores two important points:

- Those missions changed over time, and some ship types became obsolete in the process. For example, we don't have battleships nowadays because at best carriers are more cost effective, and at worst all the battleships would die horrible deaths at the hands of airplanes fairly early in any conflict;
- The important differences between such diverse platforms as

subs, carriers, and battleships are due to the differences in the three media, e.g., in the ocean, on the ocean, and in the air. Space, by and large, is a single medium, although adding Norwood's "subspace" gives us two.

So at this point you're probably thinking to yourself, "isn't this an unfair burden? When I read a WW2 novel, I don't expect the author to justify all of this." Yes, but a WW2 novel is a description of the real world. The author doesn't spend any time describing the realities of the situation (except as details) because of both an assumption of prior knowledge, and because he is dealing with the force structure and doctrine as presented. He isn't creating reality, he is describing it, and hence doesn't have to spend any time convincing us it is realistic.

Pulver, David: *GURPS Reign of Steel* (1997)

Ever watch *The Terminator* or *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* and wonder what it would be like fighting Skynet? The subtitle of the book is "The War is Over. The Robots Won." This sourcebook for Steve Jackson Games GURPS roleplaying system details how the AIs took power, how their once-united effort crumbled into factionalism and cold war (so much for being better than their creators), and what the few remaining humans are attempting to do about it. If you liked *The Terminator*, you'll probably like this -- I know that I did.

Saberhagen, Fred: *Berserker Fury* (1997) and *Shiva in Steel* (1998)

Some books, so the saying goes, should not be set aside lightly -- they should be hurled with great force. These are two such books. It's purely an accident that I read both of them, but at least the second confirmed that the first was not a fluke.

Berserker Fury is chronologically the earlier of the two, and is the one I meant to read, so I'll start there. It's a straightforward retelling of the Battle of Midway as a Berserker story. Okay, that I can live with -- indeed, that's why I read it. But while I don't have any problems with running history through the science fiction converter, I do require, at a minimum, that the converter be turned ON first. Here's the capsule summary:

Some months after a Berserker sneak attack on the naval base Port Diamond ("Pearl Harbor" -- get it?) located on the planet Uhao ("Oahu" -- get it?), where the Berserkers sunk (literally) the battleship ANOZIRA ("ARIZONA" -- get it?), Solarian codebreakers have determined that the Berserkers next target is the space atoll Fifty Fifty ("Midway" -- get it?), located in the gap between two spiral arms of the galaxy ("Asia" and "North America" -- get it?). The Solarians respond by sending three spacecraft carriers, the VENTURE ("ENTERPRISE" -- get it?), the STINGER ("HORNET" -- get it?), and the LANKVIL ("Yank Ville" = "YORKTOWN" -- get it?), which was recently damaged in the Battle of Azlaroc ("Coral Sea" -- get it?), but after three days of repairs is able to get underway. The most likely commander, Admiral Yeslah ("Halsey" -- get it?) is in the hospital with a skin disease, so the task is assigned to Admiral Naguance ("Nagumo" and "Spruance" -- get it?) instead. The initial attacks against the Berserkers fail, because of outdated Solarian equipment, with one underslugger ("torpedo bomber" -- get it?) squadron killed almost to the last man., The sole exception was Ensign Bright ("Gay" -- get it?), who watched the battle while drifting in space.

Three guesses as to the fate of the LANKVIL, and the number of Berserker carriers destroyed. (And, believe it or not, there are more such tidbits not worth repeating.)

Now, this isn't the only thing going on in the book -- there are two annoying subplots involving two different survivors of a Solarian scoutship destroyed at the book's outset. These subplots, like the plot involving Fifty Fifty, are presented in Saberhagen's usual (current) bland expository style, which is uniquely capable of being both boring and annoying at the same time. The ONLY thing worth reading this book for is the concept of the space atoll, which is a tiny lump made out of interesting material extruded from a tiny tear in spacetime. Alas, while the idea is interesting, it's covered in about two of the 380 pages in this book.

I really wanted to like this book. I was a history major in college, and WW2 in the Pacific is one of my favorite topics. I might even have been able to tolerate the book, with all of its faults, if any of the rest of it seemed to make sense, but it didn't. There's no adequate explanation as to why, for instance, either side should feel that Fifty Fifty's worth fighting over. Midway was important in WW2 because it was a good place to base aircraft, but early on the

comment was made to the effect that warships could cross the gulf in a few days. Given the distances involved, why is basing spacecraft at Fifty Fifty any better than basing them in the main spiral arm?

Shiva in Steel is better only from the standpoint that it is less annoying. It's the story of a Berserker attack on a secret codebreaking facility, and some of the interesting characters drawn into its defense. Overall, it suffers from the same writing style, but has the virtue of being 60 pages shorter.

Scott, Melissa: *The Game Beyond* (1984)

The Empress of the Imperium is dead, and her last will and testament names her consort Keira as her successor. Will the Great Houses of the Imperium recognize the claim of the long lost descendant of a mistrusted and extinct house? Will Keira's psychic Talent be sufficient to guide him through the trials ahead?

The answer, unfortunately, is "who cares?". I first read this book shortly after it came out, and I had vague but positive remembrances of it. What a difference 13 years makes! On re-reading it I found little in its favor: the story is boring, ill-thought and poorly plotted, and the characters are undeveloped. Despite being a novel set a thousand or more years in the future, some of the technology in the book was obsolescent when it was published (e.g., computers using tape drives and printing continuous-feed paper). And finally, in an Imperium consisting of nine major provinces, each with at least one major world, there are three "fleets", one of which consists of two cruisers and some escorts, with perhaps a couple of hundred crew total. (This estimates is based on the fact that the enemy flagship had a crew of about twenty.) Some of these problems (and others, such as scenes shifting over weeks and lightyears from one paragraph to the next, without section breaks) may be the result of bad editing.

Melissa Scott is a better writer than this book indicates, or at least she became a better writer. I suggest skipping this one and finding one of her later books.

It does have one nifty idea, though, which I will relay here (you do remember the SPOILER caveat at the top of the page, don't you?): The Majore nobles of the Imperium possess a variety of psychic

powers, grouped together under the heading "Talent", which allow them to see the various paths of the future. Unfortunately, Talent has its price, usually in the form of genetic disabilities. As a result, viable offspring are sometimes difficult to produce.

Sheffield, Charles: *Cold As Ice* (1992)

Charles Sheffield is one of the small number of world-class scientists who are published science fiction writers. Even more importantly, perhaps, he's a good writer who not only knows his science, but who can also create interesting characters and situations. *Cold As Ice* is a prime example of this.

Rather than try to explain the plot -- difficult to do, without giving it away -- I'll simply reproduce the relevant parts of the back cover blurb:

Twenty-five years ago there was a great interplanetary war in the Solar System. It was a suicidal spasm in which terrible weapons were created and used; in which nine billion people were killed. The rivalries that led to the war are not gone....Now Cyrus Mobarak, the man who perfected the fusion engine, is determined to bring human settlement to the protected seas of Europa. Opposing him is Hilda Brandt, Europa's administrator. And caught between them are three remarkable young people: Jon Perry, Camille Hamilton, and Wilsa Sheer.

It's tough to say anything about this book without giving it all away, so suffice it to say that the characters are interesting, the technology is believable, and the book was a true joy to read. The back cover quote from Booklist describes it as "written at the level of Arthur C. Clarke at his best -- with deft characterizations, lucid handling of scientific questions, good world building, and real wit -- this is arguably Sheffield's best book yet." I agree with everything in that quote -- except, perhaps, the choice of the word "lucid" to describe clear writing.

There was a sequel called *The Ganymede Club*.

Smith, Sherwood & Trowbridge, Dave: *The Exordium Series* (1993 – 1997)

One of my all-time favorites. This series consists of five volumes: *The Phoenix in Flight* (1993), *The Ruler of Naught* (1993), *A Prison Unsought* (1994), *The Rifter's Covenant* (1995), and *The Thrones of Kronos* (1997). The first time I read the series it took me about a hundred pages to get into the story, but after that, I basically gave up eating, sleeping, personal hygiene, etc., every time a new volume came out. In addition to my [Exordium](#) web page (which includes details supplied by the authors that are not found in the books), the authors each have a web page ([Sherwood Smith](#), [Dave Trowbridge](#)), and Sherwood maintains an [Exordium page](#) with some supplementary material about the books.

Steakley, John: *Vampire\$* (1990)

This is one of the rare instances where the back cover blurb actually says something useful about the book:

VAMPIRE HUNTER\$. Suppose there really were vampires. Dark. Stalking. Destroying. They'd have to be killed, wouldn't they? Of course they would. But what kind of fools would try to make a living at it?

What kind of fools indeed. Team Crow really isn't in it for the money, although they sort of pretend to be; they hunt vampires simply because if they don't, nobody else will. Unfortunately, one of the vampires knows Jack Crow's name, and the hunters have become the hunted...

Steakley's first book, *Armor*, is widely cited as a minor classic. *Vampire\$* is just as good; if nothing else, Steakley is worth reading just for his style. My only (minor) complaint is that Davette's story gets a little long in the middle, although not burdensomely so.

This book was later turned into *John Carpenter's Vampires*, a movie I have not seen.

Tedford, William: *Silent Galaxy* (1981)

William Tedford, to the best of my knowledge, only wrote four books, all of which were published by the short-lived Leisure

Books imprint in 1981. (The other three are books one through three of the *Timequest* series: *Rashanyn Dark*, *Hydrabyss Red*, and *Nemydia Deep*.) *I've read all four, and found them very enjoyable, so much so that I recently read Silent Galaxy for the third time.*

Silent Galaxy is the story of a Jovan pilot, Jon B-897Y, who after a battle finds himself in a disabled fighter in a decaying orbit over Earth. Against all regulation and convention, Jon elects to attempt a landing on our long-abandoned homeworld. He is successful, and is eventually adopted by a primitive tribe. Soon his idyllic world is disrupted, though, by Lisa, member of a decidedly unprimitive tribe called the Valthyn. The Valthyn have made a shocking discovery: the Earth is being watched by aliens, and given Man's predilection to violence (even 500 years after the destruction of civilization on Earth), the reaction of the warring nations of the solar system will be xenophobic in the extreme. Only Jon, with Lisa's assistance, stands a chance of averting a catastrophe.

Like all good fiction, I find a different book each time I have picked it up. When I first read it in high school, I found a book about two warring space nations (based on Luna and in the Jovian system, respectively) and a lot of cool Star Wars technology. The second time I read it, during my college years, I noticed that the technology seemed to be relatively accurate, and included such neat ideas as metallic hydrogen fuel and liquid respiration acceleration tanks. What stood out during this last reading, however, was the character development. Jon goes through several painful lessons, as he unlearns the habits of millenia, first out of necessity -- without Lisa's assistance, he would soon starve -- and later out of determination to take command of his own destiny. In this he is only partly successful, as he is standing at a pivotal moment in history.

Overall, a very good book, available only in used book store -- snap it up if you find it.

*UPDATE: Tedford continues to write ([website](#)) and is now publishing books through Lulu.com ([online store](#)), including a revised version of *Silent Galaxy* under its original name, *Battlefields of Silence*. He's also republished a rewritten version of the *Timequest*, both as separate volumes and as an omnibus. Ebook versions are free downloads.*

Weber, David: *In Fury Born* (2006)

This is a revamped version of *Path of the Fury*. This edition adds another novel's worth of prequel story, plus a "revised and expanded" version of the original tale. Hopefully this new edition is a sign that Weber will be turning it into a series sooner rather than later.

Weber, David: *Path of the Fury* (1992)

Years ago Alicia DeVries was a highly-decorated member of the Imperial Cadre, the cyborg enhanced drop commandos answerable only to the Emperor himself. After a betrayal that led to a mission gone horribly wrong, she retired from the service and moved with her family to a backwater colony planet. The planet is targeted by pirates, however, and her family is slaughtered. The only survivor from a world of 50 thousand colonists, DeVries swears vengeance upon the pirates, unites with an ancient Greek god and a sentient starship, and succeeds in uncovering a plot that threatens the stability of the Empire itself.

"Waitaminute -- did you say 'ancient Greek god'?" Yes I did, and this is where *Path of the Fury* gets a little weird. The "Greek god" is one of the Furies of myth, and she comes upon Alicia as she lays dying in the snow. Not surprisingly, the Powers That Be don't believe in Greek gods, however, so Alicia is forced to break out of her heavily guarded hospital room and steal the experimental starship in order to track down the pirates.

This book has some good points and some bad points. In its favor, it's a good yarn: the characters are likeable, some of the dialog is great, and (most of the time) it's just plain fun. On the downside, the entire "Greek god" thing is at best unexplained (how, pray tell, did an ancient Greek spirit get to the colony world in the first place?) and at worst just plain silly. It also suffers from two classic Weberisms: first, it sometimes is a little too over-the-top, as spirits melds with human, human melds with AI, AI melds with spirit, everyone melds with everyone else, with much wailing and gnashing of teeth. Second, there are also some inconsistencies, e.g., the AI ship is "too small" to carry a particularly effective type of missile, yet smaller ships appear to carry it.

But don't let any of that stop you from enjoying this book.

Williams, Walter Jon: *Aristoi* (1992)

In the far future, long after the destruction of Earth1 by runaway nano, the Aristos Gabriel, one of the technological elite of human society, is warned by a fellow Aristoi of a threat to very foundation of the Logarchy. Someone is tampering with the Hyperlogos, the supposedly tamperproof Internet-writ-large that is the foundation of Logarchic society, someone with an agenda so sinister that he or she is willing to commit the most unspeakable crimes to further it. Worse yet, if the Hyperlogos is compromised, then there is no way to alert the Aristoi of the nature of the threat...

This is a very interesting book, one which I heartily recommend. It is especially so because I first read it immediately after I read one of my favorite series, the Exordium series by Sherwood Smith and Dave Trowbridge. The two works share many themes and describe societies structured along similiar lines. Both works also pull heavily from Greek for flavor; indeed, there are several terms that would be at home in either work.

Wiseman et al, Loren: *GURPS Traveller* (1998)

Traveller, the brainchild of Marc Miller and his companions at Games Designers Workshop, is one of the flagship science fiction roleplaying games. GURPS Traveller is its fifth incarnation, and is written by GDW co-founder Loren Wiseman, who has help shape the Traveller since its inception. Supposing an alternate storyline where the "assassination" of Emperor Strephon never took place, GT is a fairly comprehensive sourcebook to the original ("Classic") Traveller line. This book is visually pleasing and a very enjoyable read. It's only drawback is a few minor inconsistencies and typos, which do not prevent me from recommending it wholeheartedly.

Wren, M. K.: *The Phoenix Legacy* (1981)

One of my all-time favorites. This series consists of three volumes: *Sword of the Lamb* (1981), *Shadow of the Swan* (1981), and *House of the Wolf* (1981). See my page on The Phoenix Legacy for more on this.
