

PROMETHEUS

The Hunger Games and Modern Dystopian Fiction

By Anders Monsen

Suzanne Collins's bestselling trilogy has placed dystopian fiction back in the forefront. *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009), and *Mockingjay* (2010) tell the story of a future America split into districts and rigidly governed by a state able to compel citizens to send their children to die on television once a year, for 74 years (longer than the existence of the Soviet Union). Yet, none of Collin's books were Prometheus Award finalists, despite their recent publication date and bestseller status.

How do her books compare with the long history of dystopian fiction, such as those by Yevgey Zamiatyn, George Orwell, Alduous Huxley and Margaret Atwood? A considerable number of dystopian-themed books have been honored by the LFS (though not Huxley or Atwood). As Wikipedia states in the entry on dystopias, these are often characterized by "dehumanization, totalitarian governments," and The Hunger Games trilogy is no exception. It might be the most stark portrayal of a dehumanizing totalitarian government in several decades.

The first book creates the world, where we have not just one post-apocalyptic event, but two. The first established the districts—thirteen of them. These are ruled by the Capitol, and each district serves a special function. One provides coal, another food, another industrial goods, and so on. At some point, some districts rose up against the Capitol, and were harshly put down, with District 13 obliterated and tossed down the memory hole. And to commemorate this total defeat, each of the remaining 12 districts must send tributes to the Capitol, one male and one female, to fight in a winner-take-all battle to the death. These tributes are teenagers of varying ages and skills. Twenty-three of them are slaughtered each year, while their parents and friends watch on big screens, and the decadent Capitol struts and preens. This variation on bread and circuses, with children instead of gladiators. This yearly spectacle continues for more than seven decades, until the events of the first novel.

The protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, a gifted archer who hunts game in the forest around her district—illegally—steps in to act as tribute for her younger sister. She is angry, rebellious, photogenic, and charismatic. Despite her often self-centered behavior she becomes a focus for others who are angry at the

Capitol, and its harsh treatment of the people in the districts. Her acts of rebellion during the Hunger Games, where she forces the hand of the Capitol and not only wins, but wins with a second tribute from her district, mark her by the government. She also draws the attention of the underground rebellion, who see her the potential rallying point they need.

In *Catching Fire*, Katniss is forced back into a second Hunger Game, and learns of the rebellion, which she both sparks and to which she becomes a symbol against the Capitol. She is headstrong and often foolish, but she shows that she won't be a pawn to rebel leaders either, and consistently goes her own way. She is only a symbol, however, as the rebel leaders plan their moves against the Capitol, while Katniss sees only the immediate picture and chafes at their slow pace. Although she leads several actions against the Capitol, her main battle appears intended to sideline her, make her a convenient martyr. This almost cynical view of "meet the new boss, same as the old boss" is not unusual in dystopian fiction, though in this case the protagonist has a few surprises.

When I looked at Wikipedia's list of dystopian literature, I was surprised by the explosion of such fiction in the early 21st century. From Margaret Peterson Haddix Shadow Children series, to Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, to a few more by Margaret Atwood, Stephanie Meyer's *The Host*, Jasper Fforde's *Shades of Grey*, and a host of others, dystopia is in the air, all ripe with dire warnings of the omnipotent state.

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The newsletter of the Libertarian Futurist Society

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A few words about schedules

Without content, this newsletter falters and falls behind. We have said this for years, other editors included. If you look at the index of articles that have appeared in *Prometheus*, we have a vast number of contributors. But in recent years, the trickle of articles that once we receive have dried up like the current Texas drought.

Previously we have merged issues, calling them numbers 1&2, or 1-3, but I reluctant to make that quantum leap here and skip forward a couple of years in one instant. So, until or unless we catch up, there is a likely chance you'll see the dates on this newsletter somewhat still in the past.

If you read books and watch movies, and have an opinion, please share that opinion with a short review for *Prometheus*. In the past we have had many movie reviews, from *E. T.* to kung fu flicks—these are still welcome. If you have opinions about the nature and future of the Libertarian Futurist Society, whether in one paragraph or twenty, I am sure people would like to hear that opinion. If you know of a rare interview or podcast that can be transcribed, let the editor know, and I'll take it from here. I've made this plea many times. I know, like in my case, your time is limited, but I hope you, the reader, will also become a contributor.

Finally, a few words about the Prometheus Awards. By the time this issue reaches you, the 2013 Prometheus Awards will have been handed out at LoneStarCon 3 in San Antonio. The process to discover candidates for next year's award already is well underway. If you have read any books you consider worth nominating, please send an email to "bestnovel@lfs.org" with the book's name and publisher.

—Anders Monsen

Prometheus Submission Guidelines

Without content, no publication can survive. In order to continue publishing future issues, *Prometheus* seeks reviews, interview, essays, articles, and columns of interest to libertarian science fiction fans. Any individual may submit material — membership in the LFS is not required.

As the newsletter of the Libertarian Futurist Society, *Prometheus* focuses on Prometheus Award-nominated works, but also publishes reviews and articles beyond the Prometheus Award candidates.

Letters of comment also are welcome, whether about the reviews, or any questions about LFS, the nominating and voting process. In this digital age the printed press continues to matter, but we need your help to sustain this newsletter.

Contact the editor for more details via email at: editor@lfs.org

Phoebus Krumm

By L. Neil Smith, Scott Bieser and -3-
Big Head Press, 2011
Reviewed by Max Jahr

With over 20 novels to his credit, L. Neil Smith makes his third foray into the graphic novel realm with an original graphic novel. *Phoebus Krumm* is set in the same universe as his novel *Henry Martyn* (1989) and *Bretta Martyn* (1997). As with the graphic novel version of *The Probability Broach*, Scott Bieser handles the artwork, along with -3- (aka Charles H. Weidman III). The eponymous Krumm appeared in both prior works as a friend of Arran Islay, the young boy who became otherwise known as the famous pirate/rebel Henry Martyn. His daughter Bretta and several other characters from both novels also appear in *Phoebus Krumm*, which belongs squarely in that universe.

At the core of the book are the two competing powers, the Jendy Empiry-Cirot and the Monopoly of Hanover. Currently coexisting in an uneasy peace, the former appears to be developing a massive starship with planet-crushing powers. The Jendy Ceo, Burton Halliwater (in a barely masked play on Halliburton and Blackwater—and with the Ceo's physical resemblance to Dick Cheney) is hell-bent on converting every human to his own galactic-core workshipping religion.

Krumm is recruited out of his retirement by the Ceo of Hanover, Lia Woodgate, whose humble origins trace back to Henry Martyn. She is related to Anastasia Wheeler, who oversees a laissez-faire society on Luna, orbiting a long-dead old Earth. Woodgate somehow governs from a libertarian perspective, and along with Krumm sends two other agents on a mission. One is the Jendy ambassador, Frantisek Demondion-Echeverria, who transferred his allegiance to Lia rather than support Halliwater's mad scheme. The other is Hannebuth Tarrant, who appears often as the narrator of Phoebus Krumm, and first appeared in *Bretta Martyn*.

While some knowledge of people, places, and events in the two earlier books helps to illuminate the back-story, this swashbuckling tale stands fairly well on its own. The black and white artwork works well; color might have added an extra dimension, but isn't necessary. Contrast the artwork with the full color extravaganza that is the graphic novel version of *The Probability Broach*; color seemed vital in that book, as it's a seminal and vibrant libertarian work of fiction. Contrast it again with Big Head Press's take on the *Odyssey*, which was in black and white, and one can see that method also works.

Despite the large cast and Smith's penchant for exotic character names which sometime confuses the narrative flow, the action/adventure style sets a fast pace. Phoebus Krumm is a crowded book, and one that probably needs to be read more than once to be really appreciated. But overall it tells a good tale, a swashbuckling adventure in space, with odds and ends of philosophy tossed in for good measure.

Sweeter Than Wine

By L. Neil Smith
Phoenix Pick, 2011
Reviewed by David Wayland

How does a noted libertarian author, who wrote the covenant of unanimous consent, write about vampires? After all, these are beings in fiction who have no compunction about killing people and drinking their blood. Vampires appear to have no human morals, sense of ethics, or ability to control their condition; they must feed, and feed on human blood. By that very nature they initiate force against people, and do so on a regular feeding schedule, or they die.

Sweeter Than Wine, written in 2009 and published in 2011, apparently has lain dormant in L. Neil Smith's mind for 30 years, so the issue of the moral vampire sounds like one he has grappled with and finally conquered, at least in the fictional sense. While another libertarian writer, F. Paul Wilson, wrote a vampire story in *Midnight Mass*, where the protagonist battles vampires, in *Sweeter Than Wine* the protagonist *is* the vampire. J Gifford, a private eye in Colorado, looks 24 but really is 9 years old. Unlike in *Midnight Mass* and many other vampire tales, Smith's world is relatively free of vampires; as far as Gifford knows, there is only one other vampire out there, the woman who turned him in 1944, and he hasn't seen her for more than 65 years. Turned in France during WWII, Gifford has since managed to not kill another human, survive through his strange abilities of persuasion to simply drink a little from his victims, make them forget, and go on with his life. He strives to live a normal life, as normal as is possible for one who would turn to ash in the sunlight.

Gifford lives in relative anonymity in his community, having settled there years ago. A handful of people know his secret, yet surprisingly instead of grabbing wooden stakes and silver bullets, they keep his secret. Despite not aging over the span of decades, he thinks his other friends don't know, but yet many of them are quite aware of his nature, and do nothing—apparently living with a deadly killer is not an issue, as he has shown that he is a moral vampire, and able to control his blood-lust.

In flashbacks we learn how Gifford was turned by a beautiful Romanian woman over 200 years old. Yet she had met no other vampires, save those who killed her family and left her for (un)dead, and whom she slayed in revenge. Yet there is at least one more vampire out there, an embodiment of evil. Leaving a trail of dead bodies in his wake, this dark vampire lands in the US and heads west toward Gifford. At the same time, hunting this other other vampire his Gifford's lady friend, who shows up again. She also happens to have some morals, and together they aim to take on the nasty vampire.

While I really enjoyed the book, I found accepting a moral vampire a tougher task, given the vampire books I used to read. Gifford and his girlfriend hardly act the role of vampires, while the antagonist over-acts it; Gifford comes across more as a superhero who needs a little blood now and then. Still, the sketches of Gifford's life and his back-story bring the book to life (so to speak).

Thoughts on the Prometheus Award

By *Fred Curtis Moulton*

The following issues and related discussion points are not exhaustive, however, I hope they act as a catalyst for more extensive discourse. I also realize that some of my statements may not be agreeable to everyone. Thus, I want to emphasize that I intend no personal insult by any of these comments. Because of the interconnected nature of many of the issues I am going to provide an opening list of issues and then a single narrative which will hopefully address each of the individual issues as well as cover the points of interconnection.

A LIST OF ISSUES:

1. Do our awards serve their intended purpose? Is the structure of nominating, determining finalists and voting on winners optimum for this purpose? Does it still make sense to have the different awards “Best Novel,” “Hall of Fame” and “Special Award”?
2. Are the works which are finalists and winners really the works of fiction we should be honoring?
3. How is the LFS viewed in the SF community? How about Libertarianism as a whole?

DISCUSSION:

We probably need to periodically re-examine the purpose of the LFS and the LFS awards; however, for now, I will define for this discussion the purposes of the LFS awards as:

- A. Highlight works of interest to libertarians and which bring a libertarian perspective
- B. Encourage authors to create works as just mentioned above

I am concerned that our current awards structure has some weaknesses. The publishing world is changing particularly with the rise of ebooks and self publishing. There is often discussion about the variability in quality of much of the self-published works. However, that does not mean that all self-published works are of low quality. Consider the emergence of small presses which might only publish a few titles per year. It is worth noting that graphic novels, manga and other forms have an increasing influence and audience in the SF world. The emergence of ebooks further complicates the matter. Regardless of whether one likes ebooks or not, it is obvious they are becoming the dominant form of fiction publishing. The SF world is no longer just Tor, Baen and a few other publishers.

I suggest that having a one-year time window might not be the best approach long-term and that more flexibility is needed. Dropping the concept of the Best Novel award as an annual award would give flexibility for works which take a while to be discovered. Also, it helps with the problem of two or three really great works in a single year followed by a year with few if any works which are good LFS award candidates. Personally, I would rather see a list with only three finalists than a list of five where several of them are clearly of poor quality.

And I think we need to consider if focusing on the “Best Novel” is the approach we want to take long term. What if the best work of libertarian fiction is a novella or graphic novel or a short story?

I suggest seriously considering making a single award and not restricting by length of work or when the work was created. The award could get a new name such as the “Libertarian Futurist Society Speculative Fiction Award” or since there is a lot of history behind “Prometheus” it could just be called “Libertarian Futurist Society Prometheus Speculative Fiction Award” or even simply just “The Prometheus Award.” Let there be more than one given each year and also let a work be a finalist multiple times.

I suggest the LFS reconsider the timing of the entire cycle of nominations, finalists, reading, voting and awarding. The timing the LFS uses currently has some major problems. First is that the reading period typically overlaps with the reading period for the Hugo awards and typically the Hugo voting deadline is close to the LFS awards voting deadline. Attempting to read all of the Hugo finalists and all of the LFS awards finalists in the same time frame is really difficult. Now, just in case anyone asks why worry about the Hugo Awards or something similar, I will answer: because I think the Hugo Awards are important. The Hugo Awards in part give a glimpse into the current state of the SF field as viewed by the Hugo Award voters who seem to me to be more sophisticated readers than average in SF and thus are often a leading indicator of some trends in the field. In addition to the reading issue is the logistics for the authors of the winning awards. Announcing the winners as soon as they are known is one of the smarter things the LFS has done.

Currently, Worldcon occurs within a range of mid-August through the first week of September and there is increasing pressure for the mid-August dates due to early school starts and other events such as Dragoncon and Burning Man. Any date a particular Worldcon is scheduled means that an author will have about six to eight weeks to make hotel reservations, airline reservations and buy a con membership if they are not already attending. Consider that airlines are now flying full on most flights and getting a seat on a plane gets more difficult and expensive within a few weeks of the flight. Further consider that the hotel room blocks negotiated by the con expire typically much earlier, so getting a room in one of the main con hotels is possibly more difficult and expensive. Plus, consider that they may need to schedule child care or vacation time or other personal arrangements on a short notice. Why put an author through all of that hassle when there is no need for it?

I suggest making the announcement of the winning works and authors on the second Thursday of January. I suggest the second Thursday of January because that means there will be

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at least one full week for the world to recover from their New Year's Eve celebrations and thus be in the mood to notice the announcement of the winning works and their authors. The rest of the schedule for nominations, finalist, reading and voting can be worked backwards from the announcement date. Also announcing the winners in January gets around the problem of the LFS asking for a time slot in April and then finding out in July that the author of a winning work can attend only on a day different from the one already requested. And by mid-July it is difficult to get a reschedule for the room and if requested it will not endear the LFS to the Worldcon staff. This is a problem we have already experienced.

PERCEPTIONS

Now I turn to some broader issues related to acceptance of the LFS. These remarks are not exhaustive or definitive but are rather some of my observations over the past few years. My observation is that the LFS and libertarians in general have a mixed reputation with SF fandom in general and Worldcon attendees in particular.

When I first started coordinating the LFS awards, once or twice we were paired up with another of the smaller awards ceremonies (the Sidewise Awards for alternate history) however this is no longer the case. Currently the LFS is able to get a good time slot and room and a listing in the program guide. This can be lost if the LFS is not diligent. Beyond the simple

logistics of getting a program slot is the broader issue of the LFS, LFS awards and libertarians as a group. My perception is that the Prometheus Award has gained in reputation particularly when works such as *Ha'penny* and *Freedom Maze* win the award. This helps dispel the notion that libertarians are only interested in "Gold and Guns" or can best be characterized as "Conservatives who want to do drugs."

One problem with that stereotype is that too often it is libertarians who are reinforcing it. If the only time a libertarian speaks on a subject is to complain about high taxes used to build a medical clinic for poor children then do not be surprised if libertarians are dismissed as selfish jerks. Fortunately there are libertarians who do not fit the stereotype who are active in SF fandom and attend cons including Worldcon. However, we need more of them.

Similarly the works selected as award finalists reflect on the LFS. Fortunately some really great works have been finalists and winners. Unfortunately there have been a few works that, in my opinion, should not have been on the finalist lists. To me for a work to be on the finalist list it needs to have literary merit as well as reflect the libertarian philosophy. I know of one case where a person told me he ignored the LFS for years thinking we were not serious after seeing a weak title as a finalist.

As I mentioned earlier, these remarks are not comprehensive but I hope that I have provided sufficient overview to convey my sense of the state of the LFS and the LFS awards in relation to Worldcon.

Further thoughts on the Prometheus Award

By Anders Monsen

The issues raised in Fred Moulton's essay are issues that we don't raise often enough. The Prometheus Award has existed for more than three decades. While we have honored some great books, I am not sure we have inspired new libertarians works. I sense some of Fred's frustration, especially with novels that are finalists (or even winners) that we find questionable in terms of quality and content.

Yet this happens for virtually every award, including the Hugo Award, which each year inspired vociferous debate regarding the winners, losers, and those who never even made the ballot. My personal opinion is that we should stick with the best novel for the previous year, and not make one book eligible multiple times. Some years there are no great candidates. Other years there are several great candidates. The same thing happens during the Oscars, or the Hugos. Yet I believe the LFS tries to highlight what we consider the best book for that year, rather than adding the same book(s) on every ballot—this already happens in the Hall of Fame.

I believe that for a best novel, there is still a place for the annual Prometheus Awards. True, the traditional publishing models currently face many changes from the rise of eBooks and eBook readers. Also, the ability for writers to publish their own books electronically without a major publishing house, and yet secure print rights for paper books means more titles

to read, more candidates to vet. In some respects publishing houses act as gatekeepers. Sometimes they prevent good books from getting published (stories about writers rejected multiple times only to suddenly become a best-selling writer). Yet at the same time many self-published books lack the polish provided by editors. The deliberation process where the judges read all candidates combined with the final voting round tend in my opinion to identify the best candidates.

With the rise of self-publishing, Kindle, eBooks, and more, the chances to discover great books should be greater. The danger is that some LFS members and judges may not discover that book in time for the annual Prometheus Award. However, that should spur us to a greater breadth in reading, and not mix in books from different years into one award.

Regarding the timing of the award, I think there is a lot of merit in the proposal about moving up the timeline to announce finalists. Although the Hugo voting deadline falls some time in March, much like the Prometheus Awards, our goal should be to read novels much earlier if possible, and then announce the finalists in January. There are usually many books to read, and waiting until close to the deadline to read them becomes a tough task. To avoid this, perhaps we should nominate books sooner, and impose a cut-off date so the slate of books is well-known before the end of the year.

Banner of the Damned

By Sherwood Smith

DAW Books, 2012

Reviewed by William H. Stoddard

Banner of the Damned follows up Sherwood Smith's fantasy tetralogy *The History of Sartorias-deles*. Its events take place four centuries later, at a time when the heroes of the tetralogy are half-legendary; in fact, an important element in the plot is the historical research needed to learn some parts of the truth about them. Institutions and customs have changed, and have done so to different degrees in different cultures. Clashes of cultural assumptions and values are another major strand of the plot.

The viewpoint character of this novel—written in first person, unlike the earlier tetralogy—is Emras, a royal scribe: That is, in part, a historian, a trained observer, a private secretary, a translator, and an archivist. The novel starts out with the three rules to which scribes are sworn: do not interfere; keep the Peace; tell the truth as you see it. Smith is not a libertarian, but this list has a rather libertarian flavor, which made me curious to see how she dealt with such themes—and, in point of fact, I found a number of ideas that will give libertarian readers a sense of recognition. It also defines a role for Emras in the story—that perhaps of a Greek chorus, able to comment but not intervene; perhaps of a John Watson, a trusted confidant of the hero and a reliable narrator but not a primary actor. But, in fact, Emras is the protagonist of this story, and she is herself profoundly changed by it, rather than being a catalyst that emerges unchanged. And the focus of the story is precisely on her conflict over how to interpret the three rules, and how far she can depart from them without betraying them, and on her temptation to go too far, to use prohibited means for what she thinks are good ends.

Emras's native culture, and that of many other characters, is Colend, a kingdom founded on diplomatic negotiations and the arts of peace, to the point where they have almost forgotten how to do battle; their relations with other kingdoms are founded on offering them trade relations and other benefits that are too valuable to forgo—certainly an attractive idea for libertarians, though being able to survive without knowing how to fight will strike many of us as fantasy indeed! Descriptions of Colend's culture often recall France under the *ancien régime*, and occasionally Heian Japan, in the era of Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shonagon, not least in the cultural predominance of women. Smith shows several elite women and contrasts their different ways of using their status and privileges; particularly important are Princess Lasva, who in a sense is the heroine of the history that Emras is recounting (she is not her own heroine!), and Duchess Carola, one of the most memorably bitchy characters I've encountered in fiction, though her portrayal gains complexity from a well done “the man who learned better” subplot midway through the novel.

Colend's polar opposite is Marloven Hesea, a society that still lives by warrior values and male dominance—among other things, they have not accepted the prohibition on using missile weapons that Colend and many other societies share—though their culture does have a recognized role for women as warriors. An early scene has a mixed party of Marlovens, led by Prince

Ivandred, one of the other main characters of the story, and civilized people attacked by a band of highwaymen who take advantage of civilized avoidance of weapons and combat; the civilized people are almost more horrified by their companions' firing arrows and, later, collecting scalps from the slain than they are by the prospect of being robbed.

Prince Ivandred later becomes involved in an attempt to kidnap Princess Lasva, which brings them together as a couple and leads to her returning to his country, taking Emras and a small group of servants. This leads to Lasva's effort to introduce the arts of peace into her new culture, and in time to her discovery, and Emras's, of an older peaceful tradition, maintained by Marloven women, and now fallen into disuse. Smith's portrayal of this older culture reminds me of Jane Jacobs's distinction between trader and guardian moralities in *Systems of Survival*, and recalls scenes in the tetralogy that show the military role of women earlier in history, as a trained defensive force. In one late scene, Emras is startled to discover that the dancelike exercise routine she and Lasva have practiced is in fact a series of combat moves, preserved in Colend as a form of art after its original function was no longer remembered—suggesting an older kinship between the two cultures from which both have diverged.

But Emras is also involved in a different research program: The study of magic, guided by ancient manuscripts, by close investigation of the magical “technology” that keeps her world going, and by a mysterious teacher, the Herskalt. Magic is traditionally limited to peaceful uses; but Emras finds her growing mastery of it making her a military resource to Ivandred, both by using magic to aid in battle indirectly, and by teaching him spells that he can turn to destructive uses that she never anticipated. Emras's study of magic results in her violating the rule of noninterference, sometimes without even knowing it. Much of the story turns on her discovery of the consequences of interference, and of how she has been changed by the temptation to interfere. And the story as a whole is framed as Emras's own testimony in her trial by the scribes for violation of their rules.

Banner of the Damned is not as purely an epic or romance as many works of fantasy. It's also a novel, offering the classic payoffs of novels: on one hand, complex character interactions and relationships, such as the three men who fall in love with Lasva, and Carola's attempt to take one of them away from her; on the other, the sense of a textured, complex society undergoing historical change. But this fictional web is woven on the frame of an elaborate, and not fully explained, set of magical assumptions. On one hand, the magic avoids many of the uglier aspects of real historical societies: magical spells provide sanitation, cleaning clothing and possessions and even teleporting away human excreta; other magical spells heal many injuries; sexual violence is thought of as a dark legend of most distant past, no longer possible, and prostitution is an honorable trade with no more element of exploitation than any other. On the other hand, though, it enables dramatic feats and terrifying violence. In fact, though it's not presented as “technology” in the style of Heinlein's “Magic, Inc.” or its suc-

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—*Banner of the Damned*, continued from previous page

cessors, it plays much the same role that technology does in our society, without the comprehensive Enlightenment rationalism that accompanied its rise, and that, in the eyes of writers from Max Weber to J.R.R. Tolkien, gave us a disenchanting world. Smith's universe is almost anti-Tolkienian, with magic that is not fading away into modernity, but flourishing and giving rise to an alternate and more colorful "modernity."

Surface Detail

By Iain Banks

Orbit, 2011

Reviewed by Chris Hibbert

Iain M. Banks's *Surface Detail* is an exploration of hell on a couple of different levels. The main conflict in the story is between civilizations that believe in using hell as a real threat to keep sinners in line, and those that are opposed to the practice. According to the story, there are enough societies with a hell in their religion to have made it a common practice, once "people" started moving into simulations, that many created "hell" simulations and sentenced people to spend time there as a judicial punishment.

Most species and societies have a creation myth. The idea of a soul is also common, even if advanced civilizations mostly outgrow belief in it. Once you add in virtual reality, and then the ability to copy minds and host them in a simulation, the idea that virtual afterlives should resemble the cultural traditions' ideas of either heaven or hell seems obvious. The problem is that as people (sophonts of whatever stripe) grow more sophisticated, many stop believing that perpetual hell could be a reasonable punishment.

The Culture took a fairly active stance (unusual for them) against the hells, and after some galactic period of time, there was a relative stalemate, in which two factions had very strong opinions that the other side was wrong. "Eventually, though, a war was agreed on as the best way to settle the whole dispute." A virtual war, of course, with both sides agreeing that the outcome on the virtual battlefield would determine the victor in the real world. There's a sub-plot for the virtual battles and another for the political and logistical maneuvering that leaks into the real world.

There's another sub-plot that takes place in one of the simulated hells. Banks does a really good job of envisioning what it would take to make a truly scary hell. In a civilization that does have hell simulations, but which tries to keep their existence from being generally known, there are some muckraking journalists who want to convince everyone that the stories are true, so they volunteer to infiltrate. Things don't turn out well for them, and this gives Banks the opportunity to really turn the screws and come up with more and more unbearable tortures.

The major plot involves an evil industrialist who kept a defeated rival's daughter as a slave, and eventually killed her. She gets a chance to come back and try to take revenge. The "coming back" requires a trip across the galaxy with a culture

Abominator class ship the "Falling Outside The Normal Moral Constraints." FOTNMC is a real personality, and seems pretty unstoppable in a battle of wits or an actual battle.

I really like Banks' Culture stories, and even though this one is filled with plausible and explicit hells and some truly evil and some powerful and amoral characters, I thought it was both fun and had philosophical depth. The proprietor of hell has to deal with someone who can't be satisfactorily tortured because she has really given up all hope, so he comes up with a way to give her just enough hope to allow her to suffer again. Truly nasty.

Ready Player One

By Ernest Cline

Crown, 2012

Reviewed by Chris Hibbert

Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* takes place mostly inside a virtual reality/MMORPG, though as usual with the recent spate of books in this genre, the action bleeds back and forth with physical reality. The setting is pretty familiar: it's 2044, and the economy has bifurcated into haves and have-nots, and most people seem to spend the bulk of their time in the OASIS. James Halliday, the billionaire founder of the company that runs the OASIS has died, and has set up a contest inside the system that will determine who gets his company shares, his wealth, and control of the OASIS itself. It turns out Halliday was hugely into eighties trivia, and most of the story involves the main character, Parzival, and his on-line friends finding and devouring movie, music, video game, and science fiction trivia from that decade. If you're not averse to geeking out on this stuff, it's a fun romp.

Parzival is the first to find the Copper key, the first step on the quest that Halliday built. Others soon figure out how to backtrack on Parzival's location which gives them the clues they need to follow on his trail. This starts a race to complete the quest and beat Innovative Online Industries, a company that wants to win the contest in order to exploit OASIS's business possibilities. The action is fast-paced, the settings are widely varied, and I enjoyed the references to familiar games, movies, and bands. The character development is fairly shallow, with Parzival maintaining a close friendship with one fellow gamer and a crush on a female-named character that lasts throughout the story. He's convinced he knows that it's someone he could love in real life, and never takes seriously the idea that people can have very different personalities and appearance than their avatars.

The major element of libertarianism is that the central struggle is over whether the game's virtual world will be under the control of the main character and his friends or the bad guys. If you think the OASIS will be all the reality that matters to most of its denizens, you might want to cast that as a struggle over governance. But the choice isn't between any kind of freedom and some kind of authoritarianism; it's between a faction that has one particular corporatist view of

—Continued on page 8

—*Ready Player One*, continued from page 7

how things should be run, and another that has no explicit goals other than keeping the VR out of the other's control. No mechanism is suggested for preventing the games' owner from doing whatever he wants. Maybe that's a libertarian outcome, in that it's private property, but that's not what the story's struggle is about.

The science fiction element in this story, like a lot of this genre, is thin. The particular capabilities of the VR software are beyond what we can do today, but not very far. The economy and society depicted outside the OASIS aren't a straight-line extrapolation from today, but they bear a strong resemblance to what some mild pessimists seem to expect.

Brightside

By Mark Tullius

Vincere Press, 2012, 288 pages

Reviewed by Max Jahr

Telepaths are constrained to a mountain-top reservation in this Mark Tullius novel. Brightside, the reservation's name, houses mind-readers in an imagined America where laws enable their violent arrests, confinement, and harsh punishment when they object or deviate from the government's benevolent prison. Called Thought Thieves, these mind readers are hunted down without any apparent due process and forced to act as if they live in a regular city; they work regular jobs,

shop, dine, and go on dates, but in a very isolated world, and one where all, save the guards, are mind readers.

The narrator, Joe Nolan, appears to have been born angry. He numbers each day at Brightside, remembering events as taking place on Day N, while mixing in flashbacks of his life, each tinged with anger. Growing up he could read others's thoughts, and each time he said or did anything that indicated this he got in trouble. His promiscuous mother brought home lovers and didn't appear to care what he saw or knew, yet remained married to his father. He abandoned his best friend, lied to his girlfriend, elements of behavior aimed at self-destruction.

Once in the community of Brightside, Joe has several relationships with women there, also mind readers. Their emotions jump from one extreme to another, and Joe's anger dominates all his thoughts, dooming all relationships. He discovers a way off the mountain, but it's not long in a society of mind readers before others gain his secret, and he discovers a plot where certain others have planned escape far longer.

Under a fairly rough prose and harsh language lies the germ of a good story. The idea that mind readers are sent to a secure and isolated location, where everyone reads minds, has a lot of potential. Unfortunately, much of this is wasted in the anger, the harsh tone and language in the prose, and the unsympathetic and un-inspiring main character. One doesn't have to like a character to enjoy the book, but in this case Joe is more cringe-worthy than interesting, which unfortunately detracts from other aspects of the novel.



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