

PROMETHEUS

Playing an sf tune

An Interview with Karen Michalson

by Joan Kennedy Taylor

Karen Michalson has been an ALF member for several years, and contributed two articles to this newsletter in 1989-1990 about her experiences as the ALF representative to a Coalition for Choice in Worcester, Mass. She has a doctorate in English from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst and is the author of Victorian Fantasy Literature: Literary Battles with Church and Empire, published by the Edward Mellen Press.

She also writes novels and is the bass player and vocalist of a rock group called Point of Ares, whose first album, "Enemy Glory," will be released in July by Cuz Entertainment on its rock label Gargoyle Records. Point of Ares is based in Worcester, Massachusetts, and has performed throughout Massachusetts in person and on television. She can be reached via email at Skylark777@aol.com.

ALF What are your current projects?

Michalson Besides an unpublished fantasy trilogy, I have written a heavily libertarian suspense novel (also unpublished) with strong elements of magical realism and rock n' roll, called *The Maenad's God*. I am currently working on another novel and starting to write some musical ideas for another album. Although it is now in the very early stages, this album might be of interest to libertarians because it will be structured around individuals in conflict with stronger sinister forces (like government agencies). We might include some songs about the Waco massacre and Randy Weaver. My

short story, "Of No Importance," was published in the January, 1996, issue of *Liberty*. I recently released a spoken word album on Dark Records, of myself reading this story. The album is also called "Of No Importance."

ALF It's not clear whether you are also writing songs? If so, music, lyrics, or both?

Michalson Yes, I am a songwriter. I write all of the lyrics, and I co-write all of the music with my guitarist (who also happens to be my husband). I use my keyboard (as well as my bass) for composing. The songs we wrote together for "Enemy Glory" are our musical interpretation of my trilogy.

ALF And are your readings of your own work or do they include the works of others?

Michalson My own work.

ALF I assume the title "Of No Importance" is a reference to Wilde's "A Woman of No Importance."



Michalson Yes, it is. Thank you for noticing. I love it when perceptive readers notice things like that. And of course, Salome, my main character, who is very much a "woman of no importance" in the story, is a reference to Wilde's play, "Salome."

ALF You are a libertarian, a feminist, a fiction writer, and a musician. Which of these aspects of yourself came first, as a way of identifying yourself?

Michalson I really have to think about this one, because I'm usually hesitant to identify myself as any of these things,

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1996 Prometheus Award finalists

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Poul Anderson, *The Winter of the World*

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Henry Hazlitt, *Time Will Run Back*

Robert A. Heinlein, *Red Planet*

Fritz Leiber, *Gather, Darkness*



by Anders Monsen

LFS proudly announces the finalists for the 1996 Prometheus Award and Hall of Fame Award. We have a very strong group of finalists in both categories, and a few nominees for the the 1997 awards already have started to trickle in, signs that libertarian sf is alive and well. The general trend in sf seems to be more and more toward media tie-ins. In itself this may not necessarily indicate a negative turn, but it does mean a somewhat restricted field, as writers operate more within the bounds of someone else's universe, universe more often than not which appear grayer in terms of politics, as well as imaginative ideas.

Victor Koman writes that he has a story entitled "Bloodlover" appearing in *Dark Destinies III: Children of Dracula*. It's a story about a vampire in the court of Tsar Nicholas, featuring Rasputin. Also, Koman and Jared Lobdell co-wrote a Fafhrd and Gray Mouser story that ought to appear in a forthcoming Fritz Leiber tribute entitled *Lankhmar*. Its title is "Meyer the Magi-

cian" and contains a parody of the reknowned conservative fusionist. See page 5 on how you can get a copy of Koman's latest science fiction novel, *Kings of the High Frontier*.

If you noticed a slew of typos in the previous issue you were not alone. As editor I assume full responsibility for those typos. Part of the newsletter was severely rushed to meet a late deadline, and it shows. I apologize.

Issue number 4 is planned for late September, with coverage of the 1996 Prometheus Awards, and a review or two. The main section will be a special commemorative feature on the republication of L. Neil Smith's 1982 Prometheus Award winning novel, *The Probability Broach*. We'll have a review of the new edition, plus letters from various people on Neil Smith's influence, and the power of *The Probability Broach* in particular.

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except libertarian. "Feminist" is a label that has been owned by socialist-oriented feminists for so long that for most people it implies a political agenda I'm not comfortable with, and that certainly does not define me.

Several years ago I got sick of feeling I had to re-define the word every time I used it, by starting sentences with, "I'm a feminist, but..." I'm a feminist but I also support the right to bear arms. I'm a feminist but I'm a first amendment absolutist and believe pornography is protected speech, etc. All of which only resulted in people telling me I wasn't "really" a feminist.

I prefer to identify myself as a "libertarian" because I find that people who know what the word means understand correctly by it that I am against taxes, for legalizing drugs, etc. They might not agree with me, but at least the meaning is clear. A lot of people, however, don't know what "libertarian" means, and that often gives me an opportunity to discuss libertarian ideas. But in either case I don't have to battle anyone telling me I'm not "really" a libertarian.

By the way, "fiction writer" is a socially dangerous thing to call yourself before you achieve some recognizable success (and maybe even after). I used to identify myself as a novelist because I naively thought that a novelist is one who writes novels. People got absolutely antsy over this. Some would frantically insist that I must be deceiving myself, that my writing must be a hobby and that surely I have a "real job" hidden in the closet. Others would say the same thing more politely. Otherwise normal, civil people would suddenly say anything to get me to deny I was "really" writing novels. And of course everyone would suddenly have a prodigy child who was a budding great writer, or try to get into some weird competition thing by telling me about the book they were "going to write someday" so of course they were "writers," too. Although now that I'm reading in public I sometimes find myself in situations where it's all right to tell people I write, in general I've learned not to talk about it.

As to "musician," it's strange, but before Point of Ares began to take off everybody was also eager to remind me that I wasn't a "real musician" yet, either, no matter how many clubs I'd played in or hours per day I'd spent practicing and songwriting. Yet now that I can call myself a "professional" in every sense: we're under management, releasing an album, planning a tour, working on getting regional airplay, etc.—all the things people have told me I needed to do to be a "real musician"—I find that people are still disbelieving or dismissive and very quick to let me know that I haven't reached the next level yet, so I don't feel comfortable identifying myself as a musician, either.

There's something about seriously identifying yourself as an artist that seems to encourage put downs. I never expected that this would be the case until I made a serious commitment to the publishing and entertainment industries and began to use those tags as identifiers. I certainly never experienced anything like it when I was a college professor (except from my own department, which is another story). I've learned that it's all right to be self-denigrating and pretend one's art is merely a hobby, but God help any serious artist that has the nerve to define herself as such without benefit of public success. Nobody believes you, and as a consequence, most people react like they think you need to be set straight concerning your true calling in life. I protect myself by not discussing what I do.

LF Is there one of them you feel to be more central than the others?

Michalson Right now, no. It depends on what I'm doing. When I'm playing bass, "musician" is more central. When I'm writing, "fiction writer" is more central. When I encounter outrageous situations, "libertarian" and/or "feminist" is more central.

LF When and how did this first libertarian identification take place? Was it a gradual process, or a dramatically quick one?

Michalson I read Ayn Rand. That was a major conversion experience for me, or if not a true conversion, she articulated things I felt but never clearly defined for myself. I fell in love with Dagny and then decided it was better and truer to be a heroine like Dagny than merely worship one. I should also mention Gene Burns, who once ran for US president on the LP ticket. He used to have an afternoon radio talk show in Boston, and I listened to his show a lot while commuting to graduate school at the People's University of Massachusetts. It helped me make sense of a lot of the Marxist silliness I encountered there. Then I just started reading everything I could find on liberty, individualism, etc.

LF What was most important about your childhood?

Michalson Reading. Being by myself in my room on a dark rainy day and reading books.

LF At what age did you know you were a writer?

Michalson Sadly, I think I knew at age three or four, because I remember having a special affinity for words even then. I taught myself to read by listening to adults read stories and looking at the words on the page and matching sounds to characters. I wrote a lot of little stories in elementary school, but as I grew older, I buried a lot of my creativity so deeply that by the time I got to graduate school I decided to earn a PhD studying literary criticism, not creative writing. It was only after graduating that I began to write fiction, and it was sad because I

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felt that was what I should have been doing all along, and that at some point I had been taught to kill off the best in myself.

LF At what age did you become interested in music?

Michalson I was very young, and easily shamed, and my musical inclinations were so thoroughly emotionally beaten out of me that it wasn't until I started writing fiction that something broke inside and I started studying music. Actually, my second novel, *The Maenads God*, is in part about a musician, and while I was creating and writing this character I discovered a long suppressed need to learn to play. That fictional character changed my life. Profoundly.

LF Did you study formally?

Michalson No, I'm mostly self taught. But I did take private lessons once I reached a point where I felt I would benefit from someone else's input.

LF Who are your favorite writers and musicians?

Michalson Writers—all of the Romantic poets, but especially Coleridge and Shelley. John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde. For the twentieth century—Thomas Mann, Ayn Rand, John Barth, Edward Abbey, and Roberto Calasso. For musicians: any and all bass players! (just kidding) Actually I like Jaco Pastorius, Stanley Clarke, Jack Bruce, Geddy Lee, John Myung, and Duff McKagan. For keyboards, Tony Banks.

LF Is this answer the same as the answer to the question, what writers and musicians influenced you most?

Michalson As to writers, in general, yes. For example, I've been reading Shelley

since I was 12 or 14, and even now when I write there are certain cadences in his poems that definitely influence my sentence structure, and he taught me the trick of seeing images from behind the image as in "darkness to a dying flame"—the flame is dying but you can see it better in the dark, so there is an illusion there that it has more life as it dies.

As to musicians, I don't know. I'm more "influenced" by the fictional musician I created, and the kinds of things I imagine he might play, than by anybody real. You have to remember I didn't study music at a young age, so I don't think I was open to be influenced when I did take up bass. I was open to learn and develop. When I was first learning to play I would study and memorize bass lines by all of my favorite bass players, so there was certainly that kind of influence, but I never consciously tried to take on the style of another player.

LF Do you have an articulated philosophy of art?

Michalson No, and I've yet to find a philosophy of art from Aristotle to Gadamer that convinces me or that I find useful in either creating or experiencing someone else's art. But I do have a personal epistemology of art. I know art happens when I feel like I'm in a sacred space, like the reality around me has lengthened out and changed, when I'm not "here" anymore, when I experience the Romantic dictum of thinking with my feelings and feeling with my thoughts. This can happen whether I'm artist or audience, but whenever I have this feeling I know I'm in the presence of art.

LF What are the connections between your art and the libertarianism and feminism in your life?

Michalson A lot of my characters are individuals in deep conflict with an op-

pressive state. I don't know about feminism. Mostly I write in first person, from a male character's point of view. One (socialist) feminist chastised me for doing this and accused me of "writing into my own oppression." Actually, I don't think my fiction is particularly feminist, not consciously so, anyway. As to music, even though there are now more women in visible positions in rock n' roll, there are still situations when I play out and people come to the club thinking that a female bass player is a novelty and wondering if I can really play. Although they are actually surprised when they discover that I can, it is almost always a pleasant surprise, not hostility. Or people assume that because I'm female I must be the vocalist (which I am) and think I'm carrying a guitar for someone else. To the extent that I'm crossing what remains of a gender line there, I suppose playing rock bass could be seen as a feminist act. But I don't intend it that way—I didn't become a bass player to make a feminist statement. I just wanted to play rock n' roll and I happen to be female.

LF How has libertarian feminism shaped your actions and expectations? How do you think it should and will influence society?

Michalson It's given my actions and expectations a neat catch phrase, which is important, a way to think about my own politics. I think it has influenced society under the rubric of libertarianism. People are more conscious of government oppression since Waco, and this consciousness I think pervades all of society, including how women think of themselves and their relation to the state. Although I also think its influence in that respect is an anonymous one.

LF What experiences have been most formative for you?

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Michalson Being alone. Being alone with a good book. (Although I don't know if one is ever alone with a good book).

ALF What do you expect out of life?

Michalson Opposition. I didn't always expect this; it's something I've come to expect in the last two or three years. I used to believe that if I worked hard at anything I'd succeed—now I know that in the fiction publishing industry that's largely a myth. People who succeed work hard, of course, but not everyone who works hard succeeds.

For example, I work like hell at my art, and other publishing professionals have compared the quality of my writing to some Nobel Prize nominees (in rejection letters I've received) yet my fiction is still essentially unpublished. Why? Well agents have told me my work is "too innovative," "too imaginative," "too challenging and sophisticated," or "too intelligent," and that readers won't accept a fantasy trilogy that's "written like good literature" or won't

accept any kind of trilogy from an unknown author because first-time novelists aren't "supposed" to be able to pull off what I did. In the meantime, I've read my work to real live audiences and people weep and ask when they can buy copies. My last agent sat on my work for 16 months and showed it to no one because, essentially, she had no idea how to deal with a well-written novel intended for intelligent readers—her contacts wanted formula. Exclusively.

It is heartbreaking to have to explain that to people who assume that my novels are unpublished because I'm not any good or not "trying hard enough." It's one reason I started reading in public.

I am at the point where I send work out hoping that the person on the other end won't notice that I write too well or write too intelligently. So I really think a lot of my hard work at novel writing has been a liability towards success. This is based on what some of my rejection letters say in so many words, and on what my last agent said to me when we parted ways. I'm still trying to sort a lot of that out.

And yet good writers do get published. But it's a knave's game for a relative unknown like me to even get read by anybody in the industry. Most of the time my work gets returned unread and unopened. My trilogy lan-

guished for two and a half years at one publishing house whose acquisitions editor called it a "classic" and "loved it" but couldn't get the senior editor to read it (and he was married to the senior editor, by the way). And in exchange for the slender hope of getting read I had to promise exclusivity, so I couldn't show it elsewhere in that time. Publishing is rife with horror stories like that. I have to say that in many ways, despite its reputation for sleaziness, the music industry is a lot cleaner.

On a strictly business level, I'd rather deal with a record label executive than a publishing industry executive, any day of the week. It's unheard of for a record label to extort exclusivity and sit on a demo for two and a half years without playing the tape.

ALF What would you like to accomplish, in the short range and in the long range?

Michalson I'd like to see my novels in print and in the hands of readers who will appreciate them—in the short range and in the long range.

This interview first appeared in ALFNews. Reprinted with permission.

Publishing news

Savior of Fire [reviewed in *Prometheus*, Vol. 13, No. 2—Editor] is available from the publisher, or from Baker & Taylor Books.

To save time, send \$5.95 + \$3.00 S&H to Blue Note Books, POBox 510401, Melbourne Beach, FL 32951. FL residents add 6% tax. Or call 1-800-624-0401 during business hours.

If you have lots of time, and want to save the S&H, the book is distributed (but not stocked) by Baker & Taylor, and can be ordered from most bookstores. Ask for ISBN 1-878398-11-3.

—Robert B. Boardman

Author of Savior of Fire (1991), and The Trashers (forthcoming).

Many of you have wondered what I have been doing with myself since 1989, when my last novel, *Solomon's Knife*, was published. Some of you know that at that time I began work in earnest on what I considered to be my most important novel to date, *Kings of the High Frontier*. It seems that—despite the obvious interest in Space for the average American as witnessed by the wild success of *Apollo 13* in the face of media surprise—traditional publishers had no idea how to handle a 225,000 word novel that treats space travel as something real and achievable *now* rather than in some fantastic future beyond our lifetimes.

For those of you who can navigate the Web, there now exists a distributor who will make the entire novel avail-

able to you: Pulpless Fiction.

If you want to read my latest novel—the one New York publishers think you don't want to read—just point your Web browser to the sampler for *Kings of the High Frontier* at <http://www.pulpless.com/king.html>

If you like the two chapters you read, you can download the book immediately using e-cash or credit card. Then, use your browser offline as reading software. You'll see the text in an easy-to-read format with links to each chapter. It even has an illustration or two!

Kings of the High Frontier may very well be published in hardback in the near future. If you want to read about the near future *right now*, you can.

—Victor Koman

Freedom, immortality, and the stars

by L. Neil Smith

I've been a science fiction writer for 17 or 27 years, depending on how you look at it. During that time, it seems like there's always been some editor or agent on the phone, whining into my ear about how bad business is lately.

Of course you have to accept some of this as a bargaining strategy on the part of editors or excuses on the part of agents for why writers should be happy to accept less money. That sort of thing's been going on since the first copper stylus got mashed into the first moist clay tablet. From an editor or an agent's point of view (and they are essentially the same, no matter what they claim to the contrary) writers should always be happy to accept less money.

But there's a particle of truth here, too: the same period has indeed been characterized by shrinking rack space for science fiction in grocery stores and drugstores, incongruously occupied by offerings with dragons, dwarves, enchanted swords, bazookas, and armored hovercraft on their covers. Where I differ with the editors and agents to whom I've vainly attempted to communicate this point for virtually every one of those 17 or 27 years is in my belief that science fiction is dying from self-inflicted injuries. Furthermore, I believe that I'm uniquely qualified to pontificate on this subject because in many respects, I'm the only writer in the whole wide world still writing the stuff.

Historically, science fiction has almost always been driven by some variety of Utopianism: stirring visions of the wonderful new universe that will "inevitably" result from practicing whatever it is the writer has to preach.

Almost always it has been some variety of socialism.

On rare occasions it has been right-wing socialism, a little-understood intellectual phenomenon in which the central idea is that the life, liberty, and

property of the average individual should be sacrificed (or at least temporarily dragooned) for the sake of achieving certain collective goals like constructing a base on the Moon, slaughtering pesky aliens, wiping out interplanetary drug pushers, or simply moving Antarctic icebergs to thirsty tropical consumers, goals such as those traditionally advocated by conservatives (or even outright fascists) ranging from E.E. "Doc" Smith to Dr. Jerry Pournelle.

But most often it was left-wing socialism, in which the central idea is that the life, liberty, and property of the individual should be sacrificed for the sake of achieving certain collective goals like national healthcare or universal weapons confiscation traditionally advocated by liberals or even outright communists. These unworthies have dominated science fiction since its inception, although 20 or 30 years ago they grudgingly made room for a few token right-wing socialists because the real goal of both camps (like the viewpoints of editors and agents) is essentially the same: sacrificing the life, liberty, and property of the individual for its own sake, whatever the excuse.

Sometimes I think the lefties moved over and made room for the righties because they became absolutely terrified of what else might be bearing down on them.

Me.

Well, not me, exactly, but somebody like me.

Only a lot worse.

Ayn Rand scared the living shit out of these people. An Evgeny Zamiatin or a Robert LeFevre or even an Ira Levin they could suppress or dismiss for one reason or another, which is why so few readers have ever heard of *We*, *Lift Her Up Tenderly*, or *This Perfect Day*. But little old Alice Rosenbaum was always right there in their nasty collectivist faces,

her literary fists clenched, challenging their most fundamental assumptions in the very language that socialists of both stripes thought they had invented, stubbornly refusing to be dismissed or suppressed.

But what scared the lefties even more was the actual new universe that seemed to be resulting inevitably, as it turned out from the practice (by Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse Tung, Lyndon Baines Johnson, and Pol Pot, among others) of what they had been preaching since the time of H.G. Wells and Edward Bellamy.

It wasn't simply that the ideas of left-wing socialism weren't working, although that was certainly bad enough. Invariably they seemed to culminate in the deaths from causes ranging from starvation to firing-squad of tens of millions of the proletarians they'd been intended to benefit in the first place. And even worse, under the stress-testing of harsh reality (this was before the Evil Empire collapsed in an unprecedented, although not exactly unpredictable, manner) they sometimes often mutated into right-wing socialism.

Which is how it came to be that all those lonely, toothless, quakey-voiced old-timers (of all ages) still eking out their existences in the philosophical badlands and political ghost-towns that Left-Wing Utopia has become and even those lucky enough to be living in far greater luxury off the tailings of the statist mother-lode they once helped mine have nothing but bad news for us now. They're mistaking the failure of their ideas for a failure of reality.

As a consequence, many of them have simply given up and become whining nihilists. Those who are more successful tell us tales today of interstellar superstates with the unquestioned power to quarantine whole sectors of the galaxy

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because, in their infinite wisdom, they've decided it would be bad for unsupervised individuals of differing species to meet and freely exchange ideas and articles of trade with one another. At the same time, they speak of local authorities with the technological ability to search individuals for concealed weapons or other contraband at a distance—a practice nobody in these stories ever resists or even complains about on humane or Constitutional grounds.

This kind of thing used to be a staple of negative Utopias like *1984* and *Brave New World*, furnishings for cautionary tales about a regrettable loss of liberty. Now it's taken for granted as inevitable, and probably even desirable, whatever other possibilities the future may present. The writers never seem to notice that nobody is listening at least not to that part of the story.

So what happens to a community of timeworn left-wing Utopian writers who for decades have continued to insist on seeing a future that demonstrably to anyone who isn't tenured, working for television, or living in Sri Lanka doesn't work? Enter J.R.R. Tolkien, along with what seemed at the time like thousands of blatant imitators, sucked into the world-swallowing vacuum in the science fiction market created by the implosion of Marxoid idealism. Enter the dragons, the dwarves, and the enchanted swords. Bazookas and armored personnel carriers came later, and when they did, it seemed like a breath of fresh air.

And so, as irrationality and magic began to displace reason and science as the motivating epistemology, and as the genre began looking backward to feudalism and the Middle Ages (for all its socialism, science fiction had been a forward-looking literature of limitless perspectives) and as readers began to tire of narrowed horizons (not to mention the same old thing re-written over and over), the rack space "inevitably" once again began to diminish.

It was the exceptions (and don't you hate it when this happens?) that proved

the rule and still do today. The books that kept the rack space open for all those parasitic and reactionary dragons, dwarves, enchanted swords, bazookas, and armored personnel carriers, the only books that didn't gradually decrease in number, were those with spaceships, aliens, and ringed planets still on their covers, those whose subtitles now always seemed to include the word "star," accompanied either by the word, "wars" or the word, "trek."

There is some truth in the idea that *Star Wars* succeeded partly by co-opting medievalism. And it's equally true that *Star Trek* and its progeny have remained as unabashedly, old-fashionedly socialistic as *The Shape of Things to Come* steadfastly (and this is an important secret of their success) refusing to acknowledge the utter demise of socialism in every other branch of the cosmos.

But both displayed a future (yes, I know, *Star Wars* claims to be set "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away", but who believes it?) featuring individualistic causes, violent adventures, and technology almost anyone could look forward to. Hence their remarkable success in a period when science fiction generally lay dying, killed by the bankruptcy of its underlying ideas and a craven retreat from a future it knew it could no longer predict, create, or control.

But the question is, do we really want to grant to Lucasian neofeudal mysti-

cism or to Roddenberrian military socialism a monopoly on the future by default? Lucas and Roddenberry did their job, they held the line for science fiction, and preserved a remnant of that precious and dwindling rack space. But, to put the question a different way, how do we go about expanding it again?

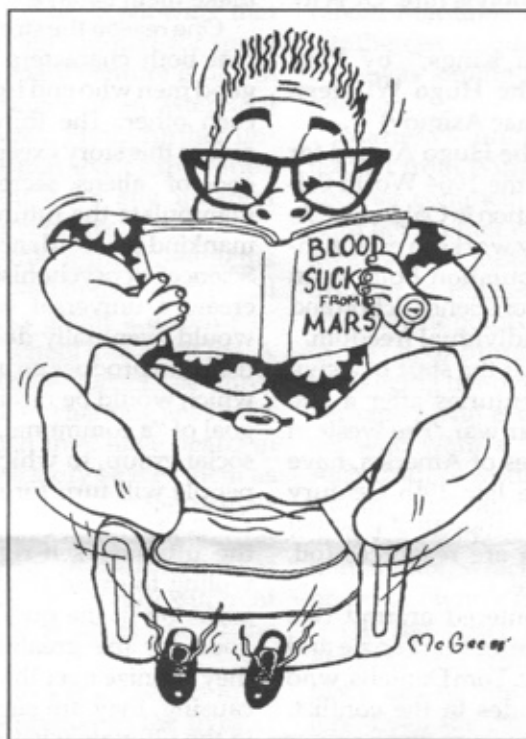
The one realistic answer will be a

bitter pill for all the right-wing socialists, the obsolete leftists, the dwarf-mongers, and the bazookists to swallow. Science fiction died because its self-contradictory dreams died first. Its one hope is to usher in an alternative literature of a credible yet fantastic future worth believing in, worth working for, and therefore worth reading about.

That literature doesn't have to be cre-

ated, it already exists. I'm very proud to say that I had a hand in its creation over 15 years ago, along with a dozen other novelists of my approximate age and outlook. Even better, I know of at least a dozen more science fiction manuscripts by other, mostly younger writers with the same viewpoint as ours, languishing now for lack of proper editorial attention. I predict that if New York publishing doesn't make a place for them soon, they will make a place for themselves, and on their own terms.

I can't bring myself to believe that New York really wants that. The last time something like that happened, they got Rush Limbaugh. Do they actually want a dozen Limbaughs, with both



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Short story reviews

Dozens of novels have been written dealing with libertarian themes. Little, however, is as emotionally charged as the short story, yet few people remember titles or can mention stories in the same breath as well-known libertarian novels. Sf seethes with short tales, yet libertarian short fiction is rare. Or is it?

"No Truce with Kings," by Poul Anderson (1963; *The Hugo Winners, Vol II*, edited by Isaac Asimov)

This story won the Hugo Award for Best Short Story at the 1964 World Science Fiction Convention in Oakland, CA. It was one of the key works in establishing Anderson's reputation both as an outstanding master of science fiction and as a champion of individual freedom.

The story opens at the start of a civil war about three centuries after a late 20th century nuclear war. The western US, the Pacific States of America, have achieved roughly a late 19th Century level of technology, though it's stated that what's lacking are resources (oil, etc.), not knowledge.

The action is centered around two individuals, Col. James Mackenzie and his son-in-law, Capt. Tom Danielis, who choose opposing sides in the conflict.

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a dozen Limbaughs, with both halves of their brains fully operational (which automatically makes them libertarians rather than conservatives) occupying the intellectual void science fiction has made of itself?

It may already be too late; New York may no longer have a choice. I hope so.

L. Neil Smith is the award-winning author of 19 books including The Probability Broach, The Crystal Empire, Henry Martyn, Pallas, and (forthcoming) Bretta Martyn. He has been active in the Libertarian movement for 34 years and is its most prolific and widely-published living novelist. This essay is reprinted with permission.

Mackenzie takes the conservative, constitutionalist view that no ends, no matter how noble, can justify improper means, while Danielis represents the impatient viewpoint of modern liberalism, demanding power and central authority over men, "strong enough to make them behave."

One reason the story is so powerful is that both characters are presented as good men who end up trying to destroy each other. The third element which makes this story exceptional is the presence of aliens, secretly attempting to manipulate the future development of mankind in accordance with their "Great Science" of psychohistory. They hope to create a universal world state which would eventually descend into despotism and produce an internal proletariat which would be receptive to the aliens' goal of "a communal, anti-materialistic social group, to which more and more people will turn for sheer lack of anything else." These aliens come across as the ultimate self-righteous planners, willing to cause tremendous pain and suffering in the pursuit of the greatest good for the greatest number. While they agonize over the suffering they are causing, they are supremely confident in the ultimate wisdom of their goals.

The pace of the story is fast and exciting, with Mackenzie discovering the truth about the Espers in the course of the war. Eventually, the conservatives triumph and the aliens are exposed and captured, leading to the strongest scene in the story. After the aliens explain their desire to "help" mankind, they beg the victors to conceal their existence and help them carry out their plan for the future of mankind. Speyer, Mackenzie's adjutant, contemptuously rejects them: "You wanted to re-establish the centralized state, didn't you? Did you ever stop to think that maybe feudalism is what suits man? Some one place to call our own, and belong to, and be part of; a community with traditions and honor; a chance for the individual to make decisions that count; a bulwark for liberty against the central overlords, who'll al-

ways want more and more power; a thousand different ways to live."

Anderson populates his stories with real people reacting in realistic ways to the crises they face. This is some of the best-written sf around, particularly if you like it with a libertarian viewpoint.

—William Howell, Jr.

"Conversation at Lothar's," by Barry Malzberg (*Children of Infinity*, edited by Roger Elwood, 1973; *The Liberated Future*, edited by Robert Hoskins; 1974.)

Malzberg's brief story leaves an unsettling echo. A young person befriends an old man, who tells tales of the past when people were free to act as they chose, before the advent of the current leadership of the statist-like Bureau.

The skeptical young narrator insists people in his day are free. There are some controls he admits, but they do have their 'Free Day,' when they are permitted to do as they please as long as they remain within prescribed limits.

These conversations are almost as forbidden as they thoughts they sow. When old Lothar one day is taken away, the subversive act of discussion and debate remains as a seed in the young narrator's mind. Powerful in its brevity

—Anders Monsen

"Dodkin's Job" by Jack Vance (*As-tounding Science Fiction*, October, 1959)

Status seekers and stuffy bureaucrats receive short shrift in Vance's drily ironic tale. "Dodkin's Job" relates a tale of the uncaring welfare state as it issues seemingly harmless edicts that make little or no sense.

Luke Grogatch, a day laborer frustrated with bureaucratic waste finds that working within the system can lead to success, if one gets to the "root" of the system. Where do decisions in the jungle of the bureaucratic state originate?

It is too easy to forget that petty conformist attitudes ooze their way into everyday life all too easily. "Dodkin's Job" is a bitter reminder of the blandness and insidiousness of all conformism. A tinge of ambiguity runs through the tale, especially in the motives of the protagonist, making it all the more real.

—Anders Monsen

Review

Firestar, Michael Flynn.

New York, TOR, 1996.

Reviewed by William H. Stoddard

Firestar is not Michael Flynn's best book; but its defects are defects of ambition. In ***The Country of the Blind***, his first novel, was sharply focused both as a narrative and in theme. **Firestar** attempts a greater breadth of vision and is sometimes awkward in handling it. Nonetheless, it was captivating reading, with moments of real intensity.

Flynn's setting is our world in the very near future: 1999, 2000, and 2007. Three plot threads provide contrasting views of that setting: a group of pilots recruited for a private space venture based in Brazil; a group of students attending a New Jersey public school, Witherspoon High School, whose management has been subcontracted to a corporate venture; the corporate and personal struggles of Mariesa van Huyten, heiress of a vast fortune and sponsor of the other two ventures.

Interspersed are short chapters of montage, in the style of Brunner's ***Stand on Zanzibar***, perhaps the most memorable of which are "Some Things That Can Happen to You," showing various forms of governmental harassment of van Huyten-owned enterprises, and "News Break," in which a series of videotaped reaction shots are edited for

broadcast and in the process every statement that might produce a favorable impression of van Huyten's venture is deleted.

Of the three plots, the spaceflight one is actually the least interesting; too much of it centers on the personalities of the pilots, especially their personal flaws. Flynn seems hesitant to believe that raw engineering can be dramatic; having spent most of *Apollo 13* on the edge of my seat, I don't agree. In showing that Mariesa van Huyten's motive for sponsoring a private space venture is obsession with the danger of an asteroidal impact on the earth, Flynn further undercuts the sense that space exploration and development have any inherent worth as human ventures.

Conversely, the human elements work extremely well in the educational plot, which tracks about a dozen students from high school into adult life. A particularly clever sequence has three black gang members chanting lines from "Horatius," which they have heard in school and whose story strikes them as clearly analogous to the dangers of their own lives. Flynn shows remarkable dramatic skill in bringing those lines back at the book's climax, in a very different context but in the mind of one of the same characters.

The theme of this story seems to be the need for inspiration in the lives of the young, and Flynn makes it persuasive that his young characters are inspired in various ways by their unortho-

dox education. Unfortunately, we are shown little of the actual process of education that achieves this.

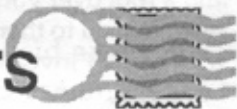
Tying these two plots together is Mariesa van Huyten, heir to one of the largest industrial fortunes in the United States. Her characterization is "realistic," meaning that it emphasizes her flaws and contradictions—perhaps not the best choice for a work intended as an epic. Flynn might have done better to reread Macaulay or Kipling and emulate their techniques of characterization, if he was aiming at romantic or tragic heroism.

Mariesa's unhappy marriage to a teacher from Witherspoon High School and her complete noncommunication with her mother establish that she is as awkward in emotional matters as she is brilliant in intellect and entrepreneurship, but the point could have been made more economically and without trivializing her or so much of the novel. Perhaps Flynn is trying to attract readers who want a "human" story—but such readers would presumably be assuming that marital problems are human but business, science, and education are not, which is diametrically opposed to Flynn's own theme.

On the other hand, a strength of Flynn's novel is that its conflicts do take place among the sympathetic characters. Even the closest thing it has to a villain, the environmental activist Phil

—continued on page 12

Letters



I enjoyed reading S. Andrew Swann's ***Profiteer: Hostile Takeover #1***, but it isn't going to get one of my Prometheus award votes. I have three major criteria for selecting Prometheus and Hall of Fame books.

The first is that it's an enjoyable read. The second is that it reflects (or reflects on) libertarian values, broadly construed. The third criteria, which is the one that Swann misses on, is that it be

good for outreach. Would the book attract non-libertarian readers to find out more about libertarianism, or to think about it in a more positive light?

Profiteer depicts a world on which no government exists and in which commercial firms compete with one another in actual battle, kill one another's employees or taking them hostage. Injuries to bystanders are common and while combatants try to miss the bystanders, they accept the occasional "collateral damage" as part of the process.

While I believe this kind of behavior would be unlikely, even in the absence of the state, I'm not dogmatic on the point; it's an interesting discussion topic

among friends. However, for people who don't understand the way markets work, this scenario plays into their preconceptions, and forms the basis for a common attack on truly free markets. People to whom such a scenario is a convincing depiction of an unregulated market would be extremely likely to accept it as proof of their worst fears and not hear any further arguments about whether it's a plausible development.

That's why I won't vote for this enjoyable and libertarian book for the Prometheus Award.

—Chris Hibbert

Reviews

Unintended Consequences,

John Ross

Accurate Press, \$28.95

Reviewed by Vin Suprynowicz

John Ross is an investment broker and financial adviser from St. Louis, Missouri. Ross fires 20,000 rounds of ammunition per year. He is "by his own admission, a member of the gun culture." Missouri is one of the last states that still bans handguns for personal protection for anyone except policemen. Ross, understanding that this exposes his wife and daughter, and the spouses and children of all Missourians, to the tender mercies of armed felons, has contributed thousands of dollars to lobby the legislature to repeal that handgun ban.

Since that hasn't yet worked, Ross, who earned degrees in both English and Economics from Amherst College, decided to write a novel. The book dramatizes the history of our government's war on the gun culture.

As Ross says in his author's note, "Today in America, honest, successful, talented, productive, motivated people are...being stripped of their freedom and dignity and having their noses rubbed in it. The conflict has been building for over half a century, and once again warning flags are frantically waving, while the instigators rush headlong towards the abyss, and their doom."

The first two-thirds of *Unintended Consequences* comprise a fictionalized chronology of various characters on three continents experiencing the effects of being armed—and being disarmed—from 1906 to the present. Characters are built with solid, credible personal histories. That takes some ink—860 pages in trade paperback.

By the time Warsaw ghetto uprising survivor Irwin Mann shows his young

American nephew pictures of naked Jews being herded to their deaths in the Nazi camps, only to have the lad point out to him that none of the soldiers' weapons have bullets in their chambers, you'll be hanging on every revelation.

"Would many people notice this fact, as you have?" the stunned Irwin Mann finally asks, after the lad demonstrates how you can tell whether each of the weapons in question has been loaded and cocked.

"Anyone with any knowledge of guns," replies young Henry Bowman.

But the Jews of Europe, of course, had no knowledge of guns. They had no gun culture. And so they died.

In the final third of the book, set after Waco and Ruby Ridge, our own gun grabbers finally go too far. The members of the gun culture find themselves pushed to the point where they realize it's either give up all their weapons, bend

over, and hope they use some lubricant ... or fight back.

Individually, without getting together to form any giant conspiracy, they start killing their oppressors. A few at first ... then by the hundreds.

One of the characters in *Unintended Consequences* says, "When the United States government suspects a citizen has failed to pay a five dollar federal tax and then spends more manpower and more money spying on that citizen then it spent on surveillance before the invasion of Haiti, there is something wrong. When government tax agents carry guns and wear black ski masks to hide their faces, the evil has become institutionalized. And when those government agents shoot nursing mothers and burn women and children alive over \$200 tax matters, then you have a government that is out of control."

Unintended Consequences is pub-

lished by little Accurate Press of St. Louis—the firm's first novel.

"Greg (Pugh) saw the first few chapters, and said he wanted it, that he hoped it would do for him what *The Hunt for Red October* did for the Naval Institute Press," Ross says.

John Ross and Greg Pugh don't know the half of it. I doubt this magnificent novel will be an overnight best-seller, without the kind of PR campaign it would get from a major publisher. But neither was *Atlas Shrugged*. Sales of Ayn Rand's masterpiece just kept growing by word of mouth, until it became this century's classic novel of liberty, never out of print in 40 years.

Now it has company.

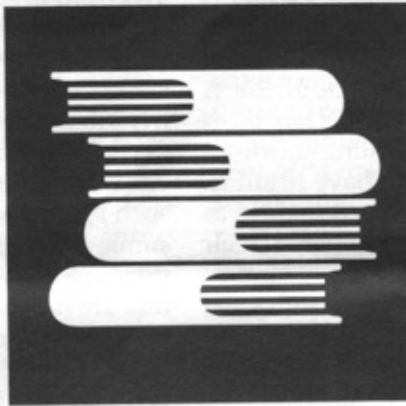
Unintended Consequences will terrify and appall jackbooted stormtroopers everywhere, and even more so the whimpering media geeks who squat to lick those boots. *Unintended Consequences* has characters you will care for, and a sense of proportion and scale that firmly resists the temptation to go overboard with superhuman feats more suited to the likes of Stallone and Schwarzenegger.

Does Ross worry about accusations that the book's "too political?"

"In the review that's scheduled to run in the publication of the JPFO (Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership), the *Firearms Sentinel*, they liken this book to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1853. A lot of northerners had considered slavery as a guaranteed three square meals a day and a roof over your head, and it didn't seem logical to them that a slave owner with \$3,000 invested in a slave would beat or torture or kill him.

"But *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a work of fiction, sensitized people to the realities of slavery in a way that a bunch of people standing around on stumps making speeches never could have done...Yeah, I've written a political novel. People who don't have any connection with the gun culture need to be made aware that our government is shooting people in the head and burning them alive because they didn't pay a

—continued on page 12



Exiles, Vol. 1. The Ruins of Ambrai,

Melanie Rawn

New York: DAW Books, 1994

Reviewed by William Stoddard

Libertarian themes are comparatively common in science fiction, much less so in fantasy. Melanie Rawn's new series is a pleasing exception. Its setting is typical of heroic fantasy—an aristocratic society with a preindustrial technology augmented by magic—but Rawn's view of aristocratic institutions is much more critical than is typical in the genre, and from an ultimately individualist slant.

The action of *The Ruins of Ambrai* takes place on two levels: political/institutional, and magical. The two are linked through the device of focusing the narrative on three sisters, of whom the eldest and youngest become leaders of opposing magical factions, while the middle sister becomes a leader of an underground political movement seeking to overthrow the authoritarian ruler of Rawn's imaginary world—though her own goals turn out to be considerably more radical.

At the magical level, the opposing

forces, the Mage Guardians and the Lords of Malerris, stand for two different perspectives on human life.

The Malerrisi see human beings as threads in a vast fabric, of no value in themselves but only as elements in a pattern to be determined by wise rulers, meaning themselves. The Mage Guardians have no such ambitions, and in fact their customs forbid them to hold any governmental office; they act as a restraint on government, while themselves being restrained by it. Rawn has restated in fantasy terms the opposition between central planning and reliance on the self-regulating market, in an almost Hayekian critique of the arrogance of self-appointed planners.

The political action complements this theme well. Events are shown from a variety of points of view, from that of members of the ruling council down to that of a runaway slave. Rawn shows the effects of statism, from simple economic exploitation and malinvestment to mass murder. And on the other side, she shows a movement of opposition to

It may just be that there is something fundamentally unworkable about government itself. As long as *Homo sapiens* terra is a wild animal...maybe a workable system of government is a political science impossibility.

—H. Beam Piper

statism—one that will recall Heinlein's *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* to many readers, notably in the sequence where Sarra Ambrai, during her training for leadership, devises an interlocking message passing scheme singularly like the one created by Manuel Garcia O'Kelly-Davis.

Equally reminiscent of Heinlein is Sarra's bitter opposition to slavery, only one of several institutions of her society which she seeks to abolish—others are personal identity registration disks and economic discrimination against men. On all of these, Rawn shows her taking positions that libertarians will applaud.

All of this material is woven into a good story, with plot twists that aptly illustrate its themes and with strongly drawn characters. Rawn's principal characters have more passions than the passion for freedom. Despite a huge cast, I seldom had any trouble keeping track of who was who.

I've grown reluctant to read fantasy in the past few years, especially huge fantasy novels that are presented as the first books of trilogies. I'm glad *The Ruins of Ambrai* got past that reluctance. Rawn has told a good story with significant ideas behind it, without falling into lecturing. I can't quite imagine how she plans to come up with two more equally dramatic books of this length, but on the strength of this volume I'm looking forward to the attempt hopefully.

Editor's note: The Ruins of Ambrai was nominated for the 1996 Prometheus Award, but since it was published in 1994, not 1995, The Ruins of Ambrai unfortunately did not make this year's ballot.

The sequel to this novel, *Exiles 2: The Mageborn Traitor*, is due in March, 1997.

Ambuehl Ulakey

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Ross, continued from page 10

\$200 tax. I make no apologies for writing a political novel."

I have rarely been as moved by any work of fiction as I was by John Ross' **Unintended Consequences**. It is a masterpiece. (And mind you, I'm saying this about the work of an Amherst man.) Anyone who cares about the Second Amendment—or any of the Bill of Rights—must read it.

Unintended Consequences will be ready to ship to bookstores nationwide in January, through wholesaler Baker & Taylor. Individual copies are \$28.95 from Accurate Press, 7188 Manchester Road, St. Louis, Mo. 63143; phone 314-645-1700.

Order several. You have friends.

Vin Suprynowicz (email address: vin@term1inus.intermind.net) is the assistant editorial page editor of the Las Vegas Review Journal. His column is syndicated in the United States and Canada via Mountain Media Syndications, P.O. Box 4422, Las Vegas, Nevada 89127.

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Firestar, continued from page 9

Albright, is carefully shown to be honest and intellectually sophisticated, able to see some virtue in Mariesa van Huyten and her projects. Ayn Rand used to say that the real conflicts in her novels were between the heroes because it was the heroes who were efficacious; Flynn seems to follow the same principle, to good effect. Perhaps the best application of this strategy is the hostile relationship between Mariesa van Huyten and Styx, a young poet who turns against Mariesa after learning that her support is motivated partly by the thought that Styx may become an artistic voice for Mariesa's visions—in this case Flynn dramatizes the relationship between Mariesa's achievements and flaws compactly and effectively.

Firestar, then, is an uneven work, not so much because its scope is too large—Flynn does far better at integrating his disparate plotline than many award-winning novelists—but because it doesn't sufficiently trust its own scope. A story of this magnitude needs larger

characters to carry it. But it's still worth reading for the ideas, the clever turns of plot, characterization and phrasing, and above all for the spirit it conveys.

At the climactic sequence in Macedonia, Flynn wove together multiple lines of causality in a brilliant convergent sequence, one in which the moral choices of many previously introduced characters were essential to the action and to showing how they had been influenced by their education in earlier chapters, making this one of the best climaxes I have seen in recent fiction and a sufficient justification for reading **Firestar**. Despite its unevenness, it will be strong competition for the other nominees for 1997's Prometheus Award.

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