



THE BOOK SMUGGLERS

**HUGO AWARD
NOMINEES**

Best Fanzine

**EDITED BY ANA
GRILO & THEA JAMES**

Review mavens, super geeks,

**HUGO AWARD
VOTER PACKET**

Art by Reiko Murakami

Created by Ana Grilo
and Thea James in 2008,
The Book Smugglers is
an award-winning blog,
dedicated to reviews
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and genre fiction for all
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mission: to discuss and
call attention to diverse,
underrepresented books,
authors, and voices in
speculative fiction
fandom.

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Thank you for your consideration

THE LIGHT BRIGADE BY KAMERON HURLEY

Let me just start by saying: The Light Brigade, the new standalone science fiction time-travel novel by Kameron Hurley, is a resounding triumph and already one of my top reads of 2019.

"Stick to the brief."

In a future a long, long time away, there are no nations anymore, the regions of the world are controlled ran by corporations in the name of #progress. And just like with some nations, you either are a citizen or you are not. Being a citizen comes with power, rights and privileges the "ghouls" can only dream to achieve. Dietz is a ghoul from a corp region that encompasses São Paulo in what was once Brazil. Or at least she used to be – São Paulo and its millions of inhabitants were wiped out of the map by Martian terrorists in something called The Blink. One day the city and its people were there, the next it was all gone. Since then the different corporations have been fighting a gruelling war against Mars. And now a recently developed technology has given the corps an advantage: the ability to teleport its soldiers from one place to the other almost instantaneously.

Dietz then has bought the ideal of the war hook, sink and line. She joins the army for revenge and for a chance. She is earnest in wanting to do better and fight for what she believes is right. After she undergoes the grisly training, she is ready for her first drop on Mars with the battalion she has become so close to.

But her very first drop doesn't go according to plan. And Dietz finds herself in a different when rather than a different where.

"Take control of the construct."

At first, completely confused by what happened, Dietz keeps going. But little by little, and drop after mangled drop, she starts to understand what is happening to her. She learns about the top secret light brigade, the soldiers no one wants to talk about, the ones who come back "wrong" just like her. She form alliances and she finally understands the nature of this godforsaken war.

And the more Dietz learns about the world, its politics, its machinations, the more I found things to relate to. And what a mind-bending experience it was.

There is nothing even remotely subtle about *The Light Brigade*. The action sequences are violent, the violence is bloody, the body horror is graphic and the politics are masticated and delivered on a plate to the reader – there is no room for different interpretations here. *The Light Brigade* is a direct confrontation of the evils of capitalism, while simultaneously praising socialism, togetherness, empathy. It is also a book about someone who is deeply ingrained within a broken system, who upon learning of its failures, successfully breaks away from it, then heroically saves the day for everybody else. And she is a bisexual woman no less.

The book also allows us to see exactly everything that Dietz has lost. Her family, her friends, a beloved. Every single subsequent revelation is an emotional punch to the gut and yet she just. Keeps. Going. At first, because there is no other choice: if she opens her mouth (“stick to the brief, Dietz”), she might disappear like the others from the light brigade. But she is also incredibly dedicated to her comrades, and she cannot, will not, leave them. And so it goes: to find answers, to fix what is going on, and to find a solution to end the war.

This book hit me like a tonne of bricks: rainbow-colored bricks that punched me in the feels like only a book addressed to our times, our generation, our political environment could. There is nothing as powerful as fiction that speaks to you directly in this way, that is rallying cry and emotional harmony at the same time. That makes you want to puke not only because of the graphic horror but also because understanding the evils of capitalism will do that to you. Just as I think this book is essential reading for anyone interested in great science fiction this year, it is also a book that is essential for those of us who feel trapped, because this is a hopeful, heroic, fist-pumping book about a heroine for our times.

“The heroes were always the ordinary people who pursued extraordinary change.”

Rating: 9 – Damn Near Perfect

Ana Grilo

“A BRAVE, UNFLINCHING, ORIGINAL WRITER” —JEFF VANDERMEER

THE KINGDOM OF COPPER BY S.A. CHAKRABORTY

I rarely gush over books—or series, for that matter—but for the Daevabad Trilogy? I am a pile of slack-limbed giddiness. City of Brass had been languishing on my TBR for over a year, until last fall when I thought, what the hell, let's give you a go. From the first description of occupied Cairo, and heroine Nahri's pragmatic scheming, I was placed under author Chakraborty's thrall—a spell that deepened with each new chapter, as Nahri's world expands from Cairo to the magic-shrouded city of Daevabad after she accidentally conjures of a djinn warrior and discovers that Nahri herself is a Daeva of a powerful lost bloodline and that the world contains real, true magic. But all magic comes at a cost, and for Nahri, the last surviving Nahid, Daevabad holds many enemies.

Fast forward to this year, and one of my most eagerly anticipated books of 2019.

The story is thus: after the dramatic events of City of Brass and her failed escape from Daevabad, resulting in the death of her beloved Afshin, Dara, Nahri has played the hand she has been dealt and agreed to marry emir Muntadhir al Qahtani. (She's negotiated the best possible deal for herself in terms of dowry, taking king Ghassan for as much as possible before closing the deal, of course.) Kingdom of Copper opens on Nahri and Muntadhir's wedding night, and the uneasy strain between the two characters, who don't really care for each other but who are both under Ghassan's orders to unify their two people for "peace"—Nahri is a Daeva and Muntadhir a Geziri, two different pure-blooded tribes of djinn with a dark history of hate and blood between them.

A QUICK REFRESHER

"I told you before that Suleiman was a clever man. Before his curse, all daevas were the same. We looked similar, spoke a single language, practiced identical rites. When Suleiman freed us, he scattered us across the world he knew, changing our tongues and appearances."

FROM CITY OF BRASS

"Even a few pages will enmesh you in its magic."

—ROBIN HOBB

S. A. CHAKRABORTY

The city of Daevabad is under the rule of the Quahatanis, of the desert-originated Geziri people—but as its name suggests, Daevabad was the seat of power and home to the Daeva tribe before the Geziri uprising that murdered the “rightful” rulers of the realm, the Nahids. The Nahids were the djinn who were entrusted with Suleiman’s seal, a magical ring that can nullify magic (Suleiman being the human prophet who scattered the djinn across the world and compelled their magic by using his ring, all to protect his fellow humans from further cruelty). A generation before the start of City of Brass, the Geziri stole Suleiman’s seal and the city of Daevabad itself, and while the Daevas are allowed to live and practice their beliefs, they are no longer in power and are mocked, jeered, and slighted. But what the Daevas have to deal with is nothing compared to the mixed blood race of the Shafit—half djinn, half human—who are seen as abominations and reviled by Daeva and Geziri alike.

Daevabad is full of Shafit, most who cannot pass for human but aren’t powerful enough to live outside of the magical protection of the city, for beyond its borders roam other evils, such as ifrit and ghouls, and a life of being discriminated against and poverty in Daevabad is better than no life at all.

The end result: Daevabad is a tinderbox of frustration and violence, primed and ready to explode.

(For more about the different daevas and their origins, check out “The World of Daevabad” on the author’s website.)

Kingdom of Copper follows the same three main characters from book one—Nari, Ali, and Dara—as they wage battles on three different fronts. For human-raised Daeva and former-thief-turned healer Nahri, Daevabad has never been more dangerous. Married to the Qahatani emir, shocked by the betrayal of Ali (the Prince she thought was her friend) and the more cutting loss of her sworn protector and lover, Dara (who also betrayed Nahri’s trust in irreparable ways before his death), Nahri has never felt more alone. But she is determined to survive and bide her time—she may be a piece in the tyrant Ghassan’s game, but Nahri knows how to play. And while she doesn’t care much for the marital expectations of producing a Nahid-Qahatani mixed blood heir, she does care about learning how to use her innate magic as the Banu Nahida (the title bestowed upon the female Nahid healer and leader of the Daeva), healing her fellow djinn and building trust amongst her new people.

...in a few pages will ennoble you in its magic.

—ROBIN HOBB

Nahri's great ambition is to restore the Nahid hospital, to treat all of Daevabad's sick and injured—be they Daeva, Geziri, or Shafit. Of course, such a thing is anathema—but Nahri will stop at nothing to get her way. Especially as tensions mount in Daevabad between the pure blooded clans and the Shafit, and Ghassan's rule grows increasingly cruel.

For exiled, stubbornly idealistic Qahatani prince Ali, returning to Daevabad is the last thing he wants, yet fate (and the schemes of his mother, Queen Hatset) bring him home. And things are... tense. His brother, Muntadhir, is determined to hate and avoid him for his role in aiding the Shafit rebellion and defying his family time and time again for his unyielding ideals—which sound great in principle, but in reality end with so many dead. Nahri pushes Ali away at first, but soon the two are back in cahoots, working together to build the hospital Nahri so yearns for.

Ali has another problem, though—since the night of the battle on the lake, when he fell into the Marid-cursed waters and inexplicably survived, strange things have been happening. Ali can control water, and has strange, terrifying dreams—he fears the worst, and that something the Marid did to him in the water is changing him.

Meanwhile, beyond Daevabad's borders, the warrior Afshin Dara is alive. Conjured back to life by Manizeh (Nahri's mother who has long been presumed dead), Dara becomes a key piece in the Banu Nahida's plan to take Daevabad back from the Geziri—no matter the cost.

Suffice it to say, there is a LOT going on in Kingdom of Copper, the second entry in S.A. Chakraborty's mad awesome Daevabad trilogy. And I'm going to go out on a limb right now and say, this book is almost certainly going to maintain a spot on my top 10 books of 2019 list (even though it's barely the second week of January). This is a sweeping tale of jaded characters making the best decisions they can in an impossibly hostile world bent on cycles of revenge and bloodthirst. This second novel is so much more than a bridge book—it is the rare second novel that outshines its predecessor, and builds on an already powerful, complex web of events, machinations, and rules. All this, while building towards an inevitable climax between characters who are so many shades of gray, resulting in what I can only fairly label as a masterpiece. Kingdom of Copper is that good.

"Even a few pages will enmesh you in its magic."

—ROBIN HOBB

The two things that truly stand out to me in this novel are the increasingly nuanced characterizations of Daevabad's heroes and villains, as well as the complex themes of tradition and duty, idealism and pragmatism that define so much of the story. In *City of Brass*, readers are introduced to familiar archetypal characters: Nahri, the orphaned chosen one AND pauper-turned-princess; Ali, the naive Jedi Knight-style prince with a conscience, despite his father's cruelty; Dara, the tortured, brooding mystery man with a Dark Past (but promise of a future with Nahri). In this second book, all of these archetypes—and more, including the villains Ghassan and Manizeh—deepen and become so much more than their superficial parts. Nahri learns quickly that political maneuvering in the Palace and amongst her own people requires force and finesse; she also is far more aware and understanding of the ever-increasing danger she is mired in, with few friends and so many enemies. It's wonderful to see Nahri grow into her abilities and wield the strength she has as a Nahid and Daeva and woman, in particular. Similarly, Ali and his relationships reveal different sides to his family—his brother's anger, his mother's love, even his father's weaknesses.

Ali more than any other character is dangerous in this novel—as Muntadhir points out, the boy's unwillingness to yield or compromise and his undying sense of right and wrong can be twisted, dangerous things that cost others their lives. Frankly, of all the characters, Dara is the least interesting in this installment, though his path and decisions to support Manizeh are believable and heartbreaking in equal measure.

And I've said nothing about the rich tapestry of lore and intricate history that Chakraborty has created! The djinn are a long-lived race, and their history full of power struggles, wrongs that are continually avenged and the cycle starts all over again. I am in awe of the world that Chakraborty has created, alongside our own human realm, and cannot wait to return to it in book three.

Absolutely recommended.

Rating: 9 – Damn Near Perfection, and I need the next book in the series like immediately

Thea James

"Even a few pages will enmesh you in its magic."

—ROBIN HOBB

S. A. CHAKRABORTY

GIDEON THE NINTH BY TAMSYN MUIR

I think I died a million tiny deaths reading this book.

I died right at the beginning when I realised that the narrator's voice – Gideon's voice – was funny. I don't know what I was expecting from Gideon the Ninth but given its cover, the fact that its main character opens the story describing how she has been trying to escape a planet where she has been kept against her will all her life and abused by its princess as well as an initial setting that is rather literally deep inside an order of dark, nefarious, serious, necromantic nuns who have to guard a Special Tomb of Doom, funny was definitely not it. With a mix of awkward jokes (there are quite a few silly What She Said jokes here) and sarcasm up the wazoo, Gideon's voice is a lighting beacon in a pool of darkness. Rather on purpose I guess. It somehow fits.

I perished when I realised that Gideon the Ninth is a cool book that mixes Fantasy and Science Fiction REALLY FREAKING WELL – it opens in catacombs and it throws magic necromancers at you, then all of a sudden there are space shuttles that take the leaders of Eight Houses who serve the emperor along with their

Cavaliers (their champions) to engage in a competition to become immortal. Gideon is trapped into being the Cavalier for the Ninth House, to travel alongside Harrowhark, the heir to the Ninth House and Gideon's sworn enemy. THERE ARE NO RULES to this competition – and each pair need to find the answers and become as close as possible in their partnership Before it is Too Late. Too late for what you ask? Noone really knows and this is when people start dying, and then that's when...

I truly and completely croaked. Because on top of everything this book is a murder mystery that takes place on a gigantic manor house slash super-developed yet decaying research facility on a planet far, far away. There is also the fact that Gideon is an orphan and you know that when you have an orphan with a mysterious past stuck in a mysterious order that keeps secrets for an immortal emperor, that SHENANIGANS WILL INEVITABLY ENSUE.

I expired when the book presented me with unexpected heroes, who unexpectedly rose to do unexpectedly heroic things. Gideon among them but not the only one. There is a lot of heroic sacrifice in these pages and it took me by surprise how much I ended up caring for so many characters. There is an unassuming depth to this story that hides behind its COOL/FUN high-concept (Lesbian Necromancers in Space!) that simply

crawls its way from the darkness and then all of a sudden THERE ARE TEARS and DID THAT JUST HAPPEN x 10 multiplied by one thousand when the ending comes.

There was some sort of la petite mort too when oh my god, a romance bloomed, a romance that was deep seated in trauma, in unspoken secrets and in the slow melting of icicles inside the hearts and souls of two individuals and their impossible wants.

I died at the end not because of how it ends (OH MY GOD) but also because it ended. This is the type of book I would happily, comfortably, hungrily keep on reading and reading and reading and ...

Waiting. Oh, gods, I will be waiting patiently for the sequel.

Rating: 10 BLOODY OBVIOUSLY ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR

Ana Grilo

GIDEON

THE NINTH

"Lesbian necromancers explore a haunted gothic palace in space! Decadent robes

THE WICKED KING BY HOLLY BLACK

Last year, I had the distinct pleasure of reading *The Cruel Prince*—the first in a new series from the prolific and distinguished Holly Black. At first, I wasn't hugely interested in reading the series—though I certainly appreciate a good tale involving the fair folk, and Holly Black's delectable writing—reading about a cruel faery prince through an under-powered mortal point of view (inevitably leading to a romance between said characters) did not register highly on my excitement meter. But then a ton of reviewers and authors and friends started raving about the book, and I was in a bookstore and it was like right there, so of course I decided to scoop it up and give it a try.

Readers, I really liked that book. I liked it so much that it made my best of 2018 list. And it ended with an awesome cliffhanger/twist, so naturally I was hooked and eager to get my hands on *The Wicked King* as quickly as possible.

[Spoilers for book 1 ahead, friends.]

In one brilliant move, Jude Duarte has gone from dissembling, weak mortal to the most powerful being in all of faerie. Having tricked Cardan into taking the crown as

High King of Faerie—as part of a desperate gamble to keep her younger brother, Oak, safe and free from their surrogate father Madoc's manipulations—Jude now secretly controls the will of Elfhame. To the rest of the fey—including Madoc himself, as well as her twin sister Taryn—Jude is an ambitious, probably love-struck mortal that has defied her father's wishes in exchange for power as Cardan's seneschal. In reality, Jude is effectually the King of Faerie. With her ability to command Cardan for a year and a day, and with the spy organization of the Court of Shadows at her back, Jude schemes and plots and tries to keep the realm under control and out of war.

Rule is not so easy, however, when no one can know of Jude's true power, and when her King fights her command at every turn. Things become even more complicated when the Queen of the Undersea makes a move against the High King, claiming that her pact for peace with the folk of the land lay with King Eldred and not with King Cardan—worse yet, somehow Cardan's defeated and imprisoned elder brother Balekin is part of the plot.

Facing enemies from within—her own network of spies and allies, and a reckless, drunken King chafing at her commands—and attacks from the outside in the form of the Realm of the Sea and her own father,

Jude walks a dangerous path. It will take all of her skill and determination to maintain her control of Elfhome. After all, Jude has learned well from her father.

Power is much easier to acquire than it is to hold on to.

The singular theme of *The Wicked King* is power. Jude has lived almost all of her life in Faerie. Being the surrogate daughter of the King's General would mean prestige and power for any creature with fey blood—unfortunately for Jude and Taryn, they are both fully mortal, the children of Madoc's human wife and the man who helped her trick her way out of Faerie. As a human in this realm of magic and riddles and glamours, Jude has been told to keep her head down and stay in her place. But, as the events of *The Cruel Prince* illustrate, Jude has never been one to feign weakness—at least, not unless it serves a larger strategy. In *The Wicked King*, Jude has gone from prey to predator; she has seized power when no one believed that she could, and though she did it to protect her family, finally possessing true power is intoxicating in its own right. (Of course the thing of it is, no one can know Jude has outsmarted them all or all of her carefully-laid plans will come crashing down.) But the crazy thing about power is that it comes with constant challenges—from the Sea, from the dethroned and those who have been displaced from Cardan's rise, and from the schemers within the court. Madoc's l

essons have always served Jude well, and she learns this particular one over and over again in *The Wicked King*—and one that rings very true.

Beyond Jude's arc, *The Wicked King* is so damn good because of its twisty plot—another Holly Black hallmark, and she does not disappoint. The realm of Faerie is full of tricks and distrust, and even friendly allies have their own secretive motivations. Though there is undeniable attraction between Jude and Cardan, it's not exactly love or lust or hate—there are reasons they do the things they do, and we can't really predict what those reasons are or how they'll unfold. That's part of the thrill, really. Similarly, the relationship between Jude and her sisters (especially Taryn) and ohmygod the relationship between Jude and Madoc are particularly thorny and nuanced. There is respect and tension, betrayals and lies, and it's all just so incredibly well written.

I finished this book with my heart in my throat at the final revelations, and while I am so frustrated I have to wait another year to know what happens next, I loved every moment of this adventure.

Absolutely recommended and one of my favorite reads of the year so far.

Rating: 8 – Absolutely Brilliant

Thea James

THE RAVEN TOWER BY ANN LECKIE

Ana's Take

There will be a reckoning.

These are the first words in Ann Leckie's utterly fantastic standalone novel *The Raven Tower*, her debut Epic Fantasy after the multiple award-winning Science Fiction Ancillary series.

At first glance perhaps we have seen it all: a young farmer's son is off to win his fortune as a soldier in service to an heir and then becomes embroiled with the fates of humans and gods, especially when one special God starts to pay attention to him and he becomes well, a Chosen One.

But there is the thing: the god – one of the Ancient Ones, a literal rock who is known as The Strength and Patience of the Hill – is the one narrating the novel, telling us their story through time since The Beginning) in first person, a story that is both local and large, epic and personal. The Hill has seen people – and gods – come and go, has seen oceans change and learned to communicate. The question of language, of speaking and communicating is of utmost importance here. Through the use of language, the gods communicate with people yes, but there are rules to

that. Rules to being a god, that say a god's words are inescapably true (as long as they have sufficient power to make them true); and that speaking an untruth (or rather, something they don't have power to enforce) can drain a god's power for a long time or even kill them. But with enough power and please pay attention to this bit, with "carefully chosen words", a god can do anything.

So through time, The Strength and Patience of the Hill has seen things. Met people. They have a BFF, the Myriad, who has arrived on Earth on a meteorite and has advised and kept The Hill company. They fought together in a war to avenge some wrongdoings done to the people who has worshiped them and this is when things started to well.... Take a turn. That war has been fought against the forces of the Raven, a God who together the Silent Forest has kept the port of Vastai and its human inhabitants safe.

But that war was a long time ago and the Raven is still a powerful god whose will and wants are communicated through his Instrument to the Raven's Lease, a human ruler who gets to live a perfectly amazing life with all comforts he requires until a time comes when he must die in blood sacrifice to the Raven. The Lease MUST die and a new Lease must be Seated every time a new Instrument is hatched. If this doesn't happen, the word of the god is untrue and that is just.... Impossible.

So here enters our (our?) hero, Eolo, who The Strength and Patience of the Hill spends most of the novel talking to in second person. The Strength and Patience of the Hill has placed all of their attention on Eolo, trying to communicate with him for an unbeknownst reason to us all (until the end, the reason is very clear in the end). Eolo is the young man abovementioned: he is a transman, a powerful warrior and the quietly smart aid to his master Mawat, the next in line to be the Lease after his father dies. But when they arrive back to the Tower, they find that a new Lease has been installed, and that Mawat's father has disappeared, not died. Mawat knows this to be an impossibility. His father MUST be dead. And he, Mawat should be the new Lease. The RAVEN SAYS SO.

But Eolo is not so sure. And he sets out to investigate what exactly happened to Mawat's father, how can these things be happening – and in the process, Eolo will find out the secrets behind the Raven Tower, the truth behind the Raven's own power and how humans have benefited from it. And as much as these things go: snooping around brings unexpected answers one may not be ready to hear.

"The relevant question here, it seems to me, is not any of those things. It is, rather, Do you care?"

This is a rewarding novel for the patient reader, the one who is willing to hear a story told (more than shown) that stretches through a long period of time

keeping track of a god's growth into their own power and how exactly that is accomplished in fits and starts and longs period of silent and navel gazing – its rewards as multi-layered as the novel itself. There is matter of human politics and diplomacy here too, and of tricking people into speaking words in a certain way as well as a story that investigates the nature of religion, belief and of godhood. On a more personal and human level, we have Eolo, his struggle to be heard on a matter that seems beyond his capable mind further establishing himself as a wise young man.

I don't know if there are any better words here for this particular god than Strength and Patience and oh my gods, when the promised reckoning comes? Did I tell you this is a revenge story? The when, why and how is just not exactly what we were expecting. But it is so clever and oh so satisfying. The very last sentence of the novel, goose bumpingly good. With a mastery of language and a careful control of a storyline that leaves nothing out, this is truly a novel that shines.

If there is such a thing as a cosy Epic Fantasy that manages to do new things to the genre whilst simultaneously examining the question of language, the tricks of communication and also being a murder mystery as well as a Revenge Story? This is it. My mind. It is officially blown.

Absolutely recommended and already one of my favorite books of 2019.

Thea's Take:

I had a very different experience than Ana did. I enjoyed *The Raven Tower*, and there are many things to love about the book. But there are also many, many flaws. The Raven Tower certainly executes its revenge story—but it's a cheap kind of trick. A short story shock. A twist, on par with a decent *Twilight Zone* episode. Don't get me wrong—I admire many things about this book, most notably Leckie's dedication and technical expertise in its telling.

But did I actually like the book?

Let us start at the beginning.

The narrator of *The Raven Tower* is an ancient god: the Strength and Patience of the Hill, as he is known by his followers, friends, and, eventually, his enemies. The Strength and Patience of the Hill narrates the entire novel in the second person—addressing much of his narrative towards Eolo (a character who cannot hear him, for the most part, but an instrumental tool in the overall plans of the god), and thusly towards us, the readers. In essence, we readers are Eolo (more on that, and the dearth of characterization, in a bit). The narrative flips back and forth between Eolo's timeline, and the events that led the Strength and Patience of the Hill to... well, where it is in Eolo's timeline. The stone god is very, very old, and very, very introspective. He has had

millennia to ponder on his existence, and the strange creatures that teach him language and supplicate themselves to him (humans).

And so, when an ambitious god from the south—the Raven, of the eponymous tower—starts waging war and amassing power against the gods of Ard Vustika, the Strength and Patience of the Hill is finally moved to do something.

In between that time and Eolo's time, the Raven has become (or is perceived to be) one of the world's most powerful gods. Ruling over Iraden, the people who follow the Raven and the Silent Forest gods have grown prosperous. Meanwhile, the Strength and Patience of the Hill ponders its fate, and watches, and thinks.

The resulting narrative is, frankly, exhausting. There are no chapters in *The Raven Tower*; no true story breaks. Being privy to an ancient god's meandering thoughts is fascinating and Leckie does a damn convincing job of creating an ever-patient sentient stone god, but it means that *The Raven Tower* is not an easy book to read. Personally, I found it hard to connect with the narrative, and while I admire Leckie's dedication and obvious skill, I didn't particularly like the reading experience.

Adding to this frustration was ultimately the lack of characterization and connection, especially to Eolo! Eolo, who should be our hero and the one character

we should empathize with! Reflecting on his character, here are some of the things we know about Eolo: he is a man (though assigned female at birth), who is unwaveringly loyal to his friend Mawat (though Mawat treats him like garbage), and who unquestioningly does as he is bid. Eolo is similarly quiet and patient and observant, which is ostensibly why the Strength and Patience of the Hill becomes so fixated on him. Sadly, the result of the narrative, and Eolo's lack of an individual personality or presence, means that the character is unconvincing, flat, and tepid.

Eolo is a tool to the Strength and Patience of the Hill and to readers, and more of a vehicle for the story and reader to insert themselves, rather than an actual full-bodied character. (Granted, this particular story is told by an observant stone, so this is likely the desired intent—again, your mileage may vary.)

Now, there are things that I absolutely loved—like the power of language and its implications for a God. I love the friendship between Myriad and the Strength and Patience of the Hill. I like the betrayals upon betrayals, and the ultimate deaths of certain characters at the novel's climax. I love the convincing job Leckie does with crafting the voice of the Strength and Patience of the Hill... I just kind of hated reading it, and was entirely disconnected from every other character in the tale. To quote the Myriad:

The question is not, said the Myriad, whether distant events will affect us. This is not truly a question— they can and they will. Nor is the question how we will be affected. One can make any number of careful and informed guesses, but until events occur any predictions are subject to error, to the extent that one's information, or one's understanding, may be incomplete. [...] The relevant question here, it seems to me, is not any of those things. It is, rather, Do you care?

Unfortunately, I did not. I did not care much at all.

Ana: 10 – Perfect (I originally gave the book a 9, but upon reflection, this deserves a 10)

Thea: 6 – Good, but not without issues

Ana Grilo & Thea James

THE TWISTED ONES BY T. KINGFISHER

Hello nightmares my old friends, it's nice to see you again this October.

Mouse's elderly father asks for her help emptying her recently deceased grandmother's house. In Mouse's family, at least the side that matters, when someone asks for help, you say yes: even though it means going back to a place she never truly liked, to empty the house of someone who was truly, truly awful who knows for how long given her grandmother's hoarding tendencies. So there goes Mouse, with her faithful dog Bongo (what a good boy, 11/10) to clear away rooms after room of her grandmother's hoard.

Here is the basic recipe for this nightmare in the shape of a book:

A house in the middle of nowhere full of rooms our protagonist cannot even fully see inside. A whole upper floor inaccessible until she can clear the ground floor first. A house that has no internet, no good connection and a phone that has a factory problem and keeps overheating and crashing. Woods. Woodpeckers, pecking, pecking, pecking away at all hours of the day (and night).

Weird-as-ass rocks found on a mysterious hill. Dead Deer. A diary that belonged to Mouse's dead step-grandfather, with a story about a story about the White Ones with a repeated refrain that finds itself ear worming into Mouse's mind:

Then I made faces like the faces on the rocks, and I twisted myself about like the twisted ones, and I lay down flat on the ground like the dead ones...

Add to the basic recipe: a framing device that is Mouse's own retelling of the totally, completely impossible supernatural events she encountered coated in a healthy veneer of humour (you know, the type that has a tendency to surface at the oddest of times) with a brilliant juxtaposition of mundane and supernatural and the result here is a delectable novel that I devoured in one sitting. I was scared out of my wits, yes, just as I was entertained and intrigued.

The voice and setting are all very expertly done but perhaps my favourite thing about the novel, which tends to be my favourite thing about T Kingfisher's work overall, is the unpredictability of how the story progresses, the subversion of the most common horror tropes. Instead of the Lone Heroine who endures her horrors alone, Mouse shares the stories of uncovered horror very early on with her friendly neighbours Foxy and Tomas. The

strength of the novel, lies in this shared horror – instead of suffering and enduring alone, Mouse has friends who help her, who go through the events alongside her. She never stands alone – and that was fistpumpingly awesome and wholesome.

My thoughts on the novel would not be complete without mentioning that Mouse is the type of heroine who will do anything and everything for her dog Bongo. And that's really, how it all starts. (1)

Rating: 8 – Excellent

(1) Fear not, we know from early on, given the framing narrative, that the dog survives.

Ana Grilo

BAD INSTITUTES FOR GIFTED CHILDREN

THE INSTITUTE BY STEPHEN
KING, INSPECTION BY JOSH
MALERMAN

It's officially Halloween season, which means I've been diving deep into the horror canon—this spooky season, I found myself drawn to two different novels about gifted children and the adults experimenting on them: Josh Malerman's *Inspection* and Stephen King's *The Institute*.

Inspection follows a basic premise: there are twenty-six boys, so-called “alphabet boys” named for the letters A through Z, who live in a tower in the middle of the woods. Under the watchful eye of their D.A.D. and their other teachers and minders, these young, brilliant boys—all the same age, all on the cusp of puberty—have grown up in their isolated tower, studying accelerated, carefully curated topics. By the age of twelve, the boys are completing collegiate-level physics and mathematics, though their curriculum is devoid of history, theology, art, or literature. In fact, every book that they boys have ever read is by the same author, and his writing is always relevant to the boys's growth, challenges, and is carefully devoid of many things—like far away cities, or cars, or most importantly, women.

You see, D.A.D. and his cohorts are running a little experiment. What happens to young men, in the absence of “distractions” (women)? Raised from birth without any mention of or interaction with females, the Alphabet Boys are carefully monitored for every moment of their young lives. To ensure that they haven't been exposed or threaten to ruin the experiment, the boys face an Inspection each morning to check for mysterious, malicious illnesses like rots and vees, to ensure that they haven't been Spoiled Rotten. If Spoiled, a boy is sent to The Corner—a place none of the boys fully understand, but know it's a place from which there is no return.

J admires his D.A.D. and yearns for his approval... but one morning, after seeing a mysterious figure outside of his tower room window, he begins to question things. Small things at first—catching D.A.D. in a lie—but then huge, world-shaking revelations. That's when K arrives—who is not a boy, who is in fact a young girl (a so-called “Letter Girl”) from an identical tower in the same forest, and is ready to tear it all down.

There are lots of things to love about Malerman's writing—chief among his strengths are his outstanding premises. In *Bird Box*, it's the haunting conjuration of a blindfolded woman trying to bring her children to safety from a monster they literally cannot see. In *Unbury Carol*, it's the horror of a woman who sometimes

falls into death-like fugue states being buried alive by her indebted and conniving husband. In *Inspection*, Malerman focuses on twisted adults performing a generational experiment on fifty-two children to prove that sex and the entanglements of relationships between boys and girls is the cause of ruinous untapped intellectual potential.

On the face of it, this is an absolutely ludicrous premise. It assumes a wholly binary cis heterosexual world, in which there are Boys and Girls and they would never ever “be distracted” by members of their same gender. Then again, the entire point of *Inspection* is that these adults—particularly D.A.D. and M.O.M.—are depraved zealots who have devoted their fortunes to run a lifetime experiment on human subjects. One can’t help but wonder at the holes in their experiment, though—surely children studying science, particularly biology, would have some questions once they start to learn about sexual reproduction of plants and animals and the concepts of gametes and zygotes. Or, the huge gaps in knowledge and formative understanding with the lack of subjects like, oh, history. These complaints said, I did love the way the adults approached providing literature to their children—hiring two writers to live at the respective towers, writing new stories deemed appropriate for the children, month after month, year after year. It is a book that is one of the catalysts for *Inspection*—one author,

driven to the brink of madness because of the choices he has made, decides to write a different book and sneak it to the Alphabet Boys.

If you can get over the knee-jerk reaction to how categorically reductive and foolish the premise is, the actual journey in *Inspection* is pretty good—it’s a story about growing up, the realization that authority figures are not infallible, or right, or even good. It’s a story of two brilliant young protagonists coming into their own and fighting for the things that they only have begun to realize they’ve missed. AND, *Inspection* has a bloody great climax and ending. The writing style is a little indulgent, but overall a fun read.

The new tome (576 pages) from Stephen King, *The Institute* is a story that also follows incredible children put under the power of some truly messed-up experimenting adults. The novel opens with an epigraph stating that according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, roughly 800,000 children are reported missing in the United States alone—most are found, but thousands are not. It is on this tantalizing statistic that King spins a story of a governmental conspiracy—one vast and deep and old, involving men in black stealing kids from their beds. Not just any kids, mind you, but those with special gifts. TPs and TKs, kids with telepathy and telekinesis respectively, are of primary

interest to the Institute for reasons unknown to readers or the kids in question.

In true King fashion, The Institute has a delectably terrifying premise, standout protagonists, and horrifically memorable villains. This time around the heroes are kids—in particular, one incredibly smart kid named Luke, who happens to be a genius with two colleges on the hook even though he's barely in middle school. Among his many talents, Luke also is well-adjusted—meaning he has friends his age, understands how social interactions work, and loves his parents very much. And, Luke has another gift: he can move things with his mind. We're not talking Carrie or Eleven style full-on telekinesis—it's akin to a parlor trick. Sometimes cutlery rattles when he's upset. There isn't much to it, until his parents are killed in their beds and Luke is whisked away to the eponymous Institute. Here, he meets other kids like him—the beautiful and cool-headed Kalisha, charismatically angry teenager Nick, funny guy George, and the more reserved Iris—and gradually discovers the horror of his situation. Luke and the others are in the Front Half of the Institute, where they are subjected to tests and injections, made to watch and see unsettling dots, and are given tokens for good behavior (they can purchase things like cigarettes and nips of booze and bubble gum and candy and soda with

said tokens). They go to bed and wake up and do their tests and one day, they graduate from the Front Half and are sent to the Back Half.

No one ever comes back from Back Half.

The other kids have all been around for longer than Luke, and one by one he sees them taken away. Carefully, Luke thinks and plans and uses his one asset to his advantage—for while he may not be as talented a TK or TP as the others, adults have been underestimating him for his entire life. Together with the help of fellow inmate, the impressively powerful ten-year-old telepath named Avery Dixon, Luke will find a way to bring the Institute to its knees and save his friends.

Found families and friendships, fighting against evil is a classic horror archetype for good reason—it's awesome. When the found family comprises a group of ragtag misfit kids, a (probably telepathic) former cop, and a soft-hearted woman at the end of her life, it becomes an even more powerful kind of family. Or, since we're talking King, ka-tet. THIS is what I loved so much about The Institute—the sense of family, of kindred spirits, finding their way to each other despite all of the other monstrous danger in the world. And monstrous the Institute is—as we learn more about the Director, Mrs. Sigsby, and her various lackeys, it's easy to understand

THE INSTITUTE

how such a place might exist. For the saving of the greater good, sacrifices must be made, right? (Honestly, the entire thing reminded me a bit of Cabin in the Woods and the need for ritual teenage sacrifice to sate slumbering angry gods.) A zealot who believes, truly, that they are doing the right thing and damn the cost is a dangerous adversary—Luke and his family have their work cut out for them in this novel.

As with pretty much any Stephen King book, *The Institute* is immensely readable—though I will say it doesn't quite hit the level of *Good vs Evil* that, say, *It* or *The Stand* do. And, while I loved Luke and Avery and Sha and Nick so much, I wanted more of a showdown at the end—more fireworks (a pun you'll pardon, after you've read the book). In Malerman's *Inspection* the boys' world ends in blood and vengeance; in *The Testament*, it's a little more sanitized, a little more like *Dreamcatcher* or *Stranger Things* where one kid's immense talent causes a paranormal seismic event that kills the bad guys. That's not a bad thing, really... I just wanted a little bit more.

Still, all things said? *The Institute* is certainly worth a read, and I absolutely recommend it.

Inspection – 6, Good

The Institute – 7, Very Good

Thea James

THE INSTITUTE

THE RISE OF KYOSHI BY F.C. YEE

I would not know how to write about The Rise of Kyoshi without coming across as the huge Avatar: The Last Airbender geek that I am so I am not even going to try.

I would like to start by saying that this book is super great on its own – as a revenge, coming of age adventure story of a young girl finding her own footing (hehe) – but as an Avatar story? It is an awesome, brilliant addition to Avatar lore: it develops the world a bit more, building on what we already know about avatars and adding fantastic snippets about what we didn't.

From the moment I finished both Avatar: The Last Airbender and The Legend of Korra, I have wanted to read/watch/consume/inhale a story about an earthbender avatar (earthbending is the best bending, don't @ me). The fact that 1) we got a story about the LEGENDARY RIGHTEOUS Avatar Kyoshi? And that 2) it is written by F.C. Yee who blew my mind away with The Epic Crush of Genie Lo? CHERRY ON TOP.

Listen, my copy has so many earmarks, it's almost impossible to close the book.

It begins slowly, it builds up on the political, economic background of the Avatar world after the short-lived

avatarhood of waterbending Avatar Kuruk, who by all accounts was a terrible, irresponsible, self-indulgent Avatar. He died early, throwing the world into a mess, and years later, his companions and bending masters are still desperately trying to find the new Avatar, to no success. The companions – earthbending Jianzhu, airbending Kelsang, earthbending Rei-Han – have tried to keep the world in balance, going to extremes to do that in the absence of an Avatar, and often amassing great wealth and influence themselves, especially Jianzhu. 16 years later, they have found the young Avatar: a young boy named Yun, with prodigious earthbending but no signs of other bending so far.

Cue to the Avatar compound where all these people live together training and protecting Yun. There is a 16-year-old servant orphaned girl named Kyoshi, who used to live on the streets until airbending Kelsang becomes her surrogate father. She is best friends with Yun and with firebending Rangi (Rei-Han's daughter and Yun's bodyguard). Kyoshi is an earthbending but she doesn't use her bending that much because she is utterly unable of doing small, subtle bendings. Boulders not pebbles, etc.

Then one day, while hanging out with Kelsang, she starts singing a song that ONLY Kuruk and Kelsang knew which makes Kelsang suspect they have the wrong Avatar. And that Kyoshi is the Avatar.

WITH AVATAR CO-CREATOR
MICHAEL DANTE DIMARTINO

CUE CHAOS. Kyoshi herself is like HELL NO, her friends are understandably taken aback and feeling betrayed, the entire world could be upended by this news.

Does the end justify the means? For Jianzhu, it absolutely does, and he does something so dramatic, so loathsome and so utterly shocking is his of finding out the truth and in his pursuit of controlling Kyoshi that it will make Kyoshi run away with Rangi setting up Kyoshi's revenge story – the heart of the book. For most of the book, this is what drives her. She couldn't give a damn about Avatar duties or about honour. Learning the other bending techniques is just the vehicle for ultimate vengeance. But of course, the journey is the thing – and in learning other bendings, she ultimately learns about the world, about honour and duty too. She meets other people, poor people that are struggling and gets together with a band of awesome thieves who become her bending masters.

The Rise of Kyoshi does not pull punches: there are HORRIBLE, TRAUMATIC violence and abuse by people who should know better (at least you would expect them to) – it reminded me a bit of season 3 of Korra, actually. Kyoshi also experiences PTSD which affects her bending.

What I also loved about the book is that it is as much the story of Avatar Kyoshi as it is the story Kuruk's companions. And this juxtaposition of the old vs the new, of tradition vs modernity, and about found

families and friendships, is one of the best things about all of the Avatar stories.

It is no surprise that the first time that Kyoshi truly uses her bending, it is to save her friends and in doing so she literally moves the motherfucking SEAFLOOR. Be still my heart.

Speaking of hearts. Guys, we get to see A BUNCH OF AIRBENDERS AND AIR NOMADS ALIVE AND WELL. THERE IS A SKY BISON NAMED PENG PENG. And Kyoshi herself is HALF AIR NOMAD, WHAT. The story about her family is complicated and fascinating and one of the best things about the book.

Pause for tears.

Also, Kyoshi is ON PAGE, canonical bisexual with a lovely romantic relationship in the book with her companion Rangi. It also has: the Kyoshi fans, the Order of the White Lotus, Pai Sho, the most epic of epics Avatar State.

MY HEART CAN'T HANDLE HOW AWESOME THIS BOOK WAS.

The Rise of Kyoshi is more than a worthy companion to the series – it is essential read for anyone who loves the Avatar world. And the best thing is: it's a duology so there will be MORE AWESOMENESS TO COME.

Rating: 10 – OF COURSE

Ana Grilo

AVATAR CO-CREATOR
MICHAEL DANTE DIMARTINO

THE FLICKER MEN

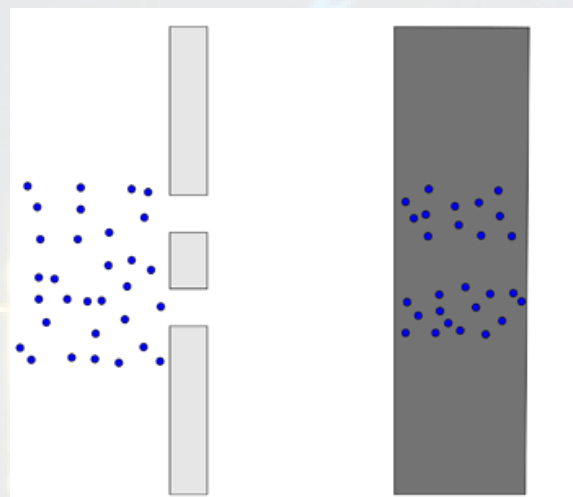
BY TED KOSMATKA

Eric Argus is a man at the end of his rope. A once-promising quantum physicist, Eric has fallen far and hard from grace following a psychotic break at his last job. A highly functional alcoholic, Eric also grapples with depression and suicidal thoughts—when we meet Doctor Argus, he’s staring down the barrel of his father’s gun in drunk contemplation.

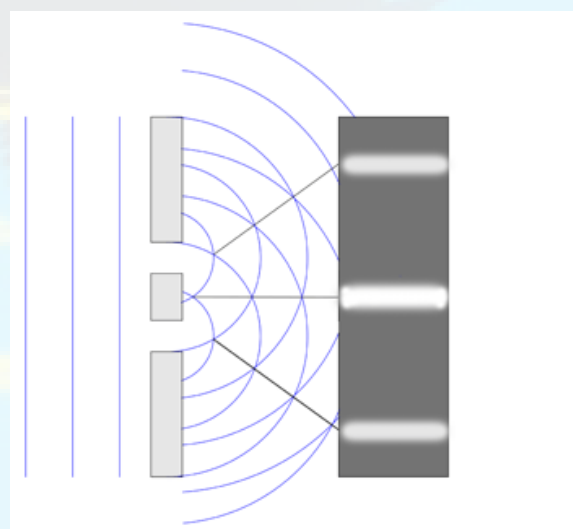
But he hasn’t pulled the trigger yet. Now, Eric has a chance to get back on his feet, thanks to an old friend manages promising scientific minds at a think-tank research facility, and who goes out on a limb to hire Eric for a three-month trial. Despite the chance at redemption—which Eric does take seriously—he refuses to work on his old quantum computing research. (It was, after all, that research and the solution to an unsolvable problem that drove Eric to disaster.) Instead, each day, Eric drives to work, assists other scientist colleagues with their research without making any inroads on his own still-undefined project.

That all changes when Eric stumbles across a new shipment of material containing a photon gun and observation recording apparatus. ‘But that’s already been done before,’ everyone tells Eric—the duality of light behaving as both a particle and a wave is well-established

and researched. Still, Eric wants to see it for himself and decides to recreate Feynman’s experiment: light passes through two slits and displays a waveform interference pattern until one tries to measure the interference pattern and the wave collapses back to particle behavior. Eric has always been fascinated with this experiment and its implications—suggesting that the act of observation profoundly affects the results of the experiment.



Electrons behaving as particles



Electrons behaving as waves

So, Eric sets up the double-slit experiment and records results. Everything behaves as expected: observation and measurement of the experiment results in collapse of the wave function. So then Eric decides to test observation—if the wave collapses upon observation, is this true for any observer? Will amphibians, or reptiles collapse the wave? What about large hunting predators, or intelligent primates? What about a fetus?

Eric Argus's discovery—that only some observers cause the wave to collapse, but not others—throws the world into chaos as other powerful figures try to harness his work to make their own political and spiritual agendas stick.

And then there are the other creatures who notice Eric's work. Those who walk in the shadows between worlds, who ruthlessly silence those threats to their own ends.

The Flicker Men is the second novel that I've had the pleasure of reading from Ted Kosmatka; I deeply loved *The Games*, his book on genetically engineered monster cage fighting Olympics, so when I was offered a copy of *The Flicker Men*, I hastily accepted. Except that I was offered a copy of this book back in 2015, where it has sat languishing on my TBR shelf until just now. (I had just come back from holiday break and after consuming an unhealthy amount of epic and YA

fantasy, I needed a break—and it's been a long time since I've read a good sci-fi thriller.) *The Flicker Men* delivered. Big time.

This is a novel with an irresistible premise: a profound scientific discovery posits a possible answer to the age-old question of the soul. From a pure science fiction perspective, *The Flicker Men* rocks. Rooted in a very famous, very well-known experiment, the novel takes some artistic license with the concept of "observation" and the quantum measurement problem, arguing that the act of observation causes matter to change its behavior. For me, this is the best kind of SFF: taking established science, then twisting and extending its applications to fictional extremes. (Note that while quantum consciousness is a cool sci-fi idea, "observation" doesn't really work in the way that it's described in *The Flicker Men*—but don't hold that against the book, this is sci-fi after all.) I love the simplicity and elegance of this premise, more than anything else.

Crichton-esque in style, Kosmatka effortlessly weaves science fiction elements with big action scenes and relatable characters, balancing thriller/genre fiction with literary restraint. From an overall plotting and world-defining perspective, *The Flicker Men* obviously delivers—the more surprising and welcome development was the powerful

characterization of Eric Argus and his colleagues. Usually the morose, navel-gazing, suicidal, alcoholic, white male protagonist type doesn't work for me—but Eric is given nuance and depth. We readers learn of his history—his father's history of substance abuse and slow death by liver failure and blindness, which he decides to opt-out of instead by way of gun; his brilliant mother's coping mechanism and her own history of mental illness—making Argus more human and sympathetic. Writing from the perspective of an alcoholic main character, who white knuckles every single day, is no easy feat; making that character someone readers care about is even harder.

My main complaint is that the second half of the book feels markedly different from the irresistible promise of the first act. From the tension and excitement around Argus's discovery that different observers cause waveform collapse and the implications that this research has on the world, Kosmatka shifts gears and focuses on the eponymous flicker men—interdimensional/multiverse traversing creatures with their own shadowy agendas. And while that's fully awesome, I felt like the novel's ultimate climax and resolution was overly simplistic and cinematic-explosion-heavy, and lost the heart of what made this book so interesting to begin with.

Still, *The Flicker Men* is one of the best sci-fi thrillers I've read in a very long time, and I absolutely recommend it.

Rating: 8 – Excellent

Thea James

STEEL CROW SAGA BY PAUL KRUEGER

By the time December 31 2019 rolls in, I am certain this year will go down in history as my favourite reading year since the start of *The Book Smugglers*, 11 years ago. *Steel Crow Saga* by Paul Krueger is another brilliant and beautiful book that the reading gods have deemed me worthy of reading in 2019.

It starts with the end of a war. A war that has ravaged different nations, left people hurt and reeling over everything that has been lost. There are complicated issues of colonialism and what happens after the empire is defeated and the colonisers are gone but not completely destroyed. What is the way forward? Drastic humiliation and annihilation of the defeated as some desire or an attempt at politics and diplomacy based on mutual understanding and a spirit of cooperation?

The latter is at the heart of the story, a story that also has a history of Firsts in a world full of Magic. Shadepacting is when a Shang or someone from the Sanbu Islands create a shared, consensual bond with the spirit of an animal who becomes part of one's soul. Calling out a shade makes it solid until you ask it to return inside. Meanwhile, the people from Tomoda, can bend and forge anything metal.

That's the bare bones of the worldbuilding.

But then, we have the characters, the true heroes of this saga.

Prince Jimuro of Tomoda is the last surviving member of his royal family. A revolution has brought down his kingdom's rule after decades of conquest and subjugation. After being kept a war prisoner and prolonged peace talks, the Prince is finally able to return home to be crowned and to start the healing process across nations. If he survives the journey. Jimuro is a young, earnest leader who genuinely cares for his people and who just wants to do better but also maybe doesn't yet fully grasp the extent of the crimes his family committed because he thinks it was all very civilised. Tl;dr – redeemed cinnamon roll.

Tala is a soldier who survived the worst of war, and who lost her entire family to Jimuro's army. Tala has a secret who can change everything everyone knows about shadepacting. And she is also now the person responsible for Jimuro's safety. Tala is a seasoned, disciplined soldier, who smiles little and trusts no one, and keeping Jimuro alive may be the hardest thing she will ever do but she will do everything in her power to follow her orders. Tl;dr – tormented cinnamon roll.

Lee is a petty thief and accomplished tracker who has always put herself first in

a life that has been crushing and unforgiving. The book opens and Lee is about to be killed for a crime she didn't commit (for a change) when she is saved by a hot Princess who then invites Lee to become a member of the law and to go on a dangerous adventure to capture Prince Jimuro before he reaches home. TL;dr – cynical yet hilarious cinnamon roll.

Princess Xiulan, a member of the Shang royal family and also a pipe-smoking detective who loves to read and takes life advice from her fave series of crime novels. She wants: to capture Prince Jimuro so that she can score against her sister, The Favourite; to be crowned Queen; to read tons of books and study more; and to shag Lee senseless, not necessarily in this order. TL;dr – precious cinnamon roll, TOO PURE FOR THIS WORLD.

So off these characters go, Jimuro and Tala, Xiulan and Lee travelling to an inevitable collision in a road-trip adventure with twists, deaths and kisses. With a foot firmly set on very real, complex issues of post-war and post-colonialism, Steel Crow Saga is effectively, a book about building up, compromising, learning from mistakes, making good on promises, mending bridges and yes, screwing up but then listening and making amends. It is about politics and diplomacy, about change and specially about letting go of noxious historical narratives– and this happens both in the large scale of the

new world these characters are building and the small scale of their personal, internal choices. It is about doing good in order to change the world for the better. The balance is *chef's kiss*.

Full of queer characters, there is also a huge amount of lovely, LOVELY romance here and this is just not something I am used to reading in my epic fantasy sagas. There is critical darkness and violence in this book but it somehow manages to completely circumvent the pitfalls of Grimdark to fall squarely on the side of romantic, hopeful and joyous. I guess I could say this book is to Fantasy what Becky Chambers' books are to Science Fiction?

This book is so good, I am just sitting here quietly crying after just finishing it, sad because it is over and I don't have more pages with these characters. THESE LOVABLE FOOLS.

TL;dr: THIS IS ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS IN A YEAR FULL OF BEST BOOKS AND I WANT ONE MILLION MORE BOOKS SET IN THIS WORLD. BRING BACK MY CINNAMON ROLLS.

Rating: Oh, yes it is another 10.

Ana Grilo

"Inception meets True Detective."

THE GONE WORLD

BY TOM SWETERLITSCH

Let me begin this review with some level-setting: Every once in a while, you read a book that is special. Not only does it suck you in from the onset, enthralling you with its killer premise and even more promising characters—this particular breed of novel manages to deliver on all of that potential, and rock your fucking world.

Such is *The Gone World* by Tom Sweterlitsch.

You dig it? Cool.

Shannon Moss is a federal law enforcement agent for the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) in 1997. Born and raised in a small, middle of nowhere town, Shannon's life at first appears to be writ in the stars: a pretty young woman, who would get pregnant young, work a local job, probably end up drinking and entertaining men at the local bar, growing old and living and dying in the same place. But when she's in high school her best friend Courtney is abducted and murdered, altering the course of Shannon's life forever. Instead of giving up, Shannon uses the anger and sadness of her friend's death and turns to a career in law enforcement, and in so doing,

catches the eye of a recruiter for a secretive, elite division of the Navy called Deep Waters—part of the Naval Space Command operating in deep space and deep time.

To other law enforcement officials and unsuspecting civilians, Moss is an agent who investigates crimes involving members of the Navy; in reality, Moss is one of a select few agents who can travel in time to myriad alternate futures in order to accomplish her work. All the while, the overarching mission of Deep Waters is to stop the end of all life on Earth, called the Terminus. At some point in the future, a second sun will appear in the sky above Earth—a white star that will turn all of humankind mad, distorting reality and sanity until nothing remains. The Terminus used to appear in distant futures, first clocked in 2666. But then it appeared to a new traveler in 2456, and then again to 2121, and so on, ever closer to terra firma in 1997—the true place of time. You see, while Moss and her fellow agents can travel to the future, each future is just a possibility, a so-called IFT: inadmissible future trajectory. The future is mercurial, and a traveler's journey represents a possibility stemming from the conditions of the present. The sole traveler to an IFT is the only real thing in her visited possible future. There is only one direction for the true flow of time, only one terra firma.

In the terra firma of 1997, Shannon Moss receives a new case: an ex-Navy SEAL Patrick Mursult appears to have murdered his entire family, and has disappeared along with his teenage daughter. The suspect was a member of the Deep Waters program and Moss is assigned to work alongside the FBI to save the missing girl and bring Mursult to justice. What Shannon discovers, however, is that Mursult's involvement in Deep Waters is paradoxical—part of a ship that ceased to exist—and his appearance may have drastic, terrible consequences for the actual future. Traveling to an IFT in 2016 to help solve the case, Moss also finds that the Terminus has jumped even closer...

"Lambs are sacrificed but rats survive."

The *Gone World* isn't Tom Sweterlitsch's first book, but it is the first one that I've read—and holy crap is it mind-bendingly, time travelingly awesome. I absolutely loved the concept of time travel in this book, with the past being fixed and unreachable, and the future is a myriad of possibilities. Not truths, and not even real; just a prism of potential, containing echoes of people living out a hypothetical existence. All of that potential, all of those echoes, they cease to exist once the sole time traveler returns to terra firma—unless they happen to bring an echo back with them. (Sweterlitsch explores some of the more horrific ways that unethical time travelers may use this to their advantage—"they aren't really people!"—

to brutal and terrible ends.) I also love that time travel isn't just a machine or portal that turns on and all is good; there are spaceships and complex maneuvers that need to be executed to traverse IFTs, and for the traveler's biological clock, time runs in one direction. Moss may be twenty five in terra firma, but because of all she has done in her career and the many trips she's taken to possible futures, she's actually closer to her mid-thirties.

Time travel aside, the real reason why *The Gone World* works is because of its heroine, Shannon Moss. An amputee—she lost her leg in her first mission to see the Terminus—Moss is an agent who has experienced more than her share of past traumas, and emerged all the more focused because of them. The murder of her best friend as a teenager sent Shannon down a self-destructive path until she decided to focus on criminal justice and law enforcement; her determination and history of screwing up but then finding her path leads her to the Deep Waters program. Shannon is tough and smart, but not invulnerable or cocky—she makes mistakes and owns up to them, all the while trying desperately to save a teenage girl who reminds her so much of her lost friend Courtney, and save all of humanity from a Terminus that jumps timelines, ever closer to terra firma. I fucking loved Shannon.

And of course, the other really really cool part of this book is that it is a thriller—

"Inception meets True Detective."

—THE NEW YORKER

there is a violent killer on the loose—in the vein of True Detective. It's also an exercise in time travel, focusing on the physics of jumping through time and space, on par with the very best hard, mechanical science fiction novels, complete with prismatic, ever-compounding alternate futures. And it's also like The X-Files (a show that Moss watches and enjoys), but imagine Scully is a time traveling NCIS agent.

My favorite read of the summer, and maybe the whole year. Absolutely recommended.

A NOVEL

Rating: 9 – Brilliant

Thea James

THE LUMINOUS DEAD BY CAITLIN STARLING

Ana's Take:

If you have been following my reviews for any measure of time, you may know I am a sucker for unreliable narratives and *The Luminous Dead* has that up the wazoo.

Gyre is a caver with limited experience who lies her way into a new expedition that pays really well. A new, unexplored cave in a foreign planet, a mission to map mineral deposits, a super advanced enclosed suit and that's it – easy gone in and out, with enough money to finally find her mother who one day up and left. But there is nothing at all easy about the expedition. The cave is deeper, there are unforeseen problems and creepy things in the dark. Also, Gyre assumed she would get a team in the surface monitoring all of her steps at all times. Always communicating and keeping her safe – and sane.

But Gyre is wrong. There is only Em. The expedition leader, the creator of Gyre's suit and the only support Gyre has in the surface. Can Em ever be enough? She will have to be enough: but what if something goes wrong when Em is resting and not paying attention?

And then things get worse: Gyre finds bodies of previous cavers from Em's other missions. Too many of them. She also realises Em knows about Gyre's faked credentials and that she has complete power over Gyre's suit. Power to move it or lock it and power to feed Gyre meds, adrenaline and any number of things to effectively and completely control her. But if Gyre quits and she should quit, it will be the safest, sanest thing to do. But then she gets nothing.

The Luminous Dead is a horror novel, a thriller: a claustrophobic, atmospheric, terrifying novel that explores its enclosed, dark setting – and the fears those things engender – really well. It provides the thrilling read its premise promises, with Gyre tackling her survival at all costs without missing out on the psychological torments said setting offers. It is hard to know if Gyre is hallucinating everything she sees (she thinks she sees?) down there and even harder to know if Em is ever being truthful. Second guessing everything – what a journey.

It is also a novel with two queer women of colour at the centre: both of them flawed, self-destructive, desperate and so, so fucked up. When romantic feelings start to develop it adds one extra unreliable level to the narrative: it's part Stockholm Syndrome, part survival instinct, part "SHE IS THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN EVER GET ME NOW THAT WE ARE SO BROKEN".

...and terrifying."
— Peng Shepherd,
author of *The Book of W*

THE CAVE WILL SWALLOW THEM WHOLE

But it was also a somewhat repetitive read – stuck inside Gyre’s head and her narrative repeats certain beats over and over. In fairness, this is partly due to the confined environment and an intrinsic part of the specific type of horror at play. But I couldn’t help feel the story would have been better served by a shorter word count.

Still, I enjoyed this trippy trip rather a lot.

Thea’s Take:

I really like climbing and I really like caves—both in real life, and also in fiction. Another thing I really like is horror—particularly the claustrophobic, building dread kind of horror that so often comes with exploration of dark, unknown places.

Enter Caitlin
Starling’s *The Luminous Dead*.

Imagine you’re a young woman on a backwater planet that is on the map solely because it has caving systems rich with ore and mineral deposits for exploitation. There isn’t much you can do to rise above your meager station—especially after your mom took off, leaving your dad kind of sad and bitter, and you all by yourself—and so you throw yourself into becoming a caver. It’s not an easy job or a safe one, and most cavers die after their first few climbs due to equipment failure or because of tunnelers (vicious burrowers that cause massive cave ins and are drawn to humans in any number—think *Tremors*). You’re

good at climbing and exploring; you love the thrill of caving, the physical challenge of climbing and setting your own anchors and routes. Most of all, you are hungry for the chance to get out—to take a job as a caver for a mining conglomerate and maximize your chances of making enough money to find your mom and tell her “fuck you” to her face.

So, when the job comes along—highly dangerous (but what caving gig isn’t?) and highly lucrative (same story)—Gyre jumps on it. It’s Gyre’s first job, and one she had to lie her way into, pretending that she is an experienced hire with other missions under her belt. Sure, she doesn’t have the real credentials, but Gyre is a climber and is confident in her hours and years of practice and her own abilities.

But when she gets to the cave, everything is different. Instead of having a team in her ear supporting her mission, there’s just a single cold, taciturn woman named Em. As Gyre gets deeper into the cave, hauling future caches of supplies to preset camps left by climbers before her, she learns more about Em, and with growing dread, more about the mission. Em knows Gyre lied about her background. She can control Gyre’s every move, sedating her with heavy drugs or amping her up with forced injections of adrenaline. She, for all intents and purposes, is Gyre’s god, on her own personal crusade for which she is willing to make any sacrifice.

And all the while, the cave watches.

I loved the simple premise of this book—two women in the literal and figurative dark, each playing games with the other and desperate for their own separate end goals. As our narrator and protagonist, Gyre is naive but tough, pushing herself to every mental and physical limit in order to survive and stop Em from luring any other caver to their death. At the same time, she starts to feel an attraction to Em and understand her, even if she doesn't agree with her. I absolutely loved the character development and the fucked up relationship between Gyre and Em. (In my opinion it is NOT romantic but a version of super-intense Stockholm Syndrome and these ladies are gonna be real bad for each other.) As the women learn more about each other, they necessarily have to trust each other. And the longer Gyre is in the cave, the more she craves basic human interaction—the touch of someone else, the sound of their voice, especially as the darkness and gaping maw of horror of the cave and her suit presses in on all sides.

Similarly along the brilliant premise lines, I love the cleverness of this contained, cabin fever (space madness) trope plot. Gyre must remain in her [space]suit the entire time, lest she attract tunnelers or become exposed to cave fauna that could kill her. The suit is a brilliant piece of technology, allowing her to eat by inserting a can of food directly into her redirected digestive tract, recycling her waste (important question that is not satisfactorily answered: where does the poop go),

regulating her temperature, allowing her to breathe underwater, and, most importantly, interact with her topside guides. The suit is super cool... but it also is a kind of prison, in an already terrible and dangerous situation. Gyre is deep in the bowels of the cave, days, even weeks, away from sunlight and other humans and she can't even rub her goddamn face. This plays a big, necessary part in Gyre's psychological deterioration as the book progresses, for good reason, and I appreciated the author's skill in crafting this underlying baseline of tension and discomfort, ratcheting it up several notches with each passing chapter.

Where *The Luminous Dead* isn't as successful, however, is with its overall pacing and with some basic suspension of disbelief questions. Overall the novel is an effective piece of horror, but the story sags a little towards the halfway mark as it is hard to write a high-tension novel set entirely in a cave from one person's perspective without reader fatigue (though Starling does an admirable job). The bigger offense, in my opinion, is that *The Luminous Dead* is never really clear what kind of horror it wants to be.

I kept expecting there to be a ghost story a la *Event Horizon*, or some *The Descent*-style monster showdown. (It isn't, and there isn't.) There are several gestures made towards ghosts, biological agents, malevolent spirits, raggedy *Sunshine*-style survivors, it's all in your

—Peng Shepherd,
author of *The Book of M*

head My Bloody Valentine... and there isn't really any clarity until the end of the book and by then it's kind of too late.

Along the suspension of disbelief vein, while I loved the spacesuit in all of its restrictive but necessary glory, the entire solo-multi-pitch climb day in and day out without a belay partner and without the ability to feel the rock either under her hands or in (what I assume are super clunky, heavy) spacesuit shoes is just a little hard to believe. Gyre runs hours and hours of climbs with no sleep, no belay partner, and makes no mistakes. (It's kind of like expecting Alex Honnold to free solo El Cap every day for a week.) I call shenanigans, and found it jarring in the extreme.

And yet, for all this? The Luminous Dead is a solid read and one that I still absolutely enjoyed. Recommended, especially for readers of the unreliable narrator persuasion.

Ana: 7 – Very Good

Thea: 7 – Very Good

Ana Grilo & Thea James

"Ghostly, mysterious,
and terrifying."
—Peng Shepherd,
author of *The Book of W*