THE SPACE COWBOY BOOKS REVIEW

CELEBRATING SMALL PRESS SFFH

ISSUE #1 DEC. 2026



The Space Cowboy Books Review #1
December 2026

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Absolutely no AI/LLM used in the creation of this zine.

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A zine for our community

The social media companies are owned by evil people. Press outlets rarely, if ever, give coverage to small presses and independent magazines. We've seen small presses and independent magazines go out of business one after another. Large publishers are using AI and putting forth predatory contracts. All of this looks pretty bleak. But … at the same time most of the interesting work going on in SFFH is being done by the indie community. Venues with dedicated staff, barely any funds, but with a passion for our genres, are the ones providing opportunities for human authors and artists. As someone who runs a small press and magazine myself, I know well the difficulties and frustrations of trying to get the work out there, and the books into the hands of readers. I say this as someone who owns and runs a bookstore that specializes in SF, so I can only imagine the challenges that other venues face. For the most part, we're on our own.

I believe there is a better way. When I look around at the excellent work that my peers are producing, I think of them as colleagues not competition. We are not in competition with each other for readers. We are in competition with technofascists, generative AI and the decline of net neutrality. We are in competition with the decline of literacy and attacks on the humanities. We are even seeing "big name" authors move away from large publishers in favor of working with small presses. For these reasons I am attempting to create a grassroots network of mutual support between independent publishers, a place where we can support each other and pool resources to put out titles in front of as many readers and fans as possible. As individuals we might be small but together we are always stronger and can enact positive change.

Each issue of *The Space Cowboy Books Review* will have features on a small press, and indie mag, an author and a poet, as well as new releases and book and magazine reviews. I can't do this alone, I need our community to help create something wonderful. So, if you are interested in reviewing contemporary titles from small presses please do get in touch. Letters of comments are also very welcome and will be printed in the next issue.

Jean-Paul L. Garnier, 2026

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RADONJOURNAL
Radical Perception.

Interview with Aimer & Lucas from *Radon Journal*



What makes* Radon Journal *different from other SF magazines?

The most obvious arrives when viewing our logo: We wear our politics on our cover sleeve. Past that, we meme on main, and we were built from the ground-up as an author-first journal. There's a certain freedom that comes from intentionally appealing to a smaller subset of readers than the mainstream journals. We can be unabashedly ourselves, more off the cuff and approachable.

When we launched, we specifically eliminated all author pain points that we hated when we were submitting ourselves. We'll never close our submission queue, charge reading fees, do theme issues, never not pay authors and artists, put submission dates only in social media posts, be vague about what we want or how we want it, create additional hoops for submission documents, prevent sim subs, use a bad submission UI, make authors wait months, have a confusing author agreement, or have a lack of transparency about where our supporters' dollars are going. Taking the extra time to nominate our authors for over sixteen awards each year and dedicate marketing days to each author we publish also goes a long way.

That said, we share more similarities to other SF journals than differences. Every SF journal has its own flavor, but we're all in the freezer together sharing the same space.

What does the word "community" mean to you?

It's like-minded people you feel comfortable around. Who you can confide in and get advice from. Who lift you up when you're down because they've been through the same experiences. For a writing community like *Radon's*, it means a free sharing of knowledge and information alongside venting frustrations to sympathetic ears.

What is one thing you would want curious readers to know about* Radon Journal*?

You don't have to be an anarchist to submit or read *Radon*. But you do have to be curious about the world. And possess a vague sense which you can't place, that the world isn't as good as it could be.

You mentioned before that you felt something was missing in SF and wanted to fill

that gap with your journal. Can you tell us about what you thought was missing, and why it was missing?

For so many years, it felt like no one was publishing what we wanted to write and read. Always told it was too political, too personal, too science fiction, too punk, too raw, too nerdy. Academic journals didn't know what to do with our text, literary journals were too pretentious and focused on creative non-fiction, and legacy spec journals had too many shareholders for truly radical texts to slip through.

So in punk rock fashion, we built the journal ourselves, found helpers, put it out into the world, and hoped for the best. Doing so was a risk. It was a danger. But it's worked out well so far.

Science fiction at its very core is challenging to the status quo. It's envisioning worlds that don't exist. It's asking ourselves to look within and then extrapolate outward. As far as we're concerned, this is what science fiction has always been and should be.

Can you tell us about* Radon*'s unique editorial structure?

Radon's editorial structure took years to solidify. In many ways, we're still figuring out what it means to organize our journal. Our early days had everyone working on the journal as an editor and contributing to each part of the journal. Every editor picked at least one piece to work on directly with the author. And we put calls out for marketing or production needs. Whoever was available and willing would volunteer to help. While in-theme for our anarchist journal to run this way, it meant that if anyone dropped the ball, the delays in editing could put whole issues at risk. Burnout was rampant as people pulled themselves along publishing paths they didn't enjoy.

Hannah Marin was our first editor to step into the new role of Managing Editor and manage not just the editing and production process, but our team as a whole. She made sure every piece had at least one editor, set clear dates for different assignments, and worked with everyone directly to make sure the ball was never dropped. Importantly, she never abandoned our anarchist ideologies by pressuring people to take on work they didn't want, or by trying to use her title to acquire any power. Instead, she focused on making sure everyone helped each other, each according to their needs and abilities.

Now we have more specialized roles that allow folks to feel less overwhelmed. We use our first reading positions as an onboarding ramp to other editor slots, and help the younger generation acclimatize to the journal industry. Still, we allow people to move or switch between roles as their wants or skills evolve.

After seven digital-only issues you started also creating physical copies of the magazine. What challenges were you faced with when making this transition?

The largest hurdle was the increase in production lead time we needed. And that need required a dedicated Production Editor with skills in HTML and InDesign. Thankfully in the modern era with Print-On-Demand we aren't required to make a massive gamble each issue to break even. but we've had to move up our production process by three weeks because print is much less forgiving than online. We had to create dedicated copyediting paths, production file mastering workflows, deal with shipping infrastructure, and learn to start working with bookstores directly. There's a need for perfection with print

that can take its toll on a team. But we're adapting.

For you, what are some of the elements that make up a perfect story or poem?

The perfect *Radon* story is one that includes all four of *Radon's* themes (science fiction, transhumanism, anarchy, and dystopia). Every author who read the previous sentence just rolled their eyes because it comes across as obvious. But only 15% of stories we publish are expressly transhumanist in plot or theme, meaning we have rarely received a superfecta submission.

We have four main things we look for in a story these days: narrative structure, relatable characters, a unique idea, and a human writer. A story needs to be more than just a cool idea though; it needs a beginning, middle, and end, which often excludes concept pieces that are 100% exposition and cheap cliffhangers. As much as we love to hate politically regressive characters and watch their comeuppance, straw men are not interesting. And lastly, AI is theft.

Over the last year with our poetry, we've specifically been looking for delicious enjambement that provides double meaning to each line surrounding it, and intentional, aesthetically-pleasing stanza shape constructions. Those can be surprisingly hard to come by with free verse authors.

What keeps you going when things get tough?

Continuing to read our submission queue keeps us going. Life feels tough because we often feel alone in our struggles. What if we're the only ones who think our values are worth fighting for? If that's true then we're doomed and it's not worth fighting. 99% of our submission queue are individuals coming to us and saying, "I share your values, and I think they're so worth fighting for that I wrote a story about it." This is why we also take the time to write personalized rejections to pieces that particularly spoke to us. We want those authors to know we believe in their struggle and that their writing was worth reading.



What are the future goals you would like to achieve with the magazine?

Our journal's "coming out party" will be Worldcon 2027 in Montreal. We're gearing up to table there and meet the world properly. We're currently expanding our team and hope to be in more bookstores across the US and Europe in 2027 and raise our pay rates from 2.5 to 3 cents. We joke among ourselves that our far-future goal is one day for Locus to recognize we exist.

https://www.radonjournal.com/

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Featured Author: Eliane Boey



As an author, what does "community" mean to you?

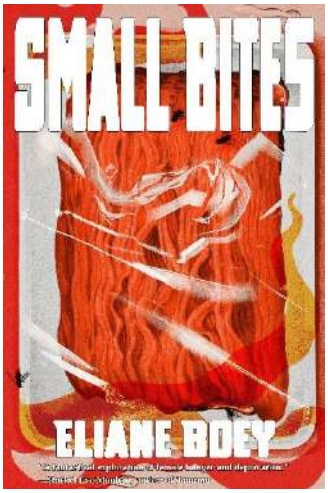
It's reading one another's early work, waiting together for subs to open, watching that subs queue, commiserating about rejections, celebrating every small win, and delusionally manifesting wins. Being based in Singapore, community has been more online than in-person, which has pulled me out of my shell more than I ever would have ventured. Like working myself up to cold DM another author to say I absolutely loved their work, respectfully.

How has your background in philosophy affected your writing?

I suppose it's always there, for having shaped me. I don't dwell(!) in theory, but some things never quite leave my mind, and end up seeping into what I write. I'm in no danger of having my work described as philosophical, and I wouldn't want it either, because, personally as a reader, the best "thought-provoking" pieces simply unsettle or bestir me as I read, without a heavy hand.

Your work often takes on themes of architecture, labor, finance, and feminism (to name just a few), what is it about these topics that attract you, and what are some other issues that you would like to take on in your work?

The straight-forward answer is that I have always been interested in and read a little urban studies and macro-economics, and by accident of the economy I worked in some shipping and finance-adjacent roles for a while. Over-all, I'm interested in the structures—corporeal and organizational—that we create, that end up shaping our actions.



You write both genre and literary fiction, what role does each satisfy for you, and when do you reach for one versus the other?

Each story comes with its own voice. *Club Contango* and *Ah Huat Engineering* needed to be science fiction, to set a believable world that turns on space migration and labour injustice. In *Small Bites*, I wanted to take the reader into the storeroom, into the hollowed out space of Hammie's mind, and that found a more literary voice.

Your novels and novellas often contain rich worldbuilding with a Singaporean flavor, can you speak about how much you find our

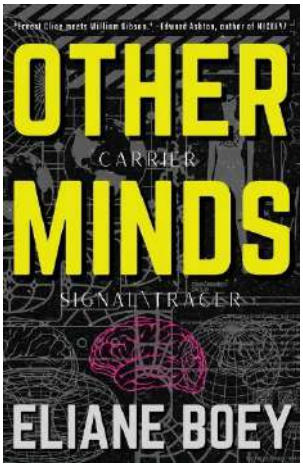
respective cultures affect the nature of creating new fictious cultures?

If by new fictious cultures you mean imagining future culture, then certainly, the culture in *Club Contango*, and *Ah Huat Engineering* are shades of Singaporean ethos and anxiety projected through hyper-capitalism of an imagined future space age. Social programs of national savings and urban renewal, stretched for a future of greater scarcity, are also part of this environment that altogether, I hope, will feel familiar, without me having to set a story in contemporary Toa Payoh.

What is one major aspect of your work that you hope readers will connect with?

Across everything I write, I hope readers will finish a story realising that none of us inherently "belong," anywhere, let alone possess the right to tell others that they do not.

You've written a lot of cyberpunk stories. Cyberpunk is often thought of as an 1980s genre, how do you think this subgenre differs today?



I came to cyberpunk almost unintentionally, mostly because I grew up on mystery and noir, which influenced my first short stories. In many ways, cyberpunk of the '80s was the grandchild of noir, with its themes of displacement and loneliness, the hollow signifiers of modern consumption and aspiration, and being lost and insignificant in a changing new order. It's possible that cyberpunk today hits harder on the dystopia and less on the promises of the future.



It's harder to read cyberpunk as a fantastic vision into a future world, taking the good with the bad, when, unlike in the '80s, we already live with the beta versions of these dread technologies and systems. But I also see more themes of community engagement and community solutions, which tends to the development of hopepunk. This is probably when I should mention *The Ah Huat Engineering Cookbook and Organizing Manual* which I have forthcoming with Stars and Sabers in February '27. It's my first novella in the hopepunk spectrum. Look out for community action against space landlords (and lots of kopitiam culture) in a standalone from the world of *Club Contango.*

What challenges do you face as an author working with many overseas venues?

As an indie author, the obvious challenge has been logistical and cost-related. Getting books to Southeast Asia, getting represented by local distributors (I'm still working on that) and yearning to be in-person at conventions and festivals in the Anglophone world. A part of me thinks that it is also harder to obtain, and sustain, meaningful agent representation at this distance, if one writes outside of what the industry projects as a sure thing, but this is largely anecdotal.

What are you currently working on, and what's coming up next for you?

I'm between projects at the moment—for the first time in a little while, with no distinct piece to work on next—and it's a wonderful and terrifying place to be. I have an idea for a

literary novel, no surprises it is more or less about being lost. And I also have a seed for yet another horror novella. I'm trying to read as widely as possible, usually outside of genre, to encourage both of them, and decide which to work on. In practical terms, I have *Ah Huat Engineering* coming up in February, and I have a completed horror novella and a contemporary lightly speculative novel that I hope will see the light of day in the next year or so.

https://www.elianeboey.com/

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TENEBROUS PRESS

Interview with Alex & Matt of Tenebrous Press

What are your motivations and aims with the* Brave New Weird *anthology series?

Alex: First of all, to keep ourselves connected to the community, and to remind ourselves that there's so many cool people out there doing cool things. Because it's an award, it forces us to look at work that's already been published over the past year—and a lot of it. It makes us consciously and deliberately keep track of what people are writing and publishing, and how. Not only the fiction itself, either; it gives us a chance to see who gravitates to what themes, who's applying best practices, who's commissioning art, who's got open submissions, who the editors are.

Outwardly, the goal is then to highlight and give a second chance at attention to the number of stories we're able to select for the award & anthology. Give them a chance to meet our regular readers, which they may not otherwise have reached. Give them something to add to their bios that hopefully people will eventually recognize as a mark that this person is doing something interesting. It's just our way of showing love to the other people working in our field, who aren't already our authors.

Can you tell us about* Skull & Laurel *magazine and how it differs from your* Brave New Weird *anthologies?



Alex: The S&L was a series of four issues (plus one charity issue which was issue zero) of a magazine that published a mix of original fiction with a handful of reprints, articles, art, games, and other oddities. We intend to release more issues when time & money allow, because the medium of the magazine is just so damned pretty and fun. There's something about flipping through it, doing a puzzle, reading the personals and the horroscope (yes, they have those!), checking out the ads which are other people in our community, maybe writing a letter to the press—it's more interactive and relaxed. And as a publisher it gives you the chance to try weird things, which we love.

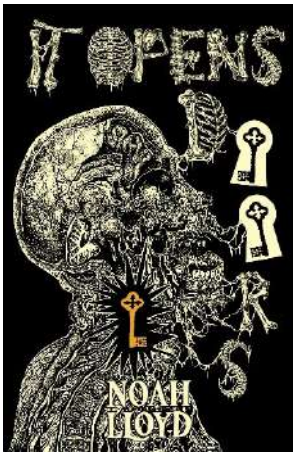
It would be nice to be able to put them on a regular schedule at some point, but since the

workload is massive and the cost doesn't really get recovered, now isn't the time for that yet.

What does "community" mean to you?

Alex: It means the people in our field who are working together towards the shared goal of improving conditions for all of us (or at the very least, firmly not allowing them to deteriorate) through distribution of knowledge, resources, and opportunities, in solidarity and with consideration given to its most vulnerable members.

Your "about page" speaks a lot about respect, kindness, and love – tell us about how your set of ethical standards guide your press.



Alex: Some of the most practical and obvious ways are also reflected in our anti-AI stance, our commitment to publishing from open submissions always (and I could speak endlessly on the implications, from an ethics and artistic standpoint, of not doing so), our collaboration with other presses to share resources and knowledge, and our charitable projects (So far including: full proceeds from 2x anthologies for Trans causes, 1x magazine for AI legislation, partial proceeds from 1x book for gun violence).

But a lot of times it's individual choices that don't necessarily favor the press. There's a lot of push in publishing to squeeze as much as you can out of every interaction, every collaboration, as if that's the only way to succeed. Contracts becoming increasingly less author-friendly, inflexibility, more and more focus on popularity and making sure the author does more for the press than the press does for the author. And it really matters to us to show that no, that isn't necessary for a functioning, healthy press.

We keep Tenebrous safe and sustainable for the long-term, too, we only offer what we know it can give so it keeps running for a long time. But at the same time, if an author needs something unexpected, we'll make that space. We've changed contract clauses for authors, and then updated all the other ones with the improvement to make each generation a little better for them. We've let people pull work that was already contracted so they could go with a bigger venue. We'll give people more time and delay releases if they tell us they need it. We'll try to get them the artist they want. We'll understand if life happens and they can't do what they promised. By contract, we don't have to, but that's kindness and love and respect. Seeing the human first.

I especially know I can be very harsh when I feel like someone's not coming to our field with the best intentions. But as much as that's true, it's also true that there will never be a time that the words "I am sorry," "I messed up," and "I need help" don't mobilize us.

What is one thing you would want curious readers to know about Tenebrous Press?

Alex: That we both have this press tattooed on our bodies. It's not going anywhere. We're not going anywhere.

For you, what are some of the elements that make up a perfect story or poem?

Matt: As much as we accentuate the Weird and the experimental and the unexpected in what we publish, we can't really fall in love with a story if it's lacking a story at its heart. Our love of Weird Fiction begins with the Pulps. Beneath the atmosphere and vibes, there needs to be a narrative that sets the pulse of Horror and Spec Fic fans racing, either with a plot that can be summed up in a couple sentences; or a pitch that comps to a

different medium entirely: a prog album, a comic book, a trio of monster-themed breakfast cereals.



If you're trying to pitch Weird for Weird's sake to us, you better be great to a degree that we've never even seen before! Conversely, comping to Stephen King or any hot flavor on the market doesn't impress us; I dig and appreciate pop horror just fine, but we're not trying to be Big Publishing in Indie Horror chic. We're not looking to prove that we can also publish the same shit that everyone is already publishing. That's safe, and it's boring; we aim to prove that the best, most innovative, most undeniable Weird fiction is being written in corners you've never thought to examine, by voices you've never heard of; and we're correct.

What keeps you going when things get tough?

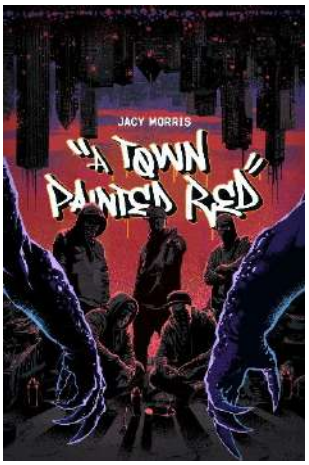
Matt: The fact that I'm never doing this alone, that I work with the greatest partner on the planet, and that she is almost always right when my own doubts creep in. We're each of us human and we each occasionally feel broken, and I think we do a good job of picking each other up and covering each others' asses. We also have a good understanding of what the other contributes, our strengths and weaknesses, so the bases are usually covered.



Also; my ego is healthy enough that I trust almost recklessly in the rightness of our shared vision for Tenebrous. What we do works. That there's verifiable proof of it—that people tell us sincerely that they love what we do—sure doesn't hurt.

Alex: What do you mean 'almost'.

What are the future goals you would like to achieve with your press and magazine?



Matt: Indie publishing is such an inherently volatile scene that we can never take anything for granted, but Alex and I have been pretty smart with the way we've approached growth and experimentation. We're still constantly overextending ourselves because that's our nature! We operate just barely within the margins of what is feasible; but we do (usually) manage to stay there, and we try to look out for each others' sanity.

That being said, all our goals tend to fall under the banner of the one bigger goal: finding new, fresh Weird stories from voices off the beaten path and amplifying them as loud as we can, without sacrificing our ethics or our vision, all the while striving to ensure that Tenebrous is sustainable and eventually financially supportive of both of us. I can see it on the horizon.

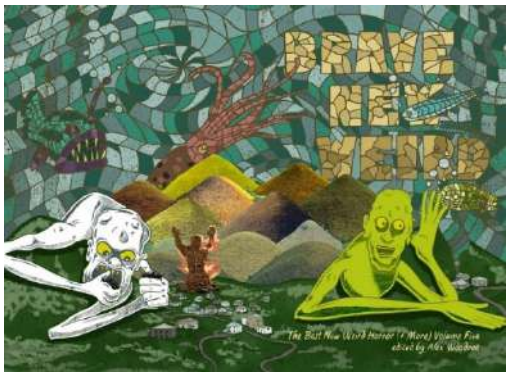
What are you currently working on, and what's coming up next for you?

Matt: Hammering the final 2027 schedule into shape, and figuring out what the back half of 2028 is gonna look like!

Getting the details of our 2027 Book Club sorted out! We have an intimate, incredibly loyal Cult of fans and their direct support really truly is the backbone that keeps Tenebrous revving. They invest in us, they trust us, and when I ponder if a potential new book is truly Tenebrous material, I try to read it through their eyes … and then see how far we can push their expectations in a new direction:)

Continuing to adapt to having a supportive distribution sales team and getting them the materials they need to succeed on their schedule—today that literally means uploading early unedited copies of our final 2027 titles so the sales team can start reading them—while also trying to remedy all the other headaches that come from being part of a much larger infrastructure. Communication has been an adventure. This first year of being part of a distributor has been just as fraught as we were warned it would be by fellow presses who have gone through it; but despite the growing pains I can see the overall promise.

Artistically speaking? I'm trying to wrap my head around some cool interior stuff for Kristal Stittle's THE DEVIL'S ADDRESS (out next Halloween!) and I'm already brainstorming the cover art for BRAVE NEW WEIRD Vol. 6.



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Featured Poet:
Denise Dumars

“Coming Home,” a Poetic Analysis

By Denise Dumars

Coming Home

As the cryocopter lands, I see
the gravid corpses lined up
along the runway. The bodies
have mostly dried tan, like devilfish
but for the large bellies, lumpen
and slatey like a clutch of dinosaur eggs.

I look at the calendar.
The Mayor’s car pulls up to the curb.
It has to be this way, he tells me,
the gerrymandered streets sodden
with fresh slurry covering the blood.
The bodies of studio execs
pollute the marshlands, Ballona Creek,
the L.A. River.
It has to be this way, he says.

The President smiles on the limovid.
His lips are ragged from the microchip edges
he’s pulled out, his ears are bloody holes
flush with his head. All this to make a point.
I shrug, I slake a thud of amyl, Demerol and ‘dust
spread more green nuflesh along my wounds.

A torch flares in the daytime darkness
when we reach downtown. The electricity
is gone again, the Mayor continues.
It’s good to have you back, you know,
he says.

I stayed in Birmingham too long,
Havana, Port au Prince and ‘Nawlins.
In Bahia the first-born’s wrapped
around the landing gear of warships
for their maiden flights, enfolded
into the body of each ship like a parasite.
I shot three surveillance probes out of the sky

during Carnival, so, who knows,
maybe the sacrifice works.

I found this in a desk drawer,
said the Mayor in his office.
The bag was nearly dust.
It had once been something organic—
burlap, hemp, but now the fabric moved
with its own life, a long dust mite parade.

Old money, I said, the thready green bills
fluttering to the steel-plated floor.
Count it, he told me; his eyes were grim.
$125 million? I asked, calculating on my arm patch.
It's something, anyway, I said.
Who do you suppose lost it, long ago?
I turned my filter back and once again
my skin was ecru.

It's funny how some things get lost,
he said, reaching for his neck pouch.
But I'd already blown his stomach away,
his pink and grey intestines fouling
the genuine wood of his desk.

I rushed for towels, a cleanse-maid,
anything to lave the rare mahogany object.
His brain still lived
and he threw open his throat with a snick
and blew off the rest of my left hand.

On the wallvid the President droned on.
He bragged about his new humanitarian aid program
the one that salvaged the gravid corpses
and built nurseries for the growing infants
of the dead.

—From *Speaking Bones: The Selected Poetry of Denise Dumars*, Dark Regions Press, 1996

This dystopian L.A. narrative poem is one of my favorites of all the poems I've written. I like to say that dystopian science fiction should be preventive, rather than predictive, but unfortunately, it's often the latter.

While its amoral government operative narrator is and was based on real operatives that our government employs, the thing that bothers me the most about the poem is, of course, the "gravid corpses." We now live in a time in which a woman who dies while pregnant can and has

been hooked up to machines to "live" until her fetus is full term. This is NOT the kind of thing that I would like to say I predicted, but here we are.

The poem is a science fictional critique of the U.S. in general and Los Angeles in particular. I've lived in the Los Angeles area all my life. The "old money" that the Mayor in the poem finds was based on some scandal in Los Angeles that was going on at the time I was writing the poem; I don't remember much about it now except it did involve a miraculously "found" amount of money equal to that mentioned in the poem.

The unnamed narrator, who, turns her "filter back" and "once again" her "skin was ecru" makes it clear that she (or he or they if you prefer) has been infiltrating mostly racially diverse areas and presenting as a mixed-race person herself, especially in "Havana," "'Nawlins," and "Bahia." In fact she may be biracial but with skin too light to fit in without the aforementioned "filter." It is not an accident that she mentions places associated with persons of African ancestry; it has always been U.S. government policy to invade and attempt to control such places. My disgust at this aspect of America should be obvious.

If the streets of Los Angeles were filled with "blood" do I believe that current or former mayors of Los Angeles would cover it up with fresh macadam, like in the second stanza? Of course! As for the "studio execs," well…'nuff said.

The "sacrifice" I mention in "Bahia" is completely fictional and I do not mean to suggest that such things would happen; it alludes to imagined practices of Afro-Latin magico-religious traditions…one such tradition was followed by one of Richard Nixon's closest advisors and is also followed by one of Trump's most vocal Proud Boys.

It's meant to be darkly funny that the narrator is more worried about saving the "rare mahogany object" that is the Mayor's desk rather than the Mayor himself. And the fact that the narrator already has a mutilated left hand which is then shot off by the Mayor is meant to match the talk of black magick, alluding to the so-called "left hand path."

The fact that the President who "drones on" while having mutilated his lips and ears I now see as some weird prescient thing about the anti-vaxxer movement and the Trump followers that adhere to it—I even mention "microchips," which some right-wingers believe are included in the Covid-19 vaccine!

The word choice is deliberate; the most important term is "gravid," because it is used to refer to pregnant animals as well as humans and the sound and spelling of the word seem to reference the word "grave," although the etymology of the two words are not connected. In fact, the term "gravid" comes from an old Proto-Indo European word that means "burdened" or "heavy."

A lot of the SFnal terms are just for fun; I have no idea what a "cryocopter" is but it sounds cool to me and alludes to cryonics which is in keeping with the themes of the poem. The Mayor having a gun in some kind of "neck pouch" is a nod to some of the more ludicrous fictional spies who keep guns in strange places on their bodies!

The choice of tone being one of flat affect is deliberate. Nothing fazes the narrator. This is not true of the author, namely me. I truly believe that a large segment of our population sees women as nothing but incubators and would not blink at female corpses being used as such.

So a dark, cynical SF poem. Hope you've enjoyed it.

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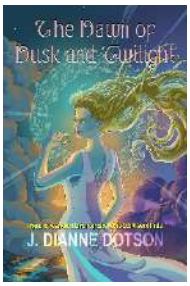
New and Upcoming Books and Magazines

Obviously, this is not a complete list of new and upcoming releases, but we try our best. If you run a SFFH small press or independent magazine we would love to include you. You can send in your new releases and recommendations via this **FORM**. Although please bear in mind that we will not be covering anything affiliated with large publishing houses or anything that is exclusive to the fascist enemy of bookstores: Amazon (we even loathe to have their name in print).

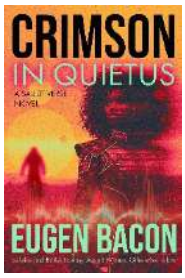
Books:



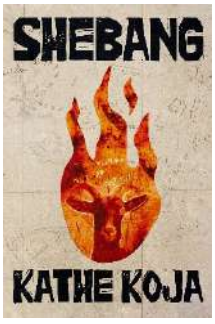
***The Dawn of Dusk and Twilight*, Jendia Gammon, Android Press**

The Dawn of Dusk and Twilight by Jendia Gammon, writing as J. Dianne Dotson, is the adult prequel to the Nebula and BSFA Award finalist YA book, The Inn at *the Amethyst Lantern* and its sequel, BSFA Award finalist *The Secret of the Sapphire Sentinel*. This is the trilogy finale. An island, an inn, a lighthouse, a moment that changes life forever! *The Dawn of Dusk and Twilight* is a prequel starting in our present, spanning centuries, with the characters facing the end of the world, their many dramas, and how they built hope from despair, for the future.

***Crimson In Quietus*, Eugen Bacon, Meerkat Press**



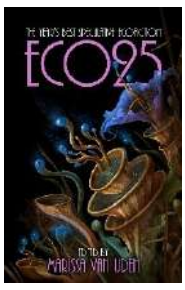
In Eugen Bacon's genre-bending *CRIMSON IN QUIETUS*, a sound scientist with the rare ability to consume and interpret sound investigates a colleague's disappearance, uncovering a trail of violence and secrets across the five-planet Sauútiverse. Blending crime fiction, serial-killer mystery, dark science fiction, and Afrofuturism, Bacon crafts a strange, immersive world where sound becomes power, silence holds danger, and reality defies easy categorization.



***Shebang*, Kathe Koja's, Meerkat Press**

In Kathe Koja's *SHEBANG*, a sharp, solitary archer named Ailey Esper lives in a near-future settlement where an annual ritual called the Fête threatens an innocent animal. When a stranger's plans set dangerous events in motion, Ailey finds herself caught in a struggle involving ancient beliefs, dark power, and the bonds that hold a community together. Enlisting an herbalist, a historian, and a goatkeeper, she must fight to save a life as midnight fires burn and human nature reveals its wilder side. A feral, unsettling modern fable about love, revenge, and the animal heart within us all.

***ECO25: The Year's Best Speculative Ecofiction*, Ed. Marissa van Uden, Violet Lichen**



A must-read showcase of the best climate fiction, eco-horror, and nature-based science fiction and fantasy published around the world every year. *ECO: The Year's Best Speculative Ecofiction* explores humanity's deep relationships with other species and our communal fears, grief, and passion as we try to protect our natural world—all through the lens of the fantastic. *ECO25*, the second in the series, features a range of beautiful and evocative stories, including works by talented authors

such as Ally Wilkes, DaVaun Sanders, G. Willow Wilson, Michael Capobianco, Rebecca Campbell, Ruthanna Emrys, and Samir Sirk Morató, among many others.



***Sailing the Golden Chersonese*, Joyce Chng, Queen of Swords Press**
Neo has been raised to be their father's son, to succeed him as the captain of the pirate vessel Sri Matahari and to sail the seas of the Golden Chersonese raiding and having adventures. They thought this was all that they needed or wanted until the beautiful Maria sought their help on her quest for vengeance. Together, they will avenge wrongs, encounter Naks and other wonders and find a magic all their own.



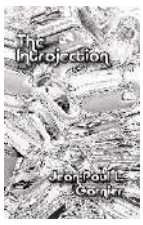
***Small Bites*, Eliane Boey, Space Cowboy Books**
Hammie is a mother who has lost her hunger, and her belief that she is, in fact, totally fine. Until the day she locks herself in the storeroom with a large spider and learns to recapture what she lost; beginning by breaking down everything that now occupies her space, and feeling her appetite return.



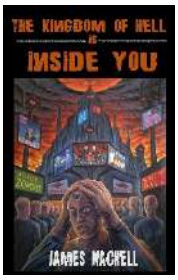
Going to Summertime, Kaaron Warren, Meerkat Press
In Kaaron Warren's *GOING TO SUMMERTIME*, the women of a neighborhood hair salon head to a seemingly abandoned cul-de-sac for a team-building exercise, guided by a man whose family history hides a dark secret. Once home to a serial killer, the street holds horrors that refuse to stay buried. As old terrors surface and one woman's hard-won recovery begins to unravel, the line between past and present, safety and danger, starts to dissolve. A deeply unsettling blend of psychological horror, dark secrets, and the terrifying pull of addiction.



***Gutterspace*, Justine Norton-Kertson, Stars and Sabers Publishing**
GUTTERSPACE is the horror debut novella by Justine Norton-Kertson! A washed-up artist in Portland, Oregon faces off against a monster that stalks its prey from between the panels of an old, forgotten comic book.



***The Introjection*, Jean-Paul L. Garnier, Space Cowboy Books**
Jenny has secretly been participating in an experimental clinical drug trial. When the unthinkable happens and an accident causes the trials to be shut down, she decides to take matters into her own hands and continue the trials on her own terms, but her life, and the nature of time itself, begin to unravel around her in this psychedelic thriller.



***The Kingdom of Hell is Inside of You*, James Machell, Space Cowboy Books**
10 Poems. 10 Eye Shots—Appearing for the first time in this collection, "The Solar Powered Man Goes to Bed" exposes the horror beneath the skin, even beyond the bone and gristle. "A Singular Death" depicts lightspeed used for self-annihilation rather than travel and "I Carried a Brain Under My Arm," the struggle for existence in a simulated universe. "The Kingdom of Hell is Inside You," which lends its name to this collection, shaves closest to the present day. In the midst of a dystopian housing crisis, where privacy is expensive, its narrator offers an insidious alternative...

Magazines:

Apex Magazine #155



A digital journal of fantastical fiction. Apex Magazine publishes short stories filled with marrow and passion—works that are twisted, strange, and beautiful; creations where secret places and dreams are put on display.



Electronic Brain #3

Art Under Fire [INFORMATION REDACTED] featuring works by James Machell, Tara Campbell, Jack Parsons, Michael Butterworth, Kris Guidio, Akua Lezli Hope, Heath Mensher, Charles Platt, Gabriel Hart, Luna Wroblewski, Christopher Scott, loopool, & Samuel Butler.

Utopia Science Fiction Vol. 8 Issue 1



Featuring: Tran Nguyen, Steve Davidson, Denis Mortenson, Gio Clairval, Calie Voorhis, Rodrigo Culagovski, Lisa Timpf, KB Nelson, Deborah Davitt, Torrey Francis Malek, Ian Li, William Tenn, Alberto Palmieri, & Samiha Zaki.



Radon Journal #14

Radon Journal's fourteenth issue features fourteen short stories and poems that challenge and entertain in equal measure. This science fiction collection features the the industry's best combined with up-and-coming talent on the verge of breaking through. Packed with social commentary and planet-hopping adventure underlined with a raw emotional core, Radon invites you to open a page and explore yourself and the world around.

Haven Spec #26



Issue Twenty-Six of Haven Spec Magazine is here! An issue late is better than an issue never, and in these pages you will find the spooky, nostalgic places that are lost to us, the anxious and excited songs of apocalypse that dream of something more, the prayerful remembrance of the dead that we must not forget, and so very much more! Fiction by T. K. Rex, D. Matthew Urban, Tonja K. Johnson, Chezza Lee, and Francesca Forrest - Poetry by Mari Ness, William Shaw, and Jess Gofton - Fiction reviews by Jessica Luke García - Cover art by Corinne Reid



Troll Breath

Trollbreath Magazine is a journal of speculative fiction, poetry, and non-fiction, publishing electronic issues on a quarterly schedule. Our interests are as varied as the endless amount of genres, from dark fantasy to hope punk to surrealism, and everything in between. We have a particular fondness for slipstream and fabulism in all their delightful forms, but what motivates us most are great stories by wonderful authors eager to share their visions of the past, the future, the in between, and everything that lies outside the margins. Coloring beyond the lines encouraged.

Starlog Vol. 2 #1

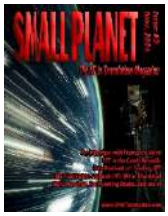


Fifty years after its debut, the legendary science fiction magazine returns with an all-new issue exploring the stories, science, and extraordinary ideas shaping tomorrow. Edited by Annalee Newitz.



Aurealis #196

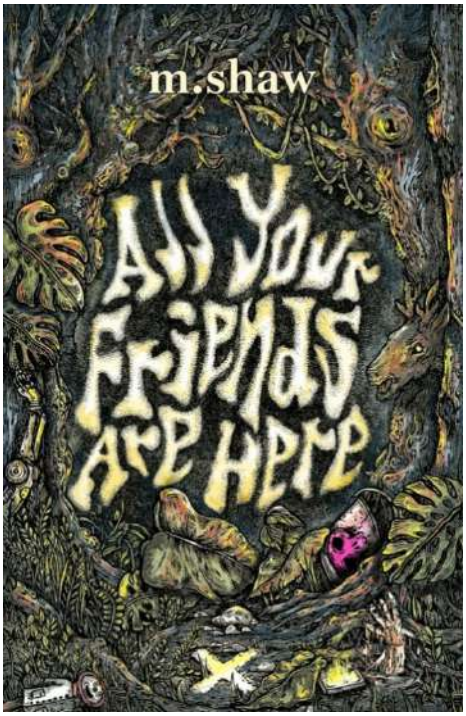
Aurealis #196 is our last issue for 2027. In it we bring you the extrapolative '1up' by Scott Steensma, the surrealist 'Zom' by Greg Foyster and the autoethnographic 'Alacrity (For Glenda)' by Stephen Higgins. Our superb non-fiction is 'The Magic Realism of Barbara Comyns' by Lynne Lumsden Green, 'Is Ozploitation Dead?' by Lachlan Walter and '*Sinners*: Why the True Horror is not the Vampires' by Louise Zedda-Sampson. And don't forget our extensive and illuminating Reviews section, also featuring the year-end Reviewers' Picks of the year. All of this and a Guest Editorial by Keith Stevenson!



Small Planet #3

Small Planet, a magazine dedicated to all things SF in translation and international SF.

Reviews:



M. Shaw's *All Your Friends Are Here*: Prose Over Plot
Tenebrous Press
(originally published in Foofaraw)
By Jeff Goldberg

What is Weird Fiction? What is New Weird Fiction? What is New Weird Horror? What is New Weird Lit or New Weird Science Fiction or New Weird Other and do any of these distinctions mean anything and/or is that the whole point of the genre?

There are some types of weird fiction that we call weird because they truly are kind of incomprehensible (M. John Harrison) or at least wildly strange (China Miéville). But not every beautifully incomprehensible work gets called Weird-with-a-capital-W, because if it did that's how we'd label our trio of great Irish modernists: Joyce, Beckett, and O'Brien. We don't, alas, but you know those three reveled in their incomprehensibility and their weirdness.

A lot of weird fiction is a form of speculative horror that isn't quite scary enough to be straight horror and isn't quite rule-based enough to be science fiction. This often has an eco-horror tilt (Jeff VanderMeer), it might earn the label because of a cosmic horror/Lovecraftian-but-anti-racist influence (Victor LaValle), or maybe it just doesn't quite fit into any other category because it's, well, a bit weird (Carmen Maria Machado). Plus, I'll again note that one could and should argue

Samuel Beckett and Flann O'Brien were writing speculative eco-horror, though no one ever says that but me.

One thing all these New Weird writers have in common is a bit of literary pretension, by which I mean a defiance of the traditional speculative fiction genre rules and—to mixed extents—an allegiance to prose over plot. Some might argue these writers are wielding that literary pretension to avoid having to worry about internal consistency or even writing coherent stories, but that's just another reason to corral them all into their own separate space to avoid sullying the more boringly-structured plot-based science fiction or horror. New Weird is what you call your book when you don't want to slum it on the genre shelves but also don't want to say "literary fiction" out loud at a party. It's prose credentials without snobbery, genre pleasures without the stigma. Never mind that plenty of genre is beautifully crafted and plenty of literary fiction is freakin' weird (and not just the Irish modernists).

*

One might wonder if M. Shaw's *All Your Friends Are Here* is classified as New Weird because, as a collection, it has too many discordant pieces to fully fit anywhere else, even if individual stories might earn themselves a more standard genre placement.

It's got horror/eco-horror/body-horror ("The Only Friend You Ever Need," "Go with the Flow," "The Cure for Loneliness") which maybe skews towards comic horror, a sub-genre having its moment in the sun. It's got science fiction ("My Dad Bought a Space Shuttle," "Ready Player (N+1)"), though these, wonderfully, are really transfemme bildungsromans with some satirical science fiction wrappings. It's got transgressive lit ("The Motorist," "Roots in the Ground," "Man vs Bomb") which I call transgressive instead of body horror because they involve sex and genital mutilation of one kind or another, and according to a poorly argued 2023 GQ review of Bret Easton Ellis's The Shards that I'm still mad about, it's not transgressive unless a penis gets disfigured.

I think we can at least agree that any collection with 26 separate content warnings—one of which I had to look up in the dictionary (dendrophilia: sexual arousal from trees)—is clearly aiming for transgression of some kind, though a bit tongue-in-cheekily.

*

The real question(s) isn't how to categorize the stories. It's whether they're any good. Are they a pleasure to read? Are they befuddling and charming and funny and heartfelt? Do they make you want to read more, as in both more of each individual story and more stories like them? And, also, least and most importantly: are they weird? And the answer is: yes. Yes, they are good, and yes, they are weird.

In "The Only Friend You Ever Need" the narrator manages to draw the attention of a malak, one of the world's many murderous, ineffable creatures, one per city. There aren't really any rules or logic or worldbuilding. It just is what it is. I'd have been happy with a novel-length version of this story, or, perhaps, an old-school 22-episodes-a-season television series.

> "I worked out a system: every time I wanted to check the back seat, instead of doing that, I made my peace with God."

In "The Cure for Loneliness," a woman slowly turns into a plant (which, as we know from Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, is a topic worthy of The Nobel Prize). It's one of the scarier stories in the collection, though that's because as a vegan I find the concept of possibly-sentient plants particularly terrifying. Like all multi-dimensional stories, this story of toxic plants is interwoven with the story of a toxic relationship, and it gets you rooting for the roots.

> "Not to blame you for anything, but hearing this made it a lot easier to believe, in the ensuing months, that I was conducting a cute little experiment and not ceding the entire ecosystem of my life to something I still barely understand."

And, of course, there's "Roots In The Ground," which deserves mentioning not just because it's the first story in the collection, and not just because it does a terrific job introducing you to the whole book's themes of the natural world gone wrong and grief and sexual deviation and self-sacrifice through numbness, but also because it's the story that needs a content warning for dendrophilia.

> "How she had doubled back and passed us without our noticing was beyond me, but it was either that or there were multiple tree orgies going on that night, which I didn't want to entertain."

Is it a perfect collection? There are, admittedly, a few stories where the satire is a little too on-the-nose ("The Apology") or a kind of wry-but-dry recitation of purpose ("One Long Staircase, Just Going Up"). Stories like that can help decode the rest of the collection. They give you a less layered look into the author's thematic goals (so we're complaining about the billionaire-led end-stage-capitalism dystopia?) which you can then apply as a template to their more obfuscated peers. Plus, there's no such thing as a perfect collection, except, perhaps, according to some literary scholars, Joyce's *Dubliners* (to bring back our Irish modernists), though those same scholars also call the final entry in that collection, "The Dead," the best short story ever written, which implies the others are not the best short story ever written. So how could it be perfect?

What all the best stories in this collection have in common is voice. It's the winking sardonicism of college-educated-but-stuck-in-a-dead-end-job, the liminal space of dying suburbia, a genuine feel that the narrator is chatting with you even as the details swerve from bizarre to bizarrer. Voice, of course, is one way of delivering an allegiance to prose over plot, and this literary elevation is why these stories sit on the New Weird shelf rather than any of the other genres or sub-genres they actually are. Voice like this holds the strangest stories together, because even when logic fails, you're being talked through it by someone to whom you want to listen.

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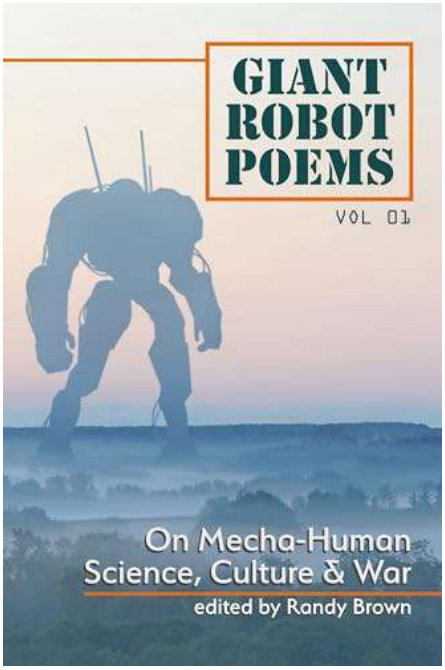


Cyber-War is Hell:
***Giant Robot Poems: On Mecha-Human Science, Culture, & War, Vol 1*, Randy Brown, ed.**
Middle West Press
By Denise Dumars

Hurry: Volume 2 is looking for poems but they might be closed by the time this review hits the fan. Or whatever it hits. It's hard to tell just where, when, and how a cyber war will hit you. In other words, this is an anthology very much appropriate to the times in which we find ourselves living. Organized into sections such as "Let Chip the Bots of War!" and "Building the Better Human," this antho features some of our best-known genre poets such as Colleen Anderson, Herb Kauderer, Brian U. Garrison, Kurt Newton and Michael H. Payne; it also contains poems by lots of poets who were new to me. I like that in an anthology—every reader of poetry likes to meet new poets.

The poems vary not only in topic but in style; free verse, formal verse, and prose poetry are all found here, making this a nicely rounded collection. Also, a lot of poets are current or former members of the armed forces, which lends a gravitas and verisimilitude to the work. So to start I'll choose one of those, "Accusation," by Brad Bailey, a veteran of two deployments to Iraq:

> My presence doesn't register.
> They've advanced beyond any fear
> of anything a man might do
> "Where were you when I needed you?"
> The giants just stood by….

Another poet veteran, N. Jay Todd, a retired U. S. Army master sergeant, hit me right between the eyes with his long poem "DrillSergeantGPT, or Mentor Mill":

> I take them all and boil the data down to constituent ingredients,
> Figure out the recipes for your failures and success.
> Bake down a war, or several wars,
> To a series of binary decision points in a tree of causality,
> (The tree which marked your grave), find a representative sample,
> And I simulate it. I predict, and I test my first prediction.
> And then I do it again. And again. And again.

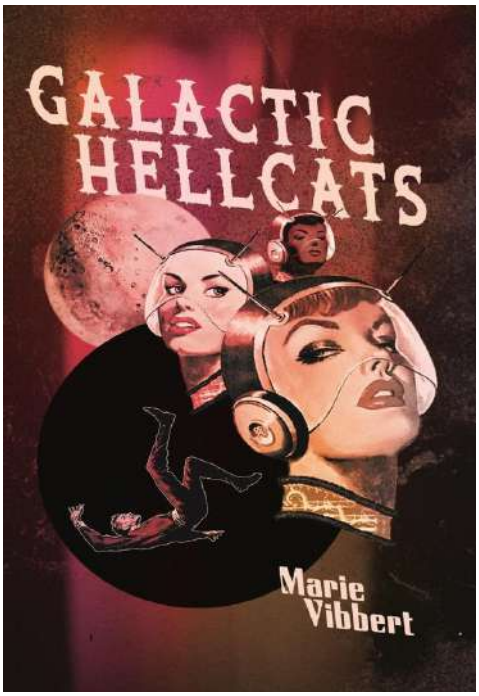
One thing I think about in considering these poems is whether cyberwar or whatever you'd like to call war in the age of AI now or in the future is whether the devices and methodology change to any great extent due to "advances" in the military-industrial system. I think the answer is yes and no. We'd need to read World War I poetry to answer that: I consider it the worst war, because in that war the ability to inflict pain and terror had advanced far beyond the ability to treat the victims

of such technology. Now we blow people up and then put them back together. In the future I'm sure we'll just put them into new artificial bodies.

I'll finish with lines from a sonnet by Jared Pearce called "The news is, we're going electric":

> The chrome machines we wanted to install
> won't fit the holes pre-drilled into your head.
> We'll need to calibrate, redo them all
> to have the sound we want you sing instead.

Lots to think about in this book and a great variety of approaches and styles. Read it a little at a time and savor it. So many science fiction fans and writers have thought about the topics in this book that it gets a great recommendation from me for any science fiction poetry fan, but especially for those who may have been in a war…to give as a gift to someone who hasn't. My highest recommendation overall.



Galactic Hellcats **by Marie Vibbert**
Lethe Press

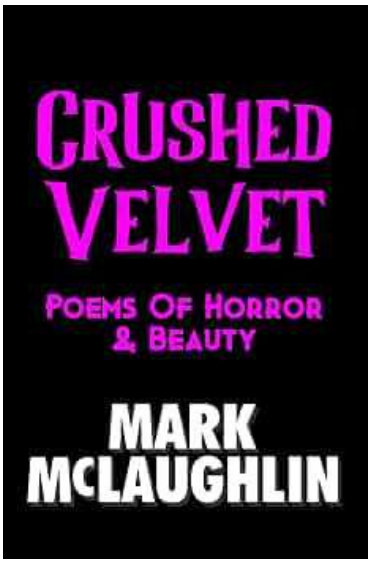
All girl biker gang in space! What more could you want? The girls have got their solo-flyers and are heading for adventure exploring the galaxy and finding their way into mischief. Meet Ki, Margot, and Zuleikah – the Galactic Hellcats – an unlikely gang of friends that's destined for greatness, or at the very least infamy.

A series of mishaps leads a group of young women together and they unwittingly start a gang, complete with solo-flyers, a sort of one person motorcycle-like space ship. Adventure ensues and they get into all kinds of trouble around the solar system and beyond. As they experience troubles and trials friendships form and strengthen, all the while running from the law.

If you're looking for a fun, quick read, look no further. *Galactic Hellcats* is a page turner, filled with adventure and intrigue. Biker gals ransack the cosmos and cause a hoopla in their wake. They move from petty theft to evading the police and eventually even kidnapping/rescuing a prince, in a fun reversal of roles. Vibbert's characters are strong and the writing is clean, all leading to a great read. I couldn't help but feel that the book was leading up to a sequel, and fortunately it does, because once you get to know the Galactic Hellcats, you're going to want to go on another adventure with these folks. One of the things I really appreciated about this book is that the characters all come from a variety of backgrounds, and these differences in upbringing give all the characters realistic and different worldviews. *Galactic Hellcats* is Vibbert's debut novel, and let's hope there are many more to come, because this is a strong book.

Fans of fun adventurous science fiction will love this book.

Cthulhu in Furs:
***Crushed Velvet: Poems of Horror & Beauty*, by Mark McLaughlin**
Privately published
By Denise Dumars



Most readers known Mark McLaughlin's cosmic horror short fiction and novels but may not know that he has a Bram Stoker Award for poetry! Deservedly so. These poems hit like a hammer in a velvet glove…sometimes hilariously dark, and other times, pow! Right to the solar plexus with real-life love and death. Our first example is of the former, with "Cyber-Cleopatra Vs. Robo-Demon Crazy Boots":

> Somewhere in Egypt, the Nile turned red,
> camels danced on their hind legs, and
> a pyramid studded with alien microchips
> turned inside-out, unfolded and became
> mile-high Cyber-Cleopatra, ancient arch-enemy
> of Robo-Demon Crazy Boots, who once stole her
> boyfriend, and some earrings…

And then there's this one, "Personal Mythology":

> Mama crouched in the corner
> running pink claws through her viper-locks
> as Grandma poured the slow syrup
> of time into my father's ear.

So, yeah. McLaughlin can be poetical at the most unexpected moments. This is free verse, mostly, and tiptoes lightly but lovingly through hallucinogenic horror and science fiction then runs screeching into confessional and imagistic verse. I think he made up his own form with "Always Falling," but you'll have to read the whole poem to see the form, and here's just one stanza:

> And I talked, and she stared with her dead
> grandma's angel eyes, as we drank Belgian cider
> in our favorite catalpa tree, the one crammed
> with coffee-black blossoms. Inside the window,
> violets fell like ink bottles.

Huh? Just tell us what you mean, Mark! Oh, you meant the following, in "Your Smile":

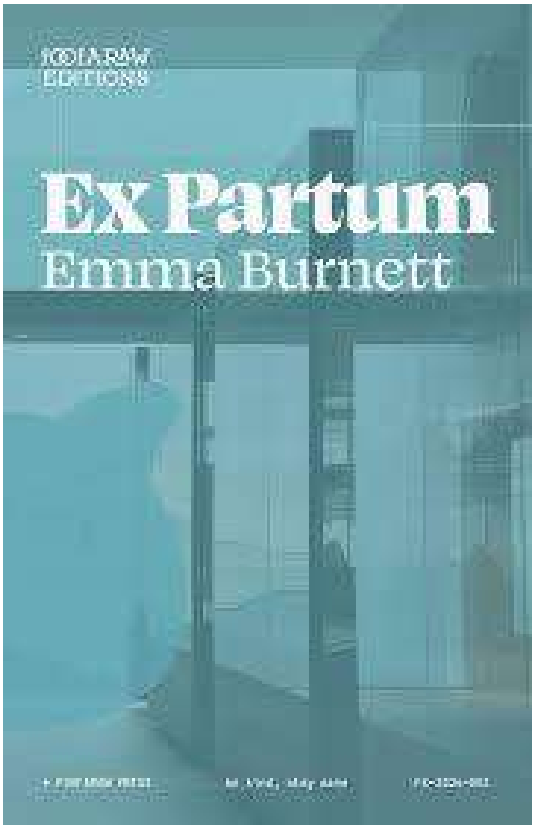
> I also love your knowing smile
> a certain curve of lip flashed
> by bestselling smut novelists,
> high priced call girls and
> supernaturally endowed porn stars.

Oh, OK. That's what you meant. Or maybe you meant to tell me about "A Dream of Shrieking Insects":

> …The taste of dead larvae
> lingers on my tongue, for I do so love the
> tang of caterpillar wine. Surely I can smell
> the dry, oddly metallic, attic-in-summer stench
> of brittle fly corpses….

McLaughlin calls this "the best of Mark McLaughlin's poetry throughout his career." I got a kick out of his surprising juxtaposition of weirdness and lost beauty, shot up with dinosaurs on speed and unrequited yearnings for a normal childhood and a partner who doesn't cheat on him with the likes of "a throbby-veined Venusian love squid" as in the poem "Lipstick on Your Straightjacket Collar." Better luck next life, dude. In the meantime we'll just take our Dramamine and get through these poems the best we can. My highest recommendation for readers who like their poetry studded-tongue in cheek, for this is real horror poetry that always gets the last laugh. Not for the person who takes themselves too seriously when it comes to horror. But for the rest of us, hell yeah!

A review of Emma Burnett's *Ex Partum*
Foofaraw Editions
(originally published in Foofaraw)
By Jeff Goldberg



An examination of the word "speculative"

I've always disliked the term "speculative fiction." I don't mean I dislike actual works classified as speculative fiction, mind you, but the term itself. There have been arguments over the meaning of this term for going on almost a hundred years now, and it's fallen in and out of favor several times along the way. So I'm not the only one.

(This is, I promise, a review of Emma Burnett's *Ex Partum*, and we'll get there eventually.)

Part of my issue is the use of the term as a euphemism meant to cultivate a more literary-sounding veneer. It has never been enough for some fans of science fiction that their preferred genre has achieved total and complete cultural dominance, but it needs respectability as well.

More importantly, words have meaning.

Robert A. Heinlein, the coiner—or at least original popularizer—of that term, defined it, in part, as works of fiction that tackle the question of "What would happen if–." That makes sense from a definitional standpoint! Speculating, as it were.

He used the term as a direct synonym for science fiction. In recent decades, it has expanded into a big tent, including (according to Wikipedia) sixteen different genres. One problem with this expansion and the vague meaning is that at some point we need to acknowledge that most works of fiction tackle some kind of "what if" scenario. What if these two enemies fell in love? What if this serial killer left clues that only one detective could decode? What if this cookie reminded the narrator of his youth? And, okay, if we acknowledge that, sure, we're all critically thinking human beings and we know what we're talking about, and, okay, speculative fiction refers to the reality-breaking "what if" scenarios, we also have to start to wonder why this still-hugely broad category needs to exist.

But since the term started as a synonym for science fiction, and it's almost always used to mean "science fiction and whoever else we've decided to invite this time," we also have to speak to the real problem, which is that "what if" science fiction is the absolute worst kind of science fiction.

<u>There are four types of science fiction.</u>

Not delineated by sub-genre, but by primary purpose. In descending order of worst to best.

4) "What If" science fiction. This is the worst kind for two reasons. Reason one is that fiction whose whole purpose is to ask and answer an internal question is essentially just a logic puzzle. What are we, babies? The second reason is my friend constantly tries to convince me that "what if" science fiction helps prepare humanity for a variety of futures and therefore is the most important kind of fiction, and then he tries to get me to read books about aliens turning the Earth into a giant video game. (Which I did eventually read and did unfortunately love.) The point is, "What If" science fiction loses ranking by the sheer pompousness of its close association to the trying-to-sound-fancy "speculative."

3) "Spectacle" (as opposed to "speculative") science fiction. I'm not exactly sure what to call this one. Action science fiction, pure plot science fiction, aliens shooting laser guns at each other, etc., just a complete reveling in the fun of unbounded science fiction play. It's the kind of science fiction that will have some breakout successes, and fans will clamor for more literary critics to review it, and those same fans will then all angrily respond to one hundred percent of that literary criticism by saying "it's not about that" or "it's not meant to be realistic" or "can't we just enjoy things."

2) "Lens on current society" science fiction. This is the thing science fiction does best! It allows an author to take us out of the limitations of our current world, weaken our psychological defenses by telling us a story about something that appears different from us, and then secretly point out all the ills of modern society while we thought we were reading about aliens. This is obviously the best kind of science fiction minus one, because this is what all the best fiction does. It's also a good way to prove that speculative fiction is a bad term, because people often point to Atwood and Le Guin as some of the best examples of speculative fiction, by which they are trying to attach the entire genre to their literary bona fides, but it's amazingly obvious that neither of those authors

were interested in some purely technical "what if" scenario building, but actually attempting to comment on us as we are now. The most speculative of speculative fiction is not speculative at all.

1) Weird shit. The only reason "lens on society" doesn't come in first is because we all know the best science fiction is the stuff that's too weird to make any certain statement about its purpose.

The Review

Emma Burnett's *Ex Partum*, a fantastic novel that you should read, falls clearly into the #2 "Lens on current society" science fiction, in exactly the best ways of Atwood and Le Guin. And, just like the novels of Atwood and Le Guin, many reviews and readers treat it like a #4 "What if" science fiction novel.

There is a clear high-concept world framing that understandably takes center stage in many readings. In the world of *Ex Partum*, subscription capitalism has reached a localized zenith. Everything from housing to medical care to—most importantly—food is now gated by universally controlled corporate subscription models. (On second thought, if one considers "rent" or "mortgage payments" akin to a subscription, that part of subscription capitalism is already nearly universal.)

In the life of the protagonist Panya and her baby Liber, subscription food is the key factor in the story's worldbuilding, where all consumables have been reduced to user-tailored slurpable "nutribulbs." To maintain this lock on distributable goo substances, the entire society has cultivated a taboo against the concept of chewing, deployed viciously against an othered group of solid-food-chomping humans who choose to live outside of corporate control. When baby Liber rejects moving from breastfeeding to nutribulbs, Panya begins to bump up against the extent of her social conditioning.

As the title implies, the book explores postpartum depression. Maybe more like postpartum anxiety. Within the limits imposed by her subscription life, she must constantly ask herself: "Am I doing the right thing by my child?"

But, also, other anxieties. There's a lot about class and status anxiety, about immigration and security anxiety, about being unsure of your footing in society. Work anxiety. Purpose anxiety (an anxiety I clearly share).

These anxieties resolve phenomenally into a critique of current techno-overlord-capitalism trends. And there's a point in reading this book where you realize this is not a fantastically realized #4 "What If" science fiction novel, but a blistering #2 "Lens on current society" science fiction novel. Because the novel is not really interested in exploring some fully realized plotting of corporate subscription models. It's interested in today's living humans, already trapped by the capitalism thrust upon us.

But, furthermore, the story's strength lies in driving more micro and more inward in its care. It's the pre-resolution that matters. (Endings are almost always irrelevant to the quality of a story.) *Ex Partum* focuses on the way anxiety about belonging keeps one, intentionally, in a place of doubt and loneliness and constant tension.

While it's easy to discuss the book's core conceit—extending "everything is a subscription now" to its horrible logical conclusion—most of the book focuses on the much more interesting question of how people (or a person) might allow themselves to live that way. It's not just "lens on current society" but "lens on human psychology," an even stronger, better sub-purpose.

The Squint

If I have any qualms with the book, it's that the ending lets Panya off a little too easily in terms of moral ambiguity. She's a complex character, not always kind and rarely perfect, fighting for no one but herself and her child. Towards the end, we learn that her husband has not just been absent, both emotionally and in body, but also physically abusive. It's not that I don't believe in his abuse (sadly, I believe it all too much) but that it lets Panya (and the reader) avoid any further moral conundrum right around the time she is choosing whether to flee with her child.

Not that this small qualm stops the momentum or keeps the book from succeeding in its purpose. It's a quiet story that manages to be very loud, a family drama with a society-spanning clash folded inside it, less a speculative warning than a brilliant interrogation of our current "whatever this is." And extremely enjoyable to read.

From a classification standpoint, *Ex Partum* demonstrates that no work of science fiction (or any fiction) can be truly categorized with any sure solidity into any of the taxonomically-authoritative four purposes. It's fuzzy borders. A science fiction story can be pure fun, with lovingly detailed "what if" scenarios, explore the depths of the human condition, and also hyper-fixate on weird-as-shit goopy food bulbs. *Ex Partum* does all four at once, at various points, usually on the same page. So you have to say "primary purpose" rather than "purpose," and employ other milquetoast conditionals to avoid getting yelled at on Bluesky.

But some primary purposes are more primary than others, and *Ex Partum* knows exactly which one it's really about. Some reviewers will keep calling it a #4 and we can mostly leave them to it. But underneath the high concept, it never loses the thread of what it's actually interested in. It's not the mechanics of subscription capitalism, but the specific, private, human weight of deciding whether to keep chewing. No matter how much you want to argue that all fiction can truly satisfy all purposes and, furthermore, that all purposes are of equal merit, they aren't. And, in your heart of hearts, you know it when you read it.

∞

Stop and Smell the Asphodel:
Diary of a Vampyress **by Ashley Dioses**
Hippocampus Press
By Denise Dumars



My review's title is a phrase from Kyla Lee Ward's Foreword to the book, for the book does ask us to take a load off our Doc Martens and savor the richness of these gothic poems. Divided into sections by theme, I particularly enjoyed the first section, "The Countess," a series of narrative poems referring to Countess Dracula, echoing the title of the collection. Dioses is known for her lush, atmospheric imagery, as in "Black Orchid," which is the third poem in this section:

> Fair Nadia rolled her moon-gray eyes and spoke:
> "A fairer man than this one, who did drown,
> Would not have let his blood besmear my gown
> Before I left him in the brine to choke."

Well, alrighty then! I think we get the tone of the book. But not so fast! Many of these poems are written in couplets, and therefore some do seem tongue-in-studded cheek. Other topics besides vampires reside herein: witches, devils, the many motifs of Halloween, and allusions to other dark literature—such as *the King in Yellow*—inhabit these poems. And yes, this collection is the very soul of Gothic literature, both classic and modern. For example, this stanza from "Lord Death":

> His icy glance invites the coldness in,
> And yet just who am I to shy away?
> He waits until I spill my every sin—
> I swoon, his scented breath is sweet decay.

Much Gothic literature, especially that in traditional forms, begs to be read aloud, and I do wish that Ashley Dioses would do more poetry readings. Fans of Halloween will enjoy the verse in the ever-so-quotable section called "All Hallows' Feast." A few lines from "Hallowed Dream":

> Her lips are crimson fire,
> Her kiss my sole desire,
> Beneath the devil's briar
> On Halloween.

One would be correct in discerning that the dark romantic is the overarching theme of the book. The poems are one long episode of Gothic striptease, an eros veiled in poisoned apples and forbidden dalliances with the lords and ladies of death.

And of course us witches get our due in poems such as "Seal the Veil,":

Around the fire we toss such herbs
As mugwort, sage, and bay
So we can summon and disturb
The spirits led astray.

Readers will be willingly led astray by these delightful dark and sensuous poems. My excerpts do not do them justice here. The poetry is really for the person who prefers traditional verse (again, not my forte) and the dark tone taken seriously and enjoyably. So I'll end with a sample from the penultimate section, "The Seven Seals," and the poem, "Heavens Departed," number VI in this section:

The heavens all departed, for the scroll
Was rolled together, while the mountains high
And island low moved from their places, whole,
The Lamb's fierce wrath soared up on doom's last sigh.

The book ends with a selection of Dioses' poems translated into Hungarian and French. You'll need to light a black candle and put on some suitable music when reading these, and silence the phone and turn off electric light. Wait—what's that tapping at the window?

Highly recommended for the fancier of dark, Gothic, formalist verse.



A Glorious Contradiction:
***On Midnight Wings* by Michael Bloom**
E. Gads Hill Press
By Denise Dumars

Michael Bloom sees dragons as contradictions: I agree. From the adorable "Puff, the Magic Dragon" to the terrifying dragons of Westeros in *Game of Thrones*, the whole idea of dragons is wonderfully diverse. To European eyes, they're usually greedy and evil, but in Asian mythology they are wise and good luck. And the eighth son of the dragon in Chinese mythology is a patron of creative writers.

Full disclosure: I am very familiar with Michael Bloom's vampiric performance poetry, but I had not read any of his dragon poems until I bought this book. Most of the poems are formalist in one variety or another, and most are narrative poems. Right off the bat I particularly liked "Happy Endings," in which a dragon surprises an abused wife:

It set the prize upon the bed
Anne recognized the thing
It was a mangled human hand
Which bore her husband's ring

All’s well that ends well, I guess! The dragons in these poems are often disdainful of humans in general and let us know how much we misunderstand them. There is humor but also pathos and longing, and even invocations to dragon magick in this collection.

I don’t care for the Ren-faire style antiquated and mannered diction in some of the poems, but then I’m not really the audience for them, ultimately. But there is true beauty in some of these poems even to a hard-hearted old free verse writer like myself. For example, try this stanza from “Wings of the Season,”:

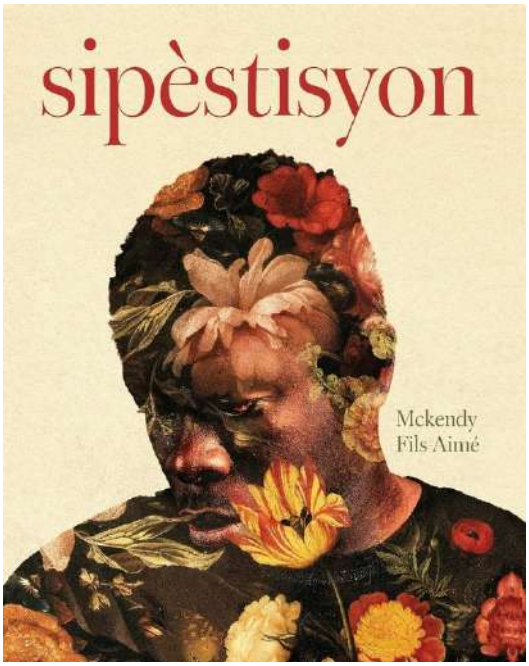
On wings of fire
Summer sun sings, can you not climb higher?
Blue air wiggles and shimmers
Giving the stars their own sapphire glimmer
The world breathes as one
Even night’s wind carries scent of the sun

It should come as no surprise to learn that Bloom is a reptile rescue person. It seems to me that dragons should be thanking him, but it’s the other way around in “A Thanks Giving (for World Dragon Day)”:

Guardian of eternity
thy flame curls deep within my soul
the essence of it dwells in me
its touch has healed me, made me whole.

You got over a hundred pages of dragon poems here, so what more could a dragon fancier want? Need a holiday gift for a friend who loves dragons? I’d recommend this book most highly. It’s also for those who like narrative fantasy poetry and are fond of the traditional forms and diction that the genre sometimes takes. A truly unique collection.

∞



Rougarou reviews lougawou:
***sipèstisyon*, by Mckendy Fils-Aimé**
YesYes Books
By Denise Dumars

When I saw Mckendy Fils-Aimé read at the Cobalt Poets I knew I had to buy his book. I think I startled him by asking him if he was attending a *Fet Gede* as it was that time of year (it's a Vodou thing). The book's title is how Haitian immigrants pronounce the English word *superstition*, and the poems provide a meditation on reality vs. superstition in the minds of Fils-Aimé's family as well as the truth versus the way people prefer to see things. *sipèstisyon* navigates family pain and the way denial acts as a barrier to relieving and removing that pain and its causes. As such it is genre-adjacent, not primarily genre poetry.

In the poem "Grandma says *don't spend too much time at rivers*" Fils-Aimé describes the story that his grandmother alludes to:

> rumor has it he was a canvas on the current's easel for seven years,
> #
> his body painted over and over by La Sirène until his skin was grayer,
> hair finer, eyes bluer, his neck blessed by a prayer circle of gills
> rumor has it the river spit his dead body back up dressed in gold.

So while his family recounts the mythology of Haiti the persona of the poem (often Fils-Aimé himself) has to navigate the real-life world of the United States, not only a different culture but also a culture often prejudiced against him and his people.

In the title poem, "sipèstisyon" we learn that "*if a blackbird enters your home you must kill it or someone close to you will die*." And the poem describes the elephant in the living room like this:

> I tried telling you
> about his ugly
> appetite, where
> he roosted when
> you left for work,
> but your ears
> were full of feathers.

Yeah, denial is not just a river in Egypt. In "maybe generational trauma is a combat sport" Fils-Aimé writes:

i crafted community before my first metaphor
learned the line breaks of kata before splitting stanzas.
you were proud of each new stripe & belt & friend
until i grew brave enough to block one of your slaps.

Fils-Aimé told us at the reading that a *lougawou* is like the French *loup-garou* (or the Louisiana *rougarou)*, a werewolf, "only much cooler." He likens the shape-shifting images of the *Thriller* video to this monster in "Michael Jackson was a lougawou":

if you ask me he was a mirror
image of the silhouettes that called
#
out to my mother in her dreams
stared with shadow-piercing flaxen eyes

I recommend this beautiful and heartbreaking collection to a variety of readers. First of all, those who know the immigrant experience. Secondly, anyone who has faced abuse, including racism. And I also recommend it to anyone who likes imagistic poetry that sings its way off the page, like a lonely lougawou howling in the night. My highest recommendation.

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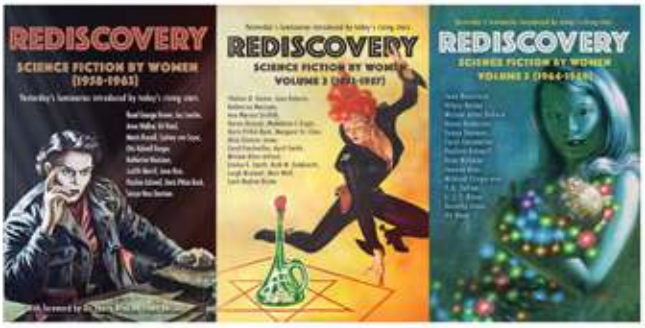





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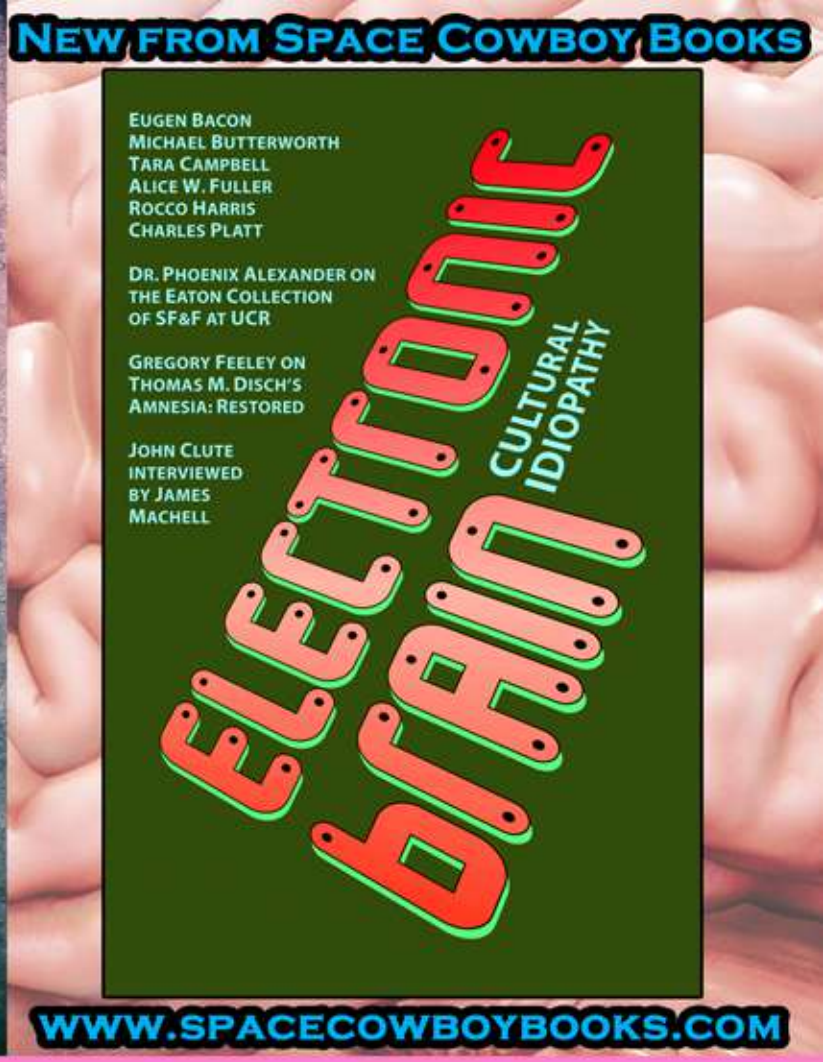

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