GUIDELINES FOR *FAFNIR* REVIEWERS

Thank you for contributing to *Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*! If you've not worked with us, you'll see below a number of guidelines that detail our expectations.

BOOK REVIEWS—The Basics
Quality book reviews for academic monographs and collections should have two basic components:

(1) *Descriptive*. Description should be fair, pointing out thesis, basic argument, methodology, contents of the book, and authorial intentions.

(2) *Evaluative*. The reviewer should assess the book's strengths and weaknesses, noting surprising or dubious points, plus the book's contribution and/or value to contemporary scholarship. This last aspect requires some field knowledge in terms of theory and background: As we expect some critical engagement with the reviewed book, reviewers should attempt due diligence. Also, as *Fafnir* serves an international academic audience, contextualizing a book (and/or assessing of its value) may sometimes be a central feature of a review, especially if the book deals with a non-Anglophone literature. Referencing other relevant secondary literature is acceptable, though not required.

Reviewers may structure reviews as they see fit, although organization should be logical. Likewise, a book's overall evaluation is left entirely to the reviewer's discretion. If a book has more strengths than weaknesses, or vice versa, please let that be reflected in your structure. We consider it a standard convention of the review genre, however, that even highly laudatory reviews contain some critique, even if a minor one; likewise, even highly negative reviews should contain some elements of praise. Ultimately, we see reviews as something like guides for other scholars with the SFF field.

Reviewers may also wish to identity a potential audience for a book: scholars, teachers, university libraries, and the like.

STYLE
Please follow the general [Fafnir stylesheet](#). For reviews, we encourage academics to write in a style they consider engaging to an academic audience. However, *Fafnir* actively encourages being concrete and specific. This entails avoiding vague verbs such as *discusses*, *analyzes*, *covers*, *talks about*, *explores*, *brings in how*, *goes over*, etc. For example, instead of writing "Smith explores the rise of early SF," we would recommend a more solid approach, such as "According to Smith, early SF is.…" Often tight, concise review writing is simply a matter of telling specifically about the reviewed book, and avoiding vague word choices.

LENGTH
Reviews for monographs generally run around 1500 words, give or take; reviews on edited collections may run longer (or focus on only strongest/weakest essays). Yet we're quite flexible on word count, since as an online journal we don't have the space limitations of a print journal.

DUE DATE
Submit reviews no later than 3 months after receipt of the book. If more time is needed, please contact the *Fafnir* reviews editor at [reviews(at)finfar.org](#). In fact, if any issues arise at all during the review process, please don't hesitate to contact me!

ODDS & ENDS
- Two sample reviews are provided at the end of these guidelines: Review 1 and Review 2.
- Please also include a short bio (c. 75 words) with your review.
- Depending on the strength of a submitted review, *Fafnir* may ask for revisions, but we always work with authors to aim for a publishable review.

DISSERTATION REVIEWS
Unlike book reviews, we see dissertation reviews as a way to advertise exciting new work within SFF research. Thus, a dissertation review should focus more on highlighting the dissertation's place within contemporary scholarship than on evaluating its strengths or weaknesses. Of course, please also provide an overview of the thesis, content, argument, and methods.

Dissertation reviews should run about 400-800 words. Please submit dissertation reviews to the reviews editor within 2 months.

Additionally, authors are especially encouraged to recommend their own dissertations for review. In return, we may ask that they review someone else's dissertation in return.

SAMPLE BOOK REVIEW FOR *FAFNIR #1*

C. Palmer-Patel

Higgins, David M. *Reverse Colonization: Science Fiction, Imperial Fantasy, and Alt-Victimhood*. U of Iowa P, 2021. ISBN: 9781609387846.

Considering the continued global rise of racism and misogyny, David M. Higgins's *Reverse Colonization* delivers a timely investigation into how far-right reactionaries have misappropriated science fiction using overt themes of imperialism and, specifically, narratives of reverse colonization. By "reverse colonization," Higgins refers to works in which readers are made to confront fears of foreign or alien invasion, thereby reversing the perspective of an audience from its usual identification with the colonizer to that of the colonized. Higgins proposes two modes of reading these narratives: the intended reading, in which the reader is made to consider the perspectives of those who have been harmed by imperial violence, and an alternate reading, in which readers who have benefited from imperialism are drawn to view themselves as victims. The reverse colonization narratives are ones which "invite identification *with* victims, but they can also provoke identification *as* victims" (18, emphasis original).

Looking at the works of canonical New Wave science fiction authors, Higgins presents this alternate reading, dissecting points where this identification with victimhood can be misread or misappropriated, resulting in what he terms "imperial masochism," "the way subjects who enjoy the advantages of empire adopt the fantastical role of colonized victims to fortify and expand their agency" (2). While Higgins focuses on influential authors of the 1960s, he extends the discussion to contemporary events which have occurred over the last decade, "demonstrat[ing] how pivotal changes in imperial fantasy that occurred during the 1960s have led to dire consequences in the contemporary era" (4). In so doing, he is also taking into account, for example, the Hugo Awards' Puppygate fiasco, in which a select group of voters contended that – due to the nominations of

several non-white, women, or LGBTQIA+ authors – the award was being granted on the basis of social justice rather than merit.

Higgins's choice of texts and authors is revealing; throughout the five chapters, he examines the works of Robert Heinlein, Frank Herbert, Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick, Thomas M. Disch, Michael Moorcock, J. G. Ballard, and Samuel R. Delany. With the sole outlier of Delany (who, I would like to point out, is the usual outlier when one lists canonical 1960s SF writers), these authors are all white heterosexual men. Higgins does not justify his choice of authors or even draw attention to the obvious lack of women, POC, or LGBTQIA+ authors. While the choice could have been explained with practical considerations – including a wider spectrum of authors would have easily doubled the length of the book – the lack of justification is disturbing because it implies that canonical SF writers are all men, white, and heterosexual (with the exception of Delany who proves the rule). However, bearing in mind that Higgins chose canonical texts that have been misappropriated for audiences who are "incels, antifeminists, white nationalists, alt-right activities, and neoreactionaires," his choice of texts can be considered to be reasonable. Even so, I would have liked to see some reflection on how this choice might potentially skew his reading and analysis.

For instance, in Chapter One, "Liberating Psychedelic Masculinity," Higgins examines masculinity alongside colonization in three foundational science fiction texts: Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), and Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) in comparison to the Stanley Kubrick film (1968). Each text has been examined in great detail by SF critics analyzing both masculinity and postcolonialism, but rarely paired in the intersectional manner that Higgins draws attention to. Integrating this scholarship that has come before him, Higgins' own contribution feels like the natural next step in the conversation. Each text, Higgins argues, "invit[es] men to identify as colonized victims undertaking a heroic struggle to liberate their personal power. This reversal is made possible by the trope of reverse colonization, which imaginatively situates elite male heroes as psychically colonized victims" (33). Turning to such critics as Frantz Fanon, who argued that decolonization also includes decolonizing the self (and patterns of thinking), Higgins examines how decolonization in these texts is linked to the liberation of the masculine self. In other words, decolonization in these texts simultaneously reinforces masculine elitism. This conclusion is drawn out and expanded on in the first half of the book as Higgins focuses the first three chapters on the theme of masculinity.

Throughout, Higgins gathers evidence from real-life examples, noting in each instance how the radical right uses allusions to popular science fiction texts to justify their visions of the society. This critical methodology in Higgins' approach is particularly strong in Chapter Two, "Threatened Masculinity in the High Castle," which he begins with the manifesto written by Elliot Rodger, a mass shooter who killed six people and injured several others before killing himself in May 2014. Rodger's actions inspired other "incels" (involuntary celibates), an "online community of (mostly white) men who regard themselves as victims because they believe that women refuse to have sex with them" (58). Dissecting Rodger's own testimonials, Higgins highlights several popular works of science fiction that feature prominently within Rodger's writing. Higgins is careful to avoid making any claims that science fiction would lead to dangerous patterns of behavior, but instead considers the ways in which science fiction can be misread and misappropriated in order to normalize dangerous ideologies. Looking at Philip K. Dick's (PKD) *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), Higgins analyses moments in which the racist antique dealer Robert Childan's interactions with other characters result in a perceived threat of emasculation, a threat which audiences may identify with. However, as Higgins points out, Childan is not a character we are meant to sympathize with; while in the position of colonized subject, Childan "identif[ies] with the Nazis and their embodiment of white superiority. Childan doesn't want to overthrow the social hierarchies that

oppress him; he just wants to be the one at the top of such hierarchies" (76). Childan is, in fact, a Nazi-sympathizer, an identity that audiences are not meant to align with – unless they are a Nazi-sympathizer themselves.

Here, Higgins turns to the works of PKD as an author prolific in "ontological reverse colonization narratives – in other words, stories that imagine that 'reality' as we experience it is a prison and humans have been oppressively colonized by false beliefs and attitudes" (64). To do so, Higgins examines the parallels with this ontological reverse colonization in Rodger's own writing where he "questioned the very fabric of reality" (109 quoted in Higgins 63). The case study and focus on PKD is sensible. Yet, I would have liked to see more than one case study, especially as PKD is infamous for the way in which he presents women characters. For instance, while Higgins briefly mentions the *Matrix* franchise in the chapter, he easily sidesteps any discussions of queerness, which are prominent in the films. Given that the theme of these chapters concentrates on the threat of emasculation, the exclusion of queer readings is an apparent gap.

Indeed, Higgins seems to sidestep controversial discussions quite often, perhaps in order to maintain some semblance of neutrality between alt-left and alt-right, but the overall effect is a critic that is playing it safe. In Chapter Three, "The Whiteness of Black Iron Prisons," Higgins concentrates on the prison narrative, or the carceral reverse colonization fantasy, "stories that imagine relatively free (and usually white) subjects as incarcerated prisoners" (92). Here, Higgins analyzes PKD's "Black Iron Prison" in his *Exegesis* (1970s) alongside the British television show *The Prisoner* (1967–68), Thomas M. Disch's novelization of the show (1969), and Disch's novel *Camp Concentration* (1968). As carceral reverse colonization narratives invite audiences to imagine themselves as victims, Higgins draws attention to how these narratives, rather than inspiring empathy with oppressed peoples, instead support elite audiences' own claims of victimhood. However, as he points out, "Imagining liberation struggles as universal … fails to pay attention to the intersectional nature of specific oppressions" (92). This observation allows Higgins to make brief commentaries on political events concerning citizenship and incarceration while, once again, avoiding digressions into full political analysis. These brief mentions of political insights are both a strength and weakness of Higgins's book. While the book potentially misses depth, the range and breath of ideas is stunning, leading the reader to extend the analysis on their own. While I would have liked to see more detail, Higgins, I believe, made the right choice in covering a number of interconnected ideas as it reveals a larger picture, one which establishes a long-running narrative of alt-victimhood.

After this thought-provoking first half of the book, Chapter Four, "Victims of Entropy," and Chapter Five, "Cognitive Justice for a Post-Truth Era," are both to some extent outliers. While Higgins still examines the alt-victim narrative, Chapter Four shifts the attention to the British authors Michael Moorcock and J. G. Ballard. Higgins has a clear strength in American studies, which is made obvious in his integration of American politics and events. This depth seems to be missing from his analysis of Moorcock and Ballard as he attempts to integrate brief mentions of British events (such as Brexit) in order to situate the differing experiences of colonization between American and British empires while still bringing the analysis to reflect on a US context. Thus, it is difficult to make out whether Higgins's inclusion of British authors here is meant to pose a different national version of alt-victimhood, or whether he is considering the ways these authors are influential to American audiences.

Likewise, the examination of Samuel R. Delany's *The Fall of the Towers* trilogy (1963–1965) in Chapter Five feels like an outlier because, as I emphasized above, Delany himself is an outlier. However, Higgins himself does not draw attention to the fact that Delany is the token minority in his list of canonical authors, thereby avoiding any discussion of racism in the discussion

of alt-victimhood. Instead, he focuses purely on the post-truth ideas that emerge from Delany's texts. The emphasis on text rather than author is a strange shift in methodology at this point, considering how Higgins included lengthy bionotes on the other authors under examination and, in some cases (like with PKD), dove into details on the author's personal writings and thought processes.

Despite these shortcomings, *Reverse Colonization* covers a vast range of real-world examples, primary text analysis, and critical theory very quickly and efficiently. This might leave the casual reader feeling a sense of whiplash with the speed at which Higgins moves from thought to thought. At the same time, this pace allows Higgins to make thought-provoking connections and bring together a number of seemingly disparate ideas in order to challenge the reader to question their own modes of reading. It is not a text one would browse quickly, but, instead, one that is meant to be read, pondered, digested, and read again to consider new ideas, connections, or kernels of thought. It is certainly one that I look forward to reading again in the near future.

Biography: [insert brief bio ~75 words]

Sean Guynes-Vishniac

Murphy, Bernice M., and Stephen Matterson, editors. *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction.*
     Edinburgh University Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-1474414852.

As most of us in the field intimately know (given that the usual rationalization of our worth to the academy tends to be based in the fact), popular fiction makes up the vast majority of the literary market, in terms of both annual sales and new titles published each year. Scholars, like me, just coming into our own have benefited from the pioneering work of earlier generations of literary and cultural studies scholars who have paved the way for science fiction studies, romance studies, crime and detective fiction studies, Gothic studies, and others. Murphy and Matterson's nearly encyclopedic volume of essays, *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction,* demonstrates, however, that a significant amount of work still remains for academics wishing to steer popular fiction into theory-infested, tenure-anxious waters—even 40 years after Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) seemingly legitimized sf and 35 years after Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* applied reader response theory to romance novels. This volume shows that the work of popular fiction studies lies not so much in "legitimizing" popular fiction as an object of study (though some still need convincing) as it does in diving head-first into the vastness of the popular fiction catalog. Though Murphy and Matterson limit their scope to the popular fiction of just the past two decades, the contributors to *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction* signal that our work has just begun—but, if Murphy and Matterson's volume is any indication of the state of that beginning, we're off to a good start.

 Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction should be best understood as a dense overview of and introduction to the scope of genres that populate the twenty-first-century popular fiction market, emphasizing those texts and genres that have had significant cultural influence in the past two decades. With twenty chapters, plus an introduction, all in 250 pages, the collection trades depth for breadth. While many will no doubt lament the exclusion of this or that genre, the overall effect is a capaciousness that comes as a relief. Murphy and Matterson ensure that an incredible range of authors and popular literary genres are covered, bringing together critical introductions to authors who have rarely appeared between the same covers on account of the usual separation between scholarship on the major genres. Thus Max Brooks, Dan Brown, Suzanne Collins, Gillian Flynn, Tana French, Neil Gaiman, Hugh Howey, E. L. James, Stephen King, George R. R. Martin, Larry McMurtry, Stephanie Meyer, China Miéville, Grant Morrison, Jo Nesbø, Jodi Picoult, Terry Pratchett, Cherie Priest, Nora Roberts, and J. K. Rowling—whew!—are all covered. The collection thus provides an author-centric approach to popular fiction and genre, which only makes sense since the craft, success, and reputation of popular genre authors are regularly measured against their genre's respective "giants"—one has only to look at book blurbs for new authors that claim they are a blend of authors X and Y to see that success in popular fiction is often measured in relation to the major names.

 The book arranges chapters chronologically by birthdate of the authors they study. The effect, however, is not relentless, since the chapters are relatively short, ranging between eleven and thirteen pages, nor is it boring, since the tight work of each chapter is new, exciting, and thought-provoking. *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction* is thus a rather energizing read through which even the best-read among us will find something new. Such is the ethos of the collection: to

suggest new directions for popular fiction studies while also modeling the kind of writing—mixing a love for the fiction with a serious, critical approach—needed to enliven the field. Murphy and Matterson refer to this in their introduction as "changing the story" of the field. They establish that the purpose of the collection is not to offer more histories of popular fiction but to "provide an informed, accessible and authoritative snapshot of the current state of popular fiction" by emphasizing "key contributions to both the individual genres or sub-genres," bringing together essays that will serve "as starting points for further reading and research" (2).

The introduction charts some key features of popular fiction in the twenty-first century, noting, for example, the increasingly blurred boundaries between "genre" and "literary" markets; the preponderance of transmedia extensions and adaptations; the "increasing elasticity of genre" as genres increasingly blur and break rules; and the subsequent creation and hybridizing of new ones. Admittedly, however, this latter feature is not particularly new; while it is certainly possible to historicize genre hybridity in this specific historical moment, the editors make no attempt to do so. It might be that we are witnessing a moment of "genre confusion" akin to that of the late-nineteenth-century that first saw the emergence of the popular fiction market. Of course, the editors could only have addressed this by including fewer chapters and permitting a higher per-chapter word count. As the introduction demonstrates, word count proves a minor problem throughout the collection; after all, when you've got twelve pages to summarize the significance and cultural position of an author with a catalog as vast as Nora Roberts's, as complex as China Miéville's, or as transmedial as Stephen King's, let alone to generate an original scholarly argument, much will be lost. This is an understandable—and by no means detrimental—symptom of the previously noted overall spirit of *Popular Fiction*: breadth over depth. This leads to occasionally regrettable exclusions or underdeveloping certain aspects of an argument. Matterson's own chapter, for example, on Larry McMurtry is misbalanced toward a general history of the Western, doing very little to advance critical knowledge of McMurtry's role, aside from noting that McMurtry produces an important dialectic between representing the "actuality" of the West's history and the significance of (inaccurate) cultural memory and its cowboy mythology to readers. On the whole, however, the chapters generally outshine their limitations.

All twenty chapters are competently written and fulfill well their duty to provide a "snapshot" of individual authors who represent the state of popular fiction. Perhaps because of the limited length and thus limited ability to break new ground, the most impressive chapters are those that focus on writers who are truly untouched by scholarship, even as they are selling millions of copies worldwide. Jarlath Killeen's chapter is on Nora Roberts's romance novels and Clare Hayes-Brady's is on Jodi Picoult's "women's fiction"; ironically, Killeen and Hayes-Brady reference Stephen King's approval of both women writers in establishing their significance, though their avid readerships and dozens of novels (over two hundred, in Roberts's case) bespeak their importance. Hayes-Brady, for example, demonstrates Picoult's masterful "movement between voices and times [that] allows Picoult to drip-feed the major moments of narrative significance to the reader, while contextualising these developments amidst moments of crisis" (150). In doing so, Picoult's *The Pact* "consolidates Picoult's abiding interest in narrative, memory, and testimony" as significant to the lives of American women (151), though it might have been useful to note the demographics of Picoult's readers. Likewise, Brian Cliff's chapter on Tana French's Irish mystery novels, Stephen Kenneally's chapter on science-fiction writer Hugh Howey's use of self-publishing, and Catherine Siemann's chapter on Cherie Priest's race- and eco-critical steampunk novels all offer excellent critical dissection. These youngest authors surveyed in the collection represent the greatest prospects for popular fiction studies modelled by Murphy and Matterson's collection.

Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction is an important resource for the growing field of popular fiction studies. It marks "popular fiction" as something separate from, but imbricated with, the study of popular culture more generally (see, for example, the work of *The Journal of Popular Culture*, where popular fiction articles regularly show up but by no means as the majority of what they publish), and a field that needs greater vision of sight than the limited scope offered by science fiction studies or romance studies. Murphy and Matterson's collection is, in essence, an argument for the formulation of a sincere field of popular fiction studies like that put forward by Ken Gelder in his 2004 book *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*, but never truly advanced since then; Murphy and Matterson's book makes clear the need for something like a journal of popular fiction studies.

Of course, *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction* falls victim to some of the issues plaguing the study of popular fiction more generally; it is Ameri- and Eurocentric in its survey of authors, and though it covers women and men nearly equally (nine to eleven), not a *single* writer of color is surveyed, nor is there much diversity with regard to sexuality, (dis)ability, or religious background. This is partly because, like most aspects of popular culture production, popular fiction is largely written by white men and women, with significantly different disparities across genres (for example, sf and the Western have been predominantly written by men, romance by women). Still, it would not have been difficult—to take one example—to reach out to scholars of black popular fiction, whether of science fiction, horror, or romance, especially given that important new work has been forwarded in each of these areas in recent years, particularly given the rise of Afrofuturism and the growth of black romance imprints/publishers. Truthfully, any survey of twenty-first-century popular fiction that does not cover non-white, non-heterosexual authors should not be considered a very thorough survey of twenty-first-century popular fiction.

Regardless, Murphy and Matterson have created an important model for future work that accomplishes the sort of scholarship, despite sacrificing depth for breadth, desperately needed to develop the field. *Twenty-First-Century Popular Fiction* is a must-need for scholars of popular fiction across the genres and across media, and it even raises questions about the place of a comics auteur like Grant Morrison and, by extension, the place of comics themselves within the fold of popular literary studies. It is a volume that I hope marks the beginning of a new era in popular fiction scholarship.

Biography: [insert brief bio ~75 words]