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Letters

Paula DiSante

Ted Nasmith

Patrick Wynne

Taum Santoski

Sarah Beach

See next page for additional authors

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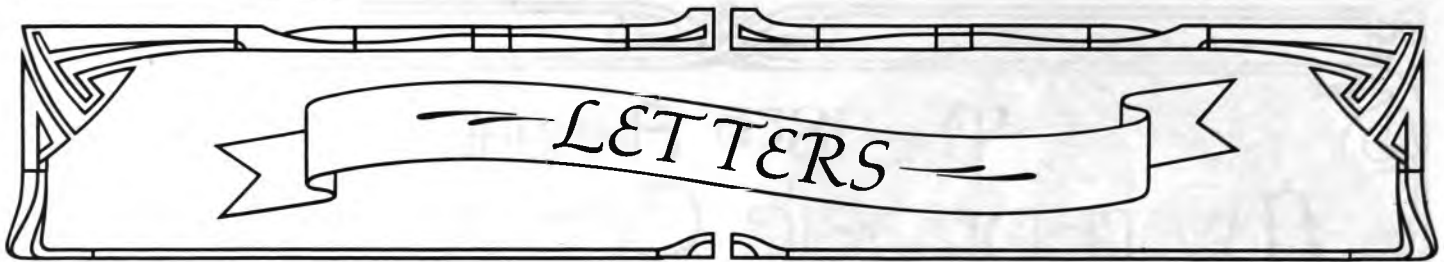
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Authors

Paula DiSante, Ted Nasmith, Patrick Wynne, Taum Santoski, Sarah Beach, Ruth Berman, and Benjamin Urrutia



Mythlore welcomes and encourages letters of comment on the articles, reviews, all other writing, and the art. Writers whose letters are printed will have their subscription extended an extra issue.

Paula DiSante

Grosse Point Woods, MI

Robert Hall's letter in ML 48, and his article "Who is the Master of the 'Precious?'" in ML 41 prompted me to turn back a few issues and re-read his "Silent Commands? Frodo and Gollum at the Cracks of Doom" in ML 37. I am glad I did, because both articles intrigued me enough to go to the text of LOTR to see if there was enough supporting evidence for Mr. Hall's observations. I must say I found a very different set of circumstances surrounding the Ring's destruction than the ones Mr. Hall supports. There are some important statements in the text about the Ring that Mr. Hall does not address that must be considered here.

When Frodo faces off with Gollum on the slopes of Orodruin, Sam becomes witness to prophetic proclamations, not silent commands. Frodo says to Gollum: "Your time is at an end. You cannot betray me or slay me now." (III, 272. Paging for all quotes, Ballantine Paperback Edition). On all three counts, his statements prove true. Gollum's time is indeed soon to end. He does not betray Frodo (for Frodo does that himself when he claims the Ring), and he does not slay Frodo.

More important than this, however, is the vision Sam has immediately following this incident: "Then suddenly, as before under the eaves of the Emyr Muil, Sam saw these two rivals with other vision. A crouching shape, scarcely more than the shadow of a living thing, a creature now wholly ruined and defeated, yet filled with a hideous lust and rage; and before it stood stern, untouchable now by pity, a figure robed in white, but at its breast it held a wheel of fire. Out of the fire there spoke a commanding voice. 'Begone, and trouble me no more! If you touch me ever again, you shall be cast yourself into the Fire of Doom!'" (III, 272)

The voice is coming out of the 'wheel of fire,' not out of Frodo. The wheel of fire is the Ring; the Ring is the prophet.

For Frodo and Gollum, the Ring in this vision functions on different levels -- not only as a physical object, but as the symbolic Wheel of Fate whose turn will seal their respective dooms, and also a flaming Catherine Wheel of mental torture and anguish that is ever-present before them, and from which, while the Ring exists, there is no escape. As an example of this, Frodo previously said "I am naked in the dark, Sam, and there is no veil between me and the wheel of fire. I begin to see it even with my waking eyes, and all else fades." (III, 264)

Is it so strange that the Ring should be given voice and prophetic powers? I would say no. Tolkien

used many objects and incidents that foreshadowed other events. He also gave literal voice and personality to animals, such as Huan the Hound of Valinor, and to objects, such as the bag of William the Troll in The Hobbit and Gurthang, the sword of Turin, so it is not a total surprise that the Ring could and would speak.

Although the Ring is foretelling the action, I do not think it is commanding its own destruction. Gollum and Frodo struggle together on the edge of Doom to control the Ring ('...and in the darkness bind them', indeed). It is dark desire that consumes them as they struggle together on the brink. But the prophecy of the Ring had earlier been directed at Gollum: "If you touch me (the Ring) ever again, you shall be cast yourself into the Fire of Doom." (III, 272) Gollum holds the Ring aloft, gloats on it, and falls. The prophecy is fulfilled.

Mr. Hall, in "Silent Commands", suggests that Frodo's finger has caused him to sin. I think, rather, that Frodo's will, pushed to the breaking point, is the cause of his sin, with his finger being only the agent of that sin. Frodo is invisible when he wears the Ring. But when his finger is bitten off, not only does Frodo become visible, but so does his finger "still thrust within its (the Ring's) circle." (III, 275) Frodo's will and desire are the sinning parts of himself, not his finger. Had Frodo's finger been the only 'guilty' part, it would not become visible when separated from his body. Yet at this point, the fate of the Ring is out of Frodo's hands (pardon the pun) and now, literally in Gollum's hands.

Now we are back to the Ring's prediction of Doom. Is Gollum's fall merely the working out of prophetic fate? I don't know if the answer is that easy. But I still do not think that silent commands are the answer, either. In the shadow of the Emyr Muil, Sam sees Frodo and Gollum in a vision as "a tall stern shadow, a mighty lord who hid his brightness in grey cloud, and at his feet a little whining dog. Yet the two were in some way akin and not alien: they could reach one another's minds." (II, 285)

Previous to this, Frodo had said to Gollum "...if you really wish to be free of him (Sauron) again, then you must help me." (II, 282) Frodo knows his errand, Gollum knows only his desire and his own vow: "Smeagol will swear never, never, to let Him (Sauron) have it. Never! Smeagol will save it." (II, 285) These are all very tantalizing bits and pieces on which to speculate, but they still don't change the facts surrounding the Ring's fate. There is no evidence of a silent command as such. The Ring's destruction appears to be a lucky accident. But is it only accident? We have been told that Frodo and Gollum are somehow akin, reaching one another's mind. It may be that, for their own, very different, reasons, Frodo and Gollum -- even without consciously intending it -- unite to keep the Ring from Sauron. The former's errand and the latter's vow aren't so much a command as a pact. The Ring, Frodo's finger, and Gollum are 'in the darkness' bound

together, their fates inseparable. Frodo's and Gollum's individual, separate, and opposing intentions strangely unite to become the only possible way to destroy the Ring. And the Ring itself has foreshadowed this very event. These distinct, individual avenues of will, desire, and prophecy are twisted together in an interlocking destiny that only finds its end in the fire of the Cracks of Doom.

Now, let's get back to commands. I do not find evidence of Frodo commanding Gollum to cast himself into the Cracks of Doom, even though he earlier had threatened Gollum by saying: "If I, wearing it, were to command you, you would obey, even if it were to leap from a precipice or to cast yourself into the fire. And such would be my command." (II, 314) In the first place, when the ring finger is bitten off, Frodo's power to command is gone. Once again, this is made clear by the fact that Frodo and his finger are now both visible. As if hearkening back to the vision of the ring as a 'wheel of fire,' at the Cracks of Doom the Ring "shone now as if verily it was wrought of living fire." (III, 275) Secondly, Gollum's fall appears accidental. He 'topples' into the fire; he does not leap (which he would have done if Frodo still had the power to command him to do so). The Ring had stated "You shall be cast yourself..." whereas Frodo had stated "If I, wearing it, were to command you, you would obey, even if it were to leap from a precipice or to cast yourself into the fire" (emphasis mine). The fall into the fire is an action that happens to Gollum. Gollum does not throw himself into the Cracks of Doom. This is not to say that the Ring intended to destroy itself; it merely prophesied.

It is here that the element of Providential intervention is suggested, at this most fateful of moments. Destiny, Fate, Providence -- call it what you will -- put the Ring in Gollum's hands at the critical moment. Not only was he touching it, but he was holding it. He falls into the Fire, and the Ring goes with him. His 'fortunate fall' (fortunate, that is, for the Good Guys) is the fulfillment of the Ring's prophecy, plus the intervention of Providence. Only then is the Eucatastrophe assured.

Ted Nasmith

Toronto, Canada

I would like to comment on your review of the 1987 calendar in order to clarify certain points raised in it.

Though it is a reasonable reaction overall, the tone suggests that illustrations on Tolkien are to be judged primarily on their technical adherence to the source text, and that other qualities are not worth comment/criticism. Granted, this calendar is deserving of much criticism, and much of the work is questionable, but such as it is, a proper review should deal with the subject multi-dimensionally.

But when restricting the emphasis to accuracy, some points are at issue: 'Shelob' is somewhat spoiled for you because of a too-bright sky; but surely the point is trivial in a work which, allowing for interpretation, is extensively faithful. The sky was a deliberate risk taken because to darken it to its true degree would leave the subject far darker relatively, and compromise definition and contrasts too much. While over-reddish, I feel it is still believable. 'Accuracy', in cases such as this, would result in

poor artwork, and often with Tolkien such dilemmas arise.

Ironically, 'The Balrog' escapes criticism even though liberties were taken with it in order that the intensity of the scene be captured. If I had rendered it exactly as Tolkien described, the result would not satisfy the beholder, much less stand up as the central image to which other details of the picture are subordinated.

It should be obvious that in case after case to be perfectly adherent to the text would result in nonsense or distracting oddities. The challenge (for me) is to get as close as possible to 'definitive' without forfeiting artistic integrity; something of a grey area, easily disputed. Others apparently don't have this objective, and rather, use Tolkien as a point of departure for their own expression, a point worth observing.

I'm not sure exactly why the other work published was selected, but I suspect it was simply the lack of other (better) work. You'd have done better to direct criticism at this point more fully, pointing out that nearly half the works were previously published for other purposes: Alan Lee's were from the book 'Castles' (and much the least of those illustrations), and Roger Garland's were meant as background illustrations for the cover of a paperback edition of the trilogy.

The comment about publishers requiring the artists to 'get the facts straight' is fair, but the fact is that they don't exercise that sort of control over the material usually, and rather, tend to try and select from works already completed, without being exhaustively critical. If excellence were more important to those buying the calendars, perhaps the publisher would be more discriminating also. Perhaps they need to hear from more people like yourself.

Of course, a calendar featuring truly spectacular illustrations would sell phenomenally well; and the publisher would do well to commission the work, and then work closely with the artist, rather than the present system, but such has not yet been the case (and I've been as disappointed as any).

Yes, some of us are out here, and Tolkien and his readers do deserve better, even the best, but a more articulate and positive critique of such work would be tremendously encouraging. Your almost grudging praise is somewhat like the husband, after his wife has slaved and cooked all day to make his favorite dish, saying flatly: yes, its good, but..., or: yes, its as it should be, almost.

Patrick Wynne

Fosston, MN

I have a couple of comments regarding Mythlore 48. I basically agree with your review of the 1987 Tolkien calendar, with the exception that Ted Nasmith's "Shelob" should be elevated into the "Best" category and his "The Balrog" dropped a notch into the "Not Bad, But..." category. Nasmith's "Shelob" is a masterpiece of Tolkien Art, as a quick glance at the ludicrous giant crawdad attacking Sam in the 1978 Hildebrandt calendar's version of this same scene should serve to emphasize. The red sky was perhaps intended as the glare from an eruption of Orodrium rather than a sunset, but either way as you rightly



Pat Wynne's reaction to "Charles Williams and the Golden Dawn" in the last issue

pointed out the text says the sky was dark. Nasmith's "The Balrog" earns Brownie points from me for its lack of wings (one of my pet opinions, as you may recall from the Tolkien illustration discussion at the Mythopoeic Conference this summer) but suffers overly from "Alien" influences, and Moria has the clean, high-tech look more appropriate to the interior of a spaceship.

I suspect that Roger Garland's "Minas Tirith" does not depict the Gondorian fortress of the Third Age but rather the fortress of the same name built by Finrod on Tol Sirion in the First Age. Note the similarities with Tolkien's drawing of Tol Sirion in Pictures, 36. Granted, Garland's version omits the bridge, heaven only knows what mountains those are in the middle of Ard-galen off to the east, and it's debatable whether or not this is even an island. Still, even more inconsistencies must be endured if one assumes this to be the Third Age Gondorian fortress. If Garland's painting does indeed depict Finrod's tower, one wonders whether the labeling of the painting as from The Return of the King was an honest (albeit dumb) mistake, or whether it was done purposely to obtain an all-LotR calendar, on the assumption that we would all be too stupid to notice. Hmmm....

Taum Santoski

Milwaukee, WI

I received Mythlore 13:2 (No.48) a few days ago and have just spent a most enjoyable Sunday afternoon reading it.

The articles on Charles Williams were most expressive: I found Bosky's "Ever an Adept..." the most fascinating. I am a great admirer of Charles Williams and was sorry I could not attend the conference last year, but this issue has seemingly filled me in on what's happening.

I did however find myself in disagreement with

Mende's "Gondolin, Minas Tirith and the Eucastrophe". I think it is a great detriment that Mende does not comment more fully upon the resonance of motifs common to The Silmarillion and The Lord of the Rings, especially when she comes so close to saying it in paragraph 3, p. 39:

"Resolution can be defined as a conclusion, or in a musical sense the progression of a dissonance (i.e. tragedy) into a consonance (i.e. the happy ending)".

What Mende has failed to see in that inasmuch as The Silmarillion and The Lord of the Rings like Niggle's are large paintings, they are more like the Bayeux tapestry where the story is a series of progressive episodes to be seen either bit by bit (as it is unrolled) or as one long story (when entirely displayed)

Sarah Beach

Los Angeles, CA

One of the disadvantages of being of the staff of Mythlore is that one rarely considers writing letters of comment about the issues. But some articles in recent issues have got me thinking, so here I am, writing.

There is a crucial point about Robert Boenig's "Tolkien and Old Germanic Ethics" in ML48. A central point of his argument is the contention that a warrior was expected to die with his lord. To quote: "The idea that a warrior must die with his lord in battle is one of the most important moral injunctions among the various Germanic peoples." (p. 9) The problem I have with this is that in my studies of Old English literature (particularly Beowulf), I haven't found an injunction that a warrior must die with his lord. There are a lot of statements that it is better to die with one's lord - but that is because thusly one proves one's faithfulness to that lord. But there is also an additional factor, which is that it is highly undesirable to be a lordless warrior - see the Old English poem "The Wanderer." I'd also like to point

out that Beowulf survives two of his lords before he becomes king himself, and yet he does fulfill all his expected responsibilities as a retainer. If there had indeed been a moral injunction that one must die with one's lord in the Germanic cultures, there'd be stories similar to the mass suicides of ronin (lordless warriors) that appear in Japanese literature. Fighting on in a hopeless battle when there is no one to succeed one's lord is a far cry from being obliged to die with one's lord.

On a second matter, which Boenig doesn't touch on—the responsibilities between warrior and lord are not one directional (that is, from warrior to lord). The lord has responsibilities to his people. In Beowulf, there is an implied criticism of Hrothgar for failing to free his people from the terror of Grendel, and there is also reference to another lord who so failed in his responsibilities that he was cast out of his kingdom. Tolkien picks this up in his portrayal of Denethor. The criticism of Denethor is not simply that in (the sin of) despair he takes his own life, but that also he abandons his people at the time of their greatest need. Indeed, he breaks his staff of Stewardship, the emblem of those responsibilities, and is willing that Minas Tirith should fall.

A second article I wanted to comment on is Jeanette Hume Lutton's "The Feast of Reason: Out of the Silent Planet as The Book of Hnau." Let alone that there have been too few papers written recently on the first two books of the Ransom trilogy, her fine paper set my mind spinning on certain aspects of the three books. As a general question to the readership, I'd like to ask just what the connections are between the three books and how they operate (aside from the presence of Ransom) on a thematic level. I have my own ideas, of course, and I do mean to put them into a paper of my own, but I am interested in other reactions as well. As you see, I've been stimulated by Lutton's article, which is praise indeed.

Ruth Berman

Minneapolis, MN

I read issue #43 just recently. Thomas M. Egan's article on "Tolkien and Chesterton" is interesting in its discussion of their similarities, but I was distressed by the statement that they believed "the enemies of ordinary decent life were the enemies of the Faith, that England and the Western nations in general were threatened by a series of growing errors and conceits we can call 'secular humanism'."

No doubt Chesterton and Tolkien would have agreed that a belief in the certainty of social benefits from scientific research was dangerous, if that's what "secular humanism" means in this case (the word "conceits" makes me think that may be the meaning intended), but it isn't clear that they would have thought any of the possible other meanings were genuine threats to "ordinary decent life," and the phrase "secular humanism" has become so much of a no-meaning, emotional pejorative, that its use should probably be avoided in all circumstances. At the least, it should not be used without careful definition of the intended meaning.

By the way, there is a minor error in the article in interpreting Tolkien's invented word eucatastrophe as "good disaster," and therefore a paradox similar to felix culpa ("happy fault"). Catastrophe comes from the Greek kata, which includes the meanings of "down," "backwards," "in reverse," and strophe, a turning. It

means a sudden turn in the course of affairs, a reversal of directions, and in a tragedy the sudden turn is normally going to be a disastrous one, but the word itself in its technical sense (which Tolkien was using) does not specify the nature of the change. Eucatastrophe is not the opposite of catastrophe, but a specifically defined subset of it.

In #45, George Musacchio's "C.S. Lewis' A Grief Observed" seemed to me ingenious in its argument, but not really convincing. He considers A Grief Observed fictional because it uses traditional motifs of elegiac art; because in an earlier letter Lewis described himself as using a habit of imagining the worst possible situation as a way of dealing with worry (and being shattered by grief is a worst possible response to loss); because the bereaved survivor of a happy marriage suffers less than the survivor of an unhappy one; and because his letters do not show comparable grief. But elegies are often both artistic and factually accurate, as in Tennyson's In Memoriam (which Musacchio points out as similar to A Grief Observed); a supposition that he might have to deal with shattering grief does not seem plausible as something Lewis would have imagined about bereavement — he must have known whether he was feeling that or not after his bereavement; suffering less than some others leaves room for suffering a great deal; and letters are likely to be less intimate than a diary and thus less revealing.

I enjoyed Steven M. Deyo's "Niggle's Leaves" on Tolkien's short poems. I wonder if he has any theory as to why "The Mewlips" was the only poem not discussed in the mock-scholarly introduction of Tom Bombadil. Was it just an oversight — or perhaps Tolkien didn't think it "really" was a Hobbit poem, or perhaps he thought readers would find it more enjoyably spooky if not told about it in advance?

Benjamin Urrutia

Los Angeles, CA

On page 16 of Mythlore 48 Judith Kollmann states that Charles Williams claimed the Hebrew word netzach means "blessing." The dictionaries and translations I have seen give netzach the meanings of "eternity" and "perpetuity." The variant form nitzach means "victory," "triumph." If there is an additional meaning of "blessing," I should like to see some authority for it.

With the centennial of Charles Williams' birth, I wish to point out that there is a possibility that the dramatic climax of J.R.R. Tolkien's great work may have been originally inspired by a "Caroline" suggestion (as C.S. Lewis would say).

In Many Dimensions (1931), the peace of the world threatened by an ancient and dangerous relic, the Stone of Solomon. Lord Arglay, Chief Justice of England, muses aloud: "I'm in several minds. And one is to take the Stone and will myself wherever what you call its Types are and collect them all one by one... and then will myself insided Vesuvius with them all." (Chapter 7; Page 113 of the 1965 Eerdmans edition.)

Whether Tolkien read this book or not, Lewis certainly did, and he may have read portions from it to Tollers, or persuaded him to at least skim and glance through it. Any of these may have led to the passage being noticed consciously or unconsciously by Tolkien, and providing the germ of an idea: that the

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 way to get rid of an ancient artifact of power that is threatening the world is to jump with it inside a volcano in the far southeast. In Williams, it is only a notion, and not really a serious one. In Tolkien, it has become the only righteous choice.

In connection with Melanie Rawls' excellent comparison (Mythlore 48) of Herland with Out of the Silent Planet, I can suggest a possible bridge between Gilman and Lewis: H.G. Wells, whose short novel Men like Gods is also about a Utopia that is briefly (and foolishly) invaded by a small group of people from our civilization. As Rawls stated when she read her paper at the Mythopoeic Conference, it is rather unlikely that C.S. Lewis read Charlotte Gilman's obscure serial. However, H.G. Wells, who was deeply interested in socialist, feminist and utopian issues and writings, may have read it. And we know for a fact that Lewis read Wells -- and enjoyed his writing, though often disagreeing with the ideology.

I do not know if it has been pointed out that some of the names in Peregrina -- Baur' and Barua, Yatsur and Yatsurah -- are Hebrew, and all four mean "created." In standard Hebrew, however, the feminine forms would have been Beruah and Yetsurah. The lack of vowel shift may have been an error in Lewis' part, or a deliberate simplification.

Has anybody ever wondered why the hero of Pilgrim's Regress is named John? Because the name

Bushes and Briars, continued from page 5

That women are responsible for this depth of characterization that has come about since they have entered the field might be construed as a sexist statement, but it isn't meant to be. Women are just as capable of writing shallow stories with flat characters as men are. But because they haven't always been involved with the nuts and bolts, because they came fresh to the genre when men had been reworking the same themes for too long, they've been able to imbue their writing with more realism--read, better characterization--than was originally available.

What this has done for the body of fantastic literature as a whole is given it a new sensibility. The understanding that women are people, too--something so given that one wonders how they could ever have been relegated to the position of second-class citizens in the first place--has added a dimension to the characterization of fantastic literature that gives it a new depth.

Because the fantasy genre--less so than science fiction, but still to some degree--was largely produced by men, for men, the stories tended to be about men, with women relegated to vague support positions, often only as an object to be rescued or chased. Women working in the genre in its earlier years tended to go by their initials or a man's name so as not to scare off the male readership.

(As an interesting--if somewhat depressing--aside, I fill in the odd day at the local sf bookstore in Ottawa and still run into men who won't read a book because it's written by a woman. It's no use trying to tell them what they're missing--that they're losing out on one half of the good writing in the genre because half of its population, like the real world's, is made up of women. Unfortunately, the reverse is true as well and that same bookstore has many woman

comes from the Hebrew Yehohanan, "the Lord is Gracious"? In honor of John Bunyan? The most likely explanation, in my opinion, is that John is the name for which "Jack" is commonly the nickname.



COUNCIL OF STEWARDS

A copy of the approved minutes of the November, 1986, Council of Stewards meeting is available by sending a stamped (39c or 44c for 2 oz.), self-addressed letter-size envelope to the Recording Secretary: Anne Osborn, 2750 Orange Street, Riverside, CA 92501.

A copy of the Society's Bylaws is also available by sending a SASE, with postage for 2 oz. to Anne Osborn.

Matters that need Council of Stewards attention or action should be communicated to the Society's Recording Secretary: Anne Osborn, 2750 Orange Street, Riverside, CA 92501.

General questions about the Society's interests and activities should be sent to the Corresponding Secretary: Christine Lowentrou, 1017 Seal Way, Seal Beach CA 90740. Questions about joining or forming discussion groups, should be addressed to our new Steward: David Lenander, 293 Selby Av. St. Paul, MN 55102.

customers who will read only books written by women.)

What's happening now, though, is that there are men writing books with strong sympathetic female leads. I don't think that this is a calculated move. I don't think men are thinking, hey, I'd better touch base with that growing female readership. I do think it's happening because there are more women writing today and anyone reading broadly in the genre will come across both strong male and female lead characters. If such readers are writers themselves, this new trend can't help but have an influence on their own work--perhaps only on a subconscious level, but an influence that makes its presence known all the same.

Or it could be more complex than that.

I use a lot of female leads myself, but it wasn't until sitting down to write this speech for this Mythopoeic Conference that I asked myself why. I realized that my writing from a woman's perspective helped me give a better understanding of women myself. All good writing should be an exploration, a pushing of one's abilities, a search for an understanding of the world at large through the microcosm of stories and novels. Because women make up half our population, and because I'm not one myself, it makes sense that I would want to understand them and would look to do so through my own creative expression--which happens to be writing.

It's been said before, that when one stops learning, one might as well stop living. I expect every book I start--whether it be something I'm writing myself, or something I'm reading--to teach me something. In fact, I demand it. And while the bushes and briars are still out there, albeit in new disguises, I'm happy to say that I'm working in a genre that has a great many roses to offer amongst the world's thorns.