



Pawn's Gambit: And Other Stratagems

Timothy Zahn

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This collection showcases the career-launching short fiction of Timothy Zahn, acclaimed author of *Blackcollar*, the *Quadrail* series, and the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Star Wars: Heir to the Empire*

The pieces included in *Pawn's Gambit* range from the adventure science fiction Timothy Zahn is famous for to post-apocalyptic tales and humorous fantasy. In “The Price of Survival,” an alien ship arrives in our solar system without hostile intentions—but with a desperate need that could destroy humanity. “The Giftie Gie Us” is set in a post-apocalyptic United States, in which two lonely survivors find love among the ruins. And in the title story, a human and his alien opponent face off over a game that will decide which one of them will return home—and which will not. This collection also includes the Hugo Award-winning novella *Cascade Point* and eight stories previously unpublished in book form.

Pawn's Gambit: And Other Stratagems Details

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Author : Timothy Zahn

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From Reader Review Pawn's Gambit: And Other Stratagems for online ebook

Alexia561 says

The first story in a collection usually sets the tone for the entire anthology, so a little sad that I didn't care for The Price of Survival. It was a little too science fiction-y for my tastes. Thankfully, the rest of the collection was more to my liking!

The Final Report on the Lifeline Experiment was an interesting take on the when-does-life-begin question. And I really loved the ending, which I didn't see coming at all. Love when that happens!

One of my favorite stories was Clean Slate, about a wizard trying to earn his title without falling victim to the Wizard's Curse. What is the Wizard's Curse? The price that the wizard must pay for the privilege of using his power. Never heard of such a curse, but loved it!

Some of the other stories that stood out for me were Protocol, Old-Boy Network, Proof, Trollbridge, and Pawn's Gambit. All different types of stories, but all original and interesting. More than a few of them had a neat little twist at the end, which I really enjoyed. Seems most of my favorites had a twist of some kind, so guess I like twists!

Even the stories I didn't particularly care for were well-written, so the author is obviously talented. Short stories are tricky, as you have to pack a lot of punch into a small space. Zahn proves himself very good at this!

While I'm pretty sure that this was my first Zahn book, it definitely won't be my last! I'm more of a fantasy reader than science fiction fan, but it looks like I still have plenty of options.

Jean-Luc says

Very excited to hear Zahn got a collection of older short stories published. He's got 4 other such collections, but they've all been out of print for so long that they're hard to find.

* The Price of Survival - Unbearably sad first contact.

* The Giftie Gie Us - The nuclear war has mutated us.

* The Final Report on the Lifeline Experiment - When does a fetus become human?

* Cascade Point - At first I thought this was gonna be Flowers for Algernon IN SPACE but then it twisted into something /r/GetMotivated could use.

* Music Hath Charms - SPACE HIPSTERS!

* The President's Doll - What do Haitian voodoo and acupuncture have in common?

* Clean Slate - An itinerant wizard has an unfortunate habit of always showing up *after* other wizards have already taken care of the problem.

* Hitmen--See Murderers - Once upon a time, if you wanted to hire a hitman, you couldn't just hop on the dark web and initiate a bidding war over who would kill your target for less, oh no. And you couldn't just hire a hitman from the phonebook...

* Protocol - We don't know what they are, we don't know where the come from, but they will kill you if you deviate from expected behavior in the slightest.

* Old-Boy Network - Previously read this in the Sol's Children (the solar system anthology). Oddly enough, Paul Krugman did his thesis on this: how do stock markets work in space?

* Proof - As long as prisoners don't realize the prison is fake, they'll basically jail themselves, right?

* The Ring - Extremely generic "be careful what you wish for" story.

* Trollbridge - It's rough being a troll in New York City, but when shit happens, is our hero really getting paid enough to deal with it?

* Chem Lab 301 - Science.

* Pawn's Gambit - In order to determine who is and isn't a threat, aliens go from planet to planet and kidnap people, forcing them to fight for survival. The loser is returned to their planet, the winner must keep fighting. This reveals vital clues to their species' personalities, which lets the aliens decide which planets to bomb and which to leave alone. Our hero doesn't want to lose and doesn't want to give the aliens the satisfaction. Brilliant story, vintage Zahn.

Some of these stories are dated af and it's obvious Zahn struggled to write women prior to Mara Jade. Still, most of it is great stuff.

Kathy Sebesta says

However did I miss this when it came out? Read all the stories, but I especially liked the title tale and Trollbridge and I bet you will, too.

Ron says

“Physical reality is never obligated to correspond with our theories and constructs.”

An adequate collection of short science fiction. Quality decreases deeper into the book, however the last tale, the eponymous “Pawn’s Gambit,” is the best of the bunch.

“You risked your life to try to save people whose music you don’t even like.” “People are people, no matter what their tastes are.”

Quibble: No one would fly the two hundred miles from Frankfurt to Stuttgart. Train or car would be faster.

“Not paranoid, you understand, just cautious.”

MD says

I had read several of these stories when they were first published and I liked them just as much reading them again now. Timothy Zahn is a master of the twist you don't see coming!

Judy Lesley says

This collection of fifteen short stories is a great introduction to the writing of Timothy Zahn if you are unfamiliar with his writing, as was I. I'm sure it will also be of interest to readers who are already familiar with his many works. The following is a listing of the stories and the year of their first appearance in print as provided by the publisher in the back of the book:

"The Price of Survival" - 1981
"The Giftie Gie Us" - 1981
"The Final Report on the Lifeline Experiment" - 1983
"Cascade Point" - 1983
"Music Hath Charms" - 1985
"The President's Doll" - 1987
"Clean Slate" - 1989
"Hitmen -- See Murderers" - 1991
"Protocol" - 2002
"Old-Boy Network" - 2002
"Proof" - 2004
"The Ring" - 2007
"Trollbridge" - 2009
"Chem Lab 301" - 2014
"Pawn's Gambit" - 1982

As you can see most of the stories were written some time ago and if you follow this author you may have already read some of them. They were all new to me and I thoroughly enjoyed how completely different each story was. They show me how Timothy Zahn has the ability to take ideas from all around him and turn them into entertaining reading. The stories are brief, but that's what you can expect from short stories and several of them I would like to see expanded into full novels or at least novella length. Surprisingly I don't think I had an absolute favorite; each story brought a new idea to life and doesn't connect with any other story in the collection. "Hitmen -- See Murderers" is the one which had me thinking about the underlying lesson longer than any other story, but they all had their own moment of making me think about life from a different perspective. This was an enjoyable reading experience, but because of the brevity of the stories none can go into great depth for world or character building. Just enough to make you see the situation through the eyes of a talented author.

I received an e-ARC of this novel through NetGalley.

Yzabel Ginsberg says

(I received a copy through NetGalley, in exchange for an honest review.)

3.5 stars. Overall a decent collection of short stories, mostly science fiction, with some fantasy mixed in. I didn't find any excellent, but none was really bad either, which makes for a good book to borrow, for want of actually buying it.

Some notes about the stories:

“The Price of Survival”: An interesting enough conundrum about how far two species are ready to go to survive. But while their representatives mourn about similar facts, the reasons that brought them to that point are different enough that it makes you reconsider the price to pay.

“The Giftie Gie Us”: I liked the idea behind the blind character. Still, it wasn't my favourite story, probably because of the post-apocalyptic setting with its defined boundaries (Man hunts, Woman stays home... meh).

“The Final Report of the Lifeline Experiment”: Kind of a loaded topic here, however the experiment's results may not be the ones you'd expect...

“Cascade Point”: One of my favourites. It deals with space travel/space bending/alternate realities gone wrong, as well as with the matter of one person's happiness vs. the greater good. When the one person to be sacrificed will go back to a less than happy state, yet ignoring that choice will strip someone of their dignity, what should a captain choose?

“Music Hath Charms”: A bit of dark comedy here, that also raises the question of life's worth in a different way. An alien artefact might actually kill thousands... or not?

“The President's Doll”: Good idea (reverse voodoo, used to heal instead of harming), less thrilling execution. I'm not sure why. It just came out as flat for me.

“Clean Slate”: One of the fantasy stories, about a wizard who never got a chance to actually use his power to do good, and is ready to pay the price to do so at least once in his life, no matter what that price will be. Interestingly, the story made me think of Orson Scott Card's writings about plot and world-building, and the author's note confirmed why I had this feeling.

“Hitmen – See Murderers”: Another good idea that fell flat. What it posits gave me matter to think about, but the short story format didn't leave room for more when it came to the flow of events, and I think a bit “more” would've been needed here to make this piece shine.

“Protocol”: In a colony where people live in fear of the mysterious Stryders, only very specific protocols allow them to survive encounters with those beings. However, what if the protocol were to fail, or if a yet undiscovered protocol was needed?

“Old-Boy Network”: Ethics and telepathy in a solar system where the wealthiest exploit whoever they want,

in horrible ways. A bit heavy-handed in its criticism of ugly capitalism, though still another story that will make you think.

“Proof”: I could sense the ending coming. Still, it was a good game of cat and mouse, with reflections about whether we can trust what we see or not.

“The Ring”: A classical approach on the theme of boons and curses, of what price a man is ready to pay to get what he desires... but is it **truly** his heart’s desire?

“Trollbridge”: Urban fantasy story, about a lone troll desperately trying to protect “his” bridge, but up until now he hasn’t really bothered to wonder about other fae-like creatures. A somewhat light-hearted tale of survival in a modern world that will not leave any room to creatures of old... unless those very same creatures find another way.

“Chem Lab 301”: Not the most original plot ever, but a cute twist at the end.

“Pawn’s Gambit”: A study, through an alien-led experiment about gaming, of what would make another race dangerous or not in those aliens’ eyes... And Humans’ resourcefulness may be both an asset and a downfall here. Quite interesting, in part because the aliens’ point of view is somewhat valid, and in part because there’s still hope for humans to put their resources to witty uses.

In general, most of these stories tended to spin one or another aspect of what it means to be human, whether “a means to an end” is an appropriate way of living one’s life, about decisions and consequences, and how sometimes you may not have a choice--or may have to bend your thought processes to find another way. On the downside, some had less than stellar characters, who acted more like plot devices than real people, and weren’t very interesting.

Donna Davis says

Pawn’s Gambit and Other Stratagems is a collection of kick-ass science fiction stories, including a novella, produced digitally for the first time. This is the cool thing about Open Road Integrated Media: the publishers find outstanding work from the pre-digital era and bring it to present-day readers anew so that it can be widely read and appreciated all over again. But though these stories were written earlier, many of them have never been published in book form before. I got to check out the collection free in exchange for an honest review, and I struck oil. I wondered why I hadn’t found this writer earlier, since I have been known to binge on sci fi now and then since the 1990’s. What Zahn is best known for is the Star Wars series, which I didn’t read. In passing it by, I nearly missed a fine writer, and I will watch for him in the future.

The settings, situations, and moods within this collection are artfully staggered, ranging from the ethical and philosophical dilemmas that the fertile imagination runs up against when what if scenarios are presented, to surprisingly funny situations. I love the characters Zahn creates, and the way they drive his stories forward. From that first “multi-tentacled grin” of the “Sk’cee” in The Price of Survival, I was hooked. The Giftie Gie Us had an infuriating ending that left me thinking of alternative possibilities. My own personal favorite, Cascade Point, was apparently the favorite of many others also, because it won the Hugo Award in 1984.

A couple of times I noted some gender stereotypes, but for work of its time period in a genre rife with this issue—which is probably why I need time out from my sci fi binges to read other things—it was surprisingly

muted. Of 82 marks I made while I read it, only 2 related to gender stereotyping.

There are no weak links, nothing that seems like filler in between good stories; everything here is strong. At a couple of points I had to bite back the urge to laugh out loud while cruising through late at night while my spouse slumbered next to me. My second favorite story is the title novella, *Pawn's Gambit*; I found it unexpectedly hilarious.

This brilliantly crafted collection goes on sale January 5, 2016. The only real question for the science fiction lover is how you are going to wait that long. Mark your calendar; you won't want to miss out on this one.

Pam says

As always Timothy Zahn does not leave the reader wanting. A series of short stories that pack a great punch and leave the reader wanting more.

A Reader's Heaven says

(I received a free copy of this book from Net Galley in exchange for an honest review.)

*The pieces included in *Pawn's Gambit* range from the adventure science fiction Timothy Zahn is famous for to post-apocalyptic tales and humorous fantasy. In “The Price of Survival,” an alien ship arrives in our solar system without hostile intentions—but with a desperate need that could destroy humanity. “The Giftie Gie Us” is set in a post-apocalyptic United States, in which two lonely survivors find love among the ruins. And in the title story, a human and his alien opponent face off over a game that will decide which one of them will return home—and which will not. This collection also includes the Hugo Award-winning novella *Cascade Point* and eight stories previously unpublished in book form.*

Anthologies / collections can always be fraught with danger - it is a very rare beast that pleases the reader with every single story.

And that is certainly the case here. A number of these stories are straight sci-fi but others delve into the world of fantasy as well.

There are some definite standouts - Hugo award winning novella "Cascade Point"; "Hitmen – See Murderers"; and "Music Hath Charms" were all favourites of mine. The inclusion of political stories seemed to be to the detriment of this collection - I really could have done without those...

Overall, a decent anthology of Zahn's shorter fiction - I wouldn't suggest reading them all at once, though - it can be just a bit much, to be honest.

Paul
ARH

Lori L (She Treads Softly) says

Pawn's Gambit: And Other Stratagems by Timothy Zahn is a very highly recommended collection of 15 short stories that were previously published in magazines from earlier in Zahn's career. Here they are gathered together for the first time in book form. The opportunity to read this collection was a treat for me. I enjoyed every single story. Admittedly I loved some more than others, as is the case with almost any collection, but there really wasn't a dud in this collection. These are hard science fiction stories with a few fantasy offerings. Every story was an excellent choice for the collection.

Contents:

The Price of Survival: The alien ship Dawnsent must scoop up fuel from suns to reach their final new home, but this action will doom life in the solar systems they go through. 1981

The Giftie Gie Us: After the Last War, a Soviet Nuke Bacteriological Barrage, the post-apocalyptic survivors include a disfigured man who offers help to a blind woman. 1981

The Final Report on the Lifeline Experiment: The Lifeline Experiment will end the abortion debate when a man telepathically attempts to answer the question, "When does a fetus become human?" 1983

Cascade Point: A cargo ship's captain accepts paying passengers. Is it just a coincidence that the voyage developed problems when a psychiatrist and his patient are aboard? Hugo Award-winning novella; 1983

Music Hath Charms: The discovery of an old alien instrument, the Demonflute, may cause a resurgence in the much-loved-by-teens Thwokerjag music movement. 1985

The President's Doll: The president's voodoo acupuncture doll has been stolen. 1987

Clean Slate: A wizard sets out to fulfill his oath by opening a mountain pass for an unappreciative town. 1989

Hitmen - See Murderers: The new phone books are out, but one of them isn't your usual phone book. 1991

Protocol: It's market day, but they must watch out for Stryders and follow the protocol. 2002

Old-Boy Network: The extremely wealthy use people as telepathic, personal terminals to insure privacy. 2002

Proof: Oregon's Hillcrest prison utilizes the CURL system (Cognitive Universal Reality Linkage) to control the prisoners, but Angel thinks she knows how to escape. 2004

The Ring: A man comes into possession of The Ring of the Nibelungs, which carries the power to create wealth. 2007

Trollbridge: A N.J. toll collector is a troll, but he may need to look for a new job. 2009

Chem Lab 301: A T.A. has 20 students and Rosie the lab in his chem lab. 2014

Pawn's Gambit: An addendum to the Alien Research Bureau's 30th Annual Report brings humans to the attention of the director and the decision to test them is approved. 1982

I really appreciated all the stories included in this collection but perhaps liked The President's Doll the least. Some of the stories are humorous, or include humor, while others are thoughtful and point out larger implications to a situation. It has been noted that the protagonists in these stories are mainly men and some of them feel dated. As I was reading I was enjoying the stories, not looking for pc things to object to, and it didn't even occur to me to complain about the protagonists being mostly male. I didn't find the stories dated, per se; many were written in the 80's so sure, some things might feel dated to a much younger reader. For me this is a great collection and most science fiction fans are going to appreciate the stories collected here.

Disclosure: My Kindle edition was courtesy of Open Road Integrated Media via Netgalley for review purposes.

Sarah (CoolCurryBooks) says

Pawn's Gambit and Other Stratagems is a collection of short stories by science fiction author Timothy Zahn. Most of the short stories are science fiction, although a few were fantasy. Some are new, and some were familiar to me from reading one of his prior collections. I didn't find any of the stories fantastic, but there were some I liked and some I didn't like.

Two stories address contact between humans and aliens. In a "The Price of Survival," an alien spaceship travels by scoping up matter from stars. Unfortunately, the ship is aimed straight at our sun and will obliterate life in our solar system if it continues on its course. "Pawn's Gambit" posits an alien race who psychologically evaluate other species by capturing subjects and making them play board games.

"The Giftie Gie Us" was one of the weaker stories in the collection. It predates the fall of the Soviet Union and explores a post-apocalyptic future brought about by nuclear war.

"The Final Report on the Lifeline Experiment" documents an experiment by the only certified psychic that has unintended consequences.

In the Hugo award winning novella Cascade Point, space travel is accomplished by jumping from point to point. All passengers and non-essential crew members will be put asleep for the process so as few people as possible see visions of their alternate selves.

"Music Hath Charms" was a light hearted story about an alien instrument being incorporated into a local type of music. Similarly light hearted, "Trollbridge" was an urban fantasy story about a troll who's a toll collector on a modern day highway.

"The President's Doll" posits voodoo and acupuncture being combined for medical purposes. But what happens when the President's doll is stolen?

A wizard in "Clean Slate" wanders the world but never arrives in time to actually use his magic. The twist

here was interesting, but I think there were some questions that should have been answered with regards to the plot.

In “Hitmen – See Murderers” a paranoid man finds a strange copy of the yellow pages that lists out the addresses of different sorts of criminals.

“Protocol” takes place on a colony planet wracked by the path of giant creatures called Stryders, who kill any human who doesn’t follow a strict protocol of behavior.

“Old-Boy Network” imagines trillionaires who use surgically created telepathy to avoid the review of the authorities.

In “Proof,” a serial killer attempts to escape from her prison, which is partly an illusion created by a chip implanted in her brain.

A stock trader in “The Ring” buys a mysterious Germanic ring, only to find that it is both a gift and a curse.

“Chem Lab 301” builds up to a reveal and a pun. There’s not much else to this story.

It’d been a while since I’d read anything by Timothy Zahn – since middle school actually. At this point in my life I’m noticing that the ratio of male to female characters is substantially skewed. I particularly noted issues in gender dynamics with the story “The Giftie Gie Us”. I don’t think the treatment of female characters was horrible, but it certainly could be better.

Overall, I would say that the collection is about average. Cascade Point was probably the best out of the bunch.

Originally posted on The Illustrated Page.

Jack says

This book is great compilation of science fiction and fantasy short stories by Timothy Zahn. I was pleased at the variety of stories included: traditional sci-fi, “hard” sci-fi, paranormal fiction, a tale about mythical creatures like trolls and gnomes, and dystopian fiction. The wide variety made for an entertaining read.

Zahn has a smooth writing style: not too simple, but at the same time, not a treatise on particle physics and faster-than-light travel. He also writes excellent dialogue. I’ve never read Zahn before but am familiar with his works, primarily his Star Wars novels. I liked this collection enough to peak my interest in checking out some his novels. Recommended for sci-fi and fantasy fans.

(The publisher provided me a review copy of this book through NetGalley in exchange for an honest review. All opinions in this review my own.)

GMCL Temecula says

(A Kindle copy of this book was provided to me by NetGalley for review purposes. This review is essentially the same as the one I posted there.)

I've read and enjoyed Zahn's Quadrail and Dragonback series, so I had high expectations going in, and I was not disappointed. I'd even say that I prefer his short stories over his novels, even though the Dragonback books in particular have a special place in my heart.

Zahn is best known for his space operas and sci-fi (particularly the novels he wrote for the Star Wars Expanded Universe), but this collection shows that he's more than capable of writing across a wide spectrum, from speculative ("Hitmen--See Murderers" and "The President's Doll") to what would now be classed as urban fantasy ("Trollbridge"). "The Final Report on the Lifeline Experiment" tackles what was then and still is a hot-button debate in a way that should both entertain, and give cause for thought to, readers on either side. (No spoilers.)

Readers who haven't heard of Timothy Zahn, or are curious about him but on the fence about starting one of his novels, will get a good taste of his writing style from "Pawn's Gambit" or "The Price of Survival." These stories also showcase one of the areas where Zahn really shines: dialogue and interactions between humans and alien species.

Longtime Zahn fans will of course want to check this one out, as will anyone who enjoys speculative, sci-fi, or short stories.

- Reviewed by Rachel C.

Joy Smith says

I wasn't a Timothy Zahn fan, though I recognized his name, but the book blurb intrigued me; the story descriptions sounded like ones I'd enjoy, even though I know that anthologies and author collections are a gamble 'cause sometimes only one or two stories are really good. However, I enjoyed all these stories; and although not every character is happy at the end because they don't--and can't--know what happened next, the endings are satisfying, and some are fun! The stories are all worth reading, but my favorites include Trollbridge, Chem Lab 301, and Pawn's Gambit. They're imaginative and well-written; I was impressed by the way some of them played out. And there are some interesting afterwords. Highly recommended.
