

Pick Up & Deliver 838: Reading Roundup, Q1 2026

Transcript

[Ed note – Each book title is in **boldface** the first time it is mentioned.]

Welcome to Pickup and Deliver, the podcast where I pick up my audio recorder as I step out for a walk and deliver an episode to you while I stroll around. I'm Brendan Riley.

[intro music]

Greetings, listeners. It's a lovely day here in suburban Chicago, and I'm on my way home. The sun is out, the birds are chirping, and I'm here to be talking to you about some books. That's right. It's time for the Reading Roundup. For those of you new to the podcast, about four times a year, I do a reading roundup episode in which I talk about books that I read in the previous quarter of the year.

I usually do this toward the end of the next quarter. I don't know why I wait so long, but that's kind of the way it is. Maybe I'll maybe I'll start changing it. So I'm doing my reading roundup immediately after the new quarter starts. Part of it is I don't want to jam two of them too close together. So like, if I did that, the next reading round up episode would be in July. But maybe I should so that the books are a little fresher in my mind. That wouldn't be a bad choice. We'll see. If you have thoughts about that, sound off in the comments. By which I mean go to Board Game Geek Guild 3269 and show up in the thread about reading, which we often do have one.

So what I'm going to do today is talk about the books that I read in quarter one of 2026. About half of these I listened to as audiobooks. I'm just going to use the word "read" for convenience sake, but I recognize the complexity of that conversation. All right.

So to start with, we have **Death of the Necromancer**, which is Ile-Rien #2 from Martha Wells. Martha Wells, of course, is the writer of Murderbot The Murderbot Diaries. But given how much I like those, I thought I would try some of her other work. She wrote another book earlier, or she wrote another book about this area called the **Element of Fire**. I didn't realize when I started to read The Death of Necromancer that I was reading the second book in a series. It's funny because the Ile-Rien series, which include. In this segment, I read both The Element of Fire and the death of the necromancer, so I'll talk about them both.

This series is about a place, but not about a single group of characters. There are some overlapping characters, but the overlaps are pretty minor. Think about it more like the way that some of the constant characters in Ankh-Morpork, the Terry Pratchett books show up in multiple books, or the Tana French Dublin Files books, where you'll have a character who's a main character in one book, and then they show up as a side character in the next one, or just randomly pass through in one or two scenes. Think of it that way.

The Ile-Rien books take place in In a fantasy world where there's politics and magic. The magic is all sort of arcane wizard type magic, but there are also fey. There is necromancy, but there's also sort of eighteenth century or nineteenth century technology. So there's muskets and there's trains. And maybe even in the early twentieth, there seem to be some steam powered cars and some ships. The technological arc of the world is roughly the same as ours.

The element of fire, that one takes place in what I would call the early eighteenth century or the early nineteenth. Yeah, the early eighteenth century. And then by the time that we are in. No, sorry. The element of fire takes place in the late eighteenth century. And by the time we're in death, death, death of the necromancer, maybe fifty years later. And by the time we're in the next book, which I read as part of quarter two. So we'll talk about next time. That one is into like the nineteen tens, twenties, something like that. So the mechanical technology is moving a pace, but then there's also magical technology or magic. So it's an interesting world. The characters are disconnected.

The writing is very good. Martha Wells really knows how to string together a story that's very entertaining. She's very good at world building. I don't like these quite as much as the Murderbot books, but they are pretty entertaining. Death of a necromancer is about exactly what it sounds like. There is a character who is a prominent villain who dies, and it starts to cause all kinds of trouble. And part of the question is, has someone

else stolen his powers? And using his magical ability to wreak havoc elsewhere? It's kind of the plot of that one.

The element of fire is a thief, like a thieving mystery with a variety of different threads as well. Honestly, I don't remember. It's hard for me to separate out the plots of the two books. I read them relatively close together and they kind of bleed together. Uh, they're both really good. Or they're both good, I would say entertaining. If you like the idea of a well-written adventure story in a kind of a land with some magic and some pistols. The Ile-Rien books might be for you. I think death of the necromancer might be my favorite of these two anyway.

Next up, we have **The Courage of Birds: And the Often Surprising Ways They Survive Winter** by Pete Dunne. This is a nonfiction book about birds that my wife and I read. Often. When we are driving to places that are further away. We will listen to. Or I will listen to a book about birds that she will read. It doesn't work for us to get an audiobook. She has trouble following them and falls asleep, but if she's reading out loud, she does fine. So often we will get a physical book about birds. She will read it to me while we're driving. And it works out great.

Overall, this was an interesting story. It's sort of about the biology of birds having us think about how do birds survive? What do they do? How do they get food? And the whole courage of birds thing is sort of like, what is it that birds have to go through to survive? And how do they interact with the world around them? Done is a good storyteller. He's somebody who has a lot of experience as a birder. It seems like tracking what birds are doing and thinking about how they get through the winter. So the courage of birds is pretty good. It got a little long toward the end, I think. Had it been fifty or one hundred page, one hundred pages shorter, it would have been better. I think it was almost three hundred pages. It probably could have been two hundred, but we still enjoyed it. That's the courage of birds.

Next up, we have another next book in the series. I have a lot of those this quarter. We have **The Seven Surrenders**. This is Terra incognita, Two. From Ada Palmer. Terra incognita is a wild, far reaching and strange fantasy or sci fi near-future sci fi story or far future sci fi story. It takes place on earth, but it is a radically transformed earth where politics has been upended and shifted around. Technology is incredibly complex and high, and the characters are all bizarre and interesting.

The first one I think, was called **Too Like Lightning** two and was about, uh, it sort of explores the nature of identity and how people present themselves and who they are. The book feels very relevant to questions of gender identity and sexuality particularly, but it has a wide ranging approach to philosophy and politics and technology. And, um, it's poetic, uh, sort of off putting. Like part of me really likes these books and part of me really dislikes them, but they're intriguing and I'm interested to see where they keep going. So that was sort of the first one.

The second one continues the story. We go from a perspective of a different character or a couple different characters, rather than the main character that we followed in the first book. As such, I didn't like it as much. I think the second one was not quite as good as the first one, although at the halfway point I was sort of thinking like, oh, I'm not going to read the third book in the series. But I did finish the second one and I'm like, yeah, I'll give it a try. I think there are four altogether, and they're relatively long, but they move along at an interesting pace and they have very complex and interesting world building.

Palmer does not pull any punches as they think about the variety of different ideas one could have, about shaping about how the world gets shaped in the future. And they seem to use all of them. It's really pretty compelling and interesting. That is Seven Surrenders by Ada Palmer.

Next up, I did read the next two two books in a trilogy. What I thought was a trilogy called The Bobiverse by Dennis Taylor. The. This definitely falls into the category of what I've heard called "competence porn". The idea of a very smart person tackling complicated problems in interesting ways. Right. **The Martian** and Artemis project, or **Project Hail Mary** both fall under this category, as does Murderbot. Frankly, the idea of a character who is thoughtful and engaged in solves problems in an interesting way. If you forget from last time I talked about it in the Bobiverse. The second oh, the second one was called **For We Are Many**, and the third one is called **All These Worlds**. But the idea is it's the far future. Humankind has figured out how to build brains into computers, but we don't know how to create the brains, or at least have them be nearly as good as a person. But we have learned how to scan brains. So through some legal loopholes, people have had their brains scanned and loaded into computers. And the main character is one such person. He is in a ship that

has a 3D printer, and one of the things he can do is print more 3D printers, and then he can use those 3D printers to print more of himself, and then he can copy them.

And there's an interesting element where each one has its own personality within the sort of broad template of himself that when it is printed, it immediately diverges from the original. And often there are core personality features that are exaggerated in each different one. So as he makes more of them. They are all slightly different, which is a really fascinating idea. It's called the barber verse because he goes out into the galaxy and starts copying himself and does a whole bunch of really interesting stuff.

The books are great. The second and third one tell a complete arc, which is honestly why I thought the story was done. But then I was looking a couple weeks ago and I found there's actually number four and number five. So those are definitely on my list to read. I'll probably end up reading them back to back because they're relatively short and they're quick, so they're fun to read, uh, fast. That is Dennis Taylor's for *We Are Many* and all these worlds, as long as we're talking about series.

I also did read two books from the Vorkosigan saga. I read **Barayar**, which was a reread from a very long time ago, and I read **The Warrior's Apprentice**. *Barayar* is the second book of the original pair. **Shards of Honor** and *Barayar* are the two original books that are kind of encapsulated and make the series. And then *The Warrior's Apprentice* is the first story in the Miles Vorkosigan saga, which most people see the story as a story about Miles, not as about these other characters. Uh, and it's really good. I'm definitely in for the long haul. I'm looking forward to reading the next one. In fact, it's probably time I should get it. I'm listening to these audiobooks, so, uh, listen to the next one, I guess. But they're very delightful. The guy they have reading them does a great job with voices and character. They're full of action and intrigue, but also really robust character writing.

There's a reason that Lois McMaster Bujold won awards for these series because they're really good, but I will caution anybody who's going to read them. They're written in the eighties, and they have a rather cavalier, cavalier attitude toward some things that we really don't want to see in our books these days. So something to keep in mind as you are thinking about reading them. Let's see.

I read the Robert Langdon book **Secret of Secrets**. This is number six in the, uh, or the Dan Brown book is number six in the Robert Langdon series, which is *The Da Vinci Code* books. This is bad, but I don't know. Dan Brown's really good at writing a potboiler. So the story was interesting, even if the writing was pretty bad. It's the sort of thing that I, you know, they call it an airport read or a beach read. That's what it was like. I literally downloaded it at the airport, read it on my phone while we were flying.

One of my students told me that Chitra Banerjee's or Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's, **The Mistress of Spices**, was one of their favorite books. So I checked that out. It was an interesting, uh, magical realist book, sort of about Indian culture, or an Indian woman in America selling spices to other Indian folks. The interplay of the different characters was really interesting. I like the kind of magical story that was told around it. It felt a little carbon. Carbon copy maybe isn't the word wooden or stereotypical for like, oh, it's a story about Indian people. So it's a woman who sells Indian spices to Indian people, which isn't probably super fair, but that's sort of what it felt like to me. There were some really interesting themes with regard to going to other places and interacting with people who are outside your culture, and the magic was really fun. Um, so it's worth reading, I would say the mistress of spices.

And then we have **The Decagon House** murders. This was a murder mystery from Yukito Ayatsuji. It feels a lot like that book that I read a couple months like last year sometime called **Strange Houses**, which was again, a murder mystery about this house. And a big part of it was just looking at the blueprints of the house and evaluating them. This book felt the same. It's a bunch of people analyzing how a murder might have happened, and a sort of constant stream of meta conversation about what could have caused a murder. I don't know if this is an aspect of Japanese culture particularly, but I didn't particularly enjoy this one. So I guess I would not probably recommend it, but there are apparently a number of other books by this writer that are similar. Two more to talk about.

We have **Howling Dark**, the Sun Eater number two from Christopher Ruocco. These are huge space opera books. I can't remember what the first one was, but *The Howling Dark* was a nice addition to the story. A robust adventure tale with drama and murder and continuing evolution of the story. It's about a prince, a disowned prince who is trying to help stop a war between humankind and a predatory alien race. And this was

an episode all about him trying to do that. It got really dangerous and wild in certain ways. The human beings proved themselves to be just as terrible as we've all thought we were, and that the aliens, while terrible, certainly aren't better or worse than us. But we're all pretty bad. So I'm enjoying this series. I'm looking forward to the next one.

I thought the main character was less unpleasant in the first one. He was pretty insufferable, but I think that was the idea as he was recalling his arrogant youth. And so he was in fact, an arrogant youth. It was less. Less like that in this one, although not dramatically less. Uh, a good story. Well worth checking out. That's the howling dark sun eater number two.

And then finally, I read two of the laundry files novels. I read **A Conventional Boy**, a laundry files novel, and I read **Escape from Yokai Island**, which was like a little laundry file short story. Both of these were pretty good. They are fill in novels, so they go back and they fill in gaps in the timeline or add story where there wasn't any previously to the laundry files tales. The conventional boy is one is particularly good because it's about a Dungeon Master who knows enough about the arcane mysteries of the elder gods that when he rolls dice, the results of the dice rolls shape the way the world is working, which is an interesting premise. So I enjoyed both of those as well. Escape from Yokai Island is really short, so it's just kind of a nibble of the laundry files stories, but I'm almost out of those. So it's nice to have have those available to me.

Well, I would love to hear what you've been reading. Head over to BoardGameGeek Guild 3269 and share your thoughts in our forums there. I have enjoyed what I read this month or the in the last couple of months, and I hope you have too. I want to say thanks for joining me on my walk today. I hope your next walk is as pleasant as mine was. Bye bye.

[Exit music]

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