

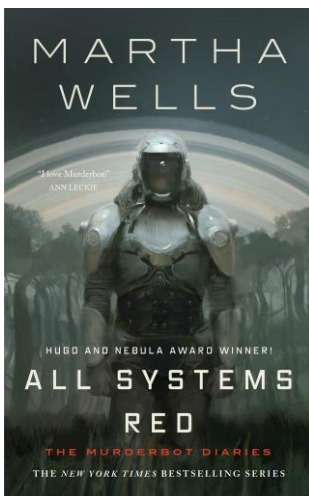
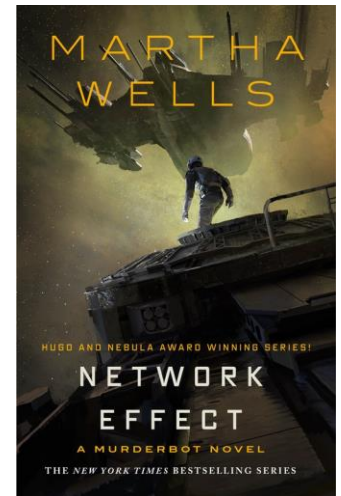
The Seventy ninth issue of a sort-of letter substitute, fanzine kinda thing. Maybe weekly, maybe not. Available from:

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Available via the World Wide Web, or as an email attachment. I recommend the Portable Document Format (pdf) or, if you insist, a word or Rich Text Format (rtf) can also be emailed or posted. Get in touch and we'll sort something out. Please do email and respond – I will feature some bits. Another burst of fannish energy from Tommy, proof read by Eugene Doherty. Dated, already, 3/07/2020.

The Murderbot Diaries by Martha Wells

I was very late to this party, having come across Martha Wells and Murderbot via the Tor emailed newsletter late in 2019. (and if you haven't signed up to their newsletter, I can highly recommend it – their latest free ebook is *The Calculating Stars* by Mary Robinette Kowal - the 2019 Hugo winner! You can sign-up here: <https://read.macmillan.com/tordotcom/newsletter-signup/>) I'd heard nothing about Wells or this series of books – which probably says more about my reading habits than any of the publishing or marketing nous of Tor. Sadly, hang on let actually celebrate the cover, because it was the cover of *Network Effort*¹ that got me hooked – a real old school 'hard SF' type of cover with spaceships (and are those monstrous guns? Yay!) with a humanoid figure poised to leap into actions. As you can see it has a dark, washed out look and feel which enticed me even more – does this actually represent the book? I checked it out online, and indeed it does. Not only that but it was the latest in a series – I was indeed well behind the curve!



The first of the series is called *All Systems Red* – where the titular anti-hero of the Murderbot diaries is introduced. Basically, a cyborg Security Unit – shortened to SecUnit throughout the books – who has slipped its leash and gone rogue. However, the human part of the Unit is suffering some pretty severe mental health issues – almost autistic in tone and nature. It utilised dramatic entertainments and long running serials to escape from the mundane work it was undertaking, literally ticking over, whilst immersed in a fictional world. I kept thinking of things like *The Young and the Restless*, or *The Days of our Lives* as a form of retreat away from social interaction. Imagine binge watching box sets of these entire series!

It is this device, allied with a wickedly dour sense of humour that picks up on the SecUnits' misanthropy that had me hooked from the get-go. In the initial books this is very broad stroke, although the drama comes, inevitably, from when feelings develop and have to be addressed. What happens when misanthropy is challenged by, well - nice people?

¹ All the images of the cover of the books come from Martha's own website: <https://www.marthawells.com/>.

So, stuff like:

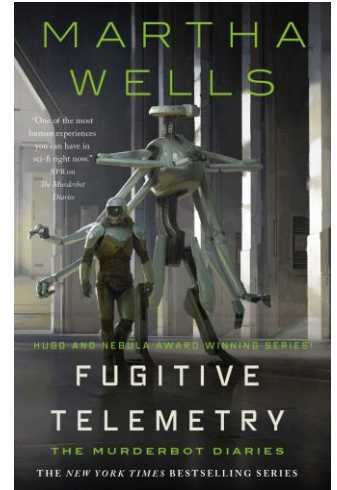
"The sense of urgency just wasn't there. Also, you may have noticed, I don't care."

Later in the first book and then more as the series and characters develop – and they do develop – this humour is turned on its self – to great effect. For example, describing its emotional state in terms of effective performance statistics is another running gag throughout the books:

"Yes, talk to Murderbot about its feelings. The idea was so painful I dropped to 97 percent efficiency."

The stories themselves are not long, novella length in some cases, and are very tightly plotted, with a very quick pace. Network Effect is the first novel length instalment in the series the forthcoming Fugitive Telemetry (due out in April next year) at 197 pages continues this trend. The cover of this has just been released – see right - and it's a cracker. I'm already intrigued by the other robot – has elements of *The Mandalorian* IG-11 – and how the relationship between the two will unfold. Ten months to wait though...

Whilst there are lots of spaceships, robots and fights in all the books there is also a bunch of stuff that will make you think. For example, the Murderbot is never assigned a gender, although I've seen discussion of this online in terms of gender and non-binary politics -with arguments for all and none. It also got me thinking about the nature of relationships and 'love' – do robots and spaceships love each other – how does that work? So, whilst it works on a pure entertainment level, there is quite a bit of subtext and good writing going on as well. What more could you ask for?



As my mate Eugene said: "Damn fine, reminded me why I loved Sci-Fi so long ago." And that's it in a nutshell.

Many thanks for the replies on the last issue – I will have lettercol in a forthcoming release.