

# Fantasy Scroll mag

ISSUE  
05



Emily Cataneo • Andrew Kaye • Laurie Tom • Christine Borne • Jarod K. Anderson  
Charles Payseur • Sarah Avery • John Giezentanner • John H. Stevens

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**Fantasy Scroll Magazine**  
**Speculative Fiction - Issue #5 – February 2015**

**Featuring works by Andrew Kaye, Charles Payseur, Christine Borne,  
Emily Cataneo, Jarod K. Anderson, John Giezentanner,  
John H. Stevens, Josh Brown, Laurie Tom, Sarah Avery**

This collection is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# Fantasy Scroll Magazine Issue #5

February, 2015

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*EDITORIAL, FEBRUARY 2015*

**IULIAN IONESCU**

5

## **FICTION**

---

*THE CITY DREAMS OF BIRD-MEN*

**EMILY CATANEO**

7

*MOKSHA*

**ANDREW KAYE**

20

*THE WHITE SNAKE*

**LAURIE TOM**

31

*TEMPEST FUGIT*

**CHRISTINE BORNE**

34

*STICKS AND STONES*

**JAROD K. ANDERSON**

42

*THE THOUSAND YEAR TART*

**CHARLES PAYSEUR**

45

*HOW THE GRAIL CAME TO THE FISHER KING*

**SARAH AVERY**

53

*HUMAN BONES*

**JOHN GIEZENTANNER**

64

*BANDIT*

**JOHN H. STEVENS**

67

*GRAPHIC STORY: SHAMROCK*

**JOSH BROWN & JOHN FORTUNE**

69

## **NON-FICTION**

---

<i>INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR JIM HINES</i>	75
<i>INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR SARAH AVERY</i>	81
<i>INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR CHRISTINE BORNE</i>	94
<i>INTERVIEW WITH AWARD WINNING EDITOR JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS</i>	98
<i>ARTIST SPOTLIGHT: TODOR HRISTOV</i>	107
<i>BOOK REVIEW: ECHOPRAXIA (PETER WATTS)</i> <b>JULIE NOVAKOVA</b>	<b>111</b>
<i>MOVIE REVIEW: RIGOR MORTIS (JUNO MAK)</i> <b>MARK LEEPER</b>	<b>113</b>

# Editorial, February 2015

Iulian Ionescu

**W**elcome to Issue #5 of Fantasy Scroll Magazine.

Here we are—Year Two! The first year flew by incredibly fast, it feels surreal. We've had the opportunity to read so many wonderful stories and meet many incredible writers. Thank you to all the writers out there who've submitted your work. Keep them coming; we promise to give as many as we can a good home!

I also want to thank all subscribers and Kickstarter supporters once again. You've helped us get this project off the ground, and we are very grateful to all of you!

With 2015 upon us, we are bringing you three new and exciting features:

First, we are changing our publishing schedule from quarterly to bi-monthly. We are receiving so many amazing stories, it would be a crime not to share them with you more often. We will publish one issue every other month, starting this February, with new issues likely to be released around the first or second week of the month. We'll keep the

same general format, aiming for about sixty stories in the year.

The second big announcement is our [fiction podcast](#). Starting with this issue, we are producing a weekly podcast featuring the stories published in our issues. We'd love it if you would give it a listen and give us your feedback so we can make it better.

Lastly, this year we will publish our very first anthology, in both print and e-book formats. The details and timeframes are still being worked on, but stay tuned and we will have an announcement very soon.

Now back to Issue #5.

We begin with Emily Cataneo's "*The City Dreams of Bird-Men*," a story of struggle and love, set in an alternate world where danger looms over the city.

"*Moksha*," by Andrew Kaye follows, and features a mixture of science fiction and fantasy elements inspired by Indian culture and myths.

Next we have "*The White Snake*," a flash story reprint by Laurie Tom, and "*Tempest Fugit*," the first published story

by Christine Borne, a tale filled with sailors, ghosts, and gin.

"*Sticks and Stones*," by Jarod Anderson is a flash story that will make you think twice before giving nicknames to baristas at your favorite coffee shop.

Charles Payseur envisions a future where actors could be machines in his story, "*The Thousand Year Tart*," complete with a very unexpected twist at the end.

Next is a wonderful story by Sarah Avery. She captures her emotions in a tale born from personal pain and the loss of a friend in "*How The Grail Came to the Fisher King*."

John Giezentanner discusses the issues of artificial body parts in his fast-paced sci-fi tale "*Human Bones*."

We close our fiction section with "*Bandit*," by John Stevens, a light horror story that will elicit a smile.

Before moving to the non-fiction section, let me mention that we are experimenting with something else new:

In this issue we are including a graphic story: *Sharmrock*, written by Josh Brown with art by John Fortune. If our readers approve, this may become a permanent feature.

In the non-fiction section we have interviews with writers Jim Hines, Christine Borne, and Sarah Avery, and with award-winning editor John Joseph Adams, editor and publisher of *Lightspeed Magazine* and *Nightmare Magazine*.

We close with the artist spotlight on Todor Hristov, a book review for Peter Watts' *Echopraxia*, and a review for *Rigor Mortis*, a horror movie directed by Juno Mak.

I hope you enjoy this issue. Please add your comments to the stories you read—our writers love to read them!

I also want to take a moment to remind everyone that our magazine lives through your subscriptions.

Please subscribe and help us spread the word!

Thank you and see you in a couple months!

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# The City Dreams of Bird-Men

Emily Cataneo

Eliška huddled in her laboratory during that short autumn before the predicted onset of the Dark. She poured over her star-maps, scrawled calculations on a black ink diagram of planetary epicycles. She hefted bound volumes of research by Copernicus and Kepler, Brahe and Galileo, about Mars and the moon, about the ascendancy of Mercury and the dangers of spotting a comet in Taurus.

She scoured the stars for a sign that the Bird-Men would return, a sign she knew would never appear.



Seven days before the Dark was predicted to sweep through the city, Eliška hunched over the Dutch spyglass she'd inherited from her father, charting yet another comet in Taurus. She was sucking on a piece of an Italian orange—the third-to-last she had left—and scratching with her quill when a hollow knock on the door echoed throughout her laboratory.

Eliška threw her quill down. "Come in."

Her maidservant entered, dropped a curtsy. "Pardon, Mistress, someone's here to see you."

Eliška scraped her chair back over the flagstone floor and stood. The first thought that leapt into her mind was, *Perhaps it's Johann*. She hated herself for that.

She hurried down the dark steps to her poorly lit antechamber.

The man who turned from the mullioned windows was not Johann: this man was short, with black leather hip boots and snow in his hair.

"Erazim Pesmet," she said. Her former apprentice had grown thin in the five years since she'd seen him. "What brings you here?"

A smile spread across Pesmet's face and he clasped her hand with a man's assurance. "Well met, Mistress Knopf."

"Did you wish to return to my service?"

"On the contrary, I come as a messenger from the Monastic Order of the Relics. I've been traveling the continent finding holy objects for them, and I've just returned from Vienna

with something that we think will be of great interest to you." Pesmet pulled aside the window curtain and studied the dark world outside. "It involves the Bird-Men."

Eliška waited.

"It's not here," Pesmet said. "It's at the monastery. A half-day's ride."

"The stars say the Dark will arrive by Christmastide," Eliška said. "You know the emperor requires that I continue researching the—"

"You don't believe the Bird-Men will ever return."

"I didn't say—"

"Come now, Eliška, I know you. But I've also seen the Dark first-hand, in Styria and Austria. It's... you must come with me, you must."

Could she justify spending a day riding hard through the countryside to examine some charlatan's trick at the monastery?

But she remembered Pesmet's boyish enthusiasm for her blue-and-gold inlaid model of the planets, his struggle to understand Jupiter's orbit. How could she shatter his faith that the Bird-Men would return in time to save them from the Dark?

And why should she stay in the city, at her telescope, searching the stars for a sign that she would never see?

"Meet me at first light on the east side of the bridge," Eliška said.



Eliška had learned the story of the Bird-Men from her father, in her girlhood. She would peer over his shoulder as he studied Mars' orbit and he would describe how the Bird-Men had come to the city, why they had abandoned it and how they would return someday. Two centuries ago, a great inventor built a creature with the body of a man. It was made of sturdy wire with wire-and-feather wings protruding from his back and a head built of dozens of tiny bird-statues sculpted from porcelain imported from the East and patterned with swirls and icons. The inventor secretly practiced astral magic. He invoked the power of the planets to give the Bird-Man life, then whispered "Go forth, and save the city." The Bird-Man flapped across the unpaved streets of the Old Town and rose between the wattle-roofed houses and the church spires.

The Bird-Man plucked a child from between the wheels of a carriage. He visited a coughing woman's deathbed and brought roses back to her cheeks. He touched the face of a crying young lady in the market and her smile lit up like a summer morning. He saved two

bankers running from a mob, and a heartbroken old man about to jump from the black-slate roof of town hall. The inventor built more Bird-Men until the city streets swarmed with them and its citizens walked happy and proud along the river under the shadow of the castle.

But as the inventor strode the streets of the city admiring his creations, the king seethed with jealousy. Word had trickled across the river to the castle that the inventor had received offers from other cities that coveted the Bird-Men. The king wanted to keep the famous Bird-Men for his own kingdom, so he locked the inventor in a dungeon and ordered his execution before he could ever build another Bird-Man.

As the inventor knelt before the executioner's blade, he muttered a few words and that night all the Bird-Men rustled into the air and flew away from the city's red roofs. Since then, floodwater had poured out of the river and sluiced over its embankments. Plague and Hungarian fever had each swept through the city, and for one week a century ago the entire city had gone blind. Its sons marched off to wars with the Turks or Austrians, and children died in the wombs of its daughters.

For two centuries, the Imperial Inventors had labored to build new Bird-Men, and the Imperial Alchemists had tried to convert lumpy metal statues into shining gold saviors, and the Imperial Astrologer had studied the stars, searching for a sign of the Bird-Men's return.

"They will return, sweetling," Eliška's father would tell her, "and if they don't return, we will force them to return."

But then her father had died pursuing the Bird-Men, and Eliška, barely a woman, her eyes swimming with tears, had told her mother she knew, deep in her gut, that the city's saviors would never return. "He was a fool to even try," she had said.

And yet the emperor, discovering her prowess with the telescope, had appointed her the first woman Imperial Astrologer to replace her father. She resigned herself to life in a laboratory.



The sky spread silk-gray above the frozen river as Eliška crossed the bridge the morning after Pesmet's visit. She drew her green cloak tighter as she strode past the blank-eyed black statues that lined the bridge, martyrs of long-ago wars and treasons, each staring down at her sorrowfully. Hard bits of snow blew off the frozen ice that lined the bridge's stone railings.

As she reached the river's far shore, Johann's house loomed out of the row of stone buildings along the embankment. A figure, all darkness, stood on the steps.

"Johann." She made herself look at him, at his blue eyes not looking at her, at his raw red hands that grasped hers less and less frequently. "You've returned from Munich."

"I didn't expect to see you at such an early hour." He studied the bare trees and red roofs strung along the opposite bank of the river.

"Did you bring any oranges?" She smiled, remembering when her smile could pull a corresponding grin from him.

"Yes," he said, not smiling. "They'll be for sale at the market."

"You used to..." She swallowed. "You used to give me oranges."

"I have a trade to conduct. I can't simply give away oranges to just anyone."

Eliška hissed out a cloud of breath.

"Eliška—"

"Maybe I'll see you before the Dark comes," she snapped, looking up at the mullioned windows of his house, shut tight for the winter. "Maybe I won't."

She marched off, blinking hard, trying to stave off the tightness in her throat.

Eliška had witnessed heartbreak at an early age: her father had broken her mother's heart when he'd used astral magic, when he had implored Mercury to give him flight so he could search for the Bird-Men. The wings caused him to overbalance on his horse and fall, the snap of his spine echoing through the clean autumn air. For many years she had thought that was the only kind of heartbreak: loss through separation or death. But in the past months Johann had taught her a different kind of heartbreak, the kind where your heart cracked just a little, day after day, from a harsh word, or a scornful gaze, all building to a creeping suspicion that seeped in through the cracks in your heart, that *he never loved you, after all*.

"Mistress." Pesmet appeared at the base of the bridge, two horses snorting behind him. "Are you prepared? I saw you speaking to Master Johann. Did you tell him how long you'll be away?"

"Master Johann couldn't give a whit how long I'll be away." Eliška seized one set of reins from Pesmet's leather glove and wondered how she could have been foolish enough to believe that a man could sustain his love for a woman like her, wedded to the emperor's wishes and the vicissitudes of the stars.

As her horse followed Pesmet's out of the city, she knew that the men, women and children who slumbered inside half-timbered houses, clutching dolls and each other—the butchers and servants and blacksmiths and priests and apprentices and old women—they all

dreamed of their salvation swooping out of the sky to shelter them from the Dark. She had seen them walking the city streets, bumping into each other because their noses pointed towards the sky, searching for a fluttering wing, the glint of a wire ribcage.

*The city dreams of Bird-Men*, Eliška thought. *They are all fools.*



The Monastic Order of the Relics stood, a stone chapel and cloister, in the center of a snowy field that rippled off to the thin line of a creek. Two crows lifted off the single tree in the field, squawking. Eliška swung off her horse and followed Pesmet to the door of the chapel.

He creaked it open and she wrinkled her frozen nostrils against the musty smell of dust and churchyards. As she stepped inside, her eyes adjusted to the dim light. Inside the chapel loomed broken skulls lining shelves, columns, the crease between the wall and the ceiling. Femurs striped the walls like half-timbering on a house, and fingerbones and hipbones were arranged in a shield pattern on one wall. In the center of the chapel stood a pedestal, lit by the weak sunbeams falling from the high windows. On the pedestal sat a rough piece of uncut glass; the glass cradled a feather.

Eliška was about to ask Pesmet why this feather sat on a pedestal as though it were a holy relic, but then she let her eyes rest on the feather, on the pale brown downiness fading to white, the brittle calamus—and a hazy, long-forgotten emotion tugged at her stomach.

"That's from a Bird-Man," she said.

"Indeed it is."

Behind Pesmet, two more monks had emerged, their white robes trailing against the dusty floor. One of them spoke, barely moving his mouth as he talked, the effect rather disconcerting. "Pesmet received it from a trader, during his travels to the east. They say it came from the far north, from the lands above the kingdoms of the Swedes and Tartars."

"How..." Eliška reached towards the feather, stopping her fingers just inches from the feather's brittle barb. "So the Bird-Men are still alive, somewhere."

The monk who had spoken looked at her as though he expected her to fall to her knees and thank them for saving the city.

"I don't see how this changes anything," she said, although hope continued to swell inside her stomach. "Whether the Bird-Men are with the Tartars or on the moon, they're not here."

"Ah," Pesmet said. "But we want you to bring them here."

"No, absolutely not. Pesmet, you should have told these men that I read the stars' predictions. I don't influence them."

"Mistress, I know you keep a copy of Picatrix in your drawer."

"Astral magic is for charlatans and necromancers," Eliška said, remembering the arch of her father's back as, weighted by his wings, he toppled backwards off his horse.

"Eliška." Pesmet stepped forward, his hip-boots clacking on the floor. "Do you know what the Dark does to a person?"

"Of course I—"

"Yes, you've heard what it does. But have you seen it? Have you seen the haunted look in the eyes of a man afflicted with the Dark, the green pockmarks that appear on the arms as the disease approaches? Have you seen the trembling hands and the snarling teeth of madness? Have you seen how it spreads from person to person, faster than the plague? Have you—"

"I'm not a magician. I'm a scientist. I do not practice astral magic."

"You will," the monk said. He palmed a key ring, and bowed his head to her. "I don't need to tell you, Mistress Eliška, that you have five days."

"What are you—"

"We've laid out supplies, and there's a fire burning in the apse." The monks swept towards the door, Pesmet keeping pace.

Eliška raced after them, shouting curses on their order, but when she reached the top of the stairs, they had already shut and bolted the door behind them.



Eliška thought of her two remaining oranges, growing mealy in a bowl in the larder. She thought of Johann and her broken heart, and how she might never see his blue eyes again, might never repair whatever had broken between them. She thought of how she only had four days to escape from the monks and return to the city before its blank-eyed statues, its frozen river, and black-spired cathedrals fell under the Dark.

But she wouldn't use astral magic, either to escape or to summon the Bird-Men. She wasn't a witch. If her father's death had taught her anything, it was that influencing the stars

never worked how you expected, that astral magic always slithered and coiled around your ankle or wrist or throat while you were busy admiring the results.

The chapel door creaked open, and Pesmet shuffled in. She seized the glass-and-feather relic and held it over the fire. "Let me go," she snarled, "or I'll burn it."

Pesmet stayed in the shadows by the door. "Have you begun work on the magic yet?"

"I'll burn it." Eliška dangled the feather over the flame. Heat crawled up her hand.

"Mistress, I don't believe you'll burn it." Pesmet blinked rapidly, just as he had when he was her apprentice struggling to understand a concept. "I think despite what you say, you want the Bird-Men to return badly enough that you—"

"Don't you challenge me," Eliška snarled. "Didn't you learn anything as my apprentice? Did I use astral magic to save my mother from the Hungarian fever, or to make myself an ordinary life?" *Or to make Johann love me again?*

"But why not? Why not save our city?"

"Astral magic never works as you expect it to. I taught you that. I've studied the stars, and the Bird-Men aren't coming back before the Dark. They're simply not."

"Eliška." Pesmet inclined his head towards her. "Why have you spent your entire life searching for signs that the Bird-Men might return?"

"Because it's part of my duties as Imperial—"

"I think, despite what you say, you still believe that they might save the city. I think it's because you secretly harbor that most heady of elixirs: hope."

"When did you become such a scholar of human nature?" Eliška snarled. "'That most heady of elixirs'? Did the monks teach you to say such things?" She stepped forward. "Let me go. I command you, let—"

"Stay back," Pesmet shouted, his voice edged with a new harshness. He stepped into the weak light seeping from the sole window. His arms were covered in pale-green pockmarks, puckering his skin and matting his arm hair. Eliška snatched up her cloak and pressed a corner over her mouth.

"Stay away from me," she said, trying to calculate when and if she had touched Pesmet, if she might be contaminated with the Dark.

"I suppose I contracted it in Vienna," Pesmet said, not looking at her. "They're terribly itchy, and they burn. It's impossible to forget, even for a moment."

Eliška pressed her hands against her stomach, withholding a comforting pat on the old apprentice's arm. He was lost now, forever, and she knew she would never be able to touch him again. Pesmet walked from the chapel, his boots clicking on the stone floor.

Eliška paced her room until the sun set. Based on what the Imperial Physicians knew of the Dark, Pesmet had a day at most before the Dark swept through his mind. Part of her mourned Pesmet, who she still saw as the eager boy studying star charts at her side, but part of her hated him and his monks for trapping her here, in these waning days of her life. And a sliver of her wondered if perhaps Pesmet was right, if perhaps she wanted to race home and check the star charts because after all one cobwebbed corner of her heart hoped that the Bird-Men might return.



The sun set early on the third-to-last day.

Eliška thought of Johann, of sending him a letter before the Dark descended on them. She thought of her two remaining oranges and the red roofs of the city and its bridges and of her laboratory and, yes, of her star charts and whether they might tell a different tale if she had the chance to read them again.

It wouldn't take strong astral magic to force the monks and Pesmet to unlock her door and leave the monastery. She wouldn't have to embody one of the planets or even invoke much of their power. It would only take a simple spell.

She walked to the table in the apse where the monks had arranged supplies. She inscribed a scrap of linen with an image of Mars in ascendance. She sprinkled dried laurel and bat's blood onto the linen, wrapped it around a clay goblet.

She told herself she needed to escape. She needed to mend things with Johann. She needed to check her star-charts.

She tossed the linen-wrapped goblet into the fire.

"Unlock the chapel door," she whispered. "And then leave. Walk away from here. Go anywhere."

The fire hissed and spat crimson sparks. Smoke puffed into the room. Eliška coughed, and her head pounded. She bent over the table and her body buzzed.

Then the scrape of a lock echoed through the chapel.

She bounced on her boot-heels, waiting for them to leave. For an hour, she made herself stand still, until the monks had enough time to shuffle off across the snowy field, until there was no chance of them seeing her and forcing her back into the chapel. She knocked over a chair as she raced to the door, but hesitated just before she pushed it open.

Returning to the pedestal, she scooped up the Bird-Man feather and concealed it under her cloak. Then she raced back again through the chapel, past long shadows trailing out of the skulls and femurs, and into the hollow bowl of the night-dark field.

As she hurried towards the stables, she tripped over something and sprawled into the snow.

"Mistress." Pesmet, eyes gleaming, clawed at her cloak-hem. She clapped her hands over her mouth and lurched away from him. His arms and face were unmarked, unnaturally smooth—a sign that the Dark had advanced. "Mistress... they went..." He frowned, and although he looked at her eyes, she could tell he no longer saw her and instead only saw the snowy field and the chapel behind her. "Hello?" he whispered. "Is anyone there?"

"Pesmet." But she knew that the Dark had consumed him—the Dark that rendered its victims unable to see or hear other humans.

"Am I alone out here?"

Her heart beat faster at the fear in his voice, the trembling around the word 'alone'. *In two days I will walk through the city and see no one... I will eat oranges alone for the rest of my life...I will walk the embankments of the river, dying of the Dark, and see only stone and shadow.*

Pesmet's eyes refocused and he gasped, a drowning man given one last mouthful of air. "They went to the city. You told them to go anywhere, and they went to the city."

He pressed his baby-smooth hands against his eyes. "They went to the city and they have the Dark. They took horses."

"They..."

But Pesmet shuddered and fell to his knees. "Isn't anyone out here?" he howled, looking through her. "Please, where did everyone go?"

Eliška squeezed her eyes shut, then raced to the stables.

As she rode through the city walls, past the gold-lit windows sheltering husbands with their wives or mistresses, girls playing with poppets, boys pretending to be the soldiers they would never be, she knew they all hoped the Bird-Men would swoop down and wrap them in soft wings and cradle them with wire hands. She knew they hoped the Bird-Men's porcelain birds would open their beaks and sing. She knew they hoped the Bird-Men would save them, save them from Pesmet's fate, from the Dark, from plagues and war and floods and loneliness...

*The city dreams of Bird-Men , Eliška thought. Can I fault them?*

She raced up the stairs to her laboratory, carrying the smell of snow into the musty room, and pressed her eye to her telescope. She swept it over the bowl of the stars, searching for a sign of the Bird-Men's return and then sagged against her table when she saw that the stars looked the same. The same reading she'd taken five days ago. Except...

Saturn in the eighth house. Saturn had been in the ninth house five days ago.

She scribbled on her star chart. She crouched next to her astronomical model and trailed her fingers against Saturn's gold impassive curve as she realized: they didn't have two days until the Dark arrived. They had one.

The Dark would arrive at dawn, along with the monks that Eliška's magic had sent racing towards the city.

She buried her head in her hands. This was why she had avoided astral magic ever since her father had tumbled from his horse shining with the light of Mercury. This was why she had studied her star charts like a dutiful astronomer and stayed far, far away from witchcraft: because it never worked out the way you intended.

So the city had one night left, one night of laughter and tears, of drinking ale together and telling ghost stories and—

Eliška opened a drawer and lifted out her copy of Picatrix. She propped open the book, with its blood-red illustrations, and ripped a piece of linen off her skirt.

She had doomed the city to the Dark one day early through her use of astral magic. So now she must save it.

She concentrated on rehearsing the Latin incantations, focused on setting up her star chart and preparing her linen, not letting the gravity of what she was about to do overwhelm her.

At midnight, she walked to her window, looked across the way at the one house still glowing with candlelight at this hour, then past the silent snow-muted roofs to the faint distant stars above. She had always thought the stars looked strong, powerful—patricians and matricians willing to impart their secrets. She had never thought they looked fragile, as though one hard tap might shatter them.

She returned to her writing table and scribbled Johann a letter. She told him she still loved him, she hoped he felt the same and that he should meet her on this side of the bridge at dawn. She slipped the letter under her door for her chambermaid to post. Then she slid into her chair and lit a censer.

As blue smoke billowed through the room, she inscribed an image of the sun in the twelfth house on the rough linen. She draped the linen around the feather and balanced it on the censer.

The blue smoke came faster, choking the room, obscuring her planetary model, her star charts and bookshelves. She clasped her hands around the censer—it should have been hot, but it was cold as the ice on the river—and she incanted, she prayed, she hoped, she asked Mars to use force, Venus and the moon to use seduction, Mercury to use manipulation, and Saturn to use its darkness to ask the sun to grant her its *anima motrix*. She asked the planets to sing in their four-range voices, to change the plan the sun had laid out for their cursed city, the plan the stars had laid out for Eliška...

*No*, sang the planets. *No, we won't bequeath the power of our god to a human, the sun's power changes a man.*

"I'm not asking you. I'm demanding you," she shouted as she shook the censer.

The smoke poured into her nostrils, and the dry air of the laboratory vanished. She rose over a plain that was covered in wild and untamed snow, snow that didn't see sunlight this time of year.

She sensed the Bird-Men, sensed that they hid somewhere on this plain. She rose higher and her rays illumed the creatures sheltering in deep unbroken snow under bent pines. Beneath her light, the porcelain birds on their heads shone, and the frost and ice that lined their wire torsos glimmered.

*Go.*

She felt their resistance—but *we were told, by our maker, to curse the city forever by our absence*—but she only had to whisper *Go* once again and they rose out of the snow, shedding specks of frost from their wings as they flapped south.

Eliška shone in the sky for just a second, the kind of second you want to spend your whole life in. Then she opened her eyes in the laboratory, surrounded by clearing smoke and by her possessions, the possessions that had always defined her—Eliška, the woman who had followed what was written in the stars, until tonight.

She had done it. She had saved the city. She had dove into astral magic and come out the other side. Her body buzzed alive, as though she still glowed, still had the power to make the world turn to her will.

She paced her laboratory, eating an orange. Then, as dawn lightened the sky, she ran outside to meet Johann, and to see her Bird-Men.



Snow fell outdoors, fat white flakes blanketing the cobblestones of Golden Lane, obscuring the castle on the hill above her. She raced through the streets, her boots slipping, towards the shouts echoing from the riverbanks.

She stopped on the wide steps that led down the hill away from her laboratory and the castle. A dark crowd congregated on both sides of the silver-iced river, milling in the falling snow, streaming over the bridge between the blank-eyed statues.

"The Bird-Men!" shouted a man. "They've come! We're saved!"

Cries of *We're saved, praise the Bird-Men*, rose through the crowd.

Eliška craned her head towards the sky.

All she saw: fat flakes of snow drifting through lavender dawn.

Eliška drew her green cloak closer around her and surveyed the crowd standing ten deep along the frozen river. Every face looked up at the falling snow as though looking upon a lover returned from the Holy Land or a castle containing their heart's desire. Some fell to their knees, weeping, curling into balls as though wings embraced them. Others held children towards the sky, held hands with grandmothers, brothers and sisters.

"Eliška!" The Imperial Physician raced down the steps towards her, his cheeks ruddy and his eyes glistening. "It's a miracle!"

"I don't..." Eliška blinked snow off her eyelashes. "I don't see them."

"What do you mean?" The Imperial Physician laughed, a giddy childish laugh, and held his arms towards the sky. His feet lifted off the ground and he soared towards the river, buoyed by nothing as he twisted like a marionette and laughed like a little boy.

The city laughed and cheered and cried tears of relief. She scanned the cluster of people near the bridge—no blue-eyed trader waited there. Instead, one of the monks she had banished from the monastery stumbled through the crowd; the Dark had arrived in the city.

Why weren't the Bird-Men swooping down to protect her too? Why couldn't she see them? Why didn't they exist for her? Why had Johann stopped loving her?

She trained her eyes on the empty snowy sky leading to the dark spires of Old Town Square and raised her arm, a bare arm that emanated a silvery light, as though she still glowed with the power of the sun...

*The sun's power changes a man*, the planets had said.

She couldn't see the Bird-Men because right now, flush with the glow of the planets' magic, she wasn't part of the city. Perhaps she wasn't even human.

She had saved the city, but she had doomed herself.

Eliška squeezed her eyes shut and thought:

*Imagine Johann's window creaking open, and imagine him bringing you basket upon basket of oranges until oranges spill out of your laboratory and cascade down the stairs.*

*Imagine sun striking the black spires and gold spheres atop the cathedrals, sending the city into a bright interplay of light and shadow and tomorrow.*

*Imagine the skin on your arms isn't prickling, itching, burning beneath your green cloak.*

*Imagine that you can change the fate that the stars have written for you.*

*Imagine the Bird-Men are swooping around you too, folding you in their wings, singing with the porcelain statues on their heads, sheltering you from the Dark forever and ever.*

When she opened her eyes something pale brown had stuck to her cloak. She pinched it between two fingers: it was a soft wispy feather, really nothing more than a piece of down.

Eliška pressed her feather to her lips, and pretended that any moment now, she would see Bird-Men in the falling snow.



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**Emily B. Cataneo** is a writer of dark fantasy and horror. Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming from the anthologies *Chiral Mad 2*, *Qualia Nous*, and *Steampunk World*, as well as the magazines *Kaleidotrope*, *the Dark*, *Betwixt*, and *Interfictions Online: A Journal of Interstitial Arts*. She is a 2013 graduate of the Odyssey Writing Workshop in Manchester, N.H. Follow her adventures and misadventures at [emilycataneo.com](http://emilycataneo.com) or on Twitter @emilycataneo.

# Moksha

Andrew Kaye

The day we met, Prasad asked me how many times I had died.

I answered without hesitation. "Forty-four."

That number is part of my identity. As important as my womanhood, my occupation, my name. My soul had occupied forty-four bodies. Had experienced forty-four deaths. And the memories of those forty-four are in my head. Unforgettable. Unshakeable.

Prasad understood. He too was a mantrik. Magical ability was our shared blessing, but remembering our past lives was our curse.

"Sixty-one," he said in reply. After he shook my hand, he downed a vial of rasayan in one gulp.



Prasad and I worked together for seven years as suppressors for the Raj. After all that time, Prasad could read me better than most. "Anusha," he'd say, ignoring rank or title, "I can see the memory coming before it hits you..."

I had come to appreciate his subtle warnings. When our vimana, *Daybreak*, neared the end of its ponderous flight, Prasad suggested I put my hand on the guardrail. I did so without thinking, watching *Daybreak's* narrow shadow fall upon the city of Kholnagara and the forested mountainside around it. The deck vibrated softly beneath my feet. The engines whispered. And the memory came.

It was a heavy one. Painful. There was smoke and fire. There were horrified screams. The memory was so vivid that I could even smell the chemicals of purgation squad firethrowers. I gasped, shook the memory away as quickly as I could.

I can't say I hadn't expected it. Memories are strongest in places familiar to past lives, and I had known where we were headed from the start. I looked down at the gray scar that was once the city's southwestern district. Empty streets, buildings choked with encroaching forest. I sighed, wiped sweat from my flushed cheeks. The memory was brief. A taste. But they would only strengthen the closer I got to Kholnagara.

"A bad one, I think. You should not have taken this assignment, Anusha."

"I go where the Raj commands."

"The Raj doesn't know your past lives, and doesn't understand the connection you have to this place. Your memories could compromise the mission. You should have requested a different one."

"And appear weak? In front of the *Raj*?"

"It's not weakness, Anusha. You get too involved down there and your memories could overwhelm you."

"Let them. I'll finish this job regardless," I said, even though my forehead throbbed with another dull ache. "Besides, I have you and Neela and the rest of the team to back me up. I'll be fine."

Prasad didn't look convinced. "In all my lives, past and present, you are the most stubborn woman I have ever met."

He sighed heavily through his mustache and offered me a vial of rasayan. I refused. I always refused.

"It'll help you forget," he said. "If only for a little while."

I nodded, struggling against the lingering stink of chemicals. "I know. But I can handle this."

He frowned in a good-natured sort of way. We'd had this discussion numerous times, always ending it the same way. I had long ago stopped calling rasayan a "crutch for weak mantriks," but that didn't mean I had stopped believing it.

"You'll think differently when you're older," Prasad said, as if reading my thoughts. "Trust me."

I could read him pretty well, too. He couldn't completely conceal the sadness in his voice.



This is what happens when a mantrik casts a spell: light, and shadow, and color. Matter is moved, transformed, manipulated. Energy is created, molded into shields and arrows, bolts of lightning, tongues of fire. Things happen. Spectacularly.

But magic has two parts. There's the energy that powers a spell, and the waste it leaves behind. Dross. Rogue magic. It falls from fingertips like ash, or drips like candle wax,

or sloughs off like dead flesh. But it's all the same: dark and deadly, a poison to anything it touches.

Magic has to be controlled. The everyday stuff is wrapped in tech, with barriers and dampeners built into the machinery that activates the spell. But mantriks don't need tech. Our magic is raw, summoned up with a command. We use siphons to suck up the rogue magic, dispel it, make it safe.

Without a siphon, the rogue magic will seep into nearby objects or, more likely, catch a ride on an updraft. When enough accumulates, it eats away at the barrier than separates our world from that of the gods. It creates a hole. A skymouth.

It's up to suppressors like me and Prasad to prevent skymouths from forming. The gods don't belong in our world. The gods are hungry. They're never satisfied.

In Kholnagara, the siphons weren't working. Not a single one.



It was a long way down.

The lift rattled on braided steel cables, a thin gray line to the ground. Above us, the vimana was a golden egg hanging in the air. Its sky anchors and dampener fields made odd patterns across its hull. I could make out the tiny silhouettes of crewmembers looking down at us from the decks. Gun ports winked as cannon and vajra were locked into place.

Prasad sucked down another vial of rasayan. That brought the count to three, or would have if I hadn't known he spiked his drinks. "You drink too much rasayan," I scolded.

"I drink enough," he said.

"Enough for what?"

"Enough to feel normal. Enough to quiet the memories by day and keep my dreams empty at night. Enough to sustain me through old age." He smiled weakly and leaned against the lift. "It isn't easy to age as a mantrik, Anusha. The magic fades, but the memories never do. Hopefully this is the last life my soul will experience. Death will bring release. But until then, rasayan will be my comfort."

I listened to the somber click-clack of machinery as the lift continued its steady descent. "And what if this life isn't your last...?"

"Then the world is crueller than even my vast experience would lead me to believe." He went quiet, as if the idea didn't bear further thought.

I didn't blame him. I had been reliving the burning of Kholnagara all morning. I didn't want to know what horrors Prasad saw whenever he closed his eyes.



The team waiting for us on the ground was made up of soldiers, not mantriks. All five of them snapped cartridges into their rifles, keeping their distance from Neela, the blademoother. They were right to be cautious. Neela paced like a caged tiger, scowling, tulwars drawn. The suppressors had deployed with Prasad and me before. They knew better than to agitate a blademoother—and doubly so if that blademoother was Neela.

"This place stinks of gods," she said as the lift kissed the paving stones.

I wrinkled my nose. The air felt unnaturally thin for our altitude, and the breeze carried an unusual smell. Copper, saltwater, ash. The ashen smell seemed particularly strong. "I think you're right, Neela."

She grimaced. "I know gods when I smell them."

"Hopefully their smell is all we'll get from them today."

"Hope all you like," she said. "I just want to cut something."

Prasad helped me out of the lift. I was weighed down with siphons; tubes and thuribles hung on chains around my waist, clattering against one another and the thin metal symbols sewn into my leather armor. Prasad was far less encumbered. His waning powers increased his faith in firearms. Two heavy revolvers were holstered where siphons once hung. A pouch around his neck held the few pieces of tech he relied on for communication and defense.

He held my hand tighter than necessary. I soon understood why. Another memory washed over me, and I shuddered at the force and the heat of it. A child reached for me, tiny fingers clawing at the air in desperation. I heard coughing and smoke-choked screams. I saw fires that didn't stop, only grew, swallowing up living and dead alike. Firethrowers hissed, spitting more flames through narrow nozzles. Purgation squads were everywhere, herding people into hungry red mouths.

Someone cried out, and I realized it was me. The others were looking at me.

"Apologies," I said breathlessly.

"I don't like this place, Anusha," Prasad whispered.

"Nor I," I confessed.

"You're certain you can handle this?" I don't think I remember him so nervous. He flexed his hands helplessly, kept his voice low. "This team relies more and more on *you*. And if you're not at your best—"

"I'll be fine," I said. Behind me, the lift trembled and retracted back into the vimana's hull. I addressed the others. "We've got a citywide siphon failure here. Odds are this isn't an accident. If we find the source of the trouble quickly, we can shut it down before a skymouth opens up. This is a big district, and the forest's taken over a good portion of it," I said, and took a deep breath. "But I've been here before. In a past life. Stay close, and you won't get lost."

"Weapons at the ready," Prasad added, drawing his pistols.

Neela grinned.



There was definitely something wrong with the air. It was thin in some places, thick in others. The sensation shifted, rippled. It was disorienting. Rogue magic had the habit of hanging in the air like dust motes in a sunbeam. We were probably surrounded by the stuff, even though we couldn't see it.

I prepared a barrier enchantment, a simple protective spell. It rose around us in a transparent dome of energy that distorted the buildings around us like mirages.

My siphons didn't react.

The rogue magic from the spell lingered above the ground, a ribbon of gray and black and pale, sickly green. It looked very much like a tendril of smoke, which aggravated my memories once more. They tugged at me, but I fought them down, clenching my jaw until my teeth ached.

But then the rogue magic did something I had never seen before. It slithered away from me. Almost as if pulled.

Prasad looked at me, puzzled. "Anusha...?"

"Follow it," I said.

"You sure?"

Neela had already started pounding after it, and I took off behind her despite the weight of the siphons. "Come on!" I shouted. "It'll take us straight to the source of Kholnagara's problems, I can feel it. And stay inside the barrier!"

Every footstep took me deeper into a world I recognized. The memories were becoming more vivid, more real. The past was superimposing itself on the present. Shimmery outlines of buildings as they once were clung to the gutted, overgrown ruins. Shades of people long dead filled the streets. My life and my past life were being lived at the same time. And though it hurt to remember the district of the past, it hurt even more to fight it. So I tolerated the memories. Worked with them.

I jogged confidently down the streets, keeping steady pace with the ribbon of rogue magic. Then I realized where it was headed and I stopped.

"It's a block away. There's an old ashram there. I... I can feel where the skymouth is forming."



The ashram was in better shape than the buildings surrounding it. Through the haze of memory, I could see that half the roof was gone, a tree grown up through the third floor. But the foundations were strong, and the walls were unbowed. "I remember this place," I said slowly to Prasad. Ghostly families were running toward it, parents clutching for their children, pulling at them. The spirits of long-extinguished fires licked at their heels. I frowned, coughed on smoke that wasn't there. "Many people hid here to escape the fires. But the purgation squads found them. They found everyone."

"They were sick," Prasad said, putting a hand on my shoulder. "The Raj in those days—"

"I *know* what the Raj did in those days, Prasad." I said, a little harsher than I intended. I was starting to feel the flames as well as see them. I coughed again. "Medicine wasn't what it is today. Plagues had to be burned away before they spread. Burned at the source. Even if that meant—"

Neela whistled from the doorstep. "We going in?"

I waved her away. "Me first," I said, keeping my voice low. I was growing impatient. I resisted the urge to just kick the door down and be done with it. The stink of copper and saltwater overwhelmed the memory of the smells from the chemical flames. But I focused. Maintained caution. "No one goes inside until I give the go-ahead."

Neela nodded. Behind me, Prasad whispered a few quiet orders, and the rest of the suppressors trained their firearms at the ashram's windows. I tried the door. It moved easily.

With a quiet chant, I poured a detection spell through the doorway, a liquid light that spilled from my outstretched hand onto the floor. As the spell rippled an all-clear, the rogue magic it produced crackled in black sparks. Again, my siphons did nothing. The sparks rose and disappeared between the cracks in the ceiling.

I nodded, and Neela followed me inside. Prasad positioned himself in the doorway.

The ashram was strewn with leaves and garbage. Animal bones. Guttled siphons. Empty vials of rasayan. Prasad rolled one of the orange-stained bottles aside with his foot. He didn't say a word but spoke volumes with a frown and the sound of his pistol being cocked.

At the ground level, the ashram was divided into two large rooms. Much of the wall dividing the two had been torn down, roots and debris everywhere. I could see a table piled with books on the other side. Real objects. My memories painted more furniture into the scene, and huddled bodies, and fire.

I went to the table. There were other things here, real things: an overturned chair, a squat bookshelf, a washbasin. An empty oil lamp hung from the ceiling, diagrams from nails in the walls. There were notebooks everywhere, and earmarked texts, and tightly rolled scrolls. I was shocked by the quantity. The content. These were dangerous ideas. Suicidal ones. The notes' author had scrawled his name alongside his findings: Manjeet Kalibhat. I didn't know who he was, but I could tell he was a mantrik, and understood what he had been looking for. I spilled the research on the floor, furious.

"Prasad," I hissed. "Alert *Daybreak's* captain. Tell him to pull anchors and wheel the vimana around, weapons aiming this way."

He nodded and pulled out a spherical communicator. He was whispering into it as he hurried outside. He could tell from the urgency in my voice that it was bad. But maybe I just didn't want him to see what I had found.

Kalibhat was trying to find release from the cycle of lives. Artificially. And if the notes were to be believed, release required summoning gods.

Neela crept back down from the stairs. "Second floor's empty," she said. "Third floor... I heard chanting. And something else. Something silent, but..." Her face contorted as she fought to explain. "Heavy. Like a sound you feel but don't hear. Permission to strike?"

"Yes," I said, although I was afraid of what we would find upstairs. And I was growing hotter.

Neela rushed back up, aggressive, incautious. As she reached the top, a concussive blast of magic knocked her off her feet. I popped my head up and screamed a spell of my own. A bearded man stood at the top of the staircase and tried to ward off my spell with an

upturned palm. The magic swirled like a cloud of glowing hornets swarming around him. He tried backing away, but the moment he got too close to the window the suppressors fired a few warning shots and he stumbled back toward me. As he managed to clear away my spell, Neela pounced.

She knocked him backward. Sat on his chest with a tulwar jammed into the floor on either side of his face. The man was breathing heavily, but didn't dare struggle. "Say the word. I'll finish him in one slice."

I looked down at Kalibhat's face. His beard was unkempt, his hair graying, his skin lined and sagging. He tried remaining impassive, but I recognized the look in his eyes. Sadness. Just like Prasad.

"Keep him pinned." I winced. The memories were stronger. Images and heat and emotions. Fear and anger. But still I focused. I had a job to do. I would not fail the Raj.

The room was dominated with a siphon unlike any I had ever seen. Large as a baby elephant, a patchwork of metal plates. The turbines inside were churning furiously, creating a low throb around it—Neela's silent, tangible sound. But the giant siphon was doing more than collecting rogue magic. It was funneling it upward, into a patch of sky just above the ashram where the roof had been torn away. From this angle it was clear how wrong the sky looked. Almost wrinkled, like old paper.

I pulled a null spike free from a tube at my back. It was a powerful piece of equipment, capable of counteracting most spells or shutting down technology. I jammed it into the siphon. Within moments, the throbbing slowed to a shudder, and the air grew lighter. My own siphons clattered to life then, quietly picking up the room's ambient rogue magic. Then I approached our captive once more.

"Manjeet Kalibhat," I said. "By the authority of the Raj, I place you under arrest for the misuse of magical abilities, the improper disposal of rogue magic, and the willful attempt to open a skymouth over Kholnagara."

He said nothing, but managed a small smile.

"I saw your notes. Think you're clever?" I spat. I thought about what Prasad had said earlier. "You had to end it all here and now, like *this*? You're a mantrik. For all you know, this is the last life your soul will experience."

"Come now, child. You don't believe that," he said, his voice low and rasping. "I've been a mantrik before, in a past life. There *is* no end. The cycle continues, over, and over, and over. Why? Progress? Enlightenment? You know as well as I that the lives we live have no

relation to those in our past! One life you're a thief, the next you're a nobleman. No reward. No punishment. Just the cycle.

"I've experienced pain, child. And I have seen and done *terrible* things," he said. His eyes began to water. "Never again. Never again. I've found a way to break the cycle. I've summoned a god to take me away. To pass through the barrier between worlds... release!"

"And once the god has taken you away, what happens next? What happens to the city? You irresponsible *idiot*! There are people living here! Thousands of them! You really think a god is going to be content ferrying you from one world to the next?"

His face twisted into a hateful frown. "We are mantriks, child. We give so much to the Raj, and for what? To retire when our magic's gone dry? To live with several dozen lives' worth of memories banging around in our heads? We deserve better." He relaxed. "I'm not the first mantrik that's tried to break the cycle. And you can be sure I won't be the last."

"I can stop them as easily as I've stopped you."

"Can you? Does it matter?" He smiled again, more confident now. "You haven't stopped anything, child. I've already succeeded."

He wasn't looking at me anymore. He stared past me. "Release at last..."

The skymouth yawned.

An alien sky of red and lavender glowed beyond the hole. It looked like dawn or sunset, only brighter, and speckled with multicolored stars like chunks of polished tourmaline. I held my breath. The gods took all manner of monstrous forms. There was no telling what would try to force its way out.

I didn't have to wait long. From the skymouth emerged a god of many arms and many eyes. Half a dozen long, muscular tentacles squirmed free. Each bulged with glistening blue-black eyes, unblinking and expressionless. Chitinous barbs lined the tentacles' undersides. The arms probed the opening, grasping at the air as if trying to haul itself out. Electricity discharged along the edges of the skymouth. Something rumbled like the gnashing of monstrous teeth.

I should have been repulsed, awestruck, even terrified. But my memories had been conjuring up far worse scenes, and the god only served as a fleeting distraction. I watched *Daybreak* unleash two decks' worth of cannon and vajra, filling the sky with exploding shells and crackling arcs of energy. The tentacles writhed, whipping wildly at the projectiles, reaching for the vimana itself. Then came the second thunderous salvo.

I hoped it would be enough. Without the siphon to funnel rogue magic into it, the barrier would knit itself back together. But that would take time. Fifteen, twenty minutes. The god couldn't be allowed to slip free.

But that was up there. Down in the ashram my world was being consumed with a fire that only I could see, filling up with smoke and ash and burning flesh. Anger flashed hot across my eyes, turning my mouth into a sneer. "You'll get no release today, traitor." Magic coursed up my right arm in rippling bands of pink and orange. "Neela, stand aside."

The blademothers obeyed, reluctantly. Kalibhat tried to sit up. I didn't give him a chance.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"Sparing you the blades."

I extended my hand. The bands of magic slipped off my arm and latched on to Kalibhat. Pinning him. Gagging him. And while the magic held the traitor tight, alternating bands of ashen rogue magic crumbled away. My siphons were humming now, their slats glowing blue and orange, and floating about my waist on their chains. I could hear choking sobs, but they weren't coming from Kalibhat.

My head throbbed. My eyes watered. My ears filled with the teakettle whine of firethrowers building pressure, a whump and hiss, a roar of flames. Kalibhat writhed at my feet. Cannon and vajra boomed and flared overhead, but I was deaf to nearly everything but the sounds of my past life. I was completely consumed, and I didn't even care.

I turned my back to leave. Ordered Neela to follow.

Neela looked shocked.

"Not a word," I said. Curt and clipped. "Mantriks serve the Raj. We make the Empire strong. Kalibhat and his discovery could undermine everything."

"A quick death, then," she said. "Not this."

"He deserves worse."

"But you're—"

"Loyal to the Raj. And *strong*." I wiped the sweat from my brow. "The strong don't need release."

Bones and empty vials crunched underfoot. I pushed my way outside, past Prasad, who nearly dropped a vial of his own. I scowled. He tried saying something in reply, but I couldn't hear him over the crackle of flames, the hiss of chemicals, and the screams of burning people.

Prasad had to repeat my name several times before I turned to him. "Anusha! The skymouth—"

"—Won't be a problem. I shut down the source." Crackle. Hiss. Scream.

"And the man we saw? At the window, the man—"

"Guilty. Weak." Every scream had a face. "Unclean."

Prasad narrowed his eyes. "We have to get you away from here. The memories are overpowering you."

"No. There's still work to be done. For the Raj."

My fingers wrapped around a firethrower that wasn't really there.

Magic pulsed along my fingertips. And memory became reality, and I summoned up fire.

I engulfed the building in flames.



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**Author's Note:** The nature of souls is a common theme in my fiction. In this particular story, I wanted to explore the soul in terms of reincarnation, and I was strongly inspired by Indian culture and ideas. The story's title, 'Moksha,' is a word from Indian religions meaning "release"—specifically release from the cycle of death and rebirth.

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**Andrew Kaye** is a writer, editor, and cartoonist from the suburban wilderness of Northern Virginia, where he lives with his wife, his three children, and a large empty space in the basement that should probably be filled with a robot or something. You can find him lurking in his usual haunt on Twitter: @andrewkaye.

# The White Snake

Laurie Tom

**Y**ou didn't know me the second time you said "Hello." You couldn't have known we'd met before, because people don't believe in spirits in this modern day. Everything is decided, neatly parceled into little bits of what is considered possible and what is not. I am just a myth. But when I look at you, gazing back at me from your seat beside my hospital bed, I know what is real. We are real, what we share is real, and I am dying.

You try to comfort me, fluff my pillow, and ask if you can get me something to drink, and I can't help but feel touched by your compassion. You have always been a gentle man. That was what drew me to you the first time we met. You couldn't have known what your actions had meant to a little white snake.

If you still have that gentleness in you, listen to me now. Please. I know you don't want to believe, but you have to accept.

I was not born in this country of yours but of a rushing stream in a land its people call the Middle Kingdom. My kind minds the ways of our common cousins and no man can tell the difference if he does not know us well. Most of the spiritfolk remained in the old country, but being a small and curious thing I sailed east across the ocean with the emigrants and landed here, on the land of your people.

At heart, people here are not so different from people there. You grow fields of wheat instead of fields of rice. That doesn't matter. You still eat. But you do not have the history of believing in us. The people of the Middle Kingdom know us, in the form of superstition if nothing else. Your people have never heard of us at all. But I didn't mind. I was only a snake.

You remember the day we met, don't you? It's only a childhood memory to you, if that at all. Some boys thought to make sport of the strange creature they found in the fields. White, but not albino, it didn't look like anything they had seen before. Of course they were curious. Of course they wanted to catch it. Even back in the old country boys did such things, but I did not expect to be caught.

Then you came. You were only a child yourself and you drove them back, yelled for them to leave. They scowled and pouted, but they scattered, and you turned to look at me.

"Hello," you said. "You can go now."

You could not have understood the thanks in my voice. To your ears my gratitude was nothing but a hiss, but I basked in your compassion as readily as I would have the sun.

Seldom does a spirit find itself indebted to a man, but never does one forget to repay what it owes.

I watched you as you grew from boy to man, and I made good on my debt. When you stayed up nights to study I was the one who gathered your things for you so they'd be ready in the morning. That day you wanted lunch but found yourself a quarter short—I placed that coin on the sidewalk where you would find it. A snake could not do very much, even one a bit brighter than the rest, but I tried.

The problem was I wanted more.

You see, I came to know you, your strengths and your faults, and I wanted to be able to be with you without having to hide in the cracks and shadows. I wanted to see you smile at me and know me for who I am.

So I shed my scales, coated my head with hair, and grew limbs from my body in order to resemble a human being. I thought you might not have liked me because I could only look like the people who come from my country, but you didn't care that my eyes were brown instead of blue, or that my hair was black instead of straw. You were as kind to the woman as you were to the snake.

Though they seem brief now, I do not regret the twenty years spent with you. You cannot know the price my kind pays to maintain a human shape. We can never stay long, as if our lives must be further shorn beyond the longevity we have already lost. Disease has wracked my body in a way that would have been impossible but twenty years ago. But I would not change my mind.

My only wish is that you would understand me. We shared so much; life, love, and children, and yet you will never know the whole of me. You don't believe in spirits and think my stories are flights of fancy. You, who have been kind to me in so many ways, are the source of the only cruelty I cannot overcome.

But love forgives, love forgets, and I have long accepted you for what you are. Soon, now, you will have to accept me for what I am.

I tried to tell you that I wasn't an ordinary girl.

What will you say when I pass on and you see not the body of a woman, but a coiled little serpent with shining marble scales?



**Laurie Tom** is a third generation Chinese American living in the southern California area. She's been entranced by science fiction and fantasy since childhood and has never been able to stop visiting other worlds. Her work has also appeared in venues such as *Crossed Genres*, *Galaxy's Edge*, and *Penumbra*.

# Tempest Fugit

Christine Borne

Captain Lawson stood in front of the wall-sized painting of the Battle of Melusinae, where he'd died.

He did not hear the wind blowing or the chilled waves pounding the rocks far below the inn. He did not hear Madame Shirley, the proprietor of this place, speaking to him, as she usually was or the lead crystal glasses clinking with rough chips of ice and fingers of gin.

Captain Lawson was too busy trying to understand where they were all going, his men—the men he'd commanded in that ill-fated battle, now so many years ago.

Captain Lawson had spent his youth the same way all young men did: dreaming and wondering about the mysteries of the world. Why nothing invigorated him like sea air, why women always smelled so good, where the spirit went after a man died—but it had all come to mean nothing, in the end. After all, *he'd* died, and he hadn't gone anywhere, had he? Except back to this inn, where he and his men had spent their last night before they set sail for Melusinae, when they were hard, ruddy-faced, blood-filled *men*.

The captain absentmindedly palmed a loose finial on the back of his chair. It was getting harder to hold onto solid objects now. That was one of the things that had surprised him most when he was freshly dead—that he and his men could still touch things. That was probably why they'd all come back here, to the Inn of the High Cliff. There were lots of opportunities for touching.

The inn had provided Captain Lawson and his men with much comfort over the years. They'd first arrived when the Madame's great grandmother—or was it her great-great grandmother, or one still greater?—had been the proprietor here. He'd seen many ladies come and go, step in the front door veiled in a rosy blush of innocence and be carried out, wizened and broken, on a bier. He remembered the Madame on the day of her birth, though now her hair was grey and her breasts lay like shriveled potatoes atop her dark corset.

The Madame hadn't hired a new girl in a while now, but exactly how long he didn't know. Business wasn't what it used to be, she said.

But why? The captain squinted his eyes at the painting, at the thick green whorls of oily sea. His eyes focused and unfocused rapidly, as if he was trying to trick himself into seeing a movement that he knew wasn't really there.

Melusinae. A place of such horrors in his youth. It was to the port of Melusinae that the Northerners had stolen so many of his people's women, sold them into slavery to fat, greedy men with too many jewels and too few scruples. Great grandmothers of girls who worked here now. He wondered if they knew that, knew the degradation their ancestors had known at the hands of these brutes.

Judging by the casual indifference with which these young little birds regarded the painting, he thought they must not.

Once, not long ago, he had perhaps gotten too rough with one of Shirley's girls, pinning her to the bed while telling her, in gruesome detail, what he would have done to her if he'd been one of those Northern slave masters. She'd squealed like a trapped piglet and wept and later Shirley had scolded him. But underneath his apology he still felt glad that although he was now too insubstantial to properly kill a man, he could still overpower a small, naive girl, still make her listen to him when he spoke.

Back when this painting was commissioned, right after the war, no one was even willing to say the name Melusinae aloud. The painting had cast a pall over the room when it was first done, as if the room was stacked with three thousand corpses. Certain normal topics of conversation were avoided out of reverence. Grown men would take their caps off in its presence, and Captain Lawson could still detect the smudge where a widow had thrown herself against it, howling with grief.

Captain Lawson remembered the painter's face but not his name. A thin, pale fellow, womanish-looking almost. There were some folk who said he was a ghost himself, that he'd been at the battle, but Captain Lawson didn't remember seeing him there.

Melusinae had boasted few survivors, and neither he nor (to his knowledge) any of his men had discussed the battle in any great detail since they'd returned. Still, the little fellow had gotten everything right: there were the orange billows of fire, bright and hot as Captain Lawson remembered them. And there was Captain Lawson himself, arrested in time, arm raised, shouting orders to his men as the frigate rocked sharply leeward—he'd been dimly aware at that moment of the *Trafalgar*, next to his own ship, bursting into flame—and then his last full memory: the cannon fire burst onto the deck, splitting his ship in two...

After that, it was all just fragments: that quiet feeling of sinking, of *loosening*, as his blood drained into the green sea. The deep blue blackness that dimmed, brightened, dimmed, as if on the breath of some unseen leviathan. And then the sudden feeling of rising, rising, skimming the water, voices coming closer... and then the faces of those long-ago girls as they stood at the window, stock—still as they watched his men stream up the side of the cliff,

pulling themselves over the edge with wild-eyed desperation, the dank, drowned souls clawing toward warm, fluttering hearts.

A dull smack on the back of his head jolted him out of his reverie. "Are you going to have a drink, or aren't you?"

Madame Shirley stood behind him, rocking a sapphire-blue bottle back and forth in her hand; the liquid inside sloshed and churned like the sea below.

"What?" he said stupidly, although he'd heard her perfectly well. With a shiver of panic he wondered if he would soon lose his ability to taste gin, too.

The Madame frowned, then went back behind the bar and started filling a glass for him. Filling it too full, he could see. She bent her head over it and her once-smooth, once-white neck turned into an accordion of red turkey wrinkles. Her eye, the one not covered by the stark shock of grey hair that fell over her face like a sagging, threadbare sail, glanced upward at him. She knew what he was thinking. How could she not? Since she had stopped entertaining his men personally, she and the captain had become the closest of companions. There was something that happened to a woman, around the time her hair begins to turn grey. Something that made her more like a man, wiser, easier to talk to. Captain Lawson was grateful for it and frequently wished he would've understood this while he was alive.

She leaned over the bar, pressing the drink into his hand. "I said, here's your drink, Captain."

He took it, ducking his face close to the glass, breathing in deeply through his mouth. Of course, he could not really eat or drink anything. Smell and taste were perhaps the ghostliest of human senses, better appreciated by the dead than by living men. A dead man, for instance, could last a week on a single glass of gin just by inhaling its essence. He'd once been proud of this, as if he'd earned a secret privilege by passing through the harbor of death. But today Captain Lawson would have sold his stripes for a real drink. Today more than any other day in the ages since he'd been stuck on this cliff he felt the weight of this particular sorrow clench around his heart like a lobster's claw.

Madame Shirley took note. She was no longer young and pretty enough to distract him properly, but perhaps she could cheer him a little. "You know," she said. "After Melusinae, when all of you old dogs started showing up at her door, my great Granny figured she was just going to have to change her business model. I mean, what living man would want to come here and mess around with a few pretty girls with all you dead-and-gone fellows hanging around?"

Captain Lawson smirked. "I remember."

"And for a while, she was right as rain. Business was bad, wasn't it? But then word got around and by gum, she had to start turning fellows away."

"Sure she did. Before she got the idea that she could double her profits selling tickets."

Madame chuckled. "Granny was a consummate businesswoman, so they say. I'll give her that."

They exchanged polite, reminiscent smiles for a moment, and then, to the Madame's chagrin, the captain drifted back to the painting. He squinted at it, listening almost—as if he were expecting a bolt of lightning to flash across its surface and illuminate everything he still did not understand.

"Shirley," he said quietly. "Why are all of my men leaving?"

Madame Shirley regarded him. He was starting to look more and more like a broken old grandfather, lost and forgotten in a time that belonged to younger men. A sudden wave of sadness pushed her gaze aside, back toward the bar. She pretended to be busy wiping up a spill. Shirley hadn't wanted him to ask this question, and she hadn't wanted to answer it. She had hoped the Captain would have figured it out himself.

"Well," she said slowly. "I expect it's because of the Tempest Fugit."

The finial that Captain Lawson was fidgeting with came off in his hand. He made to throw it at the ground but faltered, thinking better and attempted instead to pocket it. The knob fell to the ground with a loud knock and the man—the live man—sitting next to Captain Lawson jumped up, spilling his drink.

"That's it!" the man shouted, though his voice trembled. "I just can't come here anymore—"

"Now sit down, Mr. Ballard, and stop talking nonsense," said Madame. "You know very well that there's nowhere else to drink for miles around. Unless you want to take a gamble on that swill Barney Madson's got going in his cellar."

She smiled, refilled his glass, and nudged it toward him.

Ballard eyed the drink, then cast a furtive glance to the seat to his left, toward Captain Lawson. On any other day, he probably would have stayed, but he had started drinking early that morning and was fortified with spirits.

"I think I will, Madame. I think I will take a chance on Madson's. That is, until you decide once and for all to get rid of all these damned dead-and-gones—"

The wall of freezing air that hit him was enough to throw Ballard off his barstool and onto the floor.

Madame just sighed, watching the spectral form of Captain Lawson pummel the man with fists that could not really do much harm to living flesh. Can't take the salt out of a sailor, she thought, and not for the first time. That was the problem with having died in battle, she supposed.

"Now, Captain, that's about enough," she said, as Ballard's whimpers grew more pathetic. Her back was turned and she was adjusting a stack of bar towels beneath the register.

The truth was, though, that the lack of whooping and cheering that would normally accompany such a spectacular bar brawl disturbed her. Lawson and his men were no longer even a curiosity worthy of a cheap tour book. Half of her customers could not even see the ghostly sailors anymore, and the other half... well, there was no other half. The other half were the customers gave up coming, who had moved away, to better, happier places in the new country, taking their troubles with their wives, their dissatisfaction with their jobs, and their money with them.

Only she and the girls could truly see them now, the old dead-and-gones, in that same way only girls and women can truly see the very young.

When she heard the door slam, Madame Shirley finally looked up.

There's one paying customer I'll never see again, she thought. "Well you certainly taught him a thing or two—"

But instead of standing before her, inflated with the exhilaration of the fight, Captain Lawson was sagging against the frigid windowpane, peering out at his men as they jumped, one by one, off the cliff.

She came around the bar and stood near him. Just beyond the salt-spattered glass, there was a line of ghostly sailors, one after the other diving headfirst off the edge of the cliff into the sea below. How awful this must be for him to watch.

"You still have that wonderful fragrance," he said without looking at her.

His voice was so soft and hoarse, so unrecognizable. "Like sweet peas in my poor old mother's garden."

Madame felt a tear creep into the lines around her eyes, as a memory shimmered unbidden to her mind—the last time she had seen him looking so vulnerable, nearly forty years ago. The last time he had made love to her. Or the nearest thing to it, that is. She was suddenly flooded with sorrow for the man, whose world had passed out of being more than 300 years ago.

"Your grandmother smelled the same way," he said. "And her grandmother before her. There was one of them, in there, had the most beautiful black hair—putting your face right in

it, you felt like you'd sunk into the Elysian fields and you never wanted to come out. But I expect it's all rotted away now, and her lovely white flesh with it."

And then suddenly, just like a river diverted, her sorrow turned to such a magnanimous, dizzying terror that for an instant Madame felt it was she who was diving headfirst off the cliff.

Captain Lawson, however, took no notice.

"There goes Ensign McAuliffe," he said. "Came from a shipwright's family on the Old Coast. And see three behind him there? I apprenticed with his great-grandfather. Good fellow, that old man. It's a terrible pity I can't remember his name now..."

"Why don't you go out to them?" she asked. She hoped the question sounded compassionate. She hoped he couldn't hear what she was thinking beneath it: why don't you go out to them, and maybe they'll convince you it's the right thing, to let the *Tempest Fugit* take you, too.

"I'm sorry about your business, Shirley," he said.

"Oh, Captain—" she faltered. The *Tempest Fugit*. It only comes every 300 years, she thought. Don't curse yourself to 300 more years of this... this old place won't be here by then, and where will you be? "I suppose... I suppose this old place is dying anyway, and I don't have any daughters to pass it onto. I suppose places just have their time."

"I suppose they do."

Madame cast a furtive glance toward the painting of the Battle of Melusinae. The largest sea battle in the history of the known world, they said. A thousand ships, and this man here, Captain Lawson, the hero at the head of it all, who died making these shores safe against the insidious slave masters to the North.

And it had been wonderful. The war had ushered in a new era of peace and prosperity that had lasted for—how long? A hundred years? Two hundred? A long time, measured against any man's life. People had paid homage to the dead at Melusinae for quite a long time. But it had been so long since then, and so many generations from both countries had lived and died, and since then new countries had been discovered, new contraptions invented, new wars had been fought over different things that Captain Lawson and his men wouldn't have even conceived of in their own time. It had been so long ago now that the ideals Captain Lawson had fought and died for were starting to crumble once again, and crumble into different directions this time. Directions that he should never have known about, because he should have long ago been eaten by the fishes in his watery grave.

She'd grown up knowing all the stories, all the folklore. But the young people today didn't seem to, the young people growing up in the town—no, it wasn't a town anymore, but a city with strange city ways of doing things, new laws and permits and pieces of paper that said you couldn't serve liquor within city boundaries anymore. Captain Lawson should have been immortalized in tall tales, as every hero deserves to be. He should never have been subjected to a world that had forgotten him.

"No!"

Madame and the Captain spun around. A young woman with masses of red curls was thundering down the stairs at the end of the bar, half falling on the banister which she clutched in one pale, desperate hand. Her other hand clutched at the air, toward the handsome, spectral sailor who had turned his back toward her. Her violet shift was rent at the shoulder, her face contorted with grief.

"No, Lincoln, please—Please don't go—"

"Lucy—" Madame rushed to the girl's side.

"Oh, Madame, please," the girl sobbed, pitching herself into the older woman's arms.

"Please tell him not to go."

Madame made soothing noises and patted the girl's back. What a trifling, fragile creature this live girl was, like a baby bird fallen from a nest.

"With all due respect, Madame," said the man. "I did explain to her why I—why I have to."

Lucy shuddered violently. "All he said, Madame, was some nonsense about the slow march of time, about the wind and sea eating him all up in its jaws like a great big sea monster. A—a *Tempest Phooey*, he called it! Well I never even heard of such a thing!"

Madame looked up at the man. Lincoln Macmaster, Captain Lawson's faithful second in command. He had still not turned, was still facing the front window and the cliff beyond it. Another shadowy form leapt while they watched.

Captain Lawson turned back toward the painting.

"Maybe you should explain it to your captain."

Lincoln Macmaster's head dropped slightly. "Yes. I suppose I should. I owe it to him, don't I?"

"I think you do."

"That will be the end for him, too, won't it?"

Madame gripped the trembling girl, probably too tightly. "Yes. I think it will be."

Together they stared across the nearly empty bar, toward Captain Lawson hunched before the painting. There was a crack of thunder, and the lamps began to flicker and the windows rattled with wind. Captain Lawson cried out as before his eyes the green-painted sea began to roil. He leapt back in fright but then, slowly, crept closer. And then—the lightning, dazzling and dangerous, flickered across the surface of the painting, illuminating something that could not have been there before. It rose up through the cloud-daubed sky like a bloated corpse rising up from a place where it had been dined on by slow-moving and sightless creatures. It was a face. A pale, thin, almost womanish face...

Macmaster set his jaw. "It's coming," he said. "It's coming whether Captain Lawson likes it or not, and it's soon upon us." He tilted his head in that way that all sailors do, listening.

"Fearfully soon."



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**Christine Borne** is a former YA librarian, rock music archivist, and independent bookseller. In 2012 she was awarded a \$20,000 Creative Workforce Fellowship in Literature from Cuyahoga Arts and Culture, the third largest public arts grantmaking agency in the United States. She likes wiener dogs, cemeteries, and Husker Du.

# Sticks and Stones

Jarod K. Anderson

Waking up on a chipmunk's back racing through the underbrush might sound cute. It's not. Up close, chipmunks sorta smell like a dumpster fire. Plus, the first time you see a parasite, a semi-translucent tube sock full of dark blood the size of your forearm, emerge from the fur and then disappear like a breaching whale, you lose all thought of Alvin, Simon, and Theodor.

The moment I opened my eyes, I grabbed two fists full of wire-thick hair and held on for dear life. Those first few seconds were a bit fuzzy. I registered the shifting muscles of the creature beneath me. I felt the more mundane terror of being naked outdoors. And I was surprised by my own voice—not just at the change in pitch, but also I hadn't really screamed in sincere terror since I was a little boy.

I screamed for five minutes straight. I probably would have kept screaming until my lungs gave out, except that I had to switch my focus to dodging gnats the size of crows while my ride raced along the bank of a noisy little stream. That shut me up. That, plus I got a look at a spider. Just a glance. It was hanging right at face level on the underside of a rotten log. That sight was all the motivation I needed to want to shrink down to nothing and never make a sound again.

I'm not sure if there is a limited amount of fear in a human body and I used up all of mine, or if a person really can get used to anything; whichever the case, eventually I calmed down enough to start asking some obvious questions. Mainly, how does a bank teller in Granville, Ohio, go from taking his lunch break to being a naked rodent cowboy in a world of giant nightmares? Also, more importantly, how does he get back again?

I remembered clocking out. I left the bank and walked down to my usual coffee place on West Broadway. Onion bagel. Medium mocha. That scrawny blonde barista with the thick accent tried to talk to me about sports like he does every day.

The chipmunk turned sharply and I thought my arms were going to come loose. We seemed to be going up a slope but it was hard to tell. I had no sense of direction. Everything was impossibly distant. Everything was dark and wet. Each tree and rock raced away into a dirty green blur before I could make sense of any landmarks.

Every day at the coffee shop I gave the blonde kid a nickname. He looked like he should've been too young to work. Maybe fourteen, about the age of my younger brother. I

called him Squirt, Boss, Chief. On creative days, I gave him names to match his appearance: Casper, Powder, Goldilocks, Blondie. I tried to throw in the nicknames just as he was handing me my order, but if I timed it wrong he'd ask me what I meant. I'd shrug him off or make something up. I couldn't place his accent, but English didn't seem to be his strong suit.

A burning itch just between my shoulder blades sprung up as I noticed the rose hedge looming before us like a slab of jagged twilight at the edge of the trees. The chipmunk slowed and as it did I noticed streaks of multicolored light zipping through the branches of the hedge, but I couldn't see any of them clearly.

The sensation on my upper back was building up to an electric crescendo. I wanted to reach for it, but I dreaded a sudden burst of speed from the chipmunk. I couldn't imagine what would happen to me on foot in that place. Inside the hedge, we picked our way among black-tipped thorns shot through with veins of dark green. There was no path that I could see.

I had timed my nickname wrong. The kid had forgotten my side of cream cheese, so he had time to ask me who Legolas was. I was too annoyed to make something up, so I told him.

In the center of the hedge, there was a space that was open to the sky. It was probably only six feet across, but to me it seemed like a vast courtyard. Seated on a low stone in the center was the blonde barista. He looked exactly the same as the last time I saw him, the same polo shirt and khakis, but he was surrounded by hundreds upon hundreds of tiny people. All shapes and sizes. Some were mounted on animals, like me. Others zipped through the air on a dizzying variety of wings.

Blondie looked past all the others and locked eyes with me the moment the chipmunk trotted fully into the clearing. I think he was speaking in a whisper, but his voice boomed above all the noise. His tone was businesslike.

"You guessed my nature, son of Adam. By the old laws, you are one of us now. You are seelie. You are a vassal of the duke of thorns. Be welcome."

With that, all the flitting, crawling, scampering creatures in that place all turned toward me and echoed "Be welcome" in thrumming discord. Even the chipmunk roared out the words.

I felt vomit rising into my throat but managed to fight it back. That is until I felt wings, hot and wet, erupt from my back and slump quivering against my bare shoulders. I wiped my mouth on the back of my arm and forced myself to stay upright.

"When can I go home?" I asked.

The barista's eyes narrowed.

"You are not large enough to pass for human yet," he said, then sighed. There was a smile in his eyes. "I was your size once. Perhaps in an age and an age, you will grow large enough to return."

My head swam and I felt all my joints go loose.

"Until then," he added with a smirk. "Hang in there, Shrimp."

Then, he was gone.



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Formerly, **Jarod Anderson** taught college English. Currently, he works at a foundation that raises money for a wide range of college scholarships. He writes about education by day and ghosts, monsters, and madmen by night. It's a good arrangement. Jarod's work has appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Escape Pod*, *The Colored Lens*, and elsewhere.

# The Thousand Year Tart

Charles Payseur

"**A**nd to think the biggest problem the advance critics are having is religion," Shin says, smiling as he holds the pad in his hand, scrolling through the spotlight on his play in the arts page of the planet newsfeed. "As if it matters if I use New Servitism or not. It's science fiction. The future. As if the audience won't get the implication."

For my part I nod and stir, bring the spoon up to my lips to taste it. Too sweet still, and nothing to do about it other than start over. I suppress the grimace that wants to form on my face, and keep my attention on Shin.

"Like there's anything new under the sun anyway," Shin says, putting the pad down and looking over at me. His eyes are bright green, almost glowing, the mark of his enhancement, his genius. I bear no such mark, no such destiny, except to help him, to love him. He stands and walks over, licking his lips, his eyes peering at the chocolate mixture bubbling in the pan.

"Maybe they just want something familiar," I say, knowing it will come out wrong, that I don't have his way with words. But he expects me to speak, to act the part of the public that seems so far beneath him. "Maybe they just want some frame of reference."

Shin laughs, his voice high, towering in the air like a satellite. "They're human, aren't they?" he asks, and I just stir the pot. "They're fully equipped to understand, have all the tools. I think they just don't like the message. They want God to be the robot, mechanical, logical, putting everything right with pure reason. But the God I show them is a human god, an artist suffering. That's what they're afraid of, that God's just as messed up as the rest of us, that we are all just a work of art that was made and then walked away from."

"At least you're getting a lot of press," I say, hoping it helps, that it deflects the conversation away from God and art and all those things that Shin seems to like talking about endlessly. It's his genius, I know, but sometimes it gets lonely when he seems so far above, when I just want to feel him close, to be a part of him. I stir the chocolate and he reaches down, sticks a finger in the mix, tastes it.

"Ugh," he says, his face twisting some. "Too sweet."



Rehearsals are taking place in the small studio behind our flat, a cramped space barely able to fit all twelve actors and dancers. Since they are all mechanical they don't complain. I sit in the back with jars of spices, different flours, sugars, all laid out around me. I pick up a jar of cane sugar and smell it, let the pungent sweetness work its way up my nose, as though I am applying it directly to my brain.

The mechanicals, all of them humanoid in shape, all of them completely silent at the moment, sit before Shin as he reads from the script. They are recording, I know, all of them committing Shin's instructions to memory.

A completely mechanical play has never been done before. The unions are threatening to sue, to get Shin blacklisted, but he doesn't care; he's been blacklisted a dozen times before and they always take him back, and he continues to sweep up award after award.

"Okay, now this is where the Messiah is trapped in the temple," Shin says, "and the armies have him surrounded. And all the people inside with him know they don't have enough food to eat. They cry to him for bread, but he smiles slyly." Shin demonstrates, crossing his arms over his chest and looking at them with green eyes tinged with sadness and compassion and, somehow, a boyish mischief.

"He heads to the small cooking area off stage," Shin says, and the mechanical heads don't even nod, just stare at him as he pauses for a moment. "And then, instead of bread, little tarts start appearing. More and more are passed out from the kitchen and all his followers break forth in cheers at the miracle. They eat, and they dance, and they rejoice until they fall tired and still with sleep."

I put down the sugar, pick up a bottle of nutmeg, hold it next to a bottle of cayenne. I will be cooking the tarts. It was Shin's idea that to demonstrate the miraculousness, the abundance of the Messiah's gift, the tarts should literally overflow the stage, be made to feed every member of the audience, and give them a taste. I know I am not up to Shin's vision, but he will not hear it. He wants me to cook for him, to be good enough for him, and I want it too. More than anything.

I sniff the nutmeg and cayenne together, trying to think what faith would taste like, how a miracle would sit on the tongue. There are layers to Shin's play, to the idea of the tarts, so there should be layers to the actual food. The play is about art, so the tarts must be little works of art.

"When they wake, however, they find their Messiah gone," Shin says, speaking as if the mechanicals could feel the suspense of his story. For now it the tension is mine alone, the lone person in the sea of clockwork minds.

I put down the nutmeg and pick up a bottle of cinnamon.

"They search and search," Shin says, "but only find the oven he used to make the tarts. They open it—and at this point they've wheeled it onto the stage—and find that it is still warm, that there are still tarts inside. They take them out, discover they are somehow unburned. They close it, open it again, and more tarts have appeared. It is a miracle, but the Messiah is gone."

The mechanicals listen and I wonder if I shouldn't add some animal fat to the tarts perhaps. Maybe some bacon. There has to be something that makes them transcend. That makes them truly special.

"The tarts, however," Shin says, "never stop. Every time the oven is opened there are more. The followers toss them out of the temple and the armies eat them, and instantly they are converted. The wicked empire falls as every man, woman, and child tastes the tarts. They all know that the Messiah somehow has become the tarts, that he has done it for them. They all understand and everything changes."

I wonder in some ways if the mechanicals even comprehend what it means. They are logical, literal. It's why no one has ever used them in stage productions before as more than a prop or a dancer. They are precise, yes, but it is universally agreed that they cannot act. There has never been a mechanical actor until this play, until Shin's *The Thousand Year Tart*.



The fire flits blue and orange as I adjust the settings on the ancient stove. Next to the new ranges that can boil water in seconds, that can precisely match any temperature down to a degree, the clumsiness of flames is like trying to play the piano with my toes, but Shin says the meal needs something special. I adjust the flames again and then start adding the chocolate. Baking will be easier, as long as I watch it, but even with constant attention there is the chance the chocolate will burn now and spoil everything; no one can unburn chocolate, not even Shin.

"People are saying that your play is going to be the biggest failure since the Broadway Collapse," the interviewer, some smartly dressed woman from the top aggregator, says as she looks over to me and jots something down on her pad, stylus moving dramatically. Shin, sitting at the kitchen table with her, smiles as if he's just caught her in a trap.

"People will just have to wait and see," Shin says. "I'm sure I've earned at least an honest assessment of the finished product and not shots in the dark trying to sink the ship before it sails." Shin laughs, but I know he's more serious than he lets on. Bad press is not new to him, but he always resents those who want to judge him before they've seen his plays.

"But why cast mechanicals as not just your principles, but your entire cast?" the woman asks, again making a show to write something on her pad. I stir the chocolate quickly, turn down the heat. I can smell the aroma lifting up to greet me. The chocolate is dark, which only makes it easier to burn, so I try to pay attention to it and not get distracted.

"Because mechanicals will give the same performance every time," Shin says, "and I want people to see more than just the actors on the stage. When a play is normally performed, dozens of things go wrong. Every time. There is no way to help it when using human actors, human minds. So I want to make this play as pure to my vision as possible. There will only be two human minds involved, mine and Colin's." He motions towards me but I keep my head down, keep stirring as the chocolate melts.

"And you expect this will make the play better?" the woman asks.

The chocolate is close to melting completely or burning and I quickly add some heavy cream. Keep stirring.

"I expect it will make it more meaningful," Shin says. "There will be no question as to what the audience is supposed to see. The only error could possibly come from us, the only meaning only from us. It places the pressures and the weight of the play on our shoulders alone. No diffusing responsibility out among dozens. If it fails, it will be because of us. If it succeeds, it will be because of us. It's personal that way, something I think everyone in the audience will relate to."

I keep stirring, adding more cream, but I can smell the slight burning aroma in the air. I slowly dip a finger into the pot, taste it. Ruined. I don't sigh, don't betray my disappointment. I do feel the crush of expectations. Shin's faith in me hangs like a stone around my neck. But I keep stirring, keep going.



The kitchen at the theater is huge. Shin has spared no expense in installing the old gas and flame ovens and ranges. To offset the archaic equipment are a number of mechanical aides.

They're not humanoid like the actors or dancers but instead are designed for cooking, each floating around the room, their six arms making them look like metal squids.

"Doesn't it wreck the whole point, having these here?" I ask, more because I don't feel comfortable with them around than because I don't think they're appropriate. The play is days away and I still have not perfected my recipe.

"Colin," Shin says, putting a hand on my shoulder. I feel a rush at the contact, like my whole body warms to the touch. "It is the whole point. Just as I will have mechanical players, so will you. I know your skills are great, but there's no way you can cook for two thousand people all by yourself, and having human assistants would dilute the message."

I hear him, but it hardly registers. I'm looking into his green eyes, alive with intellect. He seems like an angel flying upward, burdened by my weight.

I nod and move to the stove, turn on one of the burners, start adding chocolate to a pan. Arranged around me are jars of various sugars and creams and spices. I have a few different crusts prepared, cooled and ready. I need to find the right combination. Shin is beside me, gazing at the slowly melting chocolate.

"Don't you heat the cream before the chocolate?" he asks, and I smile, blush with embarrassment. He's no chef, but he has a point; it would be easier to heat the cream first and not the chocolate. Burning is much less likely, labor less intense.

"I thought this way would be more appropriate?" I say, hoping he doesn't hate me, doesn't think of me as the idiot I feel like. "I thought... there's a much higher chance of failing this way, for not much gain. This way the chocolate is heated directly, which changes it subtly, and I think produces a better flavor. *If* it doesn't burn."

I can't quite look at Shin to see his expression, but he takes in a small breath and then I feel his lips brush against my cheek. I want to swoon, or turn and embrace him, but just as quickly he is back away and I hear his laugh. I look over to see his green eyes glowing.

"I knew you'd be perfect for this," Shin says, and then walks back toward the stage. "Let me know how it turns out."

I remain in the kitchen, where I will perform, where Shin's vision will live or die.



The theater hops with excitement, movement, everything coming together now as Shin takes a group of investors through the motions, waving to the minimal props, the assembled actors.

"The universe is a work of art," Shin says, giving a low bow to the men and women, all of whom are dressed in shades of off-white, creating a stark contrast to the glowing colors of their eyes. All of them are enhanced, like Shin, and all are expecting something they will be able to talk about for weeks.

"And, like any work of art, its beauty comes from its peril," Shin says, "from the chance it has to fail miserably. We are taking huge risks here, in hopes of creating something very special. Thank you for bringing this vision to reality."

There is applause and some light cheering, the crowd quite pleased it seems with everything. I am sitting in the back with a small tray of tarts, tasting each one of my new creations. The play is tomorrow and I still have not decided on the recipe, but I am done cooking until tomorrow. I have samples to taste, but otherwise I tell myself I will decide tomorrow, as the play is starting. It seems best that way.

"Will you give us a preview?" one of the investors asks, eyes a fiery red. Shin shoots him a look that kills the thought, and he shakes his head. There will be no preview. The book might be done and the songs all committed to memory by the cast, who could perform them perfectly, but Shin hates previews. And besides, my part is not ready.

"You will have a chance to see what your generosity has bought tomorrow," Shin says, and the investors grumble but don't ask more.

I take a bite of a tart, roll the creamy filling over my tongue. The crust was made with bacon fat, the chocolate infused with smoked, ground chipotle pepper. I can taste the spice, the savory and the sweet bitterness of the chocolate. It's close, but seems lacking something. It's me, I know. I'm just not the artist that Shin is. Tomorrow we will all know it, but for now I keep it to myself; I want Shin to think for one more day that I am there with him, his equal.



The play starts with great fanfare and Shin kisses me on the lips, lightly, before retreating to his position, making sure everything is ready and running smoothly. In some ways his part in this is already over. He will enjoy the show from the control room, surrounded by a crew of mechanicals. My own helpers zip around the kitchen, extensions of my vision as I am an extension of Shin's.

The recipe I have is committed to memory, but I know even now that it won't be enough, that though it is probably the most delicious thing I have ever made it still falls short.

The mechanicals around me start mixing together ingredients. I don't move. There are a few things I will need to see to myself, but for the most part the mechanicals will finish the tarts, will bake them as I have programmed them to do.

On stage the drama is unfolding as the mechanical actors give their lines. I can hear them mimic emotion, pulling from recordings of all the great human actors. The words are there, and yet even I can tell that something is strange about it, not quite right. It all hinges on the climax, on the tarts, on the few human elements left to the production. I start melting the chocolate in small batches, stirring constantly.

Shin's face flashes in my mind, his eyes like stars to guide me, my hands clumsy as they stir. If I was a robot I would be testing the temperature of the chocolate, would be timing everything based on stirring speed and volume, heat and air pressure. As a human I have only my own eyes to watch the chocolate melt, my own nose to smell for the first sign of burning. But it doesn't burn, and I add the cream, keep stirring. I add the cayenne and a bit of cinnamon, the smallest amount of clove. The tart must taste of the promise the Messiah is making his people. It needs to be warm and exotic and yet familiar, nostalgic. I taste it. Almost there. Still, something is missing.

I hand off the stirring to one of the mechanicals and wonder again what could be missing. When the Messiah cooks, he becomes the tarts. I start cutting walnuts with a knife, chopping them coarsely to be added to the top of the tarts. Outside, act one is falling on the audience, the rise of the Messiah. My knife deflects off a bit of nut, and I recoil sharply but feel the bite of pain in my finger. The cut isn't deep, but I see I'm bleeding. I bring the wound to my mouth, suck the blood. The metallic tang of the blood mingles with the spice and the sweetness. My eyes widen.

Moving across the kitchen, I take one of the mechanicals waiting to watch the ovens, and start to reprogram it. There is time left, I hope. I move back to the chocolate mixture being stirred by the other mechanical, hold my finger over the pot, and squeeze it. Pain shoots up my arm as a few drops fall down into the mixture. Then I move back to a new pot, begin melting more chocolate. When it is ready I add cream, then the spices. The mechanical that I reprogrammed hovers over, waiting, and I nod to it as it reaches out a knife and cuts my arm near the wrist. Blood pools and starts to drip, and I carefully measure out some into the pot.

I keep going, and with every pot of chocolate I melt I add a bit more of myself. I wonder, strangely, if this was Shin's aim all along, if he knew that it would come to this, if he believed that I would figure it out. I wonder if this is all his will, his vision, or if there is some of mine there as well. I cannot tell. It seems impossible to distinguish what I owe to him and

what is coming from me, just from me. The blood, at least, is mine alone, and as the mechanical cuts and cuts and my arms start feeling heavy I think that might be enough.

By the time the chocolate is all ready I can't move far. I collapse to the floor and the mechanicals pour the chocolate into the shells and begin baking them. The smell is intoxicating but fading, like my vision. If I call for help now I'm fairly sure that someone would hear. Out on the stage the mechanical actors are performing, and beyond that the audience is watching, and beyond that Shin sits in the control room. But I won't stop the play, especially not now.

By the time the third act is reaching its peak the cooking is done and I can't feel my body. I can barely hear the play outside, can barely see the mechanical helpers start to cart the tarts out to be distributed around the theater. I hope that Shin gets one, up in the control room. I imagine him taking a bite, those green eyes glowing in the relative darkness of the room. I imagine a single tear escaping him, and then no more.



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**Charles Payseur** currently resides in the frozen wastes of Wisconsin with his partner and their growing herd of pets. He survives the long winters thanks to companionship, books, and more beer and cheese than is strictly healthy for him. Graduating with emphases in writing of various sorts, he now works in printing as a graphic designer. His works have appeared at *Every Day Fiction*, *Perihelion Science Fiction*, and *Dragon's Roost Press*, among others.

# How the Grail Came to the Fisher King

Sarah Avery

## I

### The Grail-Bearer

**S**ir Percival spurred the borrowed police horse as far as the corner of York Avenue and 67th, where he swung his armored bulk down from the saddle to land on the sidewalk with a clangor that stopped the startled street vendors in their tracks. Grail in hand, he ran in past the security guards at Sloan-Kettering Memorial Cancer Center, who called after him, "What room number are you visiting, sir?"

Percival tried to wait patiently, chivalrously, for the elevators, but he had traveled too far to bear waiting well. Up the stairs he ran then, clattering past oncology fellows who stood aside, shielding their styrofoam coffee cups against the risk of being jostled.

In the ICU, a nurse waylaid him and insisted that he wash his hands.

"Milady, there is a bit of a hurry."

She stared him down and said in a thick Staten Island accent, "When you're done washing, the antibacterial lotion is in this dispenser right here."

Properly purified, Sir Percival gently drew aside the curtain and entered the sanctum where the Fisher King lay. He lifted the sheet and marveled at the wound. "My lord," Percival said, "I have carried the Grail to many Fisher Kings these thousand years, but your wound is like none I have ever seen. How did you last long enough for me to reach you?"

"My thoracic surgeon is a fucking genius," said the Fisher King, and he clicked the morphine button. "Sir Peredur?"

"Peredur is fine," said the knight. "I have been Peredur. I can call you Bran, if you prefer."

"Bran's good. King Bran."

The Grail was full. The Grail was always full. Sir Peredur poured it out until the wound knit clean together under his pouring. Bran the Blessed slept with breaths deep and even, and in the morning woke rested and content.

## II

### Sir Percival And The Four Queens

**S**ir Peredur wandered out of the Intensive Care Unit into the little waiting room. Really, it was too small a waiting room for a knight in full armor to pace in, but he couldn't help himself. "It was supposed to just work," he muttered. "The story usually just works." The Grail sloshed holy water onto the carpet whenever he turned in his pacing.

Four women stood in a corner of the waiting room, discussing leukemia in hushed tones. They looked strangely familiar. Peredur made bold to speak to them. "Please pardon my impertinence, ladies, but have I not seen you four on a boat? A barge, perhaps?"

"Not us," said one of the women. "Kayaks, maybe. You do look familiar, though."

"You're priestesses of Avalon," Peredur guessed.

The women laughed. "New to Paganism, are you?" said another. "We don't claim an unbroken line. None of that grandiose stuff."

The kayak aficionado said, "Oh, I know you. You're Sir Percival."

"Peredur, at the moment, but yes."

She eyed the Grail with interest. "Peredur couldn't pull off the trick, as I recall. Try being Percival again. You have a much better rate of successful treatment as Percival."

"But the fellow's a polytheist," Peredur protested. "I don't think he has any particular need for..."

The weariest of the priestesses said, "He's a polyamorist, too. Maybe we should call in Lancelot for this whole healing shtick. Lancelot got it to work once."

Percival straightened to his full height, though his armor was very, very heavy, and he had already traveled a long way. "Any healing Lancelot can do, I can do better. All the texts agree that my heart is pure."

The women did not look especially impressed with the importance of a pure heart, but they offered him their bottled water and some edamame beans from their stash of hospital cafeteria food to eat while they huddled together.

"Give it another go," said the kayak aficionado. "New name, new Grail, new day. Call him, I don't know, Pelles or something. King of the Grail Castle. Any version of the tale will do, as long as it ends happily. He's a pragmatist. At this point, he won't mind."

So Sir Percival squared his shoulders, embraced a postmodern approach to comparative literature, and got back to work.

### III

## BYOG

The clanking of Sir Percival's armor was keeping the patients awake. The doctors nudged him aside to roll the Fisher King out for a biopsy—nudged aside Sir Percival, bearer of the Holy Grail! He kept readjusting the spelling of his name, trying different redactions of his tale, but still there was no ending in sight, happy or otherwise.

The Fisher King's wife commiserated with Percival in the waiting room. "There's no such thing as time in the ICU," she said. "Haven't you noticed how all the clocks say different things? And stat seems to mean an hour and a half. I need these blood results stat, they say. Hmph."

She wouldn't allow Sir Percival to call her the Fisher Queen, nor Lady Fisher. At being called Mistress Fisher, she snorted with laughter, and Mrs. Fisher didn't go over much better. Nonetheless, when visiting hours ended at the ICU and the Fisher King's biopsy results were as well understood as the day could make them, she invited the knight to join her and her people for dinner. Some were the King's family, some were his friends, most were loud. Before long it was simpler for Percival just to think of the lot of them as the Fishers.

The wait staff at the Indian restaurant balked for a moment when Percival set the Grail on the table. "What is this BYOB, here?" said the waiter. "We charge a corking fee."

Percival had had this problem before, on other quests. "It's not BYOB. It's BYOG."

Once the orders were placed and the Fishers had puzzled over the preliminary interpretation of the biopsy, Percival said, "The nurses welcomed me to the team. Is there going to be a tournament? I've never had to stay so long before."

The bossy woman, the one he'd started thinking of as the Queen of Kayaks, said, "You're not running out on us are you? We're in for the duration."

"I never give up on a quest!" He was a little affronted.

So they stood him to a beer and persuaded him to try some chicken tikka masala, which he quite liked.

Although he was beginning to have some doubts about the Grail, it was still full, as always, when he bluffed his way back into the ICU and knelt to keep vigil for the night. A vigil seemed the thing to do. He was in for the duration.

## IV

### The Queen's Champion Arrives At Sloan-Kettering

**O**n the third day, Sir Percival finally took off his armor. None of the families in the ICU waiting room seemed to mind the way it bent the coatrack. Their minds were all on weightier matters even than good steel plate.

It wasn't so much the weight of the armor—he'd been wearing it for centuries—but rather the problem of rust. All day, he poured and poured the Grail out over the Fisher King. "To clean things away that need cleaning away," he explained to the nurses. "I may not know much, but I know about purity. And it'll help keep the fever in check."

A familiar voice said, "Oh, you know about purity, all right. How's my second favorite prig doing?"

Percival didn't even need to look up. "Hello, Lancelot."

"Could you use a hand there?"

"A worthy knight is a humble knight," Percival said, and saying so took the sting out. "Yes, I could use a hand. But you realize, you're trying to force the patient to be the Fisher King and Sir Urry at the same time. It's hard enough just crossing redactions. I've changed the spelling of my name so many times in the past three days, I think I'm getting a touch of dyslexia, and I know I'm developing a serious case of postmodernity. Some moments, I can't even tell if I'm thinking in French or German or what. Are you sure you can handle this? Are we sure *he* can handle this?"

Lancelot examined Sir Urry, whom a hundred and ten other knights had proved unable to heal. "Everyone in the Grail Castle says he's a fighter. They talk so much about his beating the odds, you'd think they'd been wagering on him at tournaments. So, if he'll never

be healed until the best knight in the world searches his wounds, we'd better get his dressings off."

Percival swallowed his pride. He'd been second-purest after Galahad, and now he would bear being second-best after Lancelot. The story had to be bigger than he was.

The two knights gently peeled the dressing off the wound, and Lancelot whistled low in amazement.

"There's something wrong with his blood, too," Percival said. "They've been searching his wound for a while."

"Better not delay, then," said Lancelot. "Just think what a report this will make when we go home for Pentecost. If it were any knight less pure than you telling the tale, they'd never believe it."

So the knight of worldliness and the knight of purity tended the wound in the world. The wound in the world happened to be in the mortal frame of Everyman, any man, the Maimed Knight, the virtuous king, a person who knew how to think in myth, a person who was still hanging on in that terribly literal body.

## V

### The Arming Of The Hero

**T**he two knights were bleary-eyed from hours of vigil, and wound-washing, and laying on of hands. Around midday, Percival decided to confide in Lancelot. "I can't tell if it's working," he said.

"He's still with us," said Lancelot. "Things being what they are, I would say that constitutes 'working.' If we can get him through one more night, we'll know what story we're in."

Percival was as uncertain as he could stand to be about what story he was in, so he turned his attention back to the Grail. Still full, so all would be right with the world. That was what the Grail was for.

"Hey, Percival?"

"Yes, Lancelot."

"Can I hold the Grail for a minute? I always wanted to hold the Grail."

"It might not let you. It's picky."

"I know, I know. But still."

So he handed the Grail over, for the first time in centuries. "Got it?"

Lancelot beamed. "I have it. I really have it. Take a break, Percival. Get some air.

You've earned it. I'll be right here." And he started singing the Te Deum.

The knight of purity yawned and headed out to the waiting room, where the Queen of Kayaks was typing furiously at a computer terminal. Percival had certain suspicions about her.

"You're the author, aren't you?"

"Busted," said the author.

"What if I get stuck here?" he asked. "This place is starting to feel... canonical."

The bespectacled woman didn't even look away from the screen. "That's because the story you're in now is the first hit on Google for anyone who types in 'Sir Peredur.' Consider it a measure of the man you're here to help."

"In the old stories, I would just ride from incident to incident. The narrator would say everything was challenging and glorious, but it only had to be work for a sentence or two. You've got me lingering in it. Why does it have to be so hard?"

She turned to look at him then. "I think every single person here in the Grail Castle is asking that same question."

"Hope was easy when I got here. I was an innocent. What's wrong with you, that you can't write innocence without wrecking it?"

"Have a seat, kid," said the author. "When I was a girl, you were my favorite knight of the Round Table. I met you in Howard Pyle's collection of Arthurian stories, with his beautiful illustrations. Remember how you were a boy alone with your mother in the forest?"

"And I saw knights for the first time and didn't know what they were. I remember."

"I loved how you wove yourself a suit of armor from willow withes, because that was what you had to hand. You improvised, and I already admired improvisation."

"They laughed," said Percival, "when I showed up at Camelot in willow armor."

"They laughed, but the laughter bought you time, and they let you in. You were always accomplishing impossible things, because nobody had ever mentioned to you that they were impossible. Laughter, time, a way in—he could use all those things."

Percival looked at his armor, which no longer bent the coatrack double with its steel weight. The willow suit he'd made himself hung lightly on a wire hanger. Putting it on, he found that he was in the body of his youth. "You made me short," he protested to the author,

and his voice cracked. "Couldn't you at least make me a tall, gangly youth? I hate it when Lancelot laughs at me."

The author smiled to herself and typed. "Tall enough?" she asked.

"Much better," said Percival. She'd also given him a silvery nimbus that floated behind his head. He looked as saintly and innocent as he had in any Howard Pyle illustration. "Cool!"

"You sound like my students," she said. "Fourteen? Fifteen?"

"I'd like to be fifteen, if that's all right." And it was.

Lancelot laughed when Percival made his way back to the ICU, but it was a kind laughter. "She's tweaked you again, has she? People do that to me all the time. At least she didn't try to give you a girlfriend. Do you need the Grail back, or is it too soon?"

Percival opened all the drawers and cabinets in the curtained alcove, to see what he had to improvise with. "Hang onto it a moment for me, would you?" The ceiling tiles were printed with a picture of a forest—no, it was a park—in springtime. It was someone's idea of a comforting image, someone's idea of what a person would want to see while looking up from a hospital bed. A stream ran through the park. And just at the edge of the image, a willow tree grew. He jumped a little jump and hefted himself up into the picture.

"Where are you going?" said Lancelot.

"To weave him a suit of armor. I'll be back in the blink of an eye."

As always, Percival was as good as his word. The two knights carefully, so carefully, helped the Fisher King into the willow mesh. Once it was on, all the places where Percival had nicked it with his little bronze knife burst into leaf anew. The leaves fluttered, feather-light, with the breath of the ventilator. Percival had brought also a sword whittled fresh from an oak bough, and this he placed in the patient's hands.

"The arming of the hero," said Lancelot. "Very classic. He looks pretty good like this. The Green Man?"

"Why not?" said Percival. "He's been everyone else. Maybe this will win him time and a way in."

## VI

### Grail-O-Matic

**P**ercival smacked his forehead. "Why didn't I think of it sooner?"

"What?" said Lancelot.

The nurses were by now quite accustomed to the constant presence of two knights of Camelot. The nurse with the thick Staten Island accent understood immediately what Percival was asking her to do.

"Well, duh!" she said. "What took us so long?"

It took some jerry-rigging, but in a few minutes they had the Grail set up to keep the Fisher King on a constant intravenous drip of holy water.

The nurse looked the arrangement over and nodded in approval. "It's kind of a Rube Goldberg device, but it'll get the stuff into his kidneys, all right."

Percival laughed. "Chrétien de Troyes never saw that one coming."

## VII

### Knights of the Cafeteria Table

**"N**ot bad," said Sir Lancelot, "for hospital cafeteria food."

Sir Percival prodded his sushi listlessly with a chopstick.

"What? Getting possessive about the patient, Percival? His wife has the right to throw us out and keep the Fisher King to herself a little."

"It's not that," said Percival. "Did you see the man by the front door?"

"The security guard? A lot of good he'd be able to do if this hospital were overrun by giants."

"Not him. The one in the hospital gown. On an IV. Carrying the IV drip thing with him. And smoking. Barefoot and smoking on York Avenue in December, with nothing to

warm him but a hospital gown. That one. I haven't been able to fix the Fisher King we're working on now, and he at least quit smoking after the surgery. How am I going to fare when the guy who's on his second surgery still won't quit? What will I do when he's the Fisher King?"

Lancelot narrowed his eyes. "You're trying to make this a cautionary tale, aren't you?"

"I'm just trying to do the right thing."

"Balderdash. I've spent the past thousand years trapped in a cautionary tale. I know the moral of the story when I see it. Don't screw the boss's wife, boys! Look how it only led to trouble for Lancelot! And you know what? Everybody makes me out to be some kind of romanticized role model anyway. Don't bother, Percival. Nobody cares."

"But if the Fisher King had only been able to quit smoking three weeks earlier, this would have been so much..."

"You tiresome prig, what could you possibly know about desire?"

"I'm not talking about Guinevere. I'm talking about cigarettes."

"Desire is desire."

"You've seen what this illness is doing to the people who love the Fisher King. If you go talking like that in the ICU, in the waiting room, around any of the Fishers, I may have to challenge you to single combat."

Lancelot smiled and shook his head. "In that willow with armor?"

"God knows that I am in the right."

"You never change," said Lancelot.

All the white-coated oncology fellows at the next table turned to stare.

"Old friend," Percival said, his voice tight and low, "it would be best if you went back to Benwick. It would be best if you went back now." His hand went to the pommel of his sword, and he found that the author had given him back his good steel. "Right now."

And just like that, Lancelot vanished.

Percival popped one last bit of eel roll into his mouth. It didn't taste like anything in particular. The pink ginger stuff was sharp, but that wasn't what he wanted, either. Though he'd been warned about the funny green paste, he swallowed the whole daub of it for penance. Surely he had something to repent.

## VIII

### To Avalon

**T**wo figures—one tall and armored in gleaming steel, the other small and matronly in a wool coat—stood at the end of a city pier on a foggy December morning.

"We're going to need a bigger barge," said the author. "This one's about the right size for four queens and a bier, but everybody's going to want to come along. To see him safely across."

Sir Percival handed her a handkerchief. "Then write a bigger barge," he said, all patience.

"He has so many friends... had so many friends... we could fill up the Staten Island Ferry."

A bright blue triple-decker barge emblazoned with the words *Avalon Island Ferry* emerged from the fog and docked silently at the pier.

"You know the deal," said Percival. "He'll come back when you have need of him."

"But you know the deal, too. He'll come back as a memory, or some entirely different person. He'll never come back as our George again."

"Here, have a sip." Percival offered her the Grail.

"What's the point?" But she drank from it anyway.

"Listen to me," said the bearer of the Grail. "Before you met him, before he became your friend, he was already a minor figure of legend, wasn't he? He already had a hero's epithet."

The author laughed. "The Man Who Gets Things Done."

"And a full name you might have chosen for a comic book protagonist. Of course a George Marvil would be The Man Who Gets Things Done, wouldn't he?"

"The first time I heard someone call him by it," she agreed, "I thought it couldn't possibly be his real name. I thought it was just praise."

"He belongs where he's going now."

"Maybe so, but he belonged among the living, too. Was I a fool to call you here, Percival?"

"No. As long as the best specialists at the best cancer center in the world said there was still hope, someone had to speak for that hope. You were asked to speak for it."

The procession of mourners came slowly down the pier. They carried, shoulder-high, a man. Though it was a chill morning in the darkest time of the year, he was naked, for they were carrying him to a place where it was always summer, and his arrival would be cause for festival among the ones who would greet him there. What a long procession it was. Percival, whose eye for counting had been trained on armies, thought there were perhaps three hundred mourners, all come to see George Marvil on his way.

When the barge was full, the author stood on the deck and said, "Sir Percival, will you come with us?"

He shook his head. "Sloan-Kettering makes a fine Grail Castle. There are other Fisher Kings there. I should get back to them."

"I wish you victory," said the author.

He couldn't look her in the eye. "Even when I've failed you?"

"There was no failure here," she said. "Only things not working out. Go back to that hospital and give someone a victory."

Silently the barge began to drift across waters that were and were not the East River.

They waved to one another, the knight and his author, until the fog filled the distance between them.



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**Sarah Avery** is an escaped academic who taught way too many sections of freshman composition. After earning a doctorate in English with a dissertation on modernist poetry, she spent a few weeks driving around the Adirondacks blasting Tori Amos on the car stereo and asking herself, What would happen if I stopped holding back? The answer turned out to be a return to her first literary love, fantasy fiction. As a mildly entrepreneurial private tutor, she's able to get almost all the best parts of teaching with almost none of the annoying parts.

# Human Bones

John Giezentanner

**T**head didn't like to think of it as depression that had him lingering by the tracks, readying to jump at the right moment. It felt more like advanced boredom, but neither did he like *ennui*, as the insufferably hip named it. He refused to join those ranks, and while he didn't really want to hurt himself, he wouldn't mind being dead if it meant he didn't have to get up and go to work in the morning.

So.

He jumped an instant too late to catch the brunt of it and instead of granting oblivion the engine merely clipped his forearm and deflected him back onto the platform. Yet in that moment of brutal physics he saw his arm hinge on a new joint, so he lay gasping on the wet concrete, viewing a vivisected forearm. It was open from the top of his hand almost to his elbow, the skin and connective tissue flayed, the muscle pulled aside to show the shattered bones beneath. Blood welled up, but there was no pain. Instead he felt giddy, his shoulders quivering with laughter. There was some fine white powder in the breaks, and small shards. He picked up one of the larger fragments with his good hand. It didn't look or feel like he expected. It was glassy on the outer surface and the edge was sharp. It was... ceramic, like a broken tea cup.

*Bone China!*

He collapsed in hysterics, pounding the ground with his good fist. He could barely feel it. There were people placing hands on him. Voices. His eyes watered and he was miserably hot and nauseous. In his last moment of consciousness he realized he was blind and panicked at the darkness.

Detached, he saw himself disembarking an automated train at a resource depot. The rust-red walls of the city were still visible, towers rising yet higher to a slate sky, yet there were no humans here. Instead, great harvesting machines worked, grinding up the old sprawl, returning heaps of concrete, steel and plastic to the depot. He hurried into a district the harvesters had yet to reach, losing sight of the city behind the ruins. Away from the noise pronghorn grazed above crumbled asphalt. The sprawl meandered pointlessly, endlessly via strips of dense sagebrush between boxy ruins. Lost in the labyrinth, he began to think of the tribes of cannibals and abominations they said still existed out in the sprawl. The sky turned

red, and growing desperation goaded him into the open door of a two story building that had been some kind of domicile. He followed stairs down into the basement to hide, but was surprised to find a heavy steel door there. It swung on greased hinges and the stairs went down and down. The LED's of ancient computers still flickered in the dark, vast space, and he was drawn to a glowing screen. But a painful noise startled him, the roar of the harvesters biting into the house, bringing it all down, and there were shapes on the opposite wall, advertisements, a window, a bushy ponderosa outside, and he realized that he was the one moaning.

"Back with us?" someone asked.

It took some effort, but he nodded.

"Do you know where you are?"

He found himself in a tiny, sterile room with one door, one window, and a bespectacled, gracefully aging man in scrubs asking questions.

Grasping for words, he made a guess. "Hospital?"

"I'm doctor Athew. I had the pleasure of fixing you up today." He described the surgery that had mended Theod's arm in the few hours since the accident; it would soon be good as new. Reading off the charts in his glasses, he detailed the therapy and prescription that would be needed to speed his recovery, never inquiring about his mental state. He had probably not seen a suicide attempt in many years; people were mostly content since the Strife ended. Content with their jobs, their families, the city—even their goddamn *ennui*.

Theod's eyes hurt as he struggled to keep up with the doctor, so he shut them. The dream was still vivid behind his eyelids, like a deeply nested memory suddenly recalled. The words from the screen were still clear, though nonsensical. He spoke to take his mind off it. "I thought there was something wrong with me. My bones didn't look... real. Like they were made of some kind of... concrete or ceramic or something."

Dr. Athew smiled, bemused. "Well, there *was* something wrong with you—you were hit by a train. Don't worry, they looked perfectly real to me."

Theod nodded, and had to smirk. He looked down at his bandaged arm. Beneath the wrapping it was impossible to see that any harm had befallen it, and he felt only a dull ache. He reached out to touch it with his good hand.

"If you'd like we could arrange for you to stay the night—"

Something fell from Theod's hand, landing on his chest. He picked it up carefully, squinting. It was a white chunk half the size of his fingertip, rough and dense on the broken underside, smooth and shiny on the curved outer surface. The jagged edge was sharp as

obsidian. He noticed the dried blood where it had cut into his palm. And the doctor staring past his glasses at it.

"—In fact, I might need to alter your prescription a bit. I'll have the nurse bring you something to help you rest." He forced a quick smile and left, closing the door behind him.

Theod sat up quickly, doubling over as his vision momentarily browned out. He anticipated roaring harvesters to wake him again, but there was the shard of not-bone in his hand and the doctor's lie. And the words on the screen.

*We made you to be us in our absence.*

His mind spun with confusion, repulsion, horror... everything but *ennui*.



Dr. Athew found the room empty. For the patient's safety, he had locked the door. But not the window.



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If **John Giezentanner** were a dinosaur, he'd be either an Allosaurus or a Deinonychus. He lives in Denver and works in Boulder, Colorado (two places dinosaurs once roamed) removing invasive plant species from protected Open Space land. Invasive species are one of the biggest threats to global biodiversity, so, you know, it's pretty important.

# Bandit

John H. Stevens

I was mowing the lawn on my tractor when a raccoon jumped out from a line of trees. Luckily I stopped in time. The raccoon waddled to the side and I continued on. I was amazed to find the raccoon keeping pace with the tractor.

I decided to name the raccoon Bandit. It's not the most original name but riding around the lawn doesn't lend itself to creativity.

"Where do you live?" I asked. Bandit didn't answer. Raccoons don't talk but you knew that, didn't you. That didn't stop me from having a conversation with him.

"Are you married?" By the look on his face, I could tell he wasn't the kind that settles down. He was a wild one.

After I finished mowing, I fetched a peanut from the kitchen and offered it to Bandit. Bandit was leery of me at first but he decided a peanut was worth the risk. I told you he was wild. He stretched his little hand and took the peanut. He was about to go on his way but quickly came back and bit my hand. He's a wild son of a bitch.

The next week, Bandit came back. We mowed the grass together. Time passes faster when you have someone to talk to. I haven't had someone to talk to since my wife and son went away.

This time I was prepared for Bandit. After we finished, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a peanut. I learned my lesson and I dropped the peanut on the grass. When Bandit reached for the nut, I pulled out a gun and put a bullet in his head.

It wasn't a sad thing. I brought him inside and I had someone to talk to everyday that week. Unfortunately, Bandit started to get a smell to him. I tried to put up with it as long as I could—he was great to talk to—but eventually he had to go away.

I put him in the deep freezer. It wasn't a sad thing. He has my wife and son to talk to.



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**John H. Stevens** lives with his lovely wife, Geraldine and daughter Katie in the suburbs of Chicago after growing up near Wrigley Field. During the day, he's a mild-mannered Systems Programmer. At night, he tries to come up with ideas for horror stories despite his dogs' demand to play with them. His scariest secret is he's a Cub's fan.

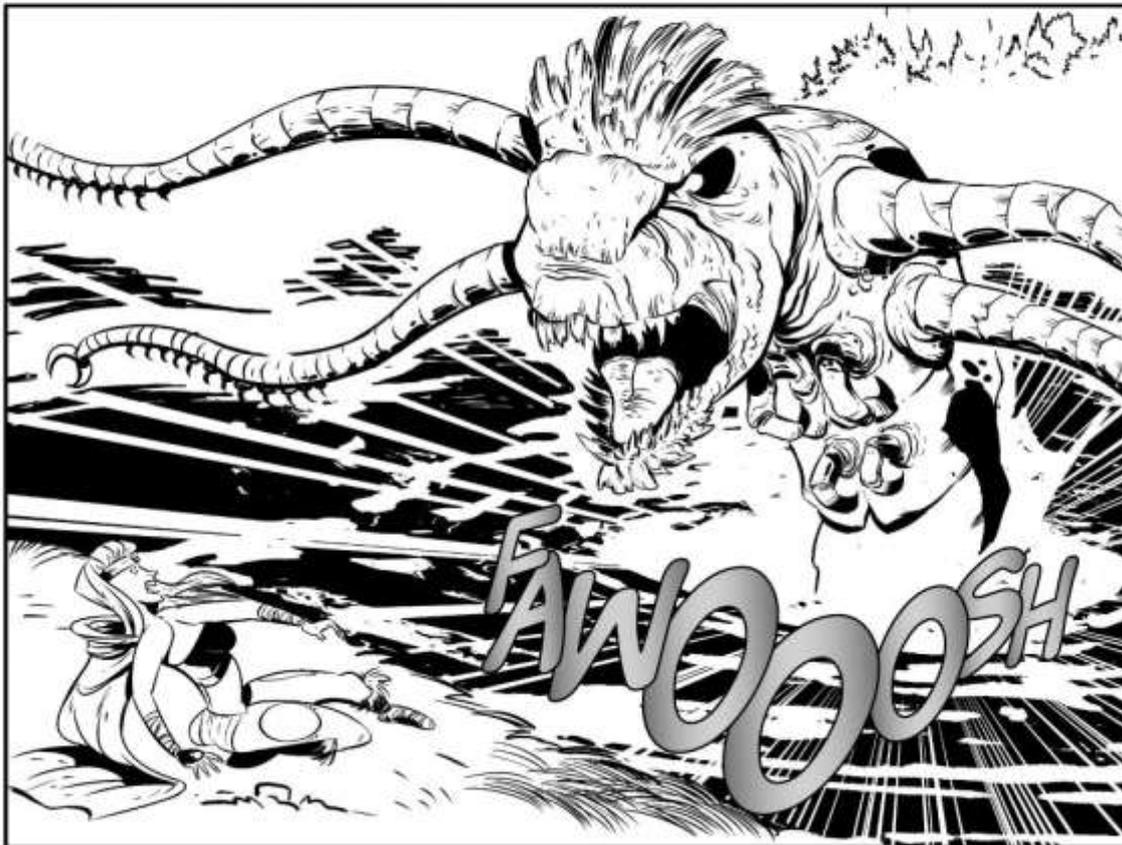
# Graphic Story: Shamrock

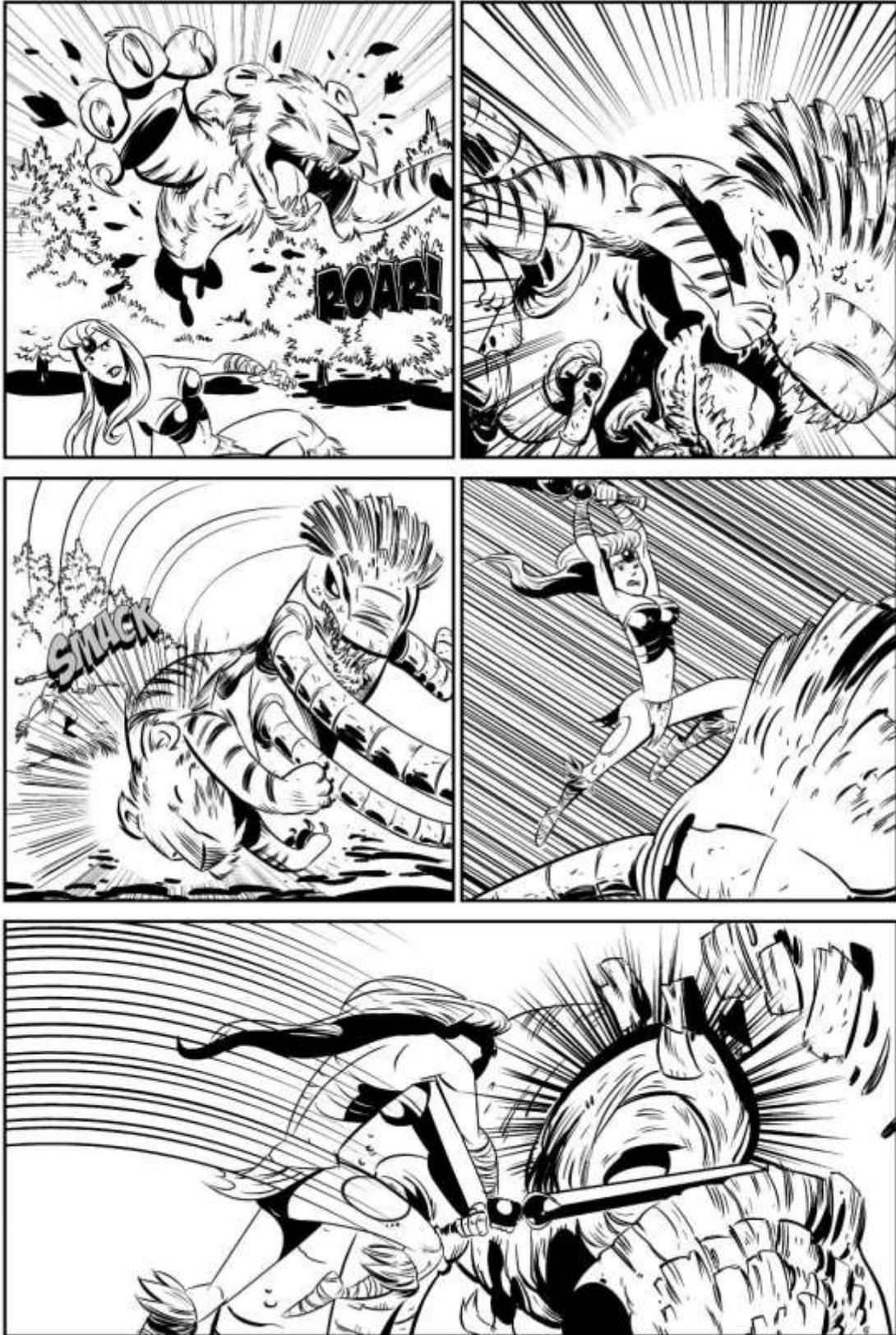
Josh Brown & John Fortune

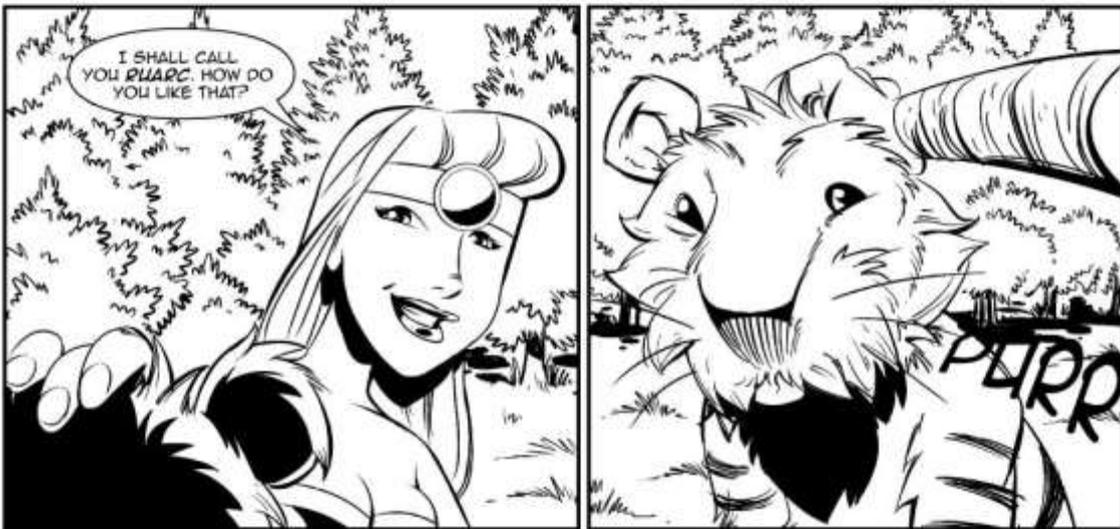












## Interview with Author Jim Hines

**J**im C. Hines' latest novel is *Unbound*, the third in his Magic ex Libris series about a magic-wielding librarian, a dryad, a secret society founded by Johannes Gutenberg, a flaming spider, and an enchanted convertible. He's also the author of the *Goblin Quest* series, the humorous tale of a nearsighted goblin runt and his pet fire-spider which actor and author Wil Wheaton described the book as "too f\*\*\*ing cool for words," as well as the *Princess* series of fairy tale retellings, which features Snow White as a witch, Sleeping Beauty as a master martial artist, and a Cinderella with an enchanted glass sword. His short fiction has appeared in more than 50 magazines and anthologies.

Jim is an active blogger about topics ranging from sexism and harassment to zombie-themed Christmas carols, and won the Hugo Award for Best Fan Writer in 2012. He has an undergraduate degree in psychology and a Masters in English, and lives with his wife and two children in mid-Michigan. You can find him online at [www.jimchines.com](http://www.jimchines.com).

### Q&A

**Julian: Jim, I can trace your first works to the early 2000s. Since then you've put 9 fantasy novels under your belt and lots and lots of short stories. How was your life before all that? How/where did you grow up, any particular influences in your life, and, of course, what jobs have you had/have alongside your writing career?**

Jim: I grew up in Michigan, and when I finished high school I originally wanted to become a psychologist. Four years in an undergraduate psychology program killed that dream—too much emphasis on statistics and doing original, publishable research, and very little actual working with people. I did a Master's program in English, with a vague idea about teaching at the community college level. The lack of available teaching jobs led to a move to Nevada, where I learned how to fix computers. Those skills got me a job with the State of Michigan, which is where I work now, because unfortunately, writing novels doesn't come with benefits or a stable paycheck.

**When it comes to writing-how did you start, what pushed you to in that direction, and when did you know that you were ready?**

I dabbled in writing growing up. I'd write these horrible one-page stories, completely ridiculous, for the sole purpose of getting a laugh. As far as I know, only one friend still has copies of those, and I'm hopeful she'll keep them hidden until after I'm dead. But I loved that I could write something and make people smile and laugh.

Later on, in college, I started writing a few short stories about our Dungeons & Dragons characters. Yeah, I was *that* geek. But I found I really enjoyed writing fiction, and soon I was applying to Clarion and submitting stories to magazines and getting rejected all over the place.

As for really feeling ready, I'll let you know when it happens.

**What can you name as main influences to your style, themes, motifs? I know you've mentioned before that playing Dungeons and Dragons in your youth had something to do with it. Where there any others?**

I mentioned the D&D. I've also been a big SF/F reader for most of my life, so this is the genre that feels like home to me. I enjoy humor, and try to work lighter and funnier moments even into my more serious work. Once I was married and had children, I found myself writing about various family themes. If not for my daughter, I don't know that I would have ever started writing my Princess series.

**Your style is different than what one would expect when thinking about fantasy. There's humor, likeable goblins, and badass princesses. How hard is it to write good fantasy humor (and we know it's hard because there's not a lot of it!)?**

It's hard to write good fiction, period. Writing humor is a skill like any other. It takes practice, and you're going to fail sometimes. Just like I had to learn how to develop fantasy worlds and characters, how to invent magical systems, how to plot stories, and so on, I also had to learn how to create humor in a way that didn't derail or interfere with the story. Some of it is wordplay, some of it is setting up characters and voices that conflict in entertaining ways. And some of it is the fact that I've had 40 years' experience being a smart-ass, which gives me a lot to draw on.

**What would you call the defining moment in your writing career, the moment when you knew you turned pro? What story, market, or anthology had a part in that?**

There have been a lot of moments. Getting the phone call that I'd taken first place in Writers of the Future was huge. My first professional sale to a magazine. Selling a story to Esther Friesner's *Turn the Other Chick* anthology was a turning point, because I had always loved those books. To see one of my stories in a Chicks anthology was awesome.

Selling *Goblin Quest* to a major publisher was probably the biggest turning point. Looking back, that's where a lot of things changed for me.

But I also want to point to a moment in early 2001. There were no particular sales or milestones, but that's when I had come back from Nevada and was job-hunting here in

Michigan. I ended up taking a job specifically because it would allow me to devote more energy to writing. I feel like I was making a conscious decision to stop messing around and really give this writing thing everything I had. It wasn't a dramatic moment, but it was an important one.

**Tell us a little bit about the Magic Ex Libris series, and especially about Unbound which is about to be published on January 6, just two days from now?**

Magic ex Libris is a modern-day fantasy series. Most people classify it as urban fantasy, even though the protagonist, Isaac Vainio, is from Michigan's Upper Peninsula, which is about as far from urban as you can get. Isaac has the ability to reach into books and pull out anything from the story that will fit through the pages. And he's a major SF/F geek, meaning he's running around with laser swords and disruptor weapons and magic potions and all sorts of fun stuff.

There's also Lena Greenwood, a dryad with a pair of wooden swords, Nidhi Shah, a psychiatrist whose job is to try to keep all of these magic people sane, and of course, Smudge the fire-spider.

In some ways, these books have been my love letter to the genre. They're also about hope and optimism. I've read a lot of grim and gritty fiction, and while there's nothing inherently wrong with that, I personally prefer more of that hope, that sense of wonder. Isaac loves magic. He thinks it's amazing in all its forms, and he's constantly searching for new ways of using it. It's let me have a lot of fun with the books.

There will be at least four books in the series, but book three (*Unbound*) wraps up a lot of things I've been working with. Isaac has had a pretty rough time of it, and he starts out in a darker place, trying to repair some mistakes from *Libriomancer* and *Codex Born*. There are monsters and thousand-year-old mysteries and lightning guns and battles at Fort Michilimackinac and all sorts of fun stuff.

**It looks to me like you are focusing a lot on novels (correct me if I'm wrong). What is your current stance on short stories? Is this something that takes away time from novel writing, or is it a good vessel for stirring up your imagination? What are short stories for you?**

I enjoy writing novels and short stories both, but the reality is, novels pay significantly better, and that's something I've got to consider. At least until we pay off the mortgage and get the kids through college. I still try to do a few short stories each year, and they're a great place to experiment and try new things. It's also nice to take a break from the world of the novels. I've

spent three years writing Isaac's story, so it helps to step away and do a short piece about a fairy tale biker gang, you know?

**You write speculative fiction (short and long), and non-fiction. What is your writing process, and how do you manage to juggle so many things? Do you have clear goals set ahead of time, or are you more of a spur of the moment kind of writer?**

I write every day during my lunch hour at work. I've found I can be pretty productive with those five hours a week. I also try to get some writing done in the evenings and on weekends. In the beginning, I could get through most of what I needed during my lunch breaks, but that just doesn't cut it anymore.

My deadlines certainly help keep me motivated, as well as giving me clear goals. I know I have to have *Revisionary* turned in by August 1 of this year, and I know I usually need at least three complete rewrites before I let my editor see a book, so I can do a rough estimate in my head and figure out that...

... aw, crap. I, um, should probably hurry up and finish this interview so I can get back to that book.

**If you were to choose one favorite novel and one favorite short story from your own works, which one would it be?**

My favorite short story, at least right now, is "Stranger vs. the Malevolent Malignancy," which is [available online at Podcastle](#). I originally wrote it for a humor anthology called *Unidentified Funny Objects 2*. It's a story about a superhero with terminal cancer. It's probably the most challenging short story I've done to date, but I'm very proud of the results.

Favorite novel? That's harder to say. I love them all for different reasons. Let's just say whatever your favorite of my books is, that's my favorite too. See? We're bonding!

**Who do you enjoy reading lately? What was the last book that made a big impression, or, perhaps, a book you wish you could've written yourself? Oh, heck, let me go one step further: if you could choose an author to co-write a book with, who would that be and why?**

I wish I'd had the opportunity to collaborate with Janet Kagan. She wrote wonderful, warm, joyful stories, full of life and determination and heart. I've joked about teaming up with Seanan McGuire one of these days... the results would either be awesome or terrifying. Or more likely, both.

**I wanted to touch a little bit upon your activity outside of writing. You are very outspoken and a big supporter of equal rights and fairness, and a strong opponent of violence, especially against women. Tell us a little bit about that and feel free to post any links that you think might be helpful to people who are trying to get more involved in these causes.**

I volunteered as a rape/crisis counselor in East Lansing before I ever got published as an author. I've also worked as the male outreach coordinator at a local domestic violence shelter and program. When my writing began to take off, I realized it had given me a bit of a platform, and that there were people out there who actually wanted to follow my blog and my Twitterings and so on. It was a little weird, but I wanted to use that platform to talk about the things that were important to me, including continuing to speak out about rape and other societal problems.

A lot of those problems are easy to ignore if they don't affect you directly. Sometimes it's malicious, but more often I think it just comes down to ignorance. Growing up a white man in the suburbs, I had no idea how much racism still existed. Likewise with sexism, homophobia, etc. I think we need to actively listen to other people's stories and experiences, and to recognize that there's still a lot of work to do, whether it's "Best of the Year" book lists dominated by male authors, sexual harassment at SF/F conventions, whitewashed cover art, books being rejected because a character was gay, and so on.

It's a broad question to try to provide links for, but there are a lot of groups and individuals talking about these problems and working in various ways to change them. The Carl Brandon Society (<http://carlbrandon.org/>), The Hawkeye Initiative (<http://thehawkeyeinitiative.com/>), and the Backup Ribbon project (<http://backupribbonproject.com/>) are a few of the places doing good work.

**What's next for you? Is there anything else you'd like to add?**

*Unbound* just came out, and I'm currently working on book four in that series, *Revisionary*. I've got two anthology projects to write for in the coming months as well. There should be at least one more book out this year that I'll talk about as soon as it goes public, and a couple of other projects I'm hoping to do, including a sequel to *Invisible*, a collection of essays I edited last year about representation in science fiction and fantasy. Also, I want to try to see and photograph Comet Lovejoy this week, assuming the weather allows it.

Also, for the past year or so, I've been hinting about a Secret Project I've been working on. The contract prevented me from talking publicly about the details ... *until now!* FABLE: BLOOD OF HEROES, a tie-in novel for Fable Legends, has started showing up on Amazon

and other online retailers. My publisher gave me official permission to share some of the details [on the blog](#).

**Jim, thank you very much for sharing your thoughts with us. I can't wait to read the new installments in your series!**



## Interview with Author Sarah Avery

**S**arah Avery is an escaped academic who taught way too many sections of freshman composition. After earning a doctorate in English with a dissertation on modernist poetry, she spent a few weeks driving around the Adirondacks blasting Tori Amos on the car stereo and asking herself, What would happen if I stopped holding back? The answer turned out to be a return to her first literary love, fantasy fiction. As a mildly entrepreneurial private tutor, she's able to get almost all the best parts of teaching with almost none of the annoying parts. She has a collection of novellas, *Tales from Rugosa Coven*, published by Dark Quest Books, and she coedited a themed anthology, *Trafficking in Magic, Magicking in Traffic*, with David Sklar. Her short fiction has appeared in Jim Baen's *Universe* and *Black Gate*.

### Q&A

**Iulian: Sarah, I am very happy to have had the opportunity to meet you in person through our common critique group, Writers of the Weird. But as much as I got to know your works, I haven't had a chance to learn too much about you. Can you tell us some cool stuff? Where are you from, how did you grow up, have you ever imagined you'd be doing what you are doing?**

Sarah: I grew up as an Army brat, so I spent several of my early years in Japan, Korea, and Germany. The biggest contiguous chunk of my childhood was in the suburbs of Washington, DC. That's where I met my high school sweetheart, to whom I've now been married for almost 21 years. Hm, how random an assemblage of cool stuff would you like? I was the worst varsity fencer at Vassar College—I had a quick eye and a quick mind, but a slow hand. I can knit in perfect darkness for three days and never drop a stitch. One year I read so many sonnets, I regularly dreamed in iambic pentameter. Still do, on occasion.

I knew I wanted to write, and which genre, when I was 11 years old. I was misdiagnosed with a terminal illness, so I took up writing fantasy to create through language a world where I was not going to be dead within five years. School seemed kind of futile—all that preparing for a future I supposedly wouldn't live to see. Writing for my own joy felt like the most purposeful part of my life. As Samuel Johnson said, "When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." By the time it was clear the doctors were wrong, the writing habit was deeply ingrained, and I was getting pretty good.

I'm not sure whether it's surprising or not, but I made better career choices when I thought I wouldn't live to see twenty than I made in my twenties, when suddenly it felt like I would have forever to pursue my dreams.

While I was in grad school, my husband and I kept a Crazy Dream List of things we wanted to try if we ever got free of my dissertation and his master's thesis. A year and a half into my first teaching gig after the Ph.D., the university budget crashed, and I was blessed with a layoff—every full-timer in my department who had health insurance but wasn't tenure-track got the axe on the same day. My first two thoughts were simultaneous: "Oh, no, the mortgage!" and "This is the best thing that ever happened to me!" When that semester ended, on my last day as a classroom teacher, I turned in my students' grades, and then went to Starbucks and started writing a new fantasy novel. That first year, I wrote 300,000 words and was truly happy in my work for the first time in a decade.

**You call yourself an escaped academic. How was your experience working in that field? Regrets? Accomplishments? Did you leave it due to disappointment with the academic field in general, or was it just a natural, conscientious step for your career?**

My teachers in college had all been tenured since the 70s, and they had the kindness to wish for me the same kinds of jobs they had: they got to read and write and talk, and teach two courses a semester to small groups of students who wanted to work hard, and somehow they got paid for all that fun. They didn't realize jobs like theirs didn't exist for my generation. Tenure was under attack, and even where younger professors were still being hired in tenure-track positions, their teaching workloads were usually much higher. The process of getting a doctorate had changed, too, with grad students carrying such high teaching loads that the average time to degree in English reached ten years, and the average dropout rate reached 75%. And of the ones who do finish, only half get stable jobs in the field. But we were at a small liberal arts college, so I didn't know any of that, and my professors had no graduate students, so they didn't really think it through. (The take-away for writers considering grad school: Don't do it!)

I wanted to write, but I also truly love teaching. As long as I thought teaching would support me as a writer, getting a degree to teach with seemed reasonable. By the time I understood that life as an academic would never allow me enough time to write, and would never allow me the freedom to write as I pleased, I was so close to the end of the doctorate that it would have been silly to give up.

Several things kept me going at that point. My husband made a lot of sacrifices to support my degree—the fact that he followed that up by making more sacrifices so I could walk away from academia and write fiction is a testament to his awesomeness as a spouse and as a person. I had a wonderful circle of friends and mentors, people I would probably never have met if not for grad school, and I'm so glad I still have those people in my life. And I had my dissertation director, the wonderful poet-scholar Alicia Ostriker, who taught me things about writing large-scale projects that I still use in writing fiction. Alicia once said to me about a

chapter draft, "Every paragraph of this has its own separate set of organs, with a head on the front; you have written a tapeworm. You need to learn to write a whale. Write something with a liver as big as your car. For a book, every structure scales up."

**Since you have a doctorate in English, this question might be moot, but I'll ask it anyway: did you participate in any kind of writing seminars and workshops, especially geared toward SF/F, or was it all just very natural to you? Would you recommend young writers to attend such venues (especially if they *don't* have a doctorate in English!)**

My first writing seminars were in summer camp in my teens, because that's the kind of geek girl I was. I spent three summers at a writing camp. In college I took creative writing of various kinds, just about every semester, and auditioned my way into the senior seminar that allowed me to write poetry for my senior thesis.

Actually, I tried to write a fantasy novel for that thesis, but at twenty-one I had no idea how to pace myself for a project that long. Even with a genre-friendly advisor, it would not have gone well for me. And the advisor I had was quite hostile to fantasy. "Nobody wants to read that," he said of the entire genre. Years later, I found it immensely gratifying to learn that fantasy and science fiction sell twice as many books as literary fiction. Nonetheless, I let myself get badgered out of fantasy.

For a solid decade after that, poetry was the only creative writing I did. I got into an MFA program at Johns Hopkins right after college, and spent a year doing that part time while working various clerical jobs. My advisor was wonderful, my classmates were wonderful, but I began to suspect that what one does after earning an MFA looks almost indistinguishable from what one does before earning it. If I walked away from schooling of all kinds and set up a card table, perhaps with an optional pizza on it, and invited some writing friends over to workshop drafts, would I really be missing anything I needed?

That was the right question. The answer was no.

So I switched to a degree I thought would be more useful for a teaching day job. Oops.

I had a wonderful dissertation workshop group that helped me learn how to think a 300-page thought and articulate it in a way that made the 300 pages worthwhile. For a while I also belonged to a goals-focused group of poets—we didn't workshop drafts, but we witnessed each other's monthly commitments to send out work out to presses and magazines, and we helped research markets for each other's work.

Ultimately, the writing workshop that has helped me most with my actual writing has been the Writers of the Weird, where I met you. It turns out a big table in a friend's basement is better than an MFA seminar, if that friend has invited enough committed writers.

The workshop that helped me most with the business side of writing—which nobody talked about at all at any school I went to—is now called Cascade Writers. It's a small annual writing retreat in the Pacific Northwest. For three of the four years I traveled out to Seattle for it, it was a larger conference called A Writer's Weekend, run almost entirely by Karen Junker. To make it sustainable, Karen scaled it down and found people to share responsibility with, and that version of her vision turned out beautifully, too. Almost every clue I have about writerly professionalism I either learned at A Writer's Weekend or realized I needed to learn because of my experiences there.

I would absolutely recommend to young writers that they go to shorter, more focused workshops, rather than degree programs. Odds are, they'll need to have day jobs anyway, even if they succeed madly at writing. Unless they already love teaching, an MFA won't help get a day job that would work for them. For a person who's interested in a program like Clarion or Odyssey, I recommend doing it as early in your life as possible, because if you have children, the possibility of a six-week residential writing workshop away from your kids is simply out of the question for several years.

Ultimately, though, you don't need schools or courses or retreats to write great fiction. A critique group of like-minded people who are serious about writing and have enough social skills to critique usefully is the main thing you need.

The other thing you need is a set of procedures that works for your group. It's easy to find out all the procedures that make up what's called the Clarion method—though it always tickles me to hear it called that, since nearly every procedure I've heard of that falls under that name is absolutely standard in almost every creative writing class I've ever taken. Those procedures are a fine starting point. Tailor them as needed.

**What do you consider to be the defining moment in your writing career, the moment when you knew this is what you will do for the rest of your life? What story, market, or anthology had a part in that?**

I was about 100,000 words into the first draft of the first novel I ever finished, the one I started right after leaving academia. I realized I'd been happy every day for months. Not just pleased with one or two dimensions of my life, but consummately happy, and happy particularly with my work. Every morning, I woke up and I couldn't wait to start writing. Every night, I went to bed excited about the next day's writing. All night, I dreamed about my

writing. I was putting in four to eight hours of pen-to-paper time every day, and two or three more in the evening to type up what I'd keep of the day's longhand work. My draft was rough—I had a lot to unlearn—but I could see the bones of the story, and I knew they were good.

Writing novels was no longer a thing I dreamed of doing, or tried to do. I was doing it. It was even better than I had ever imagined.

The time of year came when I was supposed to be applying for a new teaching job for the next school year. I said to my husband, "What if I didn't go back? What if I found a day job that actually let me write? Because I'd rather be a barista at Starbucks and come home free to write as I damn well please than be a tenured professor and write scared."

My husband might have said many things. What he said was, "That's quite a leap of faith. Can I take one, too?" So he left his big corporate software employer for a start-up, and I took up part-time tutoring instead of looking for a full-time gig, and as a family we took about a \$40,000 pay cut. Never regretted it, even though the start-up never did take off.

The moment I knew we were in it together, I knew I'd always find a way to keep writing.

The other defining moment was when I knew my stories did the deep things I wanted them to do. Stories save us in hard times—stories have saved me more than once, and I think most people have had that experience.

I see two main ways that stories do this. Of course, in conversations about fantasy, escapism comes up, and that's a valid, important function. When you're suffering, sometimes you need to be lifted out of that moment in your life so that when you come back down you have the strength to face it.

The other way is the Emily Dickinson tell-all-the-truth-but-tell-it-slant way. A story can take you into the core of the hard experience you're having, as long as it takes you by a different path than the one you're on.

I found out my writing could do both of those things during the time that produced the Grail story you're publishing in this issue. My friend George, who was a central organizer and much-beloved person in my local Pagan community, was dying. Those of us who could travel into New York to keep him company at the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center took turns making the trip. Two of my coven-sisters worked in the same office. Sabrina was about to take the train in to see George. Jen handed her a copy of my working draft of "Closing Arguments" and said, "Read this on the way—you need it more than I do." And Sabrina told me afterward that the only way she could manage her own anticipatory grief at losing George, so that she

could bring some strength to him when he needed it, was by devouring my novella and escaping into it.

In George's last days, I started the Grail story as a form of spell-prayer on my blog. Many of George's friends, including some I'd never met and some in other countries, started reading the story as its episodes came to me. For all its flourishes and funny moments, it's a story of shared heartbreak. And the vast rippling circles of people who loved George were as desperate for ways *into* that heartbreak as they sometimes were for ways out.

After seeing how people used my work to do the most important things humans to with stories, I had to grow out of the self-deprecating false modesty I had allowed myself. The decades I had spent honing my craft had resulted in an actual ability to be of service to the world through my art. Pretending not to be there yet, just because it's awkward to be a writer with no impressive professional sales, wasn't doing anybody any favors. As I knew when my husband and I committed to reinvent our lives that I *would* be a real writer, I knew after the Grail story that I had finally become one.

**Some of your work has Wiccan influences. How did you get involved with Wicca and what does it mean for you? What motifs do you use in your fiction, and are there other inspiration wells that might not be as obvious?**

My parents accidentally raised me Shinto.

For three years we lived on an Army base in Japan. Just about every weekend for those three years, we set out for Avery Adventure Day and went to see different cultural sites. My parents tried to explain to me what all those shrines and temples meant to the Japanese people around us. Being seven years old, I thought my parents were explaining how the universe worked. So for me, everything in the universe was alive, with an indwelling spirit. All of nature was sacred, and nothing in nature could be evil. The Gods and ancestors were all around us.

Boy, were my parents surprised three years later when they realized I'd settled comfortably into an approximately Shinto worldview, but I didn't know what the Lord's Prayer was. When my father got orders for a new post in the States, my parents started looking for a church that suited them both. They found a lovely one, a congregation I still regard with love and gratitude. But despite my best efforts at monotheism, I was irrevocably animistic.

Alas, it is somewhere between difficult and impossible to be authentically Shinto when one is not at all Japanese.

About halfway through my college years, a Wiccan friend suggested I read *The Spiral Dance* by Starhawk. It was the first time I got a glimpse of a community I could authentically be part of that also had the same spiritual worldview I did. It was 1990, before the internet, and it was very difficult for Pagans to find each other. For a few years, I drifted into groups that ended up saying to me something along the lines of, "You're so organized! You're comfortable with alphabetical order, and have a shoebox to put things in! Will you be our priestess?" That sounds like an exaggeration, but remember, I started to identify as Pagan while I was still an undergrad. After a couple of attempts to fill a clergy role despite having no mentors, training, or clue, I decided the answer was no, and I started looking for a group to learn from.

I had imagined myself in an improvisational, politically active, anti-hierarchical group like the ones described in Starhawk's books, but after years of guesting at various circles, the community I fell in love with was very different. They were recovering from a crisis of leadership—the two most senior people active in the lineage had just divorced each other messily—and I saw people who had not created the mess stepping up to make things better together. I saw humility and service. I saw people gathering up what they treasured about their faith and practice, and talking openly about how to pass on the good stuff without passing on the dysfunction they'd been party to. And when these people made rituals together, their rituals had oomph. (That's a technical term, oomph is.) I wanted in. They said, "Are you sure? We can't promise there will never again be a mess like the one we just lived through." They cared far more about transparency and the well-being of a newcomer than they cared about increasing their numbers. That was the clincher. Yes, I was sure. Nearly twenty years later, I'm still sure.

That's how I fell in with the Blue Star lineage of Wicca. As Wiccan traditions go, Blue Star is pretty old-school, with a stable liturgical structure and a formal path of training for people who feel called to clergy roles. My eclectic Wiccan characters in *Tales from Rugosa Coven* affectionately call denominations like ours Snobby High Episcopagans, a label we embrace and sometimes use ourselves. I took the first degree of initiation, which makes me sort of the equivalent of a deacon, but I've been inactive since my kids were born. Service as clergy will have to wait until my kids need me a little less. The Gods have many devoted priests and priestesses, and the community has many able initiates, but my sons have only one mother.

The obvious way my life in Wicca has affected my fiction is that the three novellas collected in *Tales from Rugosa Coven* are rooted solidly in a Pagan community. Those stories are about a recognizably real coven of Wiccans in a version of New Jersey that's far weirder and more supernatural than the New Jersey I used to live in. I love it that so many Pagan readers—not just Wiccans, but also Druids, Asatruar, and others—have delighted in seeing their social

world on the page, warts and all. I also love it that non-Pagan readers, including some who knew almost nothing about Paganism, have enjoyed those stories *as stories*, about human beings who laugh and suffer and make choices they never expected to make. You don't need to know or believe any particular thing to get the stuff that's funny and the stuff that's deep in that book.

It's about the family you make. The first of the stories, "Closing Arguments," is about balancing the family of people you choose with the family you're born to. I think everyone can find something to relate to there.

I hope so, anyway, because it's one of my main preoccupations as a writer, no matter what kind of fantasy I'm working on. My sprawling epic family saga has a lot of thematic overlap with my wry contemporary fantasy novellas.

The main reason I tend to write long is that I love ensemble casts. Word count is a function of cast size: if you want your story to max out under 4,000 words, you can't have more than two characters of any depth, and really you can only reach two if you have serious chops. A character-driven story with, say, six characters who all get noticeably developed will take you straight into novella territory. Novellas are harder to sell, but that's fine, because a character isolated enough to finish her business in 4,000 words is missing out on almost everything that engages me as a reader or a writer.

I think I'm not alone in this. If I had to guess why so many fantasy readers tend to love sprawling multi-volume epics, I would say they want community-of-characters-driven stories, not just character-driven ones. An editor I met at A Writer's Weekend years ago asked me to boil down the theme of my 300,000 word trunk manuscript, and I said without hesitation, "Community conquers all." I wouldn't mind that on my tombstone.

**You write speculative fiction. What drives you to the genre and have you tried writing anything else?**

When I was a kid, it was straight-up escapism. Considering what I was up against at the time, escapism was a totally adaptive and appropriate response.

In the years since, though, it's the imaginative freedom of speculative fiction that continues to engage me. I've read my share of literary fiction, and I've loved some of it—Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* taught me a lot about writing a city, and you can see that influence woven through all my epic fantasy. But what I often find when I try reading contemporary mainstream fiction, literary or not, is that there's a point in the story where possibility could open outward and the characters' emotional truth could take on a literal or poetic reality... and then it doesn't, and something aggressively mundane happens to close the story down instead,

and I feel bored, and then sad that I'm bored because I had liked the story and wanted to see it succeed for me.

I used to write a lot of poetry, though I haven't written much since I left academia. Poetry just isn't what comes to me to be written these days. If a poem happened to come to me, it would be very welcome, and I'd give it a good home. There was a decade when I wrote no fiction at all, and poetry was my only creative output. I still love a lot of that work. There are some things I'm proud of that I think will still hold up long after I'm gone, no matter what else turns out to be part of my life's work. I don't feel that I was part of any poetic movement, or poetic historical moment. It was something that came out of my life, my community, my sense of literary ancestry. Alicia Ostriker once told me, "You will be the George Herbert of Wicca," and if you read George Herbert, you will see why that strange compliment is quite high enough for me.

Since 2004 I've written a personal blog on Livejournal. Even now, when I've got my own website and I try to be regularly active on Facebook and Twitter, most of my online conversation with readers and the world at large seems to be on Livejournal. I try to be wherever my readers are, finding some expressive way to use whatever form of communication they want to read. A three-paragraph blog post is about the shortest form of prose I can really sink my teeth into, though. Maybe if I spent a month reading nothing but Japanese verse forms and Augustan heroic couplets, I could really get into Twitter. Or maybe everyone's happier that I haven't.

Since about 2007 I've contributed a column to Black Gate. These days, it's all book reviews. Before I moved out of New Jersey and left most of my students behind, I wrote essays on teaching and fantasy literature. Some of those still please me a great deal. I enjoy my column, though it does take up about a quarter of the writing time I can wrest out of a typical week.

The one form of writing I don't see myself trying is biography. Although I still love the poet I wrote my dissertation about, I spent five years writing about her work when I could have been writing my own. That feels like something I don't need to do again.

**You coedited the anthology "Trafficking in Magic, Magicking in Traffic," together with David Sklar. How was that collaboration and are you planning to edit other anthologies? To that extend, do you enjoy editing?**

There are a lot of reasons I love working with David. The one that started us on the anthology is that his kids and my kids are pretty close in age, so we've struggled to balance writing and parenting at about the same stages in our lives and careers. When our respective older children were preschoolers, and we were watching childless writers who'd started publishing

about when we did zoom past us on their career trajectories, David suggested that coediting an anthology might help us keep our hands in the game. After all, it couldn't possibly take as long as writing a novel, right? Sounded good to me.

We both look back on that and laugh.

Soliciting stories was fun. Reading slush was fun, too. We got far more delightful submissions than we could possibly fit in one volume. (It turns out, when editors say a story does not meet their needs at this time, that really may be all they mean.)

One of my favorite memories is of sequencing the stories. We and our families got together at Lunacon, and after a day of going to panels and schmoozing, David and I took our turns kid-watching while our spouses made the rounds of the parties. The children were all young enough, we tucked them into one room together with a baby monitor, and David and I laid out hard copy of all the stories up and down the length of the hotel hallway. We spent most of two nights trying out different arrangements, reading aloud to each other the last paragraph of one story followed right away by the first paragraph of the one we were considering putting next, until all our transitions felt smooth and resonant. The satisfactions of editing an anthology are different from the satisfactions of writing your own stuff, but they're compelling enough that I'd absolutely do another anthology, especially with David.

The small press we started with, Drollerie Press, was a one-person company with one intern and a couple of freelancers editors on contract. Just when David and I had finished reading slush, had finalized our story lineup, and had gotten all the authors to sign their contracts, the publisher had a health crisis. Weeks went by and nobody on the authors' listserv heard from her. We wondered if she had died. Seriously, she went into the hospital, and months later when the freelance editors helped her revert everybody's rights before the press went into bankruptcy, the poor woman was still there. It was a mess.

But the book was so good, David and I could not bear to let it die. We loved those stories, and we felt that we had put them together into something that made them more than the sum of their already-awesome parts. We asked the authors if they would stay with us while we looked for a new home for the anthology. Almost all of the authors said yes.

Hildy Silverman, publisher of the magazine *Space and Time*, is a friend of ours. At a SFWA event she heard Ian Randal Strock mention that he had just bought Fantastic Books, which had been a reprint-only small press, and that he was hoping to acquire some original titles. Hildy put in a good word for our homeless book, and after a few months of correspondence, Ian read it and picked it up. It took a while for us to make sure that the new contracts made sense for our new publisher while also offering the authors who had stayed with us terms that

were at least as good as the ones we'd offered with our previous press, but we got to an agreement everybody was happy with, and even picked back up an author we had lost.

The whole process certainly wasn't faster than writing a novel. In the time between the day we posted our call for submissions and the day we held copies of the book in our hands, I grew an entire second child from scratch to the point where he could climb stairs and use prepositions in sentences. On the other hand, most of that delay was about having to switch publishers in the middle.

One of the healthiest things about our collaboration was that we got to take turns being overwhelmed by other things. My entire second pregnancy happened while we watched Drollerie Press dissolve. David and his family had a pretty stable year, and he carried the anthology with only a little strategic consultation from me. When we got into contract negotiation and the production process with Fantastic Books, David's day job as a freelance medical editor picked up pace, and he's his family's breadwinner. I was able to step up and handle a lot of what the anthology needed while he dealt with other things. If either one of us had embarked on the anthology alone, I don't know if it would ever have been finished.

I should also note that our respective spouses also did a lot to make the anthology possible. Rachel and Dan took on the whole combined tribe of four children on numerous occasions to free David and me up so we could meet in person and put in a whole day on the book.

We enjoyed working on the anthology enough that we have plans to do more of them. Not soon, though. We're still trying to do right by this one, which just went from print only to having both print and e-book formats.

**How do you feel about self-publishing and indie-publishing? Where is this insane publishing world going?**

I think there will always be a place for curated collections of work—as long as there are editors who are consistently able to offer a constituency of readers the kind of thing they like to read from a variety of authors, there will be a place for something that looks like traditional publishing. I also think books that have had a round of developmental editing, a round of copyediting, and a round of proofreading are still at a huge advantage over books that have only had beta readers. And book design does matter.

That said, with crowdfunding it's more and more feasible for independent authors to hire A-list professionals to do for them all the things a publishing house would do. I've looked into that model for a manuscript of mine that's received several rejections that said, approximately, We love this book, we dream in your city, it kills us that we can't publish this, but our business model can't guarantee us the profit we need from a book this long by an unknown

author, so please send us your next thing. Okay, as rejections go, that's my favorite kind. But I'm not a wholly owned subsidiary of a multinational corporation with stockholders to appease, and I don't need to pay rent on thousands of square feet of office space in Manhattan, so sales numbers that would be a big loss for a big imprint could still, hypothetically, do quite well enough for me. Right now I'm contacting the people I would want on my editorial and production teams, getting estimates, doing number crunching to see what kind of goal I could set for Kickstarter. The big trunk novel may not be feasible in the near future, but I think this year I'll try my hand at crowdfunding and self-publishing something. It's just a matter of how big a project I can afford to learn on.

David mentioned an informal survey he'd seen—neither of us has turned it up, but maybe one of your readers will recognize it and point us in the right direction—that showed authors who only published conventionally earning substantially more than authors who only self-published, and authors who did both earning more than either alone. It seems that having some curated and vouched-for work keeps up your credibility with readers, and having some work that delivers a better return per copy keeps the earnings up.

Considering that prosperity in our field is measured by whether you can afford to keep putting enough time into the job to keep producing pro-quality work, I don't expect ever to get rich at this. As Tom Doyle puts it, writing fiction professionally is a pie-eating contest in which the prize is more pie. Nobody should *expect* to get rich writing, and if getting rich is a high priority for a person, there are more efficient ways to go about it than writing. Someday I would like, though, to reach a point at which all the hours I put into writing, balanced against all the income I bring in from it, calculates out to better than the minimum wage. That would be awesome, and it's rarer than you think.

**Since some of our readers are also aspiring writers, what kind of advice can you give them to help them on their path?**

There's a lot of advice for young writers just starting out at life as well as at writing—most of it's pretty good advice, and there's a lot of overlap. But there's not so much for aspiring writers with children, so I'm going to offer the things I've learned in the past seven years that I wish someone had told me seven years ago. In writing, as in other fields, nobody wants to get mommy-tracked, so the subject is full of ugly true things nobody wants to talk about.

But here's a Wiccan aphorism that usually serves me well: Where there's fear, there's power.

Before I had kids, I would have said the usual: Write every day. Now, though, I've had to moderate that for myself to this: Do something to support your writing life every day. If family obligations don't allow you to generate new words of fiction every day, there will still

be something you can do. Look at markets on Ralan.com, submit a story, make a blog post, correspond with your editors or beta readers. Just do something.

It's true that all those para-literary activities can be ways of procrastinating, but when you've got a newborn or a sick kid or a family move, your brain is just mush at the end of the day. Wait, just at the end of the day? Possibly all day.

The only thing I could do when my newborns were nursing twelve hours out of twenty-four was read, but I used that time to read lots of classic writers in the genre like Leigh Brackett and Lord Dunsany, people whose names came up all the time but whom I'd never read. All my fancy schooling left a lot of gaps in my knowledge of my home genre, and it was important to me to get to fill some of those gaps.

You do what you must, then you do what you can. When what you *can* do doesn't move you discernibly closer to your writing goals, you look for opportunities to shore up your foundational skills, lore, or resources.

Forgive yourself for being slowed down. What you are doing is hard. Nobody who hasn't done it knows how hard it is.

**What's next for you? Is there anything else you'd like to add?**

Right now I'm working on the next novella in the Rugosa Coven series. I've got at least three more novellas in mind for those characters, and more may come to me.

This summer, I'll be working on a self-publishing project. If I get a bit of seed money from a grant I've applied for, I'll self-publish the sprawling epic family saga. A big name editor who recently retired from a big name imprint and now freelances says she's excited about doing the structural edit with me, whenever I can raise the funds to pay her. If I don't get the grant, it'll probably be a related novella that I self-publish first, and I'll work my way up to the longer book and the series it opens.

I'd like to add my thanks for your invitation to do this interview. Writing so often feels like dropping words into the void, and it's always good to get a sense that there's someone on the other side of the process who wants the story, and the story about the story.

**Sarah, thank you very much for such detailed and entertaining answers. Good luck with reaching all those dreams!**



# Interview with Author Christine Borne

**C**hristine Borne is a writer, editor, and recipient of the 2012 Creative Workforce Fellowship in Literature. Christine earned a B.A. in English from Cleveland State University in 2000 and a Master's Degree in Library and Information Science from Kent State University in 2002. She has worked for numerous Cleveland cultural institutions including the Shaker Heights Library, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Western Reserve Historical Society, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum's new Library and Archives, and Loganberry Books. In July 2011 Christine attended the Tin House Summer Writers' Conference where she workshopped an excerpt from her novel *Rust World Problems*. Christine has lived in Montana, New Jersey and New York, and currently resides in Cleveland with her husband, James Nickras. She enjoys drinking sherry, watching *Columbo*, and listening to Hüsker Dü, and is currently working on a YA novel about Krampus.

## Q&A

**Julian: Give us a little bit of background on Christine Borne. How/where did you grow up, what was your upbringing and were there any particular influences in your life, especially ones that steered you towards your current self?**

Christine: That's a big can of worms! Let's see. I grew up in a small house on a busy streetcorner in an inner-ring suburb of Cleveland in the middle of the Rust Belt era. That's pretty much what set this ball of neuroses rolling.

**How did you get involved into writing? Give us summary of your path.**

I was writing as early as I can remember—from age four or five, I was obsessed with my mom's electric typewriter. As a kid I was a prolific writer of fan fiction. There was no Internet so I had no idea that fan fiction was a thing, of course. I still have notebooks full of Doctor Who and Red Dwarf and Blake's 7 scripts written in junior high. Actually I lost that compulsion to write in high school and ever since, writing has been like pulling teeth—I think it's because I kept forcing myself to try and write long fiction and never really considered the fact that what I really like doing was dramatic writing.

**In 2012 you have received the Creative Workforce Fellowship in Literature. How did this come to be and what did it mean for you and your career?**

The Creative Workforce Fellowship was a program of Cuyahoga Arts and Culture, which (I believe still) is the third largest public arts grantmaking agency in the United States, after the states of New York and Minnesota. I say "was" because the program is on hiatus right now,

which, if I might be frank, completely sucks because \$20,000, no-strings-attached arts grants are pretty hard to come by. I owe a lot to this fellowship because I would never have rediscovered my interest in dramatic writing without it—I spent the year trying to bang out this terrible satirical novel which was really just a catalogue of people who had wronged me, but through the program I met my current writing partner, Justin Glanville, and we sort of bonded over our mutual love of television. We ended up using the last vestiges of our fellowship money to take a TV writing class through Mediabistro, after which we were a little befuddled, like "what are we going to do now? Move to LA?" Well that's not in the cards for me at least because the two things I hate most are a) driving and b) the sun, so we took our idea and developed it into a dramatic podcast series, which we're now recording with a full cast at Cleveland Public Theatre. I don't know what it was, but we felt sure that podcasts were about to blow up as an art form, and apparently they are.

**What do you consider to be the defining moment in your writing career, the moment when you knew this is what you will do for the rest of your life?**

I definitely haven't had that moment, as I've spent most of my adult life avoiding writing. It's taken me a long time, actually, to realize that I want to write but I also want to do other things. I am a writer but I am other things too.

**In the past, you've worked as a librarian and independent book seller. It seems like you've lived most of your life around books. What other things have you done, or are currently doing?**

Well I've recently gone back to school because I want to do a master's degree in linguistics, which was my first love, intellectually. I'm not sure how I ended up in library school, honestly. I was a terrible librarian. I loved selling books, though. The bookstore I worked in, Loganberry Books, is like the bookstore you picture dying and going to; it's got library ladders and Persian rugs and secret nooks and a bookstore cat (his name is Otis). Seriously, if I had a nickel for every New Yorker that ever walked in through the front door and said "we don't have things like this in New York anymore..." Right now I'm winding up to do another long distance move and do some more traveling. I'd like to rent a cottage in the Shetlands for a month or two and finish one of my half-finished novels, maybe, just to say I did. Just for me.

**In our issue #5, we've included your story "Tempest Fugit." Tell us a bit about it. How did it come to be? What does it mean to you?**

"Tempest Fugit" was one of those stories that came to me fully formed in a dream. It's actually an older story—I wrote it in 2009, when I was freshly laid off from the local historical society and kind of in a tailspin—we'd just moved back to Cleveland from New

York, which I had misgivings about, because I liked New York an awful lot even though I had this terrible guilt about Cleveland, about how all the educated people were moving away and it was dying, etc. I think I spent that entire summer in the basement reading Neil Gaiman and Lisa Goldstein and every ghost story anthology I could get my hands on. I guess I felt like a ghost, in a way. I felt like there was just no use for me here. Anyway, the story is about a sea captain and his men who died in a battle hundreds of years prior, who are just hanging around the place they knew best in life—a cliffside brothel. The captain's men are starting to disappear, though, as the city they fought for declines once again. Because whatever change you work for in life is never really permanent.

**Do you have any works in progress? If so, can you tell us something about it?**

Yes! As I mentioned before, my writing partner and I are working on an 11-episode dramatic podcast series called "Munchen, Minnesota," which a friend has generously been describing to people as "Buffy meets Lake Wobegon." It's about a broken down old textile mill town in the Upper Midwest that's got a problem with, let's say, an infestation of supernatural critters. The heroes are a geeky teenage taxidermist, her gay librarian father, and an ambitious city planner who's just transferred from the East Coast. We've got an incredible set of actors lined up—working with actors is a particular joy that I wish I would've discovered a lot sooner.

**What is your advice for today's young writers who are trying to break through this ever more difficult market?**

You have to learn to recognize what advice works for you, and what never will. Getting up an hour earlier every day is just never going to work for me, and if it means I work more slowly on something, that's just how the cookie crumbles. You also have to recognize your limitations and learn to work with them rather than berate yourself for being the way you are. Also, you have to figure out how long you should spend on something. You'll reach a point where you need someone else to get excited about your work, because you've gone over it so many times that you're completely not excited about it anymore yourself. But the thing is, once you're at that point, the work is probably pretty good, and then someone else (an editor, an agent, etc.) is (hopefully) going to run with it and reenergize you.

**What's next for you? Is there anything else you'd like to add?**

Well, Justin and I are doing a presentation at the AWP conference in Minneapolis this spring on dramatic writing for podcasts, so we hope people attend (it's on Saturday, April 11, at noon). I've still got a few half-finished novels lingering. Otherwise, that's about it. Thanks for having me!

**And thank you, Christine, for participating!**



# Interview with Award Winning Editor John Joseph Adams

**J**ohn Joseph Adams is the series editor of *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy*. He is also the bestselling editor of many other anthologies, such as *Oz Reimagined*, *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination*, *Armored*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, and *The Living Dead*. Recent books include *The Apocalypse Triptych* (consisting of *The End is Nigh*, *The End is Now*, and *The End Has Come*), *Robot Uprisings*, and *Dead Man's Hand*. Called "the reigning king of the anthology world" by Barnes & Noble, John is a winner of the Hugo Award (for which he has been nominated eight times) and is a six-time World Fantasy Award finalist. John is also the editor and publisher of the digital magazines *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, and is a producer for WIRED's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. For more information, visit his website at [johnjosephadams.com](http://johnjosephadams.com), and you can find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

## Q & A

**Iulian: Before we delve into the meat of the many things you do today, give us a glimpse of your life before all that: where were you born, how did you grow up, where there any early signs foreshadowing your future?**

John Joseph: I was born and raised in New Jersey, right across the river from Staten Island, NY. (Turnpike Exit 11, for New Jerseyites.) Raised there until I was 8 or 9 years old anyway; at that point my family moved to Cutler Ridge, Florida (near Miami). A year after that we relocated to Port St. Lucie, Florida, which is where I lived for about 16 years. I graduated from the University of Central Florida in Orlando, and then after college I moved back to New Jersey so I could try to get a job in publishing. (Into the same house I lived in as a kid, actually—because it belonged to my grandparents and they still lived there.) Now I live on the Central Coast of California, where I have the nicest weather by far of any of the places I lived.

I can't think of anything as a kid that might have foreshadowed my future as an editor. I actually didn't even really identify as a science fiction/fantasy geek until my late teens, though looking back, I do remember that SF/F did seem to comprise most of my favorites in all media as I grew up, and I really was *always* a geek—I just didn't realize that there was a whole sphere of the entertainment world kind of geared toward my interests.

**You edit. A lot. And awesome stuff. What drives you to the genre? Where there any authors, books, or short stories that you can think of as the initial driving force that pushed you in that direction?**

The two most important authors for me that drove me to the genre are Michael Crichton and Alfred Bester.

Crichton might seem like an odd choice, but it was reading his mainstream-friendly, but chock-full-of-science books (like *Jurassic Park*, *Sphere*, and *The Andromeda Strain*) that sort of opened up my eyes to the fact that I could handle reading books that had that level of science in it. At that point I was already a *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* fan, and I had read a bunch of those tie-in novels, but I had never really tried any regular SF novels... for fear that I wouldn't understand them. I was under the mistaken impression that I'd need some kind of science background to be able to read them, (which of course was a ridiculous notion). But anyway, Crichton really opened my mind to the possibilities that science fiction had to offer. And I'll always be thankful that my former brother-in-law said to me "If you can handle the science in *Jurassic Park*, you can pretty much handle any science fiction novel."

But Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* is probably the most formative book for me ending up where I did in my career. At the time I read that, I hadn't read much "core" SF. I had read some, but when I read *Stars*, it just blew my mind. It pushed all of my buttons as a reader—buttons I didn't even know I had at the time—and after reading it, my goal as a reader was to find more stuff like that.

James Gunn's anthology *The Road to Science Fiction, Volume 3: From Heinlein to Here* is probably the most formative work for me specifically pertaining to short fiction. I read it in college in a science fiction/fantasy literature class as one of our assigned texts, and to this day it still contains some of my very favorite classic SF stories. Some, like "The Cold Equations" and "The Streets of Ashkelon." I'd surely reprint a couple of the others from there, but can't get the agents who manage the estates in question to even reply to my inquiries. (Or in one case, they were looking for—literally—one hundred times as much as I normally pay for reprints.)

**Let's talk about magazines. Without sounding too cheesy, I'd like to say that I am a proud member of a large crowd that believes that whatever you touch turns into genre gold. And what better way to emphasize that than through your contributions to one of my favorite magazines of all times: *F&SF*. Could you tell us how you started there and how that first role as editor has influenced your work?**

I mentioned earlier how I went to UCF (where I majored in English/Creative Writing) and then after graduating moved back to New Jersey. Once I got there, I started trying to find a job, but I set myself up with enough of a cushion that I didn't have to just take the first thing I could find—and I wanted to find something in SF/F publishing specifically. The first thing I tried was applying to the "big three" SF/F magazines—*F&SF*, *Asimov's*, and *Analog*—mainly because I thought that it might be a little easier to break in there than at a big New York publishing house. This was in January 2001. So I sent my resume to those three places. Gordon Van Gelder at *F&SF* was the only one to reply, but initially it was bad news: He told me that he wasn't looking to hire anyone at the time, but I should check back later in the year.

I continued looking around and didn't find anything, and so a couple months later, in May, I figured "Hey, it's later in the year. Why don't I follow up with *F&SF*?" And lo and behold when I emailed back, Gordon told me that his assistant had just given his notice and asked me to come up to Hoboken for an interview.

So I drove up to meet Gordon, and we went and had lunch at a diner near the *F&SF* office. It was really relaxed and informal, and we just basically talked about science fiction and fantasy. I admitted to liking Crichton, which probably lost me points, but I named *The Stars My Destination* as my favorite novel, which garnered me lots of points. Later I would learn that my unbridled criticism of *The Matrix* was one of the things that convinced Gordon to give me a shot at the job; I think he appreciated that I had a strong point of view on the subject—and was vociferous about it even though it ran counter to popular opinion.

As for how the job influenced me... well, it's hard to properly convey how much of an impact it had. Gordon basically taught me everything I know about editing. Not just by watching him work, and working alongside him, but via our extensive conversations about all things SF/F and/or publishing. I'll always really, really appreciate that he was willing to take time out of the workday to just talk from time to time, because I think it was in those conversations where I really leveled as an editor.

**After *F&SF*, you gave life to *Lightspeed Magazine*. Since then it has grown into a successful, award-winning, reader favorite e-zine that keeps delivering great content month after month. Give us a few words about the challenges you faced launching *Lightspeed* in 2010 and how bumpy (or not bumpy) was the road to the *Lightspeed* of today?**

The main initial challenges associated with launching *Lightspeed* were that (a) I'd have to leave *F&SF*, a magazine I'd worked for for 9 years and had grown to truly love, and (b) I'd have to take a pretty significant pay cut. Now as an assistant editor at *F&SF*—and a part-time one at that—I wasn't exactly making bank, but even so my initial *Lightspeed* salary was a big

pay cut. Luckily, around that time I was starting to make money selling anthologies, and I was also working as a book publicist for Night Shade Books and doing some regular freelance writing about SF/F (mainly for the Syfy Channel's website). So I was able to take the plunge and leave the relative security of *F&SF* to take my shot at sitting in the big chair.

At the time, I figured that Gordon was only 10 years older than me, and was both editor and publisher of the magazine, so it was unlikely I'd ever be promoted to editor—and naturally that's what I wanted, the shot to be the one making the final call about what goes into the magazine. Of course, as I write this, just recently *F&SF* announced that Gordon would be stepping down as editor (while remaining as publisher), to be succeeded by C.C. Finlay. So I guess I was wrong about that, but launching *Lightspeed* and making it into a success is one of my proudest achievements—and, hey, it got me a Hugo!—so it all turned out well in the end.

The road hasn't been too bumpy otherwise. The one big obstacle we had was about a year and a half after launching *Lightspeed*, the publisher Sean Wallace, decided he wanted to get out of the magazine publishing business, so he asked me if I wanted to buy the magazine and take over as publisher. It was a tough decision—not only financially but also because suddenly I'd be a publisher in addition to being an editor. In the end I think it all worked out quite well. I'm enjoying the flexibility being both editor and publisher has afforded me—for instance, the ability to do our Destroy special issues. Editing is definitely where my heart is, though!

**I am not the biggest fan of horror fiction, but I do appreciate a good story in that genre. You decided to separate *Nightmare* magazine, even though you collapsed *Fantasy* into *Lightspeed*. Tell us a little bit about the reasons behind the current setup.**

Well, to me, the audience for fantasy and science fiction is largely the same audience. There are some folks who only read one or the other, but those readers are a fairly small percentage. So to me it made sense to fold *Fantasy* into *Lightspeed*, as that made it easier to grow a singular brand, rather than having two separate but related ones.

Horror, though—horror I think has its own separate audience. Of course there's a good amount of overlap between SF/F readers and horror readers, but it was my feeling that there were enough folks who wanted to read just horror/dark fiction and those who wanted to read SF/F without the horror/darkness vibe that it made sense to launch *Nightmare* as a separate entity.

Of course the initial plan for that was also that I would not publish that magazine myself, so that was a factor as well. My original business partners on *Nightmare*, Creeping Hemlock Press, couldn't quite make it work in the end, so they turned the magazine over to me and I

found myself as publisher of a second magazine I never really had any intention of publishing. But, again, in the end it worked out for the best.

**Running two successful magazines and editing a lot of anthologies is equal, in my mind, with having absolutely no free time. So you must be surrounded by a strong team that helps out. How are your magazines structured? Tell us about the team and the separation of duties.**

I definitely do have a great team around me! Prior to 2014, I was doing a lot more myself, but starting in Jan. 2014, I brought on Wendy N. Wagner to serve as our managing and associate editor. That slightly complicated job title means that she handles a lot of the typical duties of a managing editor (keeping everything on schedule, sending out contracts — basically administrivia) but also that of an associate editor (helping me decide which material gets published, line-editing stories, etc.). I was just getting so busy that finding time to do everything I needed to do for the magazines each month was becoming tougher and tougher to do, and I knew that with me starting my tenure as series editor of *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy* in 2014, I'd have less time than ever. Now she's essentially my right hand.

But one of the other things Wendy handles is managing the rest of the team, which is fairly extensive. Anyone curious can check out our team on the staff pages of [Nightmare](#) and [Lightspeed](#). I couldn't possibly publish or edit the magazines without them.

At this point, I'm still selecting all of the fiction for both magazines, though Rich Horton and John Langan are my reprint editors, tasked with helping me find suitable reprints for the magazines. Assistant Editors Erika Holt and Robyn Lupo both provide feedback on stories but also manage our author spotlights (assigning them and making sure folks turn them in on schedule etc.). Cory Skerry and Henry Lien are our art directors. Jeremiah Tolbert of Clockpunk Studios is our webmaster. Stefan Rudnicki and the team at Skyboat Media produce our podcasts, and Jim Freund is our audio engineer. And my wife, Christie Yant, is our associate publisher, which basically means she helps me make all of the important decisions about the magazine. It's a huge collaborative effort.

**Since a lot of writers are going to read this, could you tell us what constitutes a great story for you? And, on the other hand, what is a bad story? Any advice for writers aspiring to one day have their stories in the pages of *Lightspeed* or *Nightmare*?**

This is always a hard question to answer. (If I had an easy answer for it, we'd have it up on our guidelines page so writers would know what they need to do to sell me a story!) But generally what I want to see in a story is something that surprises me, something that I've never seen before—whether that's via character, voice/style, or plot. A unique voice is

probably the hardest thing for a writer to develop, so that's one of the most frequent ways that a story will initially grab my interest; naturally it has to have more than just that in order to be fully successful as a story, but it's the kind of thing that may make me take notice of a writer even if the story in question didn't quite work for me.

As for bad stories... it's not very useful to hear, but the most common sin bad stories commit is they're just not interesting enough. Call it "boring" if you want a one word descriptor, but that's what it essentially boils down to. When I really get into a story, I disappear into it and the artifice of the act of reading sort of fades away; when I'm not into a story, it's like I'm very aware that I'm reading. A good story is a masterful illusion; a bad story is a clumsy magic trick.

As for my advice for aspiring writers for breaking into *Lightspeed* or *Nightmare*: I'd say the best thing you can do is read as much of what we publish in the magazines as possible. And otherwise just read as much short fiction as possible. Reading novels is great too, of course, but if you really want to improve your short story craft it's essential to study that particular form.

**Besides being the publisher and editor of award-winning magazines, you also edit a variety of genre anthologies. How different is editing an anthology from editing an e-zine? Do you set yourself annual goals in terms of issuing anthologies, or are they more of a spur of the moment kind of thing?**

I don't have any annual goal in terms of anthology quantity per se, but in my experience it's feasible that I can publish 4 or 5 anthologies in a year—in addition to *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*—and there's room enough in the marketplace to allow that, so that's sort of what I'm shooting for at this point. For a lot of the books I do, there's not much left of the advance after I pay the authors, and then if they earn out I won't see the royalties for a year or more, so it's good to have a lot of different irons in the fire.

Otherwise, though, most of my anthologies are born due to a burst of inspiration. Either because I detect something happening in the zeitgeist I think it would be cool to capture in an anthology, or I hit on something I just think would be fun to do, and if I'm lucky it'll have commercial potential as well.

Editing anthologies and magazines are very different beasts. I feel like editing a magazine is a more pure editorial experience because I'm not really doing much soliciting—I'm just selecting what I like best from the stories that are submitted; or even if I do solicit, I'm not soliciting with any particular theme in mind, I'm just asking authors to write something for the magazine. Whereas with an anthology, most of the time it's going to be centered on some

theme, which means that you have to recruit authors to write stories on that specific thing—and so by definition that the end result of that kind of project is going to be more of a manufactured sort of thing, not organic and pure like an issue of a magazine that is not beholden to any particular theme or genre (except the wide genres of SF/fantasy). With an anthology there are also huge commercial considerations that you just don't really have with a magazine.

**Are there any editors out there that have influenced your work and style? Any personal heroes? And on that note: what do you think makes a good editor?**

Well, as mentioned above, clearly Gordon Van Gelder was a huge influence on me as an editor. Otherwise, Ellen Datlow, Gardner Dozois, and David Hartwell also immediately come to mind, and also, to a some degree, Ben Bova—as he's kind of responsible for me reading short stories in the first place. Bova was one of the first core SF authors I followed and hunted down his books; as a result I ended up with several short story collections, and it was in those pages that I read some of my first SF short stories, but also was exposed to the wider world of genre fiction that was out there—the short fiction magazines, conventions, et al.—in the header notes he had before each story. Remember, this in the mid-to-late '90s, so the internet was around but not the treasure trove it is today, so I hardly knew anything about what was out there—thus Bova's intros and headers were kind of a revelation.

**This is a tough one: What is your favorite story from *Lightspeed* and what is your favorite anthology among those that you've published? And I'll even dare ask this: what is your favorite piece of short fiction ever?**

I'll answer your last question first: My favorite piece of short fiction ever is "Flowers for Algernon" by Daniel Keyes. The novelette version, not the novel version; though I like both, I'm not sure that the novel version was necessary, as the novelette is essentially perfect. The fact that "Flowers for Algernon" was published in *F&SF* originally is one of the many reasons it was such an honor to work there. I think my second favorite is "The Deathbird" by Harlan Ellison, and others of my top favorites include "Speech Sounds" by Octavia E. Butler, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" by Ursula K. Le Guin. But it's so hard to name just a few stories like that—I have so many stories that I truly love!

I always hesitate to play favorites among my own anthologies and magazines too, but it's a fair question. I think that my favorite story I've published in *Lightspeed* is "[Biographical Fragments of the Life of Julian Prince](#)" by Jake Kerr. I just love the inventive way in which it tells the story via excerpts of Wikipedia entries and news articles and interviews, and how it forces you to construct this meta-narrative in your head as you read it. Though I might be forced to concede that this is kind of a tie with the very first story *Lightspeed* ever published,

["I'm Alive, I Love You, I'll See You in Reno"](#) by Vylar Kaftan. My wife and I both love it so much we got Vylar to write our wedding ceremony. (And as it happened, we were getting married in Reno.)

You didn't ask, but just quickly I'll say, since I'm naming favorites, I think my favorite story I've published in *Nightmare* is probably "[57 Reasons for the Slate Quarry Suicides](#)" by Sam J. Miller or "[Construction Project](#)" by Desirina Boskovich. And probably my favorite thing that I read or published in 2014 was "[Break! Break! Break!](#)" by Charlie Jane Anders, which was in my anthology I co-edited with Hugh Howey, *The End is Nigh*. (And in my role as series editor of *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy*, I tried to read every story published in SF/F—in American/Canadian publications anyway—in 2014, so that's saying something.)

Among my own anthologies, I'd say either *Wastelands* or *Brave New Worlds* are my closest to my heart, though I kind of feel like *The Apocalypse Triptych* may be the best publishing idea I've ever had. I can tell you that if I had a business manager, *The Living Dead* would be his favorite.

**What are the most valuable non-monetary rewards you get from running *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*? The award nominations, a handshake at a convention, a friendly email from a reader? What makes it all worth it in the end?**

You know, in the middle of answering these interview questions, *Lightspeed's* Hugo for Best Semiprozine finally arrived after months of waiting. (The Hugos were presented in August, and today is January 20.) Or to be more precise, the *rest* of my Hugo arrived. They shipped it in two pieces: the base in one shipment and the rocket in another. The rocket was sadly even more delayed (I only got the base about a week before the rocket). Man, that'll teach me to not go to London when I'm nominated for an award! And on top of that I learned that two stories from *Nightmare* and my anthology *The End is Nigh* are all on the preliminary Stoker Awards ballot. It's been kind of a weird day.

The awards are a huge honor, obviously. But ultimately the things that matter most are the human connections: Hearing from readers who are moved by the material you produce, having someone tell you that you not just moved them but produced their favorite book, or doing socially-conscious projects like the Destroy series of special issues we're doing and seeing the positive effect those things have.

One of the other things that makes it all worth it is one of the things that really makes my life seem surreal at the same time: the amazing people I get to work with and consider colleagues. Like, I've had a number of phone conversations with Harlan Ellison. I've had lunch with Robert Silverberg (who insists I call him "Bob") and Joe Haldeman. I've exchanged emails

with Ursula K. Le Guin. [Neil Gaiman once gave me five gold doubloons](#). George R.R. Martin and I got married to our spouses at the same venue on the same day, one wedding right after the other. I even talked to Stephen King on the phone once, and, hell, now I'm editing an anthology with his [son](#).

**What's next for you? What should people be looking for in 2015 and beyond?**

Last year, we crowdfunded a special issue of *Lightspeed* called [Women Destroy Science Fiction!](#), which was a special issue 100% written and edited by women, challenging the fallacious contention that women don't or can't write "real" science fiction. It was hugely successful, and so we decided we might as well keep destroying things—and there are plenty of other underrepresented groups that could use a larger platform—so we asked queer authors to destroy it this year. As I write this, we're in the midst of our [Queers Destroy Science Fiction!](#) Kickstarter campaign. We started out looking to raise \$5000 in order to fund making the special issue into a special double issue, but we reached that goal in about 7 hours and are now at just over \$23,000, with 27 days to go, and have unlocked several cool stretch goals, with more to come. Of course by the time you publish this, we'll have raised more than that and probably unlocked a few more stretch goals!

Otherwise, I've got a bunch of anthologies coming out in 2015. [Wastelands 2](#), a post-apocalypse reprint anthology, comes out Feb. 24, but first, Titan will release a mass market paperback edition of [Wastelands](#) on Jan. 27. [Operation Arcana](#), from Baen, is an all-original military fantasy anthology that comes out March 3. April 1 is the pub date for the final volume of The Apocalypse Triptych, [The End Has Come](#). In August, I have an anthology coming out from Simon & Schuster's new imprint, Saga (though I can't announce what it is yet), and Vintage is publishing my video game-themed anthology, [Press Start to Play](#). In October, the first volume of [Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy](#) (guest editor: Joe Hill) comes out.

In addition to that, I've got two other anthologies under contract with Saga, which will come out in 2016 and 2017, and I've got a couple other proposals out that will probably bear fruit before too long, though it's too soon to announce anything. Plus, there will be at least one more volume of *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy* in 2016, and then hopefully the publisher will decide to continue the series long into the future.

So, you know. I've been keeping busy!

**John, thank you very much for agreeing to this interview. Good luck with all your projects. Looks like it will be a busy year!**

## Artist Spotlight: Todor Hristov

**T**odor Hristov is a concept artist and illustrator, currently working fulltime for Norwegian Software and Web development company, Kaizen Web Productions.

**Iulian: Tell us a little bit about yourself: where did you grow up and how did your early life influence your future as an artist?**

Todor: Hi, my name is Todor Hristov and I am 30 years old. I'm originally from Bulgaria and I grew up in a small town called Novi Pazar. I have been drawing ever since I can remember. Our town has a well-developed silicate industry and we have a good professional high school, preparing professional designers and decorators for that industry. Since I had an interest in arts from a very early age, it was natural for me and my family to go study there. After I graduated, I went to university studying Commercial and Graphic Design. Over those couple of years I learned to draw and sculpt. I acquired a good level of knowledge about lighting, anatomy and perspective, but I tended to avoid and disliked working with colors. That's why now, after all those years I try to keep up and learn color theory as much as I can.

The biggest influences to developing my drawing skills were all kinds of fantasy and medieval movies, books, encyclopedias, animation, and comics. I am also very interested in bodybuilding, the human body, and anatomy. Even now I train a lot and always try to have a casual fitness goal. And the dedication and discipline required achieving that goal transitioned into my art development and thus it has helped me significantly.

**What are your favorite design tools and how did you get to learn them?**

When it comes to exploring new ideas and designs, for whatever subject, I prefer line drawing with some basic perspective. Back in school we designed silicate objects (vases, glasses, bottles, etc.) drawing them accurately on paper with exact sizes and proportions in different views and perspective. I'm used to this way of thinking even now when I draw digitally. I also had a lot of experience with traditional modeling with clay and harder materials. I had learned Photoshop back in my university years and worked as a graphic designer for a few years after that. Then, 3 years ago, I had decided that I *can* achieve my dream of becoming a concept artist. So I started learning digital painting. I struggled a lot at the beginning, watched tons of tutorials online, and kept pushing. I've taken a few online classes last year at CGMA and Schoolism, learning color theory and environment design. There's still so much more to learn.

**Are there any other artists out there that you admire and whose work has helped shape your work?**

I admire A LOT of artists. I can write 100 names here and still may miss some. I had the pleasure to meet some of them, and boy it feels like I'm meeting my idols, my rock stars! That's what they represent for me. Some of the names I can't miss though are: Feng Zhu, Level Up team—Jonas De Ro, Wojtek Fus, and Darek Zabrocki. Their online tutorials and sessions with other professionals offer help to so many new artists, and I'm happy to be one of them.

Stylistically, I admire Wei Wang, Dave Rapoza's rendering techniques, Jonas De Ro, Raphael Lacoste, James Paick, Aaron Limonick's environments, Scott Robertson, and Michal Kus. There are so many more...

**Where do you find inspiration?**

As I mentioned above, all my life I have been enjoying fantasy and historic movies, books, encyclopedias, animation and comics. Later on I was fascinated by the cool CG effects in the movie industry. And as a gamer I was amazed by the graphics of the new computer games. This was the time I started looking into concept art for games and movies. This is what I wanted to do one day. Overall that's it: games, movies, books and other concept artists and illustrators.

**How would you break down your workflow in steps?**

When I do illustrations and characters/creatures, I always start with rough sketch, and gathering reference. Sometimes I clean the sketch and define it if it's more conceptual work, to make it clearer. Then I block in the basic shapes and values choosing my main color, and then I add different light sources with their colors. Keeping in mind the color harmony and color relationships, I add the additional local colors and after that just render it out.

For environments I start with small color thumbnails. Sometimes I skip the sketching phase and go directly to painting. I often use photos for reference, and sometimes I use them as a base of the image, utilizing the color palette. I experiment with a lot of custom brushes here—not that much for characters. At the end I introduce some photo textures for a more realistic feel. I like using SketchUp as well for some more complicated architecture images.

This is my basic workflow when I do client work. When I do my own stuff, I tend to experiment a lot and sometimes I just improvise.

**Your work is very fantasy-driven. What drives you to that subject?**

I just love fantasy. I like Sci-Fi too but, I just prefer fantasy more. I love dragons, demons, big hulking barbarians and sexy female wizards. I love fantasy books, movies and games. Some of my favorite books are: Raymond Fiest's Riftwar saga series, J.R.R Martin's Song of Fire and Ice, Warcraft novels. Movies: Lord of the Rings, The Hobbit, Willow, Legend, How to Train Your Dragon, and more. Games: Legacy of Kain series, Warcraft games, Diablo, Dragon Age, Elder Scrolls, Heroes of M&M, Forgotten Realms Games, and many, many other fantasy and non-fantasy titles.

**If there was one piece of advice you could give other beginning artists, what would that be?**

To the beginning artists I want to tell: practice a lot. You must devote your time to learning the fundamentals first. I know it's tempting to try to paint that epic landscape piece already, or that shiny armored knight with a flaming sword and a fierce dragon behind him. But before that you need to have patience and motivation to learn the fundamentals. Composition, lighting, color, perspective, anatomy, etc.

And motivation is one of the things of paramount importance. Sometimes there are moments when artists just want to quit and give up because certain things are not working out, because we keep failing in painting something right, or because there are some other problems in our life. Remember, you are doing this for fun in the first place, so just take a break, clean up your head, or even start working on something else. Then get back to it and push again and do it. Because nothing is impossible. Even if you have to start from scratch, you can do it.

I live in very poor country and 5 years ago I never imagined that I can actually work as a concept artist and make a living from it. I had very unhealthy way of life and when I decided to try and change that by working out, eating clean, I saw results right away. So I just decided to use the same dedication and push and develop my art skills even more. And here I am. Few years later I work with something that I love, something I hadn't imagined possible.

Be patient, and work hard.

This coming from me feels rather strange because I'm so far away from being a complete professional, and I have so much more to learn. But I will!

**We selected one of your pieces for the cover of our magazine. Tell us a few words about how that piece came to be.**

This is a personal piece I did for fun a while back. You can say it's a portfolio image where I show my anatomy knowledge. Looking at it now, it has some problems but that's normal. I

have improved a bit since then, but the piece actually worked its purpose because I had few job offers thanks to that image.

**Where can we find you on the web?**

I'm most active on **Facebook** - <https://www.facebook.com/todor.hristov.50>

Other pages:

**DeviantArt** - <http://draken4o.deviantart.com/>

**Artstation** - <http://www.artstation.com/artist/Draken4o>

**Drawcrowd** - <http://drawcrowd.com/drakennp00f6>

As I mentioned I am working for Web Development Company in Norway, and we are developing few game projects where I'm the concept artist and illustrator. Most of my works are owned by them and are currently under NDA. Hopefully in the near future I will be able to show some of them. So in the galleries above you can see my personal work, stuff I did for fun, for practice, and a few contest entries as well.



# Book Review: Echopraxia (Peter Watts)

Julie Novakova

## Echopraxia

by Peter Watts

Tor Books (August 26, 2014)

*Maybe worship. Maybe disinfect.* The Bicameral Order's approach to God is somewhat unusual - but that might be the least unusual thing about this organically linked hive mind. Daniel Brüks, a baseline field biologist, doesn't feel quite capable of understanding them - or rather *it*? But he gets caught in a plot that's much bigger than him and involves the Bicamerals, vampires, zombies and aliens. Sound absurd? If so, I'll take a guess that *Echopraxia* is your first encounter with work by Peter Watts. However, it likely won't be your last once you start reading - at least if you like well-developed, original SF.

*Echopraxia* is the sequel to *Blindsight*, Watts's Hugo-nominated novel published in 2006. It's not necessary to read *Blindsight* before reading *Echopraxia* but I would recommend it. Many of the events and characters in the current novel can be viewed in a different and more illuminating light, and may seem more complex than at first sight without knowledge of *Blindsight*.

I cannot avoid starting the review with a comparison between those novels: *Blindsight* hooked me in within the first pages, the first sentences actually, and didn't even for a moment lose grip afterwards. Where *Blindsight* started with a perfectly built dark, thick atmosphere, *Echopraxia* begins with more action, opening up with an exciting prologue that provokes many questions for those who had read *Blindsight*. It then moves to introduce the main character, Daniel Brüks before shifting to a longer exposition after bringing him together with the Bicamerals and ultimately aboard a ship, *Crown of Thorns*.

The reader is shown how the Bicams work and meets other crucial characters, but for a while it seemed to me too much like a prolonged introduction, even though there was a lot of good action. However, this feeling dissipated as the voyage of the *Crown of Thorns* continued on her way through the gravity well to the Icarus Array, a device which powers a significant part of human civilization.

Later, as we get to the Icarus Array, things move faster and are more gripping. We encounter a fascinating entity and witness an event that might be considered first contact since most of humanity hadn't learned about *Theseus's* discoveries in *Blindsight* (*Theseus* is a ship introduced in *Blindsight*). From that moment on, the pace doesn't slow down and the

questions don't cease. The more you read on, the more you suspect that in the world in which the characters live, *things fall apart*, to quote Yeats (also quoted in *Echopraxia*, for a good reason). But there is a kind of sad beauty in it, as there is in the fight against it. In the end: silent awe.

Nonetheless, *Echopraxia* didn't reach *Blindsight*'s qualities for me. It is worth mentioning that *Blindsight* is one of my very favorite SF novels and a hard one for any book to compare with. It would be highly unfair to make this comparison if *Echopraxia* wasn't its sequel. However, *Echopraxia* is also a very different story in many aspects and I expect some readers to like it even more than *Blindsight*.

Because of its not-exactly-baseline protagonist, *Blindsight* had a very distinct and enthralling voice. Siri Keeton was an observer, and brilliant at it. Seen through his eyes and filtered through his unique mind, we got to know *Theseus*'s bleeding edge crew intimately and from unusual angles. I really cared for each of the characters (yes, even the vampire Sarasti).

I didn't have such an easy time with *Echopraxia*'s characters, viewed primarily from Brüks's perspective, which might be the reason why the book didn't hook me in as instantly as *Blindsight*. Moreover, good old baseline Brüks is somewhat confused about the things happening around him for most of the time, plotted by the opaque Bicameral mind and taken on faith by other characters. As a consequence, the reader can sometimes feel in the dark, too. Brüks is also a rather passive main character at the beginning, which makes perfect sense but might contribute to my difficulty getting drawn into the story. It's true that Siri Keeton had by the definition of his profession a largely passive role, too, but it didn't feel like that at all; his unique voice made up for it by orders of magnitude.

Peter Watts showed in his newest novel that "faith-based hard SF" is not an oxymoron and can result in an original, captivating, intricately built story. I'm especially curious how it's going to be perceived throughout different parts of the world. For someone who isn't a lifetime atheist from a largely atheistic country, it might have even more strength and deeper nuances than for me. Nevertheless, though it was not as enthralling and mind-blowing for me as *Blindsight*, I enjoyed *Echopraxia* very much and certainly had a lot to ponder about after reading it. I can well recommend it to anyone who likes original plots and hard SF full of interesting thoughts.



# Movie Review: Rigor Mortis (Juno Mak)

Mark Leeper

**CAPSULE:** A victory of visual images over plotting, this is Hong Kong director Juno Mak's premier film and a tribute to Hong Kong horror films from the 1980s. An actor rents a room in a supremely ugly concrete apartment block. His plan is to commit suicide, but the supernatural world is not through with him. This is a film for the eye and not for the mind. The plot is minimal but the visual effects have been lavished on this film enough to smother the plot. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4) or 6/10

There was a time when a special effects movie would be written one way. It would start out with a story and then say, "At this point the monster is born." That part would be given to the visual effects staff and they would create the effect. Later it might say, "At this point the monster is hit by a steam shovel." And the effects people would be given that image to create for the film. Of course, some of Ray Harryhausen's films would have the set of effects he wanted to create worked into the story. But the story would not have to be greatly modified and the plot of the film would still be paramount and the effects would have to follow it.

Rigor Mortis feels like it was not created that way and I suspect it was not. I think how it was made was that the effects people started by creating a collection of disturbing, violent, kinetic, and bloody images, as horrifying as they could manage. And they do show a great deal of imagination. The images were then sorted so that the strongest ones would be toward the end of the film. Then a story was written to tie the images together is a very loose plot. What does not quite fit the plot might be explained, but even that is not really necessary. The viewer leaves the theater with not a good feel for the story they just saw, but with hopefully indelible memories of the images.

Siu Ho wanted to be a movie star, but after a short career he finds himself out of luck and ready to give up on this life for the next one. He is also giving up on his wife and his young son. With only pocket change he rents a room in a surprisingly ugly apartment block. What it does have is a ceiling fixture from which he hangs a rope, and from the rope he hangs himself. But there are strange supernatural forces in the building and they have other plans for Siu Ho. They do not want to let him die so soon. They have other plans for him. Siu Ho gets to know the other tenants who have consigned themselves to living in this hellishly ugly concrete building which houses demonic ghosts--bloody and violent. The violent visuals have gallons of splashing blood and surreal imagination. It is hard for a Westerner not steeped in Asian supernatural tradition to know if the rules that the characters are following are real folklore or

are mythology created ad hoc. They are more distraction from the plot than they are enhancements of it.

This film is a tribute to the 1980s series called "Mr. Vampire" in the West. Many of the actors from that series are used again here. Creatures are called "vampires" here also, though they are not vampires at all but Chinese hopping ghosts. This is a film that is constantly fiddling with the camera. It does enhance the weirdness of scenes artificially, but we are given images with the camera corkscrewing or looks up at characters from ankle level, all for no apparent reason. They just seem to want to upset the viewer.

Rigor Mortis is visceral but not intelligent. This is the kind of film for which you turn off your mind and let the scenery overwhelm you. And it will without benefit of drugs. I rate Rigor Mortis a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale or 6/10. It was released June 6, 2014, on Amazon and Xbox.

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Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2771800/combined>

Originally appeared on: [http://leepers.us/rig\\_mort.htm](http://leepers.us/rig_mort.htm)

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