



# The *Illuminata*

**Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy**

## Pros and Cons

By Bret Funk

Science fiction conventions are an interesting phenomenon, a gathering of people with widely disparate interests drawn together by a singular, and occasionally, tenuous, connection: a love of speculative fiction. While some conventioners may come solely to party (who knew that a collection of geeks, nerds, and weirdos could be capable of debauchery on such a grand scale!); for many, the parties are merely an extension of the Con, a bonus, something to do after the sun goes down. For them, conventions offer a myriad of opportunities, as varied as the individuals who attend. Some game, others shop, but for most, it allows access to a mélange of SF authors, talented artists, television actors, and movie stars. Through panel discussions and casual encounters, fans are given an opportunity to see into the minds of those responsible for creating their favorite characters, to grill them on details and uncovered mistakes, and maybe, just maybe, to meet someone new.

But what of the guests? What are Cons like for them?

Having attended several sci-fi conventions, all as an author guest -- but as a fan as well -- I have a unique perspective. Circumstances have put me face to face with other guests, who have regaled me with tales of wonder and tales of woe. I have seen the hordes descend on the tables of the famous, circling like buzzards around their prey. I have sat in the wasteland of an early morning panel, listening to the footsteps echo in the halls outside. I have watched virgin guests blanch at the never-before-encountered attention and bend under the onslaught of curious questions. Through it all, I have survived, and I return with a message for all.

We are not so different.

I am reminded of my first convention. At the end of the first night, there was a 'Meet the Guests' party. I arrived a little early, as is my habit, and found a segregated room, fans on one side, guests on the other. Actor, artist, or author, it didn't matter, bonded as we were by the knowledge that we were the zoo exhibits, we formed a fast union. We talked a little shop, the veterans coached us newbies on what was to come, and we shared stories about our various endeavors. I don't know what the fans talked about; after the meet and greet ceremony, a few of the braver ones asked a question or two, and then they all disappeared. We guests hung out for a while, went up to the bar and had a few drinks, and then went back to our rooms to get ready for the parties.

Could we have been more outgoing? Should we have initiated conversations? A few tried, and many wanted to, but we're human too. It's nerve-racking to be put in front of a group of people like that, especially when you feel like you should have something important, or at least witty, to say. As a new author hoping to gather a few more readers into my fold, I don't want to come across as vapid any more than I want to look narcissistic. Despite knowing that these conventions are a great marketing tool, I don't want to shamelessly promote my product to the exclusion of all else. And, as a newbie, I feel compelled to defer to my older and wiser brethren; when one of them speaks up, I'll probably hold my tongue.

Fans can be intimidating. Coming face to face with your all-time favorite Star Wars character might make the average fan a little nervous, but for a moment, switch places with your idol. Imagine yourself at your first convention, with a hundred (or more) people lined up around you, all begging for your autograph and asking detailed questions about one gig you worked on for a few months several years ago. You didn't write the story; all you did was play the part you were hired to play, one of many parts you've played. What makes that one so special? Why are you loved for that and not for anything else? Why is that odd-looking man in the makeup touching your shirt?

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# RPG Corner (v3.0): Introduction to Scenario Design

by Doug >!< Roper of EPIC Gaming

The previous year of the RPG Corner was dedicated to the general processes and thoughts that go into the fabrication of a fantasy world setting, and hopefully have provided you, the reader, with a better understanding of the way in which Role-Playing Games operate. For the budding game designer, Game Master, or author, I hope that the series provided enough guidance so that you can create your own world, and has at least inspired you to think heavily about the details and minutiae of such an endeavor, and expanded your awareness of such things.

Now it's time to assume that you have a setting finished (although I'll admit, the designing of a fantasy world is almost never, ever finished) to your satisfaction, in which to tell your stories of epic heroes and dastardly villains, beautiful maidens and hideous beasts. The actual telling of stories and sharing of adventure is the area in which Role-Playing Games really begin to shine, and the crafting of deep and dramatic scenarios for the benefit of your players is an ongoing challenge for Game Masters. The creation of your world, or at least the main part of it where the stories will take place is a one-time thing. Once you have placed a mountain, the chances are that you won't be moving it around much. Stories are different. New scenarios, adventures, villains, monsters and thrills must be created constantly by the Game Master to keep the characters interested. This is where the true art of storytelling comes alive.

So how does one create stories for a Role-Playing Game? It's quite similar to the ways in which authors write their own stories, except that other people control the main characters, though as many authors will tell you, sometimes they have no more control over something one of their own characters says or does than a Game Master would have over one of his players' actions.

## *Models*

Before getting into the more detail-oriented discussions about creating plots and adventures, the first thing you should do is return to the models of Role-Play that I talked about in the very beginning (RPG Corner Vol. 1.2, in the October 2002 edition of the *Illuminata*). The designer must keep in mind the kind of model he wants to run, and the kind in which his players want to play. The different models that I talked about can only accomplish their individual purposes if the scenarios coincide with their vision. For example,

if your group is based on the **Pure Recreation** model, then they will not have the patience to sit through long exposition or hours of careful investigation and the reasoning out of plots and intrigues. Recreational games should center on action, quick payoffs and problems that aren't too complicated to be solved with a few whacks of a sword. Great amounts of detail at this level are appreciated by players, but not as much as when the Game Master simply gets on with it.

On the other extreme, an **Immersive** group will hunger for the detail, and can enjoy and appreciate slow-moving plots that gradually build up and up until the final climactic revelation or confrontation. Players at this level will want information, and very much desire to figure things out for themselves, even if it takes a long while. Non Playing Characters (characters performed by the Game Master to advance the plot) play a much larger role, and the Playing Characters will often want to have longer, more in depth conversations with them, where as an occasional gamer won't want to waste the time talking to the NPCs, because it means less time spent attacking the monsters in the hills or swiping the Queen's Jewels.

This seems simple enough, but the designer has to keep it in mind all of the time, and must continually evaluate whether or not his design has remained true to the model. Authors' struggle with this as well, as they must know the audience for which they write well, to make sure that their work is properly appreciated. However, authors don't have the immediate feedback that a game designer or Game Master has, which relieves a great deal of the tension from the writing. If the players do not seem to be connecting with a plotline that a Game Master has created, the GM can always tweak the plotline behind the scenes and between sessions so that the players will enjoy it more. Authors do not enjoy that luxury, so don't feel pressured to turn out masterpieces on your first attempt, and always remember that Role-Playing Games are collaborative, and with the help of good players, any game or plot can be a great experience.

## *The Heroes*

This may seem a little obvious to everyone, but it must be stated that the player-characters are always the heroes of the story. I mention this here at the beginning to account for two common blunders committed by Game Masters. The first is allowing the plot to overpower the characters. This occurs when

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## The Quirky, the Quizzical, the *Otherling*:

This month let's move into an archetype that, for the first time since our discussion began, is one which lies – with only the rarest of exceptions – wholly within the realm of fantasy. No matter what type of writing one undertakes, save, perhaps, a flat-out unembellished non-fiction, there will have been something to glean from each of the archetypes we've covered to date. But this, our ninth archetype, is necessarily different. Let's talk about the quirky. Let's think about what's quizzical. Let's introduce the *Otherling*.

The *Otherling* is usually, though not definitively, one of the *waif protagonist's* companions. He or she (but very often *it*) is the playfully vexing one whose sportive prodding and eccentric conduct or viewpoint, lend unusual dimension to a story that would prove almost unimaginable without them. Like other companions (when indeed the role of the *Otherling* falls within this category), s/he serves to bring aspects of the hero(ine)'s character to light, frequently performing as a vehicle for plot twists, as well. Let's select some examples.

One of the earliest and most obvious that comes to mind is J.M. Barrie's Tinkerbell, pixie companion to Peter Pan. Although it is evident that there are other fairies in his tale, their place in the story is backdrop. Tink is different. She hangs out with those not of her own kind; unquestionably, she is quirky; she certainly fits the bill as playfully vexing and sportive; and readers familiar with Barrie's gem know well enough how decidedly Tinkerbell drives several turns of plot. Tink is the veritable *Otherling* of which I speak. Nevertheless, though she is close cousin to truly prototypical *Otherlings*, admittedly, Barrie cannot be credited with having coined the archetype. We would need to take our examination further back in history for that, but for now we will move forward in time, instead.

Who, then, are the *Otherlings* we would quickly recognize today? The droids Artoo and Threepio (George Lucas's *Star Wars*), naturally, and – although he's slightly less outlandishly different – there is, of course, Mr. Spock (Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek*). Still, the King of Quirky was perhaps none other than the visionary, Walt Disney. Disney has left a veritable legacy of *Otherlings*. While many Disney-produced stories are based on extant fairy- and folktales (i.e.: Pinocchio, Cinderella, Mulan, Aladdin,

Pocahontas) the habit of enhancing those tales by introducing endearing *Otherlings* became almost trademark. Specifically -- regarding the examples just cited -- consider Pinocchio's conscience-heavy pal, Jiminy Cricket; Gus and the other mice in Cinderella; Mushu, Mulan's bumbling dragon guardian-wannabe; the evil Jaffar's parrot, Iago, in Aladdin; and Flit (the hummingbird) and Meeko (the raccoon) in Pocahontas.

This creative pattern has, in fact, become standard fare, so much so that it now is often emulated successfully by others -- to the point, in fact, that I have developed a longing for a straight-up animated great *sans* this particular archetype! For instance, Twentieth-Century Fox's beautifully executed animated feature, *Anastasia*, bowed to this creative-cum-common device to bring us Bartok the bat, without whom the piece would have worked just as well, if not even better. Some *tinks* just can't be imitated (sorry, I had to say that).

Occasionally there will be an attempt to create an inverse *Otherling* by concocting a world in which all, save one, are quirky. The old television show, *The Munsters*, is just such an attempt, the *Otherling* in that instance being the lovely live-in niece, Marilyn, odd in her wholesome non-monstrousness. Other examples in which quirk is standardized and an average Joe (or *Jane*, in these cases) is the *Otherling* include *Beauty and the Beast*, in which Belle is surrounded by the effects of an enchantment that has cast people into animate objects, and *Shrek*, in which the enchantment has, quite quirkily, employed false beauty as curse.

What, then, is the enduring appeal of the *Otherling*? Why does this archetype 'work'? What is it about pixie dust and jive-talkin' dragons that draw us in and disarm us? First of all, *all* storytelling takes place in a magic bubble of suspended disbelief -- even non-fiction. Whether the tale to which we are listening or watching reflects fantasy or reality doesn't matter. In truth, we are never *there* (in the story). We are *here*, listening or watching, longing to be taken *into* the tale while knowing we are irrevocably linked to the moment in time and space we already occupy. That is why we say storytelling requires the audience to suspend its disbelief. The more fully we, as audience, can be coaxed into suspending that disbelief -- which means the more thoroughly we are made to forget ourselves, our place in time, and our detachment from the tale -- the more cathartic, meaningful, and

## Peeling the Fandom Onion (Part II)

by Terry Crotinger/montanasing

I'm making stew but it lacks something. I can't decide if it is a particular spice, or more onions? I want it savory and delectable, mouthwatering and satisfying. Each ingredient adds a different flavor, just like my experience with science fiction fans and groups: each person comes to the group with a new perspective—a new flavor. But do we blend with each other to make the experience satisfying for those who try it? Do we come together and share with each other in such a way that old and new members return for second helpings? As I peeled my onions and my eyes burned, I realized that more often than not, the answer was a tired and one-sided, 'No'. For some, the goal is *to have*, not to share.

I boiled the frustration, like my stew, down to one basic enigma: science fiction groups and fandom can be a bitter experiences for a fringe person; worse, if that person is a brand-spanking new convert and does not have a tough skin; like my onions (Big-O anime fans would say: tomatoes). Was it a clash of traditional versus extremes? Partly. It was also a lack of *awareness* that the group had a life of its own and that, like my onions, sometimes gave off a foul essence of exclusivity, a territorialism that excluded the general SF public while giving lip-service to desire to have more people attend their functions/groups!

Uncounted personal encounters resulted in a rude awakening that it wasn't even *me*; it wasn't even personal. That was what bothered me. I know this is hard, and I might take some flack for it, but after doing the research, I find I am not alone in feeling this angst about my sci-fi brothers and sisters. I have visited chat rooms and listened real-time to open discussions about this unrewarding experience. I've seen site after fan site checking to see if I was just a bitter fan with a rotten tomato attitude. I stumbled on a website that journaled one man's decades-long experience with science fiction fandom who expressed similar results. (Remember the government formula? One letter actually equals the opinions of ten to fifteen people?) I am not whining. That makes fandom look bad and earns some of the stereotypes non-sf people call us. There is an uncomfortable truth here. We like what we like. No problem there, everyone is entitled to his or her opinion. Not everyone will share the same likes. Ditto.

Individually, this can be expressed in more palatable ways rather leaving a lingering bad taste as well. Ever been at a convention and someone rudely cuts

in line or shoves others so they can be first in line to the 'whatever' table? Some of my sci-fi brethren can be cut-throats, and I've seen every age do this. We won't even talk about the Cons with booze, the pick-up artists (larger Cons) and the few who see this as a cheap all-weekend get away to act like jerks. Which is worse? Some kid being a rude because they are a kid still learning social skills or an adult, who knows better, being obnoxious? Ever listen at cons and hear how rude people are? Try it sometime. It will sadden you. These behaviors give fandom foulness.

What can be done? Stay quiet? Whine? Test each personality as they enter the room? I have a few ideas that are inexpensive and beneficial individually and on a group scale.

Individually, *be nice!* Give a warm fuzzy. You don't have to be the fuzzy police; a smile, accompanied by eye contact, will do nicely. Notice everyone in your group at least one time. As you and your buddies talk about the RPG you enjoyed recently, turn to the newcomer and explain a little about it, perhaps how long you've done RPG and your favorite game. Then, and this is a simple technique: Ask a *few* questions. Have they ever played RPGs? No? Introduce them to a few people who do. Yes? Ask what their favorite is. Ditto for books/movies. Ditto for anime. That is all it takes: A few minutes, no cost; great benefits. Shy people have a hard time with this. That's okay. But do it anyway. Stretch just a little and ask one question to a new person—start with their name and a "nice to meet you" type response as you tell them yours. Usually, no one bites. And when you ask, if you see an embarrassed smile, you know you created a warm fuzzy. Good for you!

My personal method is to lead by example because I have no way to bring this up in a meeting without causing hard feelings. So I invite the strays to sit with me and get to know them. I put aside my own pursuits for awhile and introduce newcomers to people with similar interests. Soon, I've gained a new friend or know who to refer someone to. I'm not the social chairman, and I don't play one on TV. It only takes a little time and I'm still getting the same benefit at the meetings as I did before. Now, I'm richer for it, and so is someone else.

Am I talking-down to anyone? No, sadly, I wouldn't be so passionate if I thought some of my sci-fi buddies realized what a negative persona they project as they talk and engage in science fiction interests. They either

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# The Writer's Block: In The Tradition Of

by Charles Gramlich

I remember well one of the first fantasy novels I ever read--*Kyrik: Warlock Warrior* by Gardner F. Fox--and how there were, slashed at an angle across the front cover, the words: "In the Tradition of CONAN." Since I liked Fox's book, I went in search of others like it. And, of course, I kept my eyes open especially for anything having to do with "Conan," though I didn't know who or what Conan might be at that time.

Years later, after discovering that Conan was only one of the creations of an amazing writer named Robert E. Howard, I began to make a serious attempt at collecting paperback originals in Heroic Fantasy and Sword & Sorcery, focusing primarily on Howard's work and the work of those he influenced. Recently, I decided to take a look at my fantasy books to see the extent to which Howard's influence was indicated on the covers--and to find out when comments like "In the tradition of" first began to appear, and where such comments were conspicuously absent. Here's what I found, broken down by author in alphabetical order. (This does not include those books written as "pastiche" of Howard's characters, nor those anthologies that contain Howard stories. Maybe a second article will examine those books.)

## ANTHOLOGIES:

*Heroic Fantasy* (1979), edited by Gerald Page and Hank Reinhardt, contains the following mention on the back: "Conan and Frodo, Brak and Kane...Witch World and Middle Earth..."

*Heroic Visions II* (1986), edited by Jessica Amanda Salmonson, contains the following on the back cover: "From Beowulf the Dane to Conan the Barbarian."

The first *Heroic Visions* collection (1983), also edited by Jessica Amanda Salmonson, does not contain any cover mention of Howard but the introduction does discuss Howard and "Conan the Barbarian."

*Swords Against Darkness* #1, #2, #4 (1977, 1977, 1979), edited by Andrew J. Offutt, also cover Howard in the introductions, although there is no mention of him or of Conan on the cover. *Sword Against Darkness* #1 has a partial Howard story in it, "Nekht Semerkeht," which was completed by Andrew Offutt. *Swords Against Darkness* #3 (1978) has only a passing mention of Conan in the Foreword.

*Swords Against Tomorrow* (1970), edited by Robert Hoskins, has Howard in the introduction, but there is no mention of him or of Conan on the cover.

NOTE: Most Sword & Sorcery anthologies that I own contain a story by Robert E. Howard, which excluded them from consideration here.

## INDIVIDUAL AUTHORS:

Robert Adams: Although the Horseclans books by Adams seem clearly to have been influenced by Robert E. Howard, there is no mention of Howard or Conan on the front or back covers of any of the eighteen books in the series. These were all published by Signet between 1982 and 1988.

Poul Anderson: All of the three *Last Viking* books contain the back cover quote: "Poul Anderson's mighty historical epic of the last and greatest Viking King--Harald Hardrede--the real-life CONAN." Publication dates for these are all (1980), from Zebra. Anderson also published a Conan pastiche called *Conan the Rebel* (1980 from Bantam).

Neal Barrett, Jr.: One of Barrett's early books was called *Kelwin* (1970), which has a very standard Sword & Sorcery cover. However, despite the fact that it was published by Lancer, best known for their Conan series, there is no mention of Conan or of Howard on the cover of this book.

John Gregory Betancourt: *The Blind Archer* (1988) from Avon Books, is notable, not for any mention of Howard, but because the dedication is: "For the writers who most shaped my view of fantasy: Hannes Bok, Robert E. Howard, and Clark Ashton Smith."

Chris Carlsen (Richard Holdstock): I have the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> book of his Berserker series, *The Bull Chief* (1977) and *The Horned Warrior* (1979), both of which carry the cover quote: "From the publishers of Conan." I don't know if the first book in the series carries the same quote but am guessing it probably does. These were published by Sphere Books, a British publisher.

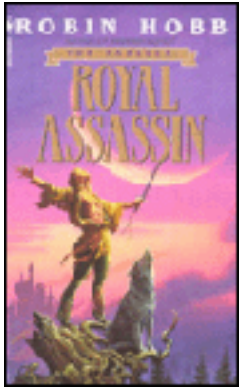
Lin Carter: I found only three Carter books with mention of Conan, *Thongar and the Dragon City* (1970) carries the comment "In the stirring tradition of CONAN." *Thongar and the Wizard of Lemuria* (1969) carries the quote: "The famous first adventure of the mightiest warrior-hero since Conan." *Thongar Fights the Pirates of Tarakus* (1970) carries the quote: "Sorcery and seafighting--and mortal peril for the mightiest warrior-hero since CONAN." All of these were published by Berkley Books. The two Thongar books that I have from Warner Books, *Thongar in the City of Magicians* (1979 Reissue) and *Thongar at the End of Time* (1979 Reissue) contain no mention of Conan. The original publications of these two books was 1968 but I don't have copies of those. In addition, I have *Thongar Against the Gods* (1970) and *Thongar of Lemuria* (1970) from Tandem and neither makes mention of Conan on the cover. Tandem is also a British publisher, however.

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## Reviews

### Royal Assassin (The Farseer Trilogy, 2)

Robin Hobb



Bantam Spectra, Feb. 1997  
\$6.99, Mass Market, 675 pp.  
ISBN: 0553573411

Reviewed by Scott H. Andrews

In "Royal Assassin," Robin Hobb continues the development of FitzChivalry Farseer's character as he returns to Buckkeep and perseveres through more young man's emotional growth. Hobb's strengths, the tactile first-person narrative and the fluid realism in Fitz's mental connections with other characters, flourish as Fitz's mind becomes even more intertwined with Prince Verity and a new animal character. This parallels his emotional development through interactions with the youthful Molly, an exhausted Verity, and the wasting King Shrewd.

However, Hobb's consistent weakness, the glacially moving plot, struggles to carry this character development as Fitz languishes in Buckkeep for the first 500+ pages. The continuing Red-Ship raids provide external pressure on the nobles, but until the scenes at Neatbay, the actual raids feel distant from the insulated narrative. Fitz's brief summer as an oarsman reads like a contrived plot detour to allow the narrative to witness a few battles, but the gritty counterattack at Neatbay provides a crucial direct view of the raiding and features key plot points for Fitz and Nighteyes, Burrich, and Kettricken.

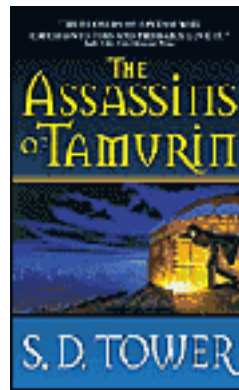
Against the backdrop of the coastal vs. inland political tension, the vicious royal intrigue feels like a natural element in this book, unlike the abrupt shift at the end of "Assassin's Apprentice." Hobb boldly casts Fitz emotionally adrift, as his closest mentors Chade, Burrich, and Verity all spend long periods of time away from Buck before the conspiracies rush to a climax. The ending would have been cheesy *deus ex machina* in the hands of a lesser writer, but hints in the Epilogue and the first pages of "Assassin's Quest" show that Hobb treats it as merely another character choice with benefits and consequences.

The "Assassin" titles of these books belie the very minor role of Fitz's assassin training and service -- he's only sent out of Buckkeep on assassin missions three times in the first 1000+ pages. He spends far more time as a stable hand or an errand boy or mental observer

for other more important characters, and his assassin training only comes to the forefront in the endgame of "Royal Assassin." Hobb's intensely real depiction of Fitz's character and the growth she steers him through manage to carry "Royal Assassin" on the strength of that developing character alone, without any fast-paced stock fantasy plot

### The Assassins of Tamurin

S. D. Tower



Eos, 2003

Review by D. L. Parker

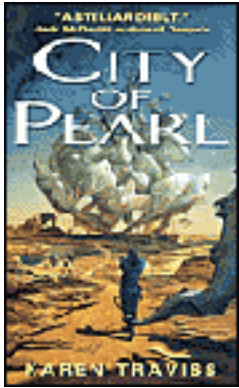
"The Assassins of Tamurii" begins in familiar rags-to-riches territory: young Lale the foundling, painfully aware of her differences from the poor villagers, is cast out of her unwelcome fosterage at eleven years old. But by good fortune -- and it soon proves, by intent -- young Lale meets up with an entourage of the Depostana (ruler) of Tamurin, and is taken into hand by her new mentor. But the unusual school that Lale joins is a secretive school for spies and assassins, and its "Mother", the Despotana and spymistress, harbors a deep hatred for her rival the Sun King, who deposed her family and killed her young son.

Young Lale is a face that the Despotana has long been searching for. At seventeen, the honed young graduate eerily resembles the Sun King's recently deceased wife, the Surina. Lale soon comes to the attention and favor of the young Sun King. But she must eventually determine whether to follow her training and pledge of allegiance to the woman she calls "Mother"...or to follow her heart and conscience and rebel against her one-time mentor, even at a fearful price.

"The Assassins of Tamurii" is a lively action story, and young adults, especially girls, will enjoy Lale's adventures. Older and more sophisticated readers may wink at the fantasy of the deadly young warrior princess and assassin crafted out of the imaginative and good-hearted young girl. This reader found Lale's surely turbulent inner progression from orphan to assassin and mistress of the Sun King too scantily portrayed; the story does not have much psychological depth. But "The Assassins of Tamurii" has plenty to entertain younger readers in its action and busy plot. Enjoy!

# Reviews

## City of Pearl Karen Traviss



EOS, 2004  
Review by D. L. Parker

Karen Traviss has written an absorbing and complex First Contact novel in "City of Pearl". Shan Frankland, Environmental Hazard Enforcement officer, is drafted into leading a mission to recover a priceless gene bank of earthly plant and animal biomaterial held by the long-separated colonists of the world of Constantine. The gene bank, if recovered, could allow Earth's embattled ruling body to swing the balance of power in its favor against the commercial cartels now controlling most biomaterials on Earth. Primed with a Suppressed Briefing, Shan and a small contingent of marines and cartel-aligned scientists embark on a ten-year journey to Constantine.

But the small religious colony of Constantine is not alone. They exist at the grudging mercy of the wess'har, technologically advanced aliens who enforce strict boundaries to protect the native ecology and species, including the intelligent, aquatic bezeri. To enforce those boundaries, the wess'har exterminated the cities of another would-be colonizer, the aggressive isenj. The spider-like isenj want their colony back; they also want revenge for the millions eliminated by the wess'har. And most of all, they want revenge on the primary means of their destruction – Aras, a genetically modified wess'har whose blood contains a secret more valuable to both the isenj and to humanity than the lost gene bank or their colonies.

Shan and her complement of marines and scientists upset the delicate balance that has let the Earth colony survive where their predecessors, the isenj, were destroyed. The wess'har and their tool of destruction, Aras, uphold the ecological peace and balance ruthlessly. The lives of all the humans are put at risk when the Earth scientists dissect the body of a bezeri child. When a second Earth ship, sponsored by the commercial cartels, appears suddenly on the heels of its predecessor and appears to have formed an unexpected alliance with the isenj, the situation flares into a flashpoint.

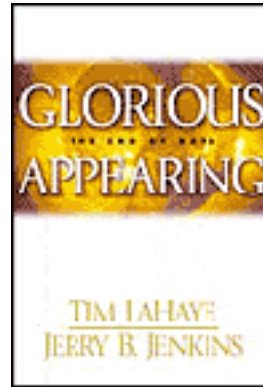
This is the first book I've read by Karen Traviss, a new U.K. based novelist. She writes a genuinely suspenseful

story and handles the complex relationships between the protagonists - personal, political, and military – well. The relationship between Shan and the powerful but lonely destroyer Aras is especially absorbing.

There are few loose ends left at the end of the story that hint at an upcoming sequel, so I expect to read more of Shan's adventures in an upcoming volume. The relationship between Shan and Aras in particular is left inconclusive and I turned the last page feeling somewhat cheated – "What happens NEXT here?" Still, I recommend "City of Pearl" to readers who enjoy classic "hard science fiction" and/or science fiction with a military or environmental theme.

## Glorious Appearing

Tim LaHaye & Jerry B. Jenkins



Tyndale, March 2004  
\$24.99, Hardback, 399 pp.  
ISBN 0842332359  
Review by Harriet Klausner

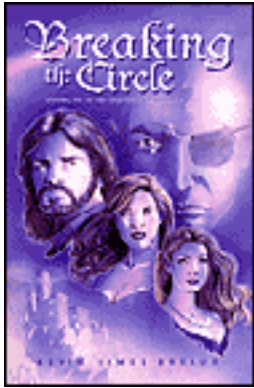
Earth has been torn apart as the Anti-Christ has taken control politically, economically and religiously. The believers who have not taken the Mark of the Beast have been deprived of their freedom, have gone into hiding, or fight against Nicolas Carpathia's preaching and the powers he possesses. Jews have been the victims of the Anti-Christ's hatred, and many have been martyred for their beliefs. God's chosen people are supernaturally protected in Petra, while the remaining Jews in Jerusalem try to hold the city against Carpathia's forces.

Fed up with opposition to his regime, Carpathia amasses the biggest army the world has ever seen to kill the remnant in Petra and take control of Jerusalem. The ultimate battle between good and evil is about to take place, and though foretold in Revelations how it will end and who receives just awards, remember that the victors write the history books.

This is the twelfth and last book in the Tribulation series and it is the most rewarding tale of all to read because the theme is explicitly and unusually explored. No matter how powerful the forces of darkness are, one knows that the power of goodness will always defeat them. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins have created a once in a lifetime storytelling extravaganza, one that will be a classic in the years to come.

# Reviews

## Breaking the Circle Kevin James Breaux



Xlibris, 2004, 293 pp.  
ISBN: 141343021X  
Review by Harriet Klausner

The island continent of Zrydova tasted war and its aftermath before dividing into four relatively peaceful kingdoms. Except for Orcs and bandits, eighty years of peace has reigned supreme on the island.

However, recently the peace has had two major setbacks. First, a severe drought has hurt the southern forest regions, impacting the central plains by its woes. Second, a vicious warlord leads a powerful army that is not only destroying the human settlements, but has buoyed up the non-humans who believe the prophecy has finally arrived, spelling the end of human domination.

The High Council of Mages is divided into two conflicting camps that clash on the island. The White Mages decide the warlord can help their fight against the Black Mages. However, the White Mages fail to control their puppet, who unleashes his horde against both sides. The White Mages are devastated to the brink of extinction, while the Black Mages survive enough to try to remove the deadly warlord before he eradicates them.

However, the warlord rallies his force, devastating everyone with his scorched earth policy. Three individuals stand in the way of Zrydova falling, but each of this trio has flaws that could lead to failure. Melissa is a Mage-in-training not ready to take on the role of magic practitioner. Keith is a brave cavalry soldier, but has doubts about his abilities as he still feels the scars of failure as he could not stop his home from becoming conquered. Kayla the elf must find a way to unite with these two and help them overcome their shortcomings, but he is not human, so what does he want? Melissa is a magical tyro; Keith has memory lapses that hide his ties to the Warlord; and Kayla is an unknown magical element with her own agenda. Will this courageous threesome and their intrepid followers forge a bond that will unite the island behind stopping the malevolent warlord and is overwhelming brutal forces or are they just fodder?

*Breaking the Circle* is an exciting epic fantasy filled with numerous twists and turns that end with one

final spin that will surprise the audience, though many will expect one more weave. The story line seems typical of the sub-genre with its good vs. evil Tolkien style battle, but the audience will enjoy the fast-paced, action-packed epic fantasy especially with the Lord of the Rings just out.

Though clearly in the Tolkien mold, *Breaking the Circle* also breaks out of the pattern through a refreshingly unique cast that includes complex characters in which the good guys contain nasty traits and the evil studs have redeeming qualities. For instance it is the White Mages who bring the warlord into the fray rationalizing that the means defends the end though the end is not what they anticipated. Thus readers will find an entertaining tale with three deeply developed heroes, powerful myth-like creatures such as Orcs and fire giants seem authentic and a strong belief in the magic makes the story seem genuine. With all that, there is still a moral threat throughout the exhilarating tale that current leaders should remember when they put someone else's child in harm's way: the means needs to take the high road if the objective is to remain ethical. Finally, though a stand alone, this is book one of the Brydovan Chronicles. Fans of epic fantasy, in which the unbelievable is believable, will look forward to Kevin James Breaux's second tale *A Prophecy Unfilled*, which takes place two decades into the future.

### **Illuminations SF Writing Contest**

*The Illuminata* is happy to announce its second speculative fiction writing contest. Winning entries will be included in an anthology published by Tyrannosaurus Press. This is an excellent opportunity for both budding authors and seasoned writers!

A one-time fee of \$5.00 (per entry) is required to submit a story; multiple entries are allowed. This fee will be used to help finance similar future projects. Once the anthology is published, copies will be made available to all entrants at a discounted price. Our goal is to help talented but unknown authors gain some exposure for their work. Both digital and hard copies of each entry are required. Send correspondence to:

**Illuminations Writing Contest**  
**Tyrannosaurus Press**  
**PO Box 8337**  
**New Orleans, LA 70182-8337**

For full contest guidelines and details, please visit <http://www.tyrannosauruspress.com> or e-mail us at [Illuminations@TyrannosaurusPress.com](mailto:Illuminations@TyrannosaurusPress.com)

# Original Fiction

A former humor columnist at *The Kansas City Business Journal*, NPR book reviewer and philosophy teacher, Dennis Weiser has published poems and stories in *P.R.N.*, *New Letters*, and *Chouteau Review*. He has completed his first novel, *Crash Dummies*, an Iran-Contra satire that spoofs romance, spy and sci-fi/fantasy genres. An excerpt from *Crash Dummies* will appear in *Things That Go Bump In The Night* (Outrider Press, June 2004). Weiser has the following to say about his story 'Excellence'.

From 01/2001 to 05/2003, "Excellence" went through many mutations. I even did a one-hour teleplay with UPN's *Twilight Zone* series in mind. My grandson

Zachary typed the first three sections as I dictated.

My basic insight into the origins of race hatred and genocide in the master-slave relationship resisted expression; my challenge was to unfold what is essentially a visual epiphany without giving away the ending. The idea had germinated since 1978, when I read a selection from Hegel on romanticism versus classicism in the arts for an advanced project in aesthetics with Jim Swindler at Westminster College.

Any resemblance, therefore, between Grover and George W. Bush, between the commonwealth of Ussia and the USA, or between the War against the Wogs and the War on Terror, is purely coincidental.

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## Excellence by Dennis Weiser

1

The Ussians had won the day. They proclaimed Beauty their standard, an azure cursive *beta* on a crimson field. Throughout the land, people rejoiced. Trades and commerce flourished. Agriculture, biotechnology and telecommunications blossomed, filling retail shelves with a virtual cornucopia of nifty treasures. Professionalism reached its scintillating zenith.

Yet, at the very heart of Ussia, something was amiss; working silently, hidden in darkness, it began to gnaw away at the sublime roots of the great commonwealth. In spite of unparalleled prosperity, general dissemination of right-thinking and compulsive phone courtesy, unintelligible noises, whispers and rumors began circulating, like the garbled moans of a tormented sleeper. People felt uniformly queasy, as a maddening uncertainty mirrored their former victorious elation. Uneasiness as minutely disquieting as the first inchoate prefigurement of toothache crept ubiquitously into everyone's daily affairs.

In the capitol of Ussia, Grover the Humble assumed the mantle of Executive Authority. Before a gathering of his directors and ministers, sensibly screened members of the press, and a demographically-appropriate focus group of elite citizens, Grover the Magnanimous and Fearless flew to the podium like a winged lion, all heads turning as he passed. The bright pantheon seemed too small to contain his broad shoulders and dashing figure, his incredibly handsome face, at once gallant and stern. Clearly, the crowd loved him. His epaulets gleamed like golden brushes. Letting his gaze roll calmly over the exquisitely beautiful faces and forms of his audience, Grover the Wise and Compassionate considered what he might say.

"I proclaim the New Day," his voice rang from the stone walls, a resounding echoing mantra. "A New Heaven and a New Earth." There was a gentle sprinkling of applause. 'Such a reasonable people,' Grover thought, choking up. He hid his emotion by quickly clearing his throat. Confident no one saw, he went on.

"I am saddened—and alarmed!—to report. . . *blight*. Blight in our midst." Every eye trained on Grover; each expression registered shocked bewilderment and growing numbness.

"Yes, Blight, possibly Contagion and Plague. A disturbing new development threatens our commonwealth, and with it, all the Beauty we have achieved." An involuntary murmur like a gulp of fear passed through the crowd; tears sparkled like diamonds in more than one eye.

"At first, there were only a few vague sightings, nothing more. I hastened to confirm them. When I could not, I discounted them. But gradually, imperceptibly, these reports have increased. My scouts and messengers have made no mistake. Our great and beneficent empire has been invaded and overrun by," Grover could scarcely bring himself to speak the loathsome syllable, which he finally spat out in a violent effort of will, as potent and visceral as a slimy toad: "Wogs."

Con't on page 10

# Original Fiction

## Excellence (con't)

"Wogs!" screamed a svelte goddess who fainted dead away. The assembly trembled, looking with terror into each other's faces, their minds a single thought. Grover, looking crushed and forlorn, closed his eyes for a moment.

## 2

Fortunately, the Inaugural Gala that evening was unmarked by any overt awareness of state peril—as if everyone simply forgot the Executive's dire warnings. Champagne bubbled, chandeliers sparkled, innumerable courtesans dazzled, gorgeous as bridesmaids in their formal gowns. A buoyant lightness like the sheer skin on boiling milk when one is making hot cocoa veiled whatever ominous foreboding may have been simmering just below the surface of consciousness and conversation. Grover himself felt extraordinarily refreshed; he had taken a nap after his speech. He awoke relaxed and calm. Now the evening's unfolding promises perfectly matched his inner mood.

The Minister of Justice, Schlag, was Grover's chief advisor; he had for many years been the young man's mentor. It was fair to say Schlag had groomed Grover for executive office almost since the latter had been a boy.

"Have you seen Rowie?" For a moment Grover thought it might be pleasant to avoid Schlag altogether; finally he shook his head. "She's here somewhere," Schlag droned on. "I know she'd love—" But the old man was unable to finish his sentence, for a luscious young matron with high cheekbones and lips like pillows careened into them, her diamond earrings clinking like ice. Her strawberry blonde hair wound atop her head like a coiled snake. Pretending to study the perimeter of his fluted champagne glass, Grover was actually admiring the size and shape of the young woman's breasts (which jiggled slightly when she talked! Grover found it most distracting).

"You have a strategy in place?"

Grover smiled diplomatically at her, peripherally noting that Schlag had engaged in conversation another young courtesan, tall and tawny, whose visage and posture suggested a feline quality, a relaxed agility or muscular prowess at repose.

"I'm sorry. What's your name?" Grover asked so discreetly he was sure only the strawberry blonde had heard.

"Dvora," she panted back at him, erupting in a smile (he could count her perfect teeth).

"Rest assured, Dvora—"

"That's a beautiful name. Biblical, isn't it?" Schlag interrupted, sliding in, edgewise.

"—all appropriate steps are being taken."

"When will your campaign begin?" It was the tawny lioness who spoke, Katrino by name.

"One or two days," Grover announced. "I have to visit my mother."

"It's not like," Schlag apologetic, "we've never had this problem before," chortling, his moustache-ends twitching like a cat's tail.

"What are they like—these Wogs?" Katrino to Grover.

"Have you never seen one—*walking*?"

"More like, *ambling*," Schlag disputatious. "A waddle or shuffling, back and forth, from side to side . . ." The Minister of Justice demonstrated for the ladies. ". . . Like a crab!" Judging by the hysterical explosion of laughter which Schlag's buffoonery elicited from the courtesans, Grover had to wonder whether they weren't all from another planet. Or was it some association with crabs they shared which Grover lacked?

"Like rabbits," Dvora chimed in. "Filthy rodents. Or so I've heard," giggling.

Behind smoky eyes of verdigris, Katrino kept her feelings to herself, perusing the Executive's rugged good looks ("I wonder what the little boy inside him's really like?") while pretending to attend Dvora's banter.

"What will you *do* to them?" Dvora asked innocently, eyes wide.

Before Grover could open his mouth, Schlag intervened. "Oh, they'll be reconstructed," he told her matter-of-factly. In a lower register, as if wanting only Grover to hear, or in an aside, an afterthought to himself: "We'll probably be lucky to survive it ourselves."

Con't on page 11

# Original Fiction

## Excellence (con't)

The Minister replenished champagne all around. A diminutive brunette in a bodywrap of lime-green crinoline sneezed—("Vermin!" someone said quite distinctly, though Grover could not make out just who it was in the crowd)—startling Dvora, whose breasts joggled so violently now that Grover had to exert a definite effort of will not to stare.

Not so Katrino, who took silent notice of Grover's inner struggle and mistook it for something less delicate and far rarer.

"What exactly is the strategy?" Dvora's face pressed close to Grover's cheek, her query a desperate breathless whisper. The two of them felt as alone as the tiny brunette who had sneezed a moment ago, whom all the others at the gala had fled as from a pariah. Schlag and Katrino resumed their intercourse; and no one seemed to pay the slightest attention to Grover and the strawberry blonde.

"Your *strategy*?" Dvora's eyes were hot and flashing, cheeks flushed, chest heaving.

"Complete *ex-ter-mi-nation*," Grover whispered, perhaps a little too loudly, for now Katrino turned, over her shoulder, mock sarcasm or icy disdain: "You *brute*." As Dvora licked away the frothy saliva from her lower lip, hysterical laughter choking in her throat, it occurred to Grover that she might be having an orgasm. The Executive made a hasty excuse and quickly fled the Great Ballroom.

§§§

Grover was halfway across the marble outer hall when he heard Rowie call his name. He recognized her voice before she loomed up in the somber light. With her long-flowing red hair, ample breasts and lyre-like hips, Rowie was ravishing, an icon of Ussian womanhood and maternal virtue. Grover and Rowie had played together as children, and it was a foregone conclusion that they would marry one day. With the impending campaign against the Wogs, Grover no longer knew what the future held.

"Will you be gone long?" Rowie asked. Taking her hands in his, Grover looked into her large chestnut eyes. "A few days. Perhaps a week or two," he muttered. How warm and moist her hands are, Grover thought, amazed. He loved Rowie, but it was more a brother's bond of affection than anything else. When he told her this, Rowie asked, sheer innocence: "So? What's wrong with sister-love?" Grover had no answer to that. He gave her a quick hug, kissing her cheeks.

"I'm off," he announced.

"To the New Day!" Rowie screamed hysterically at him.

Passing the grandfather clock in the great hall, Grover could not suppress a shudder as he noticed the time: nearly midnight.

3

Lighting a candle, Grover slowly ascended the wide stone stairs of the dark mansion. At a window near the top of the stairs, a sliver of moon winked spasmodically at him through swiftly passing black clouds. For some reason, he thought of the family dog, Zanzibar (The dog was eleven, his muzzle shot with gray. He had let the dog out in the back yard. It was a windy October day, with gusts of 35 miles an hour. When he went back later to call Zanzibar inside, the dog didn't get up, but remained laying under a tree in the shade. This had never happened before; Zanzibar had always run to Grover when he called. The boy went out to him, the big dog looked at the boy and did not get up. Grover picked the animal up in his arms and gently carried him inside the house. Zanzibar hardly ate or moved again. A few days later, they found him at the foot of Edie's bed, her blue peignoir clenched tightly in his teeth, his open eyes opaque marble orbs, the carcass stiff as old leather shoes on a winter porch. Things were never the same after Zanzibar died . . .).

Soft light suffused from his mother's boudoir at the end of the hall, her door ajar. It seemed to take Grover forever to reach it. The door was halfway open when he got there.

She was seated before her vanity mirror and dresser, wearing a long sheer gown the color of pearl, with a coral blue satin jacket. Grover rapped twice on the door with his knuckles, so gently as to be nearly inaudible. "Edie . . ."

Con't on page 12

# Original Fiction

## Excellence (con't)

"I wasn't expecting you," not turning her head to look at him as she brushed her cheeks and forehead.

Grover entered the room gingerly, careful not to look at any of the objects in it too closely.

Accepting the interminable wait he knew foreordained with the cheerful pluck of the damned, Grover picked up a magazine from the sewing table. "I see you've renewed your subscription to *The Alcibiades Monthly*—" (flipping through the pages, his eye lighted on a title, "Redundancy of the *The*", by a former editor of *The Columbine Journalis Review*; he read a few paragraphs until the lines and letters began swarming like bacteria in a petrie dish . . .)

"I've never let that subscription lapse," huffily annoyed, as she applied the chartreuse lipstick to her mouth with surgical precision.

"Something's troubling you." A cheery statement.

"Mother, what is happening?"

"Things change, Grover. You have to accept them."

"Mother?" his voice croaking now, a raspy whisper. "Do you love me?"

"What a silly question." Edie was done applying her make-up. Still she did not turn to look at him. "You," she pronounced in the merriest of stage accents, "are my pride and joy. You wear the executive sash and wield the dual scepter of Ussia; you command the troops and the hearts of the great commonwealth and her people." Grover had turned his back while awaiting her answer, hands clasped behind his back just above his coccyx. Her bed was made, the extravagant pillows with gold tassels, richly brocaded, piled high at the headboard. It didn't look slept in . . .

"I love you more than life itself, Grover, you know that." He turned and they briefly made eye contact before she turned back to study her face in the vanity mirror.

"Is this new?" Grover puzzling at a framed image hanging on the wall: it appeared to be a dog eating a corpse, but he couldn't be sure his eyes weren't playing tricks. He'd never understood his mother's taste in art.

"Your father will be home," she said, Grover standing beside the wall, trying to catch a glimpse of her face. "Soon."

Distant thunder boomed and pealed and rolled. Beads of perspiration broke out on Grover's forehead.

"How do we look? Give us a kiss." He did, but disinfectant stench clotted his nostrils like sudden hemorrhage. He let his lips brush hers briefly then stood behind her chair, his hands on her shoulders. As Grover looked down into the vanity mirror, it was not his mother's face that he saw: instead, a sore-infested, hunchbacked, grotesque hag with crooked teeth leered back at him with yellow bulging eyes. His pulse raced and his vision clouded over. When he looked again, it was the ordinary sight of his mother reflected in the glass. Grover could feel the icy terror melting in his stomach and slowly spreading to his limbs.

## 4

Ussian resolve hardened into steel, ratcheting up the campaign of organized terror. Each village, town and habitation was marked for annihilation. At a wave of the Executive's hand, kommandos marched like corporate masters into a shareholder's kitchen. When they departed, no living thing stirred in the remaining heap of charred smoking rubble.

With cool frenzy, Grover unleashed cannonade and machine-gun, rifle and grenade, howitzer and aerial bombardment. Furious fighting at close quarters with pistol and saber ensued. At each Wog-infested site, enormous pits were dug and filled with decapitated torsos, limbs and chunks of dead Wog. The pits were flooded with gasoline and torched. When the blaze died down, Grover ordered his men to prepare treats of marshmallows and S'mores which they toasted on long skewers over the coals. Grover rallied his men with speeches, touting their courage as the pride of Ussia; and they sang camp songs.

Carnage became a regular and endless feature of life in Ussia, as weeks telescoped into months. Black rats swarmed in the army's wake, trailing a safe distance behind . . .

Rains came to Ussia, big splattering drops unleashed in torrents, turning streets and roads to muddy lakes. A week's worth of rain fell in minutes without surcease. Unpredictable weather unlike anything the commonwealth had ever seen now ruled, uniting the provinces in a miasma of fever and enervation.

# Original Fiction

## Excellence (con't)

Into the provinces a steady phalanx of trained kommandos marched, with Grover at its head. Following maps handed down by ancient memory, with well-marked routes, they approached a dilapidated barn, a great communal storehouse on the outskirts of a village, an unwholesome bog of a place.

"Spilch," Grover said woodenly, as if reliving or recalling it from a dream. The Commander-in-Chief entered the barn quietly. His men watched, curious and tense. A few moments later, a large dark shape with what looked like bat wings came flying through the door and sprawled in thick mud: a great sow of a Wog, nasty as spite, covered from head to toe with tattered oily peasant rags. Grover emerged from the barn, clapping the dust from his hands.

A ray of sunlight broke through the purple thunderheads, its shaft falling before the hag, which shielded its eyes with a raised fist.

"See how they hate the light," Grover instructed his men. "They love filth and darkness." Yanking the Wog by the hair, Grover jerked it backward to its knees. "Take a good look!"

Hair like the black bristles of a boar sprouted from a huge brown mole on her cheek and the left eye, yellow and bloodshot, had sunk too low, nearly parallel with the bloated porcine snout. Grover tightened his grip on the handful of hair until the ogre hissed. "Where are the others? Of your kind, Blight? *Where?*"

"Goot! Paugh! Vank!" the evil hag sputtered. A great bubble of mucous appeared at her nostril, then exploded. A swollen black tongue licked the green snot away before it could dry.

Grover signaled his lieutenants with a quick nod. "We'll interrogate in the barn." Two muscular blond kommandos dragged the Wog, kicking and spluttering gibberish, backward by the arms into the barn.

"It will be dark soon," Grover observed. He turned and the troops followed their leader single-file inside . . .

They bound the monstrosity with thick ropes and tore off her boots. Grover applied the traditional peacock feathers and ostrich plumes to her bare soles, suffocating her with interminable questions. They stripped and flogged the brute; the Executive held hot coals to arms and thighs. In the end, a mirror did the trick—Grover got the information he wanted. He had begun to turn away when the Wog revived briefly, her gaze transfixed with a beatific vision, and said, quite plainly: "Glynna repairs. She prepares for *you*." Overcome at last by truth, the Wog expired.

Grover felt the mercury drop in his veins, quickly scanning the face of the young soldier nearest him. The rosy-faced cherub apparently had not heard the crone's mysterious oracle—Grover was inwardly relieved. They threw a blanket over the remains so no one would have to look. "Burn everything to the ground," the Executive ordered . . .

The nightmare was about to end, Grover reflected, when he had made the final calculations at his maps. He had at last discovered the secret stronghold of his nemesis, the recondite Glynna. At the village of Norex, all plans and dreams would coalesce: it would be his finest hour, their final destruction, and Ussia's apotheosis.

"I'm tired," Grover said, listening to the steady clatter of rain on the canvas tent. Suppressing a yawn, he watched as his bed was prepared, the pillows arranged. He noticed a slight headache, a ringing in his ears. Posting guard, Grover retired for the night.



In sleep sometimes, when one is truly exhausted, mentally and physically drained by arduous overwork and worry for too long a time, a tormented genius arises, flooding the waking soul with an edgy radiant light. In subterranean depths of the psyche, a lavish feast is prepared, an extravagant outpouring of emotion too intense for the mundane eye invests each image and moment.

A regal omnipotent child of seven or eight sat on a golden throne, the frozen likeness of a lion reclining at his right hand, an immense black statuary eagle perched majestically behind his left shoulder. Though he could sense other presences, Grover felt completely alone before this divine child whose limpid eyes held his the way one might gaze at a pet, a dog or fish. When the child spoke, his voice was thunder; only then did Grover notice their relative enormity, how small and frail he himself was; and he trembled.

Con't on page 14

# Original Fiction

Excellence (con't)

—*What do you wish?*

Submissive, Grover tried to speak; he could barely make himself heard. "I—I wish to be—released . . ."

—*I command you to love!*

His robes showed such splendor and intricate perfection of design that Grover felt he might spend a lifetime simply watching them. His crown was the synthesis of every existing crown and seemed to be a physical part of this child. Every line of the ceiling, walls and floor hypnotically drew one's gaze with a geometer's precision to this central figure of the throne and the demonic incarnation that belonged to it. Grover saw the inlaid flowing script on the throne, woven into the carpet, sewn into the child's very robes; but it was a language he did not understand. Only now did Grover begin to comprehend how enormous, all seeing and omnipotent was the being that he confronted.

—Love, Power and Serenity: these are my commands, austere and absolute!

The child seemed angry (Was he angry with Grover?) yet the tone of his voice was the richest, most compassionate sound Grover had ever heard.

The lion's eyes blinked and, opening its jaws, poured forth a roar that shook Grover to his knees, tears welling in his eyes.

—You must hunt Beauty down in every cranny and nook of Existence!

Unfolding its wings, the eagle emitted a piercing shriek: *Skreeeee!* He could feel the blood pounding in his ears as he lay, immobilized and vulnerable, prostrate before this Tyrant, whom he loved, whose every command and very voice seemed to come from deep within his own being. His chest felt as if it would explode; and only now did Grover realize that he was completely naked. Through his tears, he could hear his own small sobbing whisper: *Yes, I will, I will, I will . . .*

5

When Grover awoke, he could not at first remember where he was. He sat up, blinking dully, and lighted a candle. Gradually, he became aware of the shadows and contours of a tremendous pain in his head, like a horse's hoofprints in the mud, ringing and echoing in his ears, or like the ruts left in the road by mud-encrusted wheels of wagons dragging heavy artillery.

Grover stumbled over to the tent flap, shouting at the guards to fetch him boiling water. How sluggish, even obdurate, they seemed, Grover thought, choking back impatience and rage. When the guards finally arrived and set the boiling cauldron down, the Executive brusquely ordered them out of his tent, ferociously cuffing their ears. "Out, Wog!" he snarled.

The Executive delightedly busied himself at his toilet. Dipping his brush into the scalding water, he worked up a fine thick lather and applied it with zest to his face. With each cautious stroke of the razor, the Executive cast off his earlier disagreeable mood, which was replaced by an incredible sense of contented satisfaction. Excising the last patch of stubble, he noticed an anomaly in the full-length mirror, something his attention had utterly failed, until now, to notice.

His eyes no longer shared the same latitude on the globe of his face. His right eye had definitely begun to creep upward. Retrieving the thirteen-inch ruler from his pack, he held it up to his nose, slowly oscillating his head from side to side. Yes, there could be no doubt about it, his right eye and brow were fully an inch higher on his forehead than their counterparts. The eyes had parted company for good, it seemed. 'The stress of command,' Grover said; but inwardly he prided himself on his new look.

Pulling on his military coat, he found he could no longer fasten the buttons; he had gotten so fat, his belly hung over his belt. 'Foraging must agree with me,' Grover thought. 'Perhaps I'm turning into a cow,' dreamily ruminating aloud. Suddenly wary lest one of the guards overhear, he spun on his heel, hand on the butt of his pistol. The tent flap was down. Nobody there.

A last glance in the dress mirror decided that his lack of ocular symmetry required a special, an extra, effort.

'Might upset the men,' he mulled. Snatching a red silk bandana, he tied it diagonally around his head,

Con't on page 15

# Original Fiction

## Excellence (con't)

completely concealing the wayward eye. Grover pulled a wide-brimmed slouch hat down tightly over his ears and stood back, admiring the figure he cut in the glass.

"An atrocity, my boy," smug satisfaction, a sneer curling his lip to reveal yellow crooked teeth. Slinging his bandoleer and sheathed saber over his shoulder, he stepped outside the tent . . . and found himself slipping and sliding, knee-deep in mud. Spring thaw had erupted overnight, transforming the world into an oozing, fetid mess.

Under a dark, pre-dawn haze, Grover's band crept into the town. But where was the Enemy? A stealthy canvass of the outer buildings yielded only emptiness.

Grover led them to the central sanctuary of the town: there, he knew instinctively, he would find Glynnna.

This pivotal structure was a church or barn—he could no longer easily distinguish a cross from a weather vane. Scrambling awkwardly up the steps, his tongue lolling outside one corner of his maw (What was he waiting for?), Grover wiped his nose with a filthy claw, and flung open the door, disappearing inside.

He could see nothing, realized he was numb, paralyzed with dread . . . When he heard the coarse heavy breathing, he did not even recognize it initially as his own. Staggering forward, Grover tripped, banging his shin with electric pain, eyes blinded with a dazzling light—an epiphany of bright blue eyes, bare flesh, a shock of golden hair!—vanishing instantly.

Powerful hands seized him by the shoulders, gripped his throat, forcing him back. Through his muffled groan, he heard the metallic clang of drawn swords.

"Do not kill him." Commanding, burnished, a voice of honey and steel, an exotic sound unlike anything he had ever heard, sang to him like mythic runes of mercy and freedom. "Take him outside," the voice said.

Squinting at the first light of morning, Grover got his first real look at the Enemy: warriors erect and unblemished, with straight hair and perfect teeth. When the blonde maiden strode out into the square, zipping up her leather vest, he saw only a tall radiant queen, a shapely figure clad in black leather from head to toe, a river of flowing blonde hair, and blue diamond eyes. At her hip hung a golden sword.

There was no sign of his men: only a sorry troop of Wogs, with their broken faces, humps, crooked yellow fangs and eyes.

Their weapons fell to the ground in unison, clanging and clattering on the cobblestones, as a cock crowed.

Head hung low, arms dangling at his sides, Grover began to drool and sob.

Glynnna leaped forward, tore the Imperial blue sash from his chest.

Gnashing his teeth, he could barely raise his eyes to look at her, Glynnna the Victorious. In a transmogrified flash of anguish and relief, he saw—no longer comprehending—that the tables were now turned. They had become the hunted.

Raising the dual scepter high above her head, Glynnna cried out in a bold, brazen voice that rang echoing through the town:

*"To the New Day!"*

## Vampire Quiz

(Answers on page 19)

Oh, those pesky vampires. Blood suckers extraordinaire. The first vampires in literature were evil. But over time vampires took on more and more romantic and sympathetic elements until today they can even be leading men. Can you match the famous vampires from page and screen on the left with their creators on the right? Zero to five correct means you're either covering for the vamps or you're VQ is a little low. Six to ten correct is a good score. You've probably bitten a few necks yourself. Over ten correct makes me wonder if the phrase "blood bank" has more than the usual meaning for you.

- |                                       |                      |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Vampirella (1 <sup>st</sup> issue) | Laurell K. Hamilton  |
| 2. Carmilla                           | Anne Rice            |
| 3. Saint-Germain                      | Whitley Strieber     |
| 4. Molochai, Twig, & Zillah           | Suzy McKee Charnas   |
| 5. Prince Vulkan                      | Robert R. McCammon   |
| 6. Edward Weyland                     | T. Prest OR M. Rymer |
| 7. David Lyle Hardwick                | Stephen King         |
| 8. Jean-Claude                        | P. N. Elrod          |
| 9. Jonathan Barrett                   | Nancy Kilpatrick     |
| 10. Dracula                           | J. Sheridan Le Fanu  |
| 11. Joshua York                       | Forrest Ackerman     |
| 12. Miriam Blaylock                   | Chelsea Quinn Yarbro |
| 13. Varney                            | Poppy Z. Brite       |
| 14. Barlow                            | George R. R. Martin  |
| 15. Lestat                            | Bram Stoker          |

## RPG Corner (con't)

the Game Master has designed something that he finds particularly ingenious, and through action or pressure from NPCs, forces the characters into what he has designed. This is sometimes called railroading, because the Game Master provides only one avenue for the characters to pursue, which leads the characters right where the Game Master wants them to go. Now, don't get me wrong, ultimately that's what every game is about, but there are ways to make the players and their characters drive the plot, and not the machinations of the Game Master. Sometimes, and in some places, the characters will have to be railroaded, but this heavy-handed technique should only be used as a last resort, and only if there is truly no other way to get the characters to commit to a choice the designer has orchestrated.

The second boo-boo is to allow a Non Playing Character, a character controlled by the Game Master, to become the center of attention, either by what he knows, or what he does. NPCs are tools for the Game Master to help run the adventure he has designed. They should never be used to one-up the characters, and should rarely make them look bad or weak. Occasionally, an NPC (usually a villain) will show up the characters, and that's to be expected, but sooner or later (depending on the patience level of your players) the characters should give the NPC his just dessert. Likewise, a friendly NPC should not always show up and save the day when the characters are faltering. The game is not about the Game Master's characters; it's about the players'.

That's enough for now. The coming months will have us looking at designing one-shot stories, as well as longer multi-part stories requiring many sessions to play through, as well as talks about plot, conflict, action, drama and characterization. All of these things are major factors in creating good scenarios, as well as good writing.

In the beginning the Universe was created. This has made a lot of people very angry and been widely regarded as a bad move.

– Douglas Adams

## Writers Wanted!

*The Illuminata* is seeking both regular and occasional contributors interested in sharing their opinions or original fiction. Visit [www.TyrannosaurusPress.com](http://www.TyrannosaurusPress.com) for more information on joining our creative staff.

### KeyCommentary (con't)

memorable will be the experience. Simply put, the more thorough the suspension of disbelief, the greater the impact.

The reason, then, that *Otherlings* will rarely be effective in non-fantastical settings is that fantasy as a genre requires a greater degree of suspended disbelief to begin with. From there it is rarely an unattainable leap to embrace an even more fantastic character that by the already established standard will seem quirky. But that explanation only addresses the mechanics of *how* an *Otherling* 'works.' What, then, of the 'why?'

I would like to suggest that literary archetypes at large work in the first place because they rub a common core in each of us. Humans are creatures of imagination. Every great scientist was first a dreamer. We dream because of a capacity to project, to magnify what already lies like a seedling within us. Therefore, within each of us rests a hero or heroine, the *Waif Protagonist* of our heart, longing to launch seaward -- or starward -- on some great undertaking that requires chutzpah: a *Quest*. We long to find or to be great *Companions*. We have been *Mentored* and will pass the wisdom we've gained unto others -- or would like to. We fear some personal *Nemesis*, perching all through life on the veritable brink of a *Darkening* of our soul, yet we drive onward, overcoming many an *Obstacle* with our *Talisman* (crucifix? blankie? lucky penny? a four-leaf clover pressed between the pages of our favorite book) in hand.

That's why archetypes 'work,' which is to say that is why they reach us and touch us and move us either to introspection or achievement. They 'work' because it is out of us from which they spring. Archetypes are our reflections dressed in someone else's clothes. And so the reason, it would seem, that the *Otherling* also 'works' as archetype is that we, too, are quirky, quizzical, cuddly kin to Tinkerbell. There's a corner of eccentricity locked somewhere within each of us -- and perhaps a grain or two of pixie dust as well.

Here's to all the writers across time who polish the mirror wherein our reflections shine.

### Fandom Onion (con't)

forgot how to do this, *refuse to do it*, totally unaware of anyone other than their friends are in the room or never knew how. Really.

Like partially-cooked onions, unless the person or group *accepts* that newcomer, there is no integration! No happy joining of like-minded with like-minded. What often happens is that the newcomer does what I do, wait for another newcomer and end up as a fringe group within the group. Groups within groups... the haves, and have-nots. Who is at fault here? It would make me feel so much better to think someone evilly planned it this way. So I'll do what I can and share and give out warm fuzzies. Anyone hungry?

I think the stew is ready, though I'm not a chef and I don't play one on TV. The scents of all those ingredients have come together nicely. It should taste wonderful with some bread and butter and a big glass of cool milk. And I have enough to share with lots of my friends. Like fandom, there are lots of incredible types of science fiction to enjoy with each other. So as I dish this up, sit back, get comfy and let's discuss the fandom group experience next month. Let's eat!

### Writer's Block (con't)

NOTE: It seems rather odd to me that more of Carter's books did not contain the "In the tradition of Conan" blurb, given his heavy association with Howard's work. The Callisto, Green Star and Zanthodon series books made much more of his connection to Edgar Rice Burroughs and A. Merritt, but I think those books were, in fact, much more influenced by Burroughs than by Howard.

NOTE 2: Carter did often discuss Howard in the introductions he wrote in his capacity as an editor. *The Year's Best Fantasy Stories: 6* (1980) did not have Howard or Conan on the cover but Howard was mentioned in Carter's introduction. All five of the *Flashing Swords* books (1973-1981) contain information on Howard in the introductions, and Carter even dedicated the first volume to Howard.

Ross Anton Coe: *Warrior of Vengeance: Sorcerer's Blood* and *Warrior of Vengeance #2: Trails of Peril* (Both 1982 from Pinnacle Books) contain the cover quote: "In the Epic Sword and Sorcery Tradition of the Mighty Conan." By the way, the inside cover page of book #1 contains the following quote: "with thanks to ROBERT E. HOWARD..." Nice, huh?

Adrian Cole: Here was a refreshing change. The last of his three "Dream Lord" books, *Bane of Nightmares*

(1976) from Zebra, has the following quote on the cover: "Heroic fantasy in the tradition of ROBERT E. HOWARD." It was nice to see Howard rather than Conan on the cover. However, to keep things in perspective, book #2 of this series, *Lord of Nightmares* (1975), also from Zebra, claims that this is "fantasy and horror in the tradition of Tolkien and Lovecraft." Now, one would hardly link Howard's "type" of fantasy with that of either Tolkien or Lovecraft. Doesn't say much for the perception of the people writing the cover blurbs, does it?

Gardner F. Fox: Fox wrote a number of Conan-esque books, including the Kothar and Kyrik series. The Kothar series appeared first, five books between 1969 and 1970. The titles were: *Kothar: Barbarian Swordsman*, *Kothar of the Magic Sword*, *Kothar and the Demon-Queen*, *Kothar and the Conjurer's Curse*, and *Kothar and the Wizard Slayer*. None of these contain any mention of "In the tradition of," and no mention is made of Howard or Conan on the covers, although it seems clear that the Lancer Conans of a couple of years earlier were a major influence.

There are four Kyrik books, appearing between 1975 and 1976, all from Leisure Books, and all of them carry on the front cover, "In the tradition of Conan." One of the books, *Kyrik and The Wizard's Sword*, looks like it has a rejected Conan painting for the cover. This shows a scantily clad woman on an altar, a giant snake, and a black haired, heavily thewed warrior facing it with a sword. Though no inside credit is given for the painting, it looks like the signature reads Ken Kelly to me. The other three Kyrik books are: *Kyrik: Warlock Warrior*, *Kyrik Fights the Demon World*, and *Kyrik and the Lost Queen*.

Arthur O. Friel: *The Pathless Grail* (1969), from Centaur Press, contains a quote on the back that mentions Robert E. Howard, but this is a blurb about "Time-Lost Books" rather than about this book being in the tradition of Howard. The quote is: "Or it may be the sword and sorcery exploits of Solomon Kane in Atlantean Negari as in Robert E. Howard's THE MOON OF SKULLS."

Another "Time-Lost" book that I have is *City of Wonder* by E. Charles Vivian, but it lacks the back cover comment on Howard.

John Jakes: On the back of four of the five Brak books we find a quote from Lin Carter to the effect that: "Crisp, vivid, exciting--the ghost of Robert E. Howard's Conan moves through the pages of John Jakes. (I find

Con't on page 17

### Writer's Block (con't)

myself proud of Carter here for mentioning Howard instead of just Conan.) These four books were *Brak the Barbarian* (1968), *Brak VS. the Sorceress* (1977), *Brak: When the Idols Walked* (1978), and *Brak VS. The Mark of the Demons* (1977). The first was published by Tower Books, the other three by Pocket Books. The only one without a Conan blurb was *The Fortunes of Brak* (1980) from Dell Fantasy.

Jeffrey Lord: (Blade Series). I only have a few books in this very long series, #1 *The Bronze Axe*, #9 *Kingdom of Royth* (1974), #30 *Dimension of Horror* (1979), #31 *Gladiators of Hapanu*, and #32 *Pirates of Gohar*. All are from Pinnacle Books and all contain the following statement on the back cover: "In the best tradition of America's most popular fictional heroes--giants such as Tarzan, Doc Savage, and Conan--Richard Blade..." Since these five books, widely separated in the series, contain the quote, I imagine other books in the series also bear it. These books are also listed as "Heroic Fantasy" on the front cover.

Colum MacConnell: *Tark and the Golden Tide* (1977) contains the cover quote: "In the tradition Of Conan." This is from Leisure Books.

David Mason: Both of the Kavin books, published by Lancer, contain a cover quote about Conan. *Kavin's World* (1969) has "In the tradition of the immortal CONAN." *The Return of Kavin* (1972) has "...in the tradition of CONAN,..." (NOTE: As you can see, by 1972 Conan has lost stature and is no longer immortal.) I'm shaking my head here.

Michael Moorcock: The only Moorcock book I could find with mention of Conan was *The Jewel in the Skull* (1967), which bears the following quote from SF Weekly: "A natural successor to Conan." The back cover says: "...a series destined to rank with the Conan series and the Lord of the Rings trilogy." Several other Lancer editions of Moorcock books did not mention anything about Conan, although they were published around the same time.

Talbot Mundy: All three of his *Tros of Samothrace* books from Zebra contain the cover quote: "Heroic fantasy in the tradition of ROBERT E.HOWARD." These were published, or republished rather, in 1976. It is interesting to note that Mundy was actually an influence on Howard but that Howard's name was later used as a selling point to push Mundy's books.

Manning Norvil (Kenneth Bulmer): *Odan The Half-God: Dream Chariots* (1977) contains the cover quote "Manning Norvil presents a hero of Conan stature..."

The back cover claims that "Odan is a hero fit to stand alongside Conan of Cimmeria..." The second book in this series, *Whetted Bronze* (1978), has two Howard related comments on the back cover. First, "Manning Norvil has created a mighty character comparable to Conan of Cimmeria..." Second, "Odan is a hero-warrior of whom Robert E. Howard would have been proud." The last of the three books, *Crown of the Sword God* (1980), bears the cover saying: "Heroic fantasy in the grand Conan tradition!" The back cover claims that: "Odan's a hero to stand alongside Howard's Conan and Jakes' Brak!"

Charles Nuetzel: On the back of *Swordmen of Vistar* (1969) we find the quote: "For readers who thrill to the adventures of John Carter, Conan the Barbarian..." This is from Powell Sci-Fi, a small publisher of the 1960s who also published the first Kane novel by Karl Edward Wagner.

Andrew Offutt and Richard Lyon: *Demon in the Mirror*, (1978), Pocket Books, carries the following back cover note: "...sword and sorcery writing has been waiting for a swordswoman who can stand beside Conan, Brak, the Grey Mouser..."

Norvell W. Page: Both of Page's Prester John books carry the cover quote: "A Novel of Heroic Fantasy in the CONAN Tradition." These were *Flame Winds* and *Sons of the Bear-God*, both published from Berkley in 1969. The back cover of *Flame Winds* says "...a swashbuckling hero to rank with Conan and King Kull." NOTE: The original copyright was 1939 on both tales.

Quinn Reade: *Quest of the Dark Lady* (1969) carries the cover quote: "In The Tradition of CONAN." This is from Belmont Tower Books.

Charles Saunders: On the back of *Imaro* (1981) we find the quote: "Imaro's saga will be compared with that of Conan and other heroes of history and legend..." (One aside about this quote. Notice how Conan is implied to be a hero of 'history and legend.'). On the cover of *Imaro III: The Trail of Bohu* (1985), we find the quote: "Imaro follows in the footsteps of Conan." *Imaro II: The Quest for Cush* is the only one of the three that has no mention of Conan. All of these are from DAW.

James Silke: Silke published four novels based on Frank Frazetta's "Death Dealer" character, and all four had cover illustrations by Frazetta. None of them have any mention of Conan or Howard on the covers, but they were not published until the period between 1988 and 1990.

Con't on page 18

### Writer's Block (con't)

Mike Sirota: On the back of two of the Dannus books (# 1 & 4) I found mention of Conan. #1, *The Prisoner of Reglathium*, had "...which rival the best of CONAN and GOR." #4, *The Dark Straits of Reglathium*, had "Move over Conan...here comes Dannus." Both were published in 1978. On the back of *Berborra* (1978), also by Sirota, we find the quote: "in the tradition of Conan, *Lord of the Rings*..." These are all from Manor Books.

David C. Smith: Smith's first novel was a Howard pastiche called *The Witch of the Indies* (1977 from Zebra), but his later books about a Conan-esque hero named Oron contained no mention of either Conan or Howard on front or back covers. This is despite the fact that they were published between 1978 and 1983 from Zebra. I find it strange that Zebra didn't try connecting these books to Howard's name when they had been capitalizing on Howard for years by then.

Dave Van Arnam: *Star Barbarian* (1969) has the cover quote: "In The Tradition Of The Magnificent CONAN." This is from Lancer Books.

Karl Edward Wagner: I find it interesting that none of Wagner's Kane novels had any mention of Conan or Howard on either the front or back covers. It's true that Wagner's Kane was not directly influenced by Howard's Conan, but the power of the two characters and the fact that both are Sword & Sorcery might have suggested such a connection to many. Wagner also wrote a Conan pastiche called *Conan: The Road of Kings*. Except for one book published by Powell, all the Kane books were published by Warner between 1973 and 1978, right in the middle of the time when "In the tradition of Conan" seemed to be at its most popular. However, Warner may have been relying on the covers by Frank Frazetta to help sell the books, since other covers by Frazetta had helped sell the Lancer Conans.

Interestingly, in 2002, Nightshade Books issued a hardcover collected edition of the Kane "novels" called *Gods in Darkness*, which contains a cover blurb from David Drake that reads: "These are the novels that returned heroic fantasy to the vitality it had lost when Robert E. Howard committed suicide." The novels collected here were, *Bloodstone*, *Dark Crusade*, and *Darkness Weaves*.

### END NOTE:

This is far from an exhaustive list of fantasy novels, of course. There are many other books that I don't own, and there are reissues with different covers that I don't have either. However, this is probably a relatively broad sample. The main points that jump out at me from these notes are:

1. The books claiming to be "in the tradition" of Conan or Howard were published between 1967 and 1985, with the vast majority coming between 1969 and 1980. It seems highly likely to me that it was the publication of the Lancer Conan books that set this "trend" in motion. This would have been in 1967, 1968, 1969. And, likely, the later publication of the Ace and Berkley versions (in the mid to late 1970s) kept the momentum going. There are some glaring inconsistencies, though, particularly with the David C. Smith and Karl Edward Wagner books.

2. All but a handful of the books whose covers are cited here mention "Conan" without any mention of Robert E. Howard. Thus, even if readers had read them and wanted more, they would have looked for "Conan," not Howard. This might have been OK during the 1970s and early 1980s when Ace and Berkley were publishing books with REH's Conan in them (albeit in altered form and mixed with pastiche). And at the same time, Ace, Berkley, Zebra, and Bantam (as well as a few others) were publishing REH's stories about his other characters, such as Kull (most of which had "By the Creator of Conan" on the covers). But, to find pure Howard would have called for a roundabout path, a path through Conan rather than through Howard directly. To me, this suggests an important point:

Few have ever been led directly to Robert E. Howard by reading other heroic fantasy fiction. The signs to Howard were always few, though at least in the late 1960s and in the 1970s they did exist. Instead, people were led to "Conan," and they, if they were discerning enough readers, picked out Howard's brutally honest prose from the pastiche background and went in search of more genuine REH. Even when this happened, however, (as was the case with myself) it probably took the reader time to develop an appreciation for Howard that wasn't diluted by exposure to the pastiches.

The words "In the tradition of" might have been good for Conan, but they didn't do much for Robert E. Howard.

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### Answers to quiz on page 15

Answers: (Last name only) 1. Ackerman, 2. Le Fanu, 3. Yarbro, 4. Brite, 5. McCammon, 6. Charnas, 7. Kilpatrick, 8. Hamilton, 9. Elrod, 10. Stoker, 11. Martin, 12. Streiber 13. Prest or Rymer, 14. King, 15. Rice.

## Pros and Cons (con't)

Last year, I had the great honor of meeting Peter Jurasik, prior to my being force-fed Babylon 5. Because we were both guests, we had plenty of opportunity to talk, and because I had never watched the show (it turns out, by the way, that neither had he!), we were forced to talk about other things. We spoke of family, friends, our homes, our lives outside the convention; all in all, it is one of my most pleasant Con memories. Peter is a talented actor and a kind, outgoing man. It's not difficult to see why he was such a popular guest, or why his panels were filled to capacity.

I remember sitting in on those panels and being a little sad for him. "What was it like working on Babylon 5?", "Why did the Centauri in Season 3, Episode 5, Scene 6 have a topknot instead of the traditional hairstyle?", "What was the significance of you using your left hand to scratch your cheek in this episode, when you clearly favored your right hand in subsequent episodes?" These questions are an exaggeration, but only to a degree. While such devotion to a show and character is, I'm sure, flattering, for an actor with a body of work, including spots on other SF projects, incessant and inane questions about one aspect of your career must be frustrating. I can almost understand why Sir Alec Guinness came to hate Obi Wan Kenobi.

But I can't honestly say I'd be better than any other fan. Had I watched B5 before going to that convention, I doubt I would have had the courage to open a dialogue with Peter. He's Londo Mollari, after all, a star on one of the best SF series in recent history! If I did talk to him, my opening comments would probably have focused on the show, not on whatever other topic I asked about. The entire dynamic of our friendship would have changed, and I wouldn't have come to know him as I do.

Guests come with a wide variety of personalities as well, which can add its own level of anxiety for the uninitiated. Some guests are egomaniacal and conceited; they have to be the center of attention. Others have little compunction about interrupting someone to spew their opinions, and fan or guest be damned if they want to get their own ideas across. Some, maybe most, are nice, and do their best to make both fans and the newer, less well known guests comfortable.

No Con experience was more terrifying for me than sitting in on a panel with Larry Dixon and Mercedes

Lackey. Why was I, a new and unknown author, sitting up here with two names I'd seen in bookstores for years? What on Earth could I have to say to rival them, and why on Earth would anyone care? Larry made an effort to include me in the discussion, though, and both of them went out of their way to encourage me. I owe them a great debt; they helped me find my stride at conventions.

Some guests handle the pressure of conventions better than others, but for the most part, it's a matter of personality and training. Outgoing guests are always on the move, signing this, talking about that, sitting in on other panels or signing autographs at their table. Shy or pretentious guests slip out of their rooms for panels, make a few remarks, and then disappear again. Media guests, on average, fare better at the big events, despite having a greater number of attendees. Many of them are nervous under the scrutiny, too, but they are used to having the spotlight on them, and facing fans isn't very different from facing the media. We authors are a far more solitary lot. Our days are spent alone, in front of a keyboard. Many of the writers I've had the chance to meet are shy and humble; some can't stand to be the center of attention and go to conventions only when forced to. They can be drawn out of the shells, but only carefully, and a room full of drooling, wide-eyed fans quickly puts them on the defensive.

All of these people, whether actor or author, has a wealth of knowledge and a great number of fascinating stories, but for fans to gain access, they must be willing to knock a couple of levels off the pedestal and treat the guest like a person. Ask about their SF ties, but don't be afraid to go one step further. Ask about their other work, maybe even ask about the guest's hobbies, but be careful not to get too personal. Those are the worst kind of fan, the creepy ones that want to know, or seem to already know, all sorts of details that they shouldn't. If you want a rule of thumb, put yourself in the guest's place. What questions would you be comfortable answering?

For a fan, approaching someone you admire may be difficult, and approaching a guest you've never heard of may be awkward, but remember that most of us are nervous too, and we'll gladly talk with you if we think you're interested. Besides, of all the guests I've met, only a couple have bitten.