



The *Illuminata*

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Spider-man... No More?

By Bret Funk

I love Spider-Man. There's something about that science-loving, quasi-nerdy, wryly sarcastic guy that just appeals to me. Maybe he reminds me of someone I know. I have read (or watched) nearly every incarnation from the original comics, to the animated series (I all but grew up on *Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends!*), to the campy, live-action show of the late 1970s. Most recently, I have re-explored my love of this American icon through the big-budget Hollywood interpretations of Sam Raimi, and I can honestly say that I am impressed.

Raimi captured the essence of Spider-Man without sacrificing his vision or the tenets of the comic, and he managed to do so in a way that appeased Hollywood moguls and brought in the green (money, that is, not goblin). The director's love of the story and his insistence that the films be done properly put Spider-Man at the top of a long list of comic crossovers. What's more, the sequel has outdone the original, both in terms of dollars earned and in the esteemed opinions of the critics (and public). That's a rare feat for any film.

Part of me hopes these movies will continue for a long time, that Tobey Maguire and Kirsten Dunst will reprise their roles for years to come, putting out one quality story after another, exploring each of Spider-Man's numerous foes and tackling some of the other grand storylines described in the comics. I see a shelf lined with Spider-Man DVDs, a new generation of Americans falling in love and then crying out for more of the tormented hero, increased comic book sales, and with that, a demand for even more movies, until America is drowned in Spider-Man paraphernalia

and you can't turn a corner without seeing a picture of the Wall-Crawler or reading a line akin to "Spider-Man Throws A Web Over the Movie Industry".

What? That's already happened? Well, then, let me tell you what I'm worried about. My greatest fear is that greed will tarnish my hero's reputation, as it has so many heroes before him. I fear that Hollywood will drag Spider-Man through the streets, feasting on him until his desiccated carcass lies bereft of life and can provide no further nourishment for the ravenous populace. What terrifies me the most is that Hollywood, in its infinite wisdom, will cut corners wherever possible, replace actors as required, find a cheaper director, and finance any script that has Spider-Man at the top, no matter how lackluster the writing or how weak its tie to the comics. I am afraid that Spider-Man will become a laughingstock, that people will say Clooney's Batman was far superior to Ashton Kutcher's Spider-Man, that those once proud of the Web-Slinger will turn their backs on him.

Never one to leave well enough alone, Hollywood will drive every franchise into the ground, but a disturbing pattern has emerged in comic book crossovers, and I fear that same fate awaits Spider-Man as well as other popular comic-based movies like X-Men. The first film in the series, or the "Creation" movie, tells the tale of the hero's birth. It is the story of how the character acquired his powers, why he chooses to fight evil, or both. (As an aside, many may think X-Men bucked this trend, but it is not entirely the case. Although Xavier had formed the X-Men prior to the movie's start, the tale is truly that of Wolverine and his induction into the group).

In many cases, "Creation" is not the most interesting aspect of the comic, but the decision to make a creation movie is a wise one. A major goal when producing a crossover franchise is to attract more than just those people who already love the story. "Creation" explains the hero's existence, and that is a key piece of the puzzle when trying to understand the character. Once viewers understand why the hero does what he does, a bond is created, and the theory is that most viewers will come back to see future films because of that bond.

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The RPG Corner (v3.31): What A Character!

by Doug >!< Roper of EPIC Gaming

A lion's share of the time spent playing in a role-playing game will be devoted to interacting with characters. This interaction can come in the form of the player characters speaking with one another, or with them interacting, either alone or in a group, with non-playing characters. The intra-player character interaction isn't as important in the design phase as the interactions the Game Master has planned for the non-playing characters. The GM controls the NPCs, whom oftentimes provide vital clues and encounters for your player characters; but the NPC are not just veins of information to be mined and abandoned, they are tools for the Game Master to create varying moods from comedic to tragic, and to add tension, suspense and terror – as well as wonder and joy – to the game. A great NPC, one developed with effort, attention to detail, and a small bit of foresight, can make the difference between a game and a great game that players will always remember and talk about when the game itself is a long time gone.

Types of NPCs

NPCs need to be designed with care, but the GM can't spend hours and hours developing the driver who gets stuck in traffic next to the heroes on Monday afternoon. While it would certainly be interesting and useful if a conversation did somehow get started, the chances of that occurring are pretty small. A GM needs to know where to spend his limited free time when developing characters.

Firstly, as you set down an outline to your story, take note of where information can / needs to be related by a person. If the GM is working on a one-shot story, then all of the NPCs can be a little fuzzier around the edges and less time can be spent on developing them. However, if the GM is planning a protracted scenario, then much more care must be taken with NPCs that will continually occur in the scenario. Knowing which characters will reoccur, and what characters will be in certain scenes but without any information for the characters is important. To accommodate this, I usually set up my characters according to a fast and loose rank of importance. To provide a single example to cover all of the ranks, imagine yourself in a crowded restaurant.

Rank One – Filler. These are the people at the tables and the bar. While at any time, you could conceivably stand up and start a conversation with one of these folks, you normally wouldn't. These types of characters help to dress the stage, and to fill it out,

but will have no meaningful interaction with the plot or playing characters. For purposes of development, well... describe the overall look of the people and you've probably done enough.

Rank Two – Casual Interaction. These characters will speak with and interact with your PCs, but won't have much in the way of usable information. They would be the hostess and waiter in the restaurant; the bartender or coat checker. They might be able to provide superficial information. The easiest way to decide who knows what is to create a list of random facts or clues that anyone in this rank might know, and if the PCs think to ask about it, or seek out the information, it's there. These characters need physical descriptions, mannerisms and identifiable quirks. Why, you ask? If they are barely important to the plot or story, why waste the time assigning so much detail to them? The answer is simple. Players will likely fall into the habit of paying attention to which NPCs the GM has paid attention to. If the GM were to describe the waiter as, "A tall man with brown hair" and a person across the room as "a thirty something woman with a curly tumble of strawberry blonde hair that falls past smooth, pale skin. Eyes of deep brown peek out sheepishly above a small but sharp nose and full lips stained the color of ripe cherries, and her black satin dress shows that she is aware of her body and the affect it has on the people that see her. The plunging neckline reveals a lack of fear and modesty, and her gaze lingers on you for a moment as she adjusts herself on the barstool, long legs shifting and painted toenails flashing through the open toe of her shoes, which seem made entirely of heel and laces," which character do you think knows more about the missing emeralds? The GM must obfuscate his intentions a bit by having consistent descriptions of characters that the PCs are likely to talk with, or he will inadvertently tip his hand and let the characters know where they are likely to find information, and what characters are simple window dressing.

Rank Three – Extended Interaction. These characters are the new spouse of an old friend, or the mutual friend who has set you up on a blind date. On top of the detailed description, there needs to be a deep background for the character. Likely in protracted scenarios, these characters will appear many times and will develop their own histories with the playing characters. Before that, however, they need to be fully

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Candidly Considering the Common Collector

by Terry Crotinger/montanasing

And someone collects it all... So many things to collect; so many interests! Does one wake on the wrong side of the bed and declare, "I'm going to start collecting science fiction stuff!"? Hardly. Well, maybe. It seems to be a recessive gene (non-gender specific) that starts out rather reluctantly in most people. As a Dungeons and Dragons roll player stated emphatically, "I don't collect anything!" Then he laughed, and added, "at least not intentionally". Ask any dedicated D&D player and they will inform you that accoutrements are part of the game—and they don't come free! Apparently "stuff" accumulates as interest peaks. Few think beforehand about the hobby (or lifetime passion) they are slowly being pulled into and what it's going to cost them.

The cost of collecting is likely the most important factor in determining a level of involvement. Having one-of-a-kind items or a complete series of items is desirable. So much so, that good caution often disappears in order to complete a series/set with a rare volume or piece. When it comes to financing your growing collection, a strong constitution is helpful, nay, imperative!

Space to store or display is another factor to consider when collecting science fiction items and usually not planned beforehand. Die-hard collectors are willing to purchase special display cases or bookcases, and in some instances, storage lockers. But what usually occurs is that as the collection grows, so does the need to expand the area and most make do. Mismatched bookcases and shelving seem to be a favorite – and often less expensive – solution for this dilemma.

Another storage trick are the large, stackable tubs with lids. As these come in various sizes and colors, color-coding the contents help keep track of collected treasures. These are excellent for storing those MIB models of the *Millennial Falcon* or the *Space Cadet* playsets from the 1950's era. These 'totes' are perfect for more delicate items like that Hallmark line of *Star Trek Christmas Ornaments* that even have the voice of Captain Janeway or Mr. Spock at the push of a button. Ditto for the *Star Trek Barbie* and *Star Trek Collector Plates* when not prominently displayed in the wife's china cabinet.

Other tricks collectors use are special envelopes to store and display those MC *Superman* comic books, *Starlog/Fangoria* magazines and even loose advertisements for old science fiction television shows torn from *TV Guide*. (What value loose pages have is, as yet, undetermined.) An interesting debate occurs among collectors as they explain the benefits of using interlocking, self-sealing plastic bags or special composition bags versus white paper envelopes

(of all sizes) or scrapbooks with specific coatings to keep printed material from deteriorating into the next millennium. How to store items are typical topics for discussion among accidental and intentional collectors.

Whether accidental or intention, Forrest Ackerman may be the ultimate collector. Not only was his former house a virtual live-in museum (he even had open house on Saturdays for science fiction buffs to tour), but he has been known to wear various items he has collected from his seventy-plus years being an actor and major figure in science fiction fandom. He has shown his prized ring, part of a prop in a Bela Lugosi film, to countless science fiction fans. In fact, he has the distinction of being recognized as the *first* science fiction "fan" over sixty years ago. "Forrey" Ackerman is truly a collector and a living icon...*

Not everyone can start collecting like Mr. Ackerman. So, where are these items found? eBay and similar online auctions, garage/tag/estate sales and even dollar stores can surprise dedicated collectors. Of course, book stores and specialty shops will carry items that appeal to gamers, rpg, LARPerS, SAC, horror fans, anime, technical individuals and the like—science fiction fans. Some peruse hobby newsletters for postings for buyers/sellers. Others get serious and scour monthly periodicals for information on what kind of item is soon to be released, its value, and how to obtain it. Then again, the dealers' room at Conventions tempt Con go-ers into thinking that *now* is a good time to start collecting "Buffy" and *Babylon Five* key chains, posters, miniatures, trading cards, comics... this list is endless!

Once a collection is established as a "collection", (an obscure, but important milestone in each person's mind) learning the language of collectors creeps into play. Words and acronyms like, MIB (Mint In Box—meaning it has never been opened and the item in the box AND the box are in perfect, 'mint' condition), MC (Mint Condition), and all the grading from mint condition to poor become a proud sign of a collector who can banter about these phrases as if they were wearing their *Star Trek* Communicator pin proudly on their chest. Knowing the vocabulary is probably listed in the [Rules of Acquisition](#) somewhere.

There are pitfalls to collecting. Buying an item then finding it somewhere else for a more reasonable price is inevitable, but hurts. Knowing you needlessly helped pad someone's bank account is a similarly bad feeling. If live auctions and online auctions are used to buy and sell items, beware! Each has their own set of rules and syntax

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The Writer's Block: So You Want To Be A Writer

by Charles Gramlich

There are writers who are content to put their words on paper and who don't care if anyone else ever sees them. At least, I believe there are such folks, although I've never met one. All the writers that I know, and all the people that I know who tell me they would like to write, are saying – at least in part – that they would like to be published. Being published validates us, and it doesn't matter whether that is a good thing or a bad thing. It just is.

Several years ago, a friend that I'd corresponded with for a long time began to express doubts in her ability to be a writer. She had published a short story a couple of years earlier, and one or two non-fiction essays, but she was very close to quitting writing. Yet, she had talent. It had even been recognized.

In trying to encouraged my friend, without lying to her about her chances, I had to dredge up and lay out logically my own thoughts about what it takes to get published – and what it would take for me to know that I should move on to another interest. Just below is my response to her.

* * *

You've asked a question that I can't answer. Do you have what it takes to be a writer, or are you knocking your head against a wall? I don't know. In all honesty, I think you do have some grammar problems that may make selling fiction difficult for you. (Not impossible, difficult.) I had much more academic training than you have before I wrote my first publishable story. But I also honestly think that you have a gift for description, a solid feel for the land and for growing things, and a strong sense of purpose.

There is also something else about your writing that I don't know, and it's not something you've really said anything about. You mentioned in your letter that you "haven't produced any marketable work," or been able "to create material worthy of publication." What I have to ask you very bluntly is: How many pieces of fiction have you completed? And how many pieces have you submitted to a market? If the answer is anything less than 25 then I would have to say that you've really made little effort toward publication. I don't want to sound mean, but no one can judge you as a writer until your stuff has actually been offered on the open market in polished form. That's really the only test. In 1994, I submitted pieces to 69 different markets. I got 49 rejections, sold 15 pieces, and am still waiting to hear on the rest. This was, in fact, a better than average year for me.

Pretty much every day of 1994, whether I felt good or bad, I sat down at my computer and wrote, at least for an hour. The only exceptions were if my son were sick, or if the pressure of school work made it impossible, or if, very rarely, I just said to myself that I couldn't do it that day. I'll bet I didn't miss more than fifteen or twenty days. On January 1, 1989 I gave myself five years to get published, and I wrote a promise to myself that I would work on some writing task, no matter how small, each day. That meant I would read a book about writing, or study a grammar guide, or, mostly, that I would just write. I kept very close to that promise, and it didn't take five years to sell my first story.

There is only one way to find out if you have what it takes to be a writer. Write and rewrite and submit – over and over and over again. Don't set a time limit on yourself (that was a mistake for me, I think) It doesn't matter how much time has passed. It only matters how many actual words you've put down on paper and sent out. If I were to lay it out in steps, they might look something like what follows. I'm sure there are other ways of doing it, but this is the way I tried, with some hindsight about what I did wrong.

Step 1. Decide that you'll work on some writing task every single day. Feel guilty if you don't.

Step 2. Pick a manageable task, the completion of one short story.

Step 3. Jot down the story's basic plot in a few sentences. Make sure you have an idea how the story will end, and that the end is in some way surprising. Very importantly, plan for a story that will be no longer than five or six thousand words. To get ideas, use dreams, real events, folklore, myth, retelling of classic stories, variations on stories you've read or seen on TV, or just make it up.

Step 4. Promise yourself that you will complete at least one good paragraph on your story every day. One paragraph! Four to ten lines maybe. And do it no matter how long it takes. But if you finish that paragraph and are really tired, then quit for the day. At this rate you will complete a five thousand word story in about two months. (There will be many days when you'll do more than one paragraph.)

Step 5. Take some time when you are not writing to look for potential markets for your story. Look for places that pay money first, but don't worry too much about the amount of money or how prestigious the magazine is. Worry about whether they publish pieces

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KeyCOMmentary: A Society of Women

by garrie keyman

It may sound like a lesbian social club, but it's not. It's an experiment. One between me and you. One that gives you the opportunity to participate in world building. Here's how it works. I started a story about a year ago that, like so many others, charged out of the starting block at full tilt only to falter, then sit idly by conferring with dust bunnies while I went on to other projects.

With your help, dear reader, I'd like to get back to it. I've never been part of a critique group, on-line or otherwise, so this will be something new. For a time I will attempt to publish installments of a story under development, giving you the chance to e-mail feedback and have a real say in the course of a story's development. If you are a writer I'll even agree to reciprocate. Just send your story to garriekeyman@yahoo.com and I'll give you feedback, too.

Here's the set-up:

Kydra Cordell, bored transit pilot assigned to Starbus 567/kr, imagines escaping the decaying orbit of her mind-numbing routine and gets her chance when her unfortunate habit of daydreaming lands her on Nogud – an uncharted world that at first seems utopian. Kydra finds only one thing lacking: men.

Chapter One (or more precisely, *Part I* thereof)

Kydra awoke. There was a brace around her neck and traction held her limbs at odd angles from her body, but at least she had done that much – awoken. She hadn't expected to. Not when Starbus 567kr drifted from stable orbit due to simple oversight. Certainly not when it had slipped from space, breaking through the stratus-lock to plunge through the superheated esophagus of that landing vortex that hadn't been entry-ready. Dully, she hoped the ground crew had gotten out of the way in time.

Kydra blinked, trying to clear the blur from her vision. It was the daydreaming. It had gotten her at last, just like her father had warned her for years. *That untamed imagination of yours will bring you to no good*, the General used to say. And here she was. She cleared her throat, to see if that much worked, then took a mental inventory of body parts. *Pain. Discomfort. Yup, still there. Ouch!* Kydra came away with new knowledge, helpful or not: there was a bandage on her head, and when she wiggled the toes of her right foot she had to pee.

The soft hums and muted whispers of a hospital ward surrounded her and Kydra tried to take in more of the scene. Well, there was too much pale blue and white, for one thing. Kydra preferred color – wild colors in unusual combinations and untried patterns that shifted abruptly, surprising the eye. Other than being parched of imagination, the rectangular ward was standard fare: one long row of beds facing off with an attendant's station lined with charts and banked by crash carts jammed with supplies. One bored attendant played games at the compdesk, his back to the patients. The regiment of identical beds lined one windowless wall, and at the far end of the ward Kydra could just make out a small, separate room, which she supposed was reserved for the most critical of cases. At least she wasn't in *there*, she told herself, wishing she could rub her itching forehead with her captive fingers.

"Well, hello there."

Kydra made a mental note to turn her head toward the voice, but her body refused to obey. A middle-aged woman with short grey hair and a broad face came into view around the foot of the bed. She was sturdily handsome and exuded casual confidence.

"I'll come over here, so you can see me better," she offered.

Kydra's gaze dipped to the black-on-white I.D. clipped to the woman's frock. Even the picture was black and white. It read, *Dr. Lycia Rubenthal*.

Is color some sort of a crime on this planet? Kydra intended to ask, but the words remained mere thought, and did not escape her lips.

"We're happy to see you've re-joined the world of conscious folk," the doctor said, smiling warmly.

Kydra again made an attempt to speak, but her jaws and tongue were in a traction all their own. The questioning look in her eyes apparently spoke for her.

"Five days. I'm afraid there's nothing left of your bus, but I'm sure your company will understand. You're lucky to be alive, you know. Tech was able to cast a broad rescue beam and snag you before abandoning the landing pad. It's been in all the papers. He's being called a hero."

Rubenthal smiled anew, but turned her gaze on the Prestochart in her hand as she made a notation. Everything she wrote appeared on one of the screens beside the game-playing attendant at the commcenter across the room. "I won't say what they're calling you."

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Reviews

The Runelords by David Farland



Tor, Apr. 1999
\$6.99, Mass Market, 613 pp.
ISBN: 0812541626
Reviewed by Scott H. Andrews

The Runelords features a clever concept in a stock fantasy tale, but Farland's slapdash writing ruins both. The system of transferable physical endowments is a brilliant gimmick rife with ethical dilemmas, but Farland leaves gaping plot holes. The major flaw is why good characters accept endowments at all, since the donors are crippled, but Farland waves this away by having them only use willing donors. The peasants' fawning eagerness to become zombies to empower their lords strains belief. The ethical ramifications could have fueled a deeper work, but Farland rushes ahead with his fantasy plot, only briefly examining ethics in Borenson's guilt.

This potentially interesting concept and the trite plot of Prince Gaborn discovering his divine legacy end up buried, as *The Runelords* is jumbled in every possible way. Characters flit from one idea or place to another with no justification except rambling monologues – Gaborn escapes from the castle, only to sneak back in. The plot jumps between unrealistic military campaigning and ponderous earth prophecy. Farland's writing stumbles with trite phrases and halting exposition dumps – Gaborn is fleeing the keep, but Farland stops to describe the kitchen in numbing detail. The prose constantly blurts things rather than show characters figuring them out – Raj Ahten somehow immediately knows that Orden is using a serpent ring. Farland adds new concepts seemingly whenever he needs to turn the plot in another direction, like the introduction of vectors just before Iome becomes one, and the serpent ring when Orden needs a weapon. This muddled writing makes *The Runelords* read like a disorganized flight of fancy. The only memorable narrative skill is the vibrant array of spices and scents that permeate the early sections of the book.

Unlike most fantasy, Farland does try to inject some moral conflict into his characters, but the weak writing can't support it. The justification for Ahten's conquest reads like ponderous backstory. The constant inner whining of Gaborn and Iome feels like Farland groping

for the next turn in the plot rather than plausible character growth. It's hard to believe that this sloppy prose is the pseudonymous work of an author who's published dozens of novels, Dave Wolverton, but many of those were franchise tie-ins for *Star Wars* and *The Mummy*.

The Runelords combines the interesting endowment concept and an admirable attempt at round characters with a stock fantasy plot, but drowns it all in sloppy writing.

Iron Sunrise Charles Stross



Ace, July 2004, \$23.95, 368 pp.
ISBN 0441011594
Review by Harriet Klausner

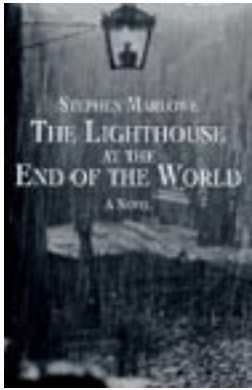
The Escheton, an artificial intelligence, caused the human disappearance on Earth, sending nine billion people to different planets by opening macroscopic wormholes in space-time. People were warned not to violate causality (time travel) or they would suffer the consequences by the Escheton or its agents. Five years ago, weapons of mass destruction destroyed the planetary system of Moscow, though nobody knows who caused it.

Moscow had in orbit four ships sent to destroy the 800 million inhabitants of New Dresden, who they believed caused the destruction of their planet. There are people who know the codes to abort the attack, but an enemy who seems invisible and invincible is killing them one by one. Rachel Mansour, a black ops agent, is sent to New Dresden where two of the people with the codes are staying and hopes to bait a trap to catch the assassin and find out who is behind this tragedy. On New Dresden is Wednesday, a Goth teenager who works with the Escheton to learn who the enemy is and destroy it. The teen has knowledge that she is not aware of that could solve everyone's dilemma if only if she can figure out what it is.

Iron Sunrise is innovative science fiction with many subplots leading seamlessly back to the main storyline. The characters are well developed and feel realistic, especially Wednesday, whose parents were killed by the same group that was involved in destroying her home world Moscow. Although she is emotionally a mess, she has the brains to be an agent of Escheton even though for much of the book she does not know what its plans for her are. Charles Stross is a great storyteller and an author who is superstar bound in the science fiction galaxy.

Reviews

The Lighthouse at the End of the World by Stephen Marlowe



Plume, October 1996,
324 pages, HB & Mass Mkt
ISBN:0-525-94049-9
Reviewed by D. L. Parker

It could be said that both Edgar Allen Poe and H. P. Lovecraft, masters of the modern American horror genre, died appropriately. Lovecraft, prey to monsters of dream as real to him as his own face, died in a madhouse; Poe,

inventor of detective and nightmare, died in a stupor under mysterious circumstances in a Baltimore charity hospital. What happened to Poe in that missing week before he died? Things were apparently looking up for Poe, but in characteristic fashion, he never managed to grasp the golden ring. Marlowe's novel, "The Lighthouse at the End of the World", attempts to answer the question of that mysterious week. The result is both a historical imagining of Poe's life, told in flashback, and a phantasmagorical riff on the themes of both his life and his fiction worthy of the subject's own oeuvre.

The story begins with its ending. Poe indulges in one last fatal drinking binge in a series of skuzzy Baltimore taverns. What happens to him in the course of that final self-destruction is fuzzy even to the narrator. It is 1849; congressional elections are going on. Out of the bar, Poe is recruited to do his patriotic and paid duty by voting according to orders. But elections in those days were often violent. Poe and his press-ganged fellow derelicts fall afoul of a political rival's own gang, and Poe is hit with a brickbat. That's the closing event in his "real" world. All that remains is the hospital he dies in.

But the salient quote of the book is Poe's own: "Is all that we see or seem/But a dream within a dream?" Poe begins to recall his life in flashback. There is his child-bride, his fourteen-year-old first cousin Virginia, who torments Poe with her prolonged and painful death by consumption. There are his vain struggles to earn a living, undercut both by his drinking and his fatally truthful acerbity to publisher, employer, and friend. He remembers the agonizing consumptive death of his brother Henry, almost a spiritual twin, who longed to write like his brother just as Edgar longed to travel like the footloose sailor. Lost opportunities, as inevitable as the inherited doom of the Ushers, haunt him throughout.

Yet interleaved throughout are Poe's dreams. In his dreams, his beginnings are changed; his new beginnings beget new endings, and the universe disappears into and renews itself. The lighthouse of the title is an unfinished story that the historical Poe left which describes a writer who maroons himself two hundred miles from land in order to finish his manuscript. In his dream, a storm, as cataclysmic as the Fall of the House of Usher, casts the writer into the sea and swallows the lighthouse into the maelstrom. The manuscript so painfully completed is both lost and eventually re-found. The story within a story is the symbol of Poe's universe of self-destruction and rebirth, of dream that resembles reality and reality that resembles dream.

"The Lighthouse at the End of the World" is not an easy book to read. Poe's dreams, as he struggles to beget change in his dream-life, form multiple narratives within the story. The dream Poe finds himself in Paris, where he enlists his fictional detective, C. Auguste Dupin, to help him solve the disappearance of both his brother Henry and a strange artifact. During the dream in Paris, Poe writes a story, "How the Yaanak Lost Their God", which is itself part fiction, part dream-reality. In that story Edgar and his brother destroy a cosmic idol worshipped by the Yaanek. Only a Shard, with the mysterious ability to alter natural laws, remains. The Yaanek, deprived of the god they praised, pray now for destruction, and in Poe's dream world that destruction will arrive in the form of a fiery giant comet and a typical Poe cataclysm. Yet the comet is also part of the dream of his blighted wife Virginia, who longs in her doomed life for something to *happen*. The Shard by which the dream Poe saves his world is also an invention of his own imagination. Layer upon layer, Poe's life, dreams, and the lives and dreams of others loop and circle and re-invent themselves.

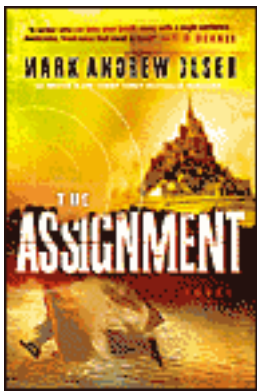
The astonishingly inventive riffs on Poe's themes of dream and reality worked best for me in the story. The least convincing part of the story was, oddly enough, the author's historical Poe. This Poe is perhaps more assertive than he was in real life. Was the real-life Poe as physically truculent or as attractive to women as this fictional Poe? I suspect not. To me, one need only look at Poe's images in the few photographs we have of him to suspect a more curtailed and tragic life. I see a broad white brow, evidence of his intellect and morbid imagination; compressed beneath that large forehead are delicate and sad features, evidence of his frailty. In this story, as is perhaps appropriate, the dream Poe with his desperate longing to save brother, wife, and the world he himself imagines into destruction is the more real.

Reviews

Those who are serious readers of metaphysical writing (Hesse, for example) should not miss this book. Poe wrote several kinds of stories: there are the nightmares and, wildly apposite, the relentlessly logical detective stories. Both kinds are represented well here. The merely casual reader may find the multiple narratives of the story confusing. But if you are a thoughtful Poe fan and can handle a story that will require you to really *think*, check it out. Enjoy!

The Assignment

Mark Andrew Olsen



Bethany House, July 2004,
\$12.99, 400 pp.
ISBN 076422817X
Review by Harriet Klausner

Lazarus experienced the beauty of Heaven only to be brought back to life by Jesus to act as the Catacon, 'the restrainer of destruction' who will be taken away just before the end of time.

His primary role is to send the destroyer back to hell, but every time he comes close, his enemy's minions bury him for decades.

The priests of the Order of St. Lazare spend decades trying to find him. When they do, Lazarus sees a world more technologically advanced but with the same old hatreds. The 2000-year-old man is tired and wants to go home, for he no longer believes that the destroyer can be defeated. Nora, a Harvard graduate student, is almost kidnapped by members of Hamas and a Roman Catholic priest. Lazarus saves her and disappears but Nora tracks him down in Paris where she learns the truth about her long-living relative. The destroyer knowing Lazarus is loose, sets in motion a series of events that bring the world to the edge of war and Lazarus vows to fight him one more time.

Told from the viewpoints of many different characters including Lazarus, one can understand why immortality is as much a curse as it is a blessing. There is no sense of Divinity about the protagonist but he is a catalyst that sets events in motion the ongoing battle of good and evil. Surprisingly, this is not a preachy or apostatizing story but reads more like an urban fantasy in which the powers of good and evil fight for supremacy. Mark Andrew Olson is a talent comparable to Frank Peretti and Jerry Jenkins.

Stalking Darkness

by Lynn Flewelling



Bantam Spectra, Mar. 1997
\$6.99, Mass Market, 512 pp.
ISBN: 0553575430

Review by Scott H. Andrews

Stalking Darkness concludes the tale of Seregil and Alec, the dashing thief and his orphan ward, begun in Flewelling's debut *Luck in the Shadows*. *Luck* jumped from an unfinished pursuit of necromancers into

urban thievery and political intrigue, but *Stalking Darkness* provides a more consistent storyline by focusing exclusively on the necromancer plot.

The early chapters see Seregil and Alec prowling through Rhininmee. As in *Luck*, both characters flourish in this setting. Their burgeoning relationship grows in appropriately hesitant steps for a mentor and his charge. The fascinating linguistic cipher is a rare flash of in-depth detail for Flewelling. The first half of the novel peaks as Seregil and Alec make a key discovery, yet the pace stumbles after they reach a dead end. The focus shifts to trite fantasy prophecy, with Nysander droning about presaged roles and orphaned Alec learning of his secret heritage.

The necromancers' brutal countermove revs up the pace again, but then the plot falls into stock fantasy: evil minions seeking to reanimate the artifact of their dead god while the prophesied good characters must stop them. The subtleties of Seregil's and Alec's characters fade in this rush, next to the stock archetypes of Nysander and Micum. The entire plotline of Beka's cavalry march feels artificially inserted once their destination is obvious.

In the dash to the conclusion, Seregil and Alec wonder if their friends are dead and if Nysander's strategies will stop the evil scheme. These attempts at suspense read like melodramatic excuses, as any fantasy reader can predict the outcome given Flewelling's weakness for clichés. The ending does simmer with a few unexpected twists. Doubt that foreshadowed the failures that actually do happen would give the characters more depth.

The true conclusion isn't the evil plot, but the relationship between Seregil and Alec. Here, Flewelling's work drips with poignant originality as she confronts a subject that is awkward for the characters and many readers as well. The final actions feel perfectly

Reviews

appropriate for both characters, with no trace of the melodrama that hobbles the stock fantasy plot.

As with *Luck in the Shadows*, Flewelling's work straddles a line between exciting but predictable adventure fantasy like Raymond E. Feist and character-focused work like Robin Hobb's *Farseer Trilogy*. The outcome of *Stalking Darkness* is never in doubt, but the delicately-written relationship between Seregil and Alec pulls the reader through the stock fantasy elements.

God Stalk P.C. Hodgell



Simon & Schuster, Sep 1982,
\$2.75 used, 271 pp.
ISBN: 0689308442
Review by Terry Crotinger

God Stalk centers around an abandoned young woman trying to remember her past (as in, many lifetimes of 'pasts') and why the beliefs she's held no longer seem true — all the while searching for her lost brother in a country she is unfamiliar with. With a title like this, a religious pilgrimage would be expected, but no such pious journey ensues. However, Jamethiel aka Jame unknowingly *is* on a type of self-discovery pilgrimage and the reader discovers, along with her, some of the answers for which she searches. Jame is likeable, in a roguish fashion. Her attitude is cynical, sarcastic, yet her real temperament is revealed in tender moments of compassion, orchestrating harmony in the midst of a revengeful, confusing society. In *God Stalk*, the reader soon realizes action and behavior on the surface is less important to motive.

As fantasy goes, P.C. Hodgell uses typical character development devices but has paired it with an atypical title. While it doesn't sport elves or fairies, it does offer the spiritual equivalent in the form of many kinds of gods. Up until the last few chapters, I had no idea what the title referred to, nor why. My inability to comprehend it angered me; like grasping the elusive pun of a joke two days later. However, I liked the pace and plot twists of *God Stalk* once I started to understand what the author was aiming at. Since I may be hasty in my assessment, I set off to discover why this woman (who has a hobby of collecting skeins (yarn to the rest of us) has such a loyal fan base.

With a Ph.D. in 19th. Century English, P.C. Hodgell knows her folklore and creates a rich, if not complicated, background for the main character, Jame. (I smell a sequel.) In fact, readers have requested several follow-up stories for the young heroine—if a thief can be a heroine? With three books to finish the tale, apparently, Hodgell and her readers are not satisfied; another volume is planned for 2004-2005.

A word to collectors: first edition hardcover copies of *God Stalk* with the jacket (both in good condition) can run as high as \$40; obviously more, if signed. Hodgell's other books about Jame (*Dark of the Moon*—Vol. 2, *Seeker's Mask*—Vol. 3, *Dark of the Gods*—a compilation of *God Stalk* and *Dark of the Moon*, and *Blood and Ivory: A Tapestry*—short stories about Jame) start at \$10 and go to almost \$55. Most are available in hardback; reprints are available in paperback.

Some have claimed *God Stalk* is high fantasy. Here, again, like the title, I don't easily see the connection. No matter, loyal P.C. Hodgell fans already appreciate her writing style. This is a tale that should be discovered for those who like fantasy. *God Stalk* can stand on its own, but likely the true value is recognized by reading the entire set of Jame stories.

Last Chance to Submit Entries To The Illuminations Writing Contest!

The deadline for the Illuminations Writing Contest is August 1. Winning entries will be included in an anthology published by Tyrannosaurus Press. So hurry to get your submission in before it's too late.

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 finance future contests. Our goal is to help talented but unknown writers gain exposure, and hopefully start them on what will be long and prosperous careers. 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

Help support a good cause! Encourage your friends to submit an entry to the Illuminations Contest!

For full contest guidelines and details, please visit
<http://www.tyrannosauruspress.com>.

Reviews

The Outstretched Shadow (Obsidian Trilogy, 1) Mercedes Lackey and James Mallory



Tor, 2003

\$7.95+, Hardcover, 604 pgs

ISBN:0-765-30219-5

Reviewed by D. L. Parker

I have a sneaking respect for writers who are able to collaborate successfully with other writers. In my own short writing career, I tried only one collaborative effort. I suppose it did not get off to a good start

when my Swedish friend and I went around and around arguing about the very topic of our planned joint short story. In desperation I just *wrote* something, to be honest nearly the complete story, and sent it to him. My sputtering indignation when I got it back, my characters changed beyond recognition and all sorts of illogical stuff (to me) *inserted*, startled even me. I suppose it was not good form to then tell my friend he had simply *ruined* the story and obviously didn't get it at *all*. Alas! We finished the story, neither of us liked it, and though (in guilty conscience) I offered to try another collaboration to see if we could do that one better, for some reason, my friend stopped replying to my emails around that point. Pasi! I suppose it's too late now to apologize.

Mercedes Lackey, however, obviously does collaborations well. I am trying to remember whether I have ever read any story that is *only* written by her; most I remember are joint-authored. Her style comes through clearly, however, in almost all of them, so she must be a dominant partner in most of her collaborations. I cannot imagine writing 604 pages in peaceful harmony. If I ever manage to meet the woman face to face, I shall ask her what her secret is. And if I ever meet Andre Norton, a famous name in science fiction and one of the dear treasured writers I discovered so long ago, I shall ask her to *stop* co-authoring books. She does not do them well. Or, judging from what I've read to date, do them at all, even with the help of Mercedes Lackey.

The Outstretched Shadow is part of a new trilogy by Lackey and her co-author Mallory. Young Kellen is the son of the Arch-Mage Lycaelon, ruler of the frozen, static, microscopically managed city of Armethalieh. Kellen's father is the prime example of the smug, petty, bloodless, rigid Mages (none of the Mages are

depicted as anything other than one-dimensional prudes, bigots, and chauvinists, so excuse all the adjectives). For some inexplicable reason (we cannot imagine why, given the way his character is portrayed in the story), Lycaelon married a Mountain Trader who later, predictably, deserted him and their boy and girl. The free ways of the lost mother's bad blood are passed on to Kellen, who hates the dry rigor of his training in his father's High Magic and his unloved existence in his father's austere mansion. One day three outlawed magic books find their way – magically – to Kellen. He begins to read about the forbidden Wild Magic. Worse yet, he begins to practice it. And surprise – it's something he finds natural, and something he likes.

But of course Kellen is caught. The vicious Arch-Mage banishes his own son to the wild lands Outside and turns the Outlaw Hunt upon him. Young Kellen escapes with the aid of the Wild Magic and a new friend, and once outside, meets the older sister he never knew he had. Kellen at last understands his father's lies. But he still has one deep worry. Lycaelon warned him that those who practice the Wild Magic would turn to Demons. To Kellen's horror, outside the protective bounds of the Mage's city of Armethalieh, Demons prove to be very real...

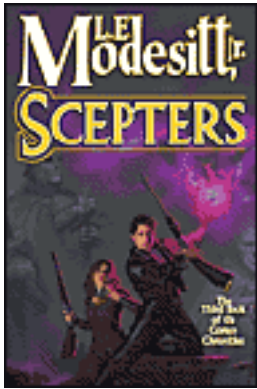
The Outstretched Shadow exhibits many of both the good and bad qualities of Lackey's writing. She does adolescence very well in most of her stories, and young Kellen is portrayed lovingly. Plot and action sequences are well handled. If the story uses the same old tired stock characters that Tolkien, in his innocence, unleashed upon the literary world forever after – elves, dragons, mages, and so forth – they are competently done, all the same. But though Lackey does well with her protagonist, as always, she should really try to give her villains more depth. The Mages are just – well, trite chauvinistic pucker-mouthed windbags. The Demons, the other villains, are just as one-dimensional in their evil. There's nothing there but Bad with a capital "B": torture, incest, cannibalism, tax-collecting (oops, sorry, that's the Mages), classic red hides and horns, obviously *all* the really nasty stuff the authors could think of. I'm sure this was intended to be horrific, but it was so thick it had an unintentionally comic effect on this reader – I laughed. Well, at least it makes choices simple for our hero, and for the reader too. There's not much doubt which side should wear the White Hat in this story!

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Still, "The Outstretched Shadow" is a good adventure, even if far too long at 604 pages. The rest of the trilogy hasn't yet reached my tiny local library, but when it does, I'll consider it worth finishing. As usual, Lackey's a competent storyteller and her new collaboration is a good reading choice for any hot mindless summer day. Enjoy!

Scepters (Corean Chronicles, 3)

L.E. Modesitt, Jr.



Tor, Jul 2004, \$27.95, 624 pp.
ISBN 0765310422
Review by Harriet Klausner

When his country needed him, Alucius joined the army with the rank of overcaptain and almost single handedly won the battle facing overwhelming arms. As soon as he was no longer needed, he left the army and returned to Iron Stem where he and his wife

Wendra herded sheep and had a baby.

The Ifriti, beings from another world who drain the life force of a planet and eventually destroy it, are back. They have stirred up enough unrest so that Lanchrona is besieged on all sides.

The Lord Protector asks Alucius to lead Northern and Southern Guards to put down the revolt in Hyalt. He finds the prophet who is leading the revolt is Ifriti-possessed; Alucius cuts off its life force. He next goes to Stronghold to prevent the troops of the Regent from overpowering loyal troops and taking more Lanachrona land. Alucius and his troops are to destroy the deadly spear throwers while the regular army deals with the enemy force. Alucius is victorious and is rewarded by becoming the colonel of the Northern Guard, but he learns that the Ifriti are setting up portals to drain and destroy his world's lifeforce. Alucius and his wife have the talent to stop them if they can find and destroy the scepters that enables travel between the two worlds.

This is the third and final book of the Corean Chronicles and it is a powerful, enthralling and exciting fantasy epic. All the questions of the previous two books (*Legacies* and *Darkness*) are finally answered and all the loose ends are tied up. The protagonist is a hero for going into battle against an enemy that is more powerful than he is. His love for his wife adds a romantic dimension that humanizes the larger than life champion. *Scepters* is an outstanding fantasy.

Silenced Jerry Jenkins



Tyndale, July 2004

\$24.95, 348 pp.

ISBN 0842384103

Review by Harriet Klausner

World War III, fought over religious differences, decimated the population. Religion became banned and led to the National Peace Organization killing traitors who disregard the taboo; none of them are as fanatical

as NPO operative Paul Slepola, until he becomes a believer. He also becomes the highest placed male in the party but he does not tell his wife because her father was the father of the party.

When Paul brought down what was thought a high placed person in the underground, he became a hero to many, and his wife, who forgave his many infidelities, began to believe they had a future together. When someone claiming to represent the underground bombs Italy and France, Paul is sent over to bring him to justice. He makes contact with the underground, but back home they believe he has turned traitor and are going to use his wife to prove it. The party is also implementing measures to have citizens sign papers saying they do not believe in religion; the penalty for lying is loss of freedom or death. Paul must stop this from happening or even worse problems will resonate around the Globe.

Jerry Jenkins always tells a great story and *Silenced* is no exception. Paul wants to prove to his wife that he changed and she must choose which side she is on: her father's or her husband's. There is a lot of action in this science fiction thriller, but the best part of *Silenced* are the scenes where Paul's wife must make up her mind about what she truly believes in. This series is as good as the Left Behind Books, but they are very different, as the author shows the audience the powers of prayer and how it works in our every day lives. This compelling tale is about a repressive regime that punishes those who do not obey its edicts.

"History is made at night. Character is what you are in the dark."

– Lord John Whorfin

Writer's Block (con't)

like what you're writing. Markets can be found in a lot of ways. See magazines like *Writer's Digest* or *The Writer*. Check out the book called *Novel and Short Story Writer's Market*. (Today there's the internet.)

Step 6. When your story is finished, assume that it's not publishable and rewrite it again. Rewrite it at least four times, checking the meaning and spelling of every word that you're not absolutely sure of, checking the placement of every punctuation mark, especially commas. Read it out loud to yourself after every rewrite, and make the changes that jump out at you when you hear them. By this time you may well be sick of the piece. You may think it's absolutely worthless. Ignore that feeling. Put the manuscript in a drawer somewhere for at least a week.

Step 7. Reread the story one last time. Correct anything that seems weak. Make sure the piece is in proper submission format, which means your name and address single spaced at top left of the first page, the word count at top right of the first page, and the story double spaced below. You need page numbers and a short title at the top right of each page after the first one.

Step 8. Write a brief cover letter to the editor of the market you've selected. At its simplest this letter could say something like: "Dear _____. Please find enclosed a story entitled _____, that I would like to submit for your consideration. Any attention that you might give to it would be appreciated."

Step 9. Make sure to include an SASE, an empty stamped envelope addressed to yourself, when you mail the story. (Unless you're emailing, of course.)

Step 10. Start another story using the same process.

Step 11. If the first story gets rejected, reread it again, make any corrections that are warranted, and send it out to another market within one week. Repeat as needed, at least twenty times.

Step 12. When you've written fifty stories this way, and every one has been rejected at least twenty times without a single sale, then this might suggest that writing is not your game. This'll take four to five years. But you have to start somewhere and sometime. Ray Bradbury started out doing one story a week but I couldn't handle that.

Are there things you can do to improve your skills? I think so. Here's some suggestions. Most are ones that I used myself, and/or occasionally still use.

1. Get an anthology of stories similar to those you'd like to write. Type one out from first line to last. You might try this exercise several times to get a feel for how published writers do what they do. I know a guy who typed out a whole novel this way.

2. Study books on writing technique. I typically read four or five books a year on writing, as well as various magazines.

3. Get an English textbook. Read it like you were taking a class. Read five pages a day maybe. Do the exercises in the book just like they were homework. Start a note file for yourself and put anything new you learn into that file. I've read through my English text twice this way. And I have pretty big file of writing notes by now.

4. Try to go to a writing conference. Go to the panels and listen. Ask questions if can think of any. But mostly listen. I go to at least one conference a year, and I'd go to more if I could get away from work.

5. Do writing exercises. Study an object and then describe it as completely as possible. Listen to conversations at work or over lunch and try to write them down the way you heard them. Free associate, which means just start typing and don't stop to think. Do this for five or ten minutes at a time, then go back and see what you've got. Write out descriptions of past experiences.

6. Make yourself a writer's "list to do" sheet and mark off tasks as you complete them. I also keep a notebook that lists guideline requests and submissions that I make, along with the date and cost in postage.

7. Keep a writing journal and record what you do each day that is related to writing. Be honest. If you're lazy one day, say so. I find this helps motivate me.

8. When you see a magazine that interests you, study their guidelines, which you can often find online or can send for through the mail (with an SASE, of course). If you submit a story to them, mention having looked at their guidelines. I usually say something like: "About a month ago I requested your guidelines for submission, and after looking them over I believe I have a story that meets your requirements."

9. Take a story that you like and analyze it. Count paragraphs, count long sentences versus short sentences, see how many long sentences appear in a row, how many words in a sentence. Look to see how soon the writer introduces action, or the main character, or how soon the first major conflict arises. Study the story's pattern. I do this a lot.

Writer's Block (con't)

In closing, nobody can answer your question except you. You have strengths and weaknesses like any other writer. You have doubts about your ability, but so does every writer. Ultimately, the fate of your writing is in your own hands. I wish you the best of luck. Write to let me know how you feel and what you're thinking.

* * *

For those of you reading this column, do you think I laid it on my friend too thick? Did I make it seem too hard to be a writer? Should I have mouthed platitudes rather than truths? All I know is, I didn't lie to her about what I think it takes to be a writer. I also know that I never heard from her again.

RPG Corner (con't)

realized and fleshed out. The amount of detail can vary, but any GM worth his stripes would do well to have personal information ranging from birth date and parents' names to favorite meal and most hated movie. Personality quirks and mannerisms should also be detailed, like stuttering when upset, or avoiding confrontation with anyone. These characters need to be as real as the players' characters, with all of the same attention to detail. Of course in a one-shot game there are fewer chances to sit and talk with characters about anything other than the pressing issues of the plot, but protracted scenarios, with their slower pace and emphasis on detail, are places for the NPC and the PCs to sit and talk of anything. Who knows what seemingly insignificant remembrance uttered by an NPC about his days in college will mean to the large plots of the scenario? Well, the GM does, of course. In protracted scenarios, NPCs can be woven into the larger plots and provide links to events and happenings that would otherwise pass the playing characters by without their noticing them. The GM must know these connections, and must have them set down so that the characters can find them, long before they will even know what they are looking for.

This type of planning ahead can appear daunting, and to some extent it is. There aren't any tricks to inserting plot hooks into NPCs. Once you have a character that is fully detailed, and once you know what it is you need that character to accomplish for your scenario, it's easy to adjust the details somewhat to blend the character into the plot. Sometimes, the designing of an interesting character will create stories by itself. Next time we'll look at what makes a character "interesting" to PCs, and take a look at roles for NPCs, such as Allies, Neutrals, and my favorite, Villains.

KeyCOMMENTary (con't)

There you have it. The start of a potential story. You might begin by telling me if the concept sounds interesting. Then, how about the hook? Did the story grab your attention enough to pull you along? Are you left wanting to read more? That, perhaps, is the most telling sign, so be sure to let me know. Be honest, now.

If feedback is favorable, I'll write on and share what I come up with next month. If not, perhaps we'll let this little experiment of ours die a quiet death, or try another story starter and see how that fares. In any event, thanks for your time and attention, and on another note – good luck to all who entered our *Second Annual Illuminations Writing competition*. Before next issue, the deadline for entries will have expired, so if you haven't entered yet, please do! We love reading your work. We hope you love reading ours, too.

Collector (con't)

to go with it—study each form carefully. Watching a prized item go to someone else or knowing your friend got the same Darth Vader mask at a garage sale for less than the price of a candy bar when you bought yours online instead of making your car payment is hard to stomach. Think of it as character building.

Whether starting your science fiction collection was intentional, accidental, or accumulated, it's yours. Finding others with the same interests to share your victories with is simple if you are computer savvy and online. If not, hobnobbing at conventions or discreetly asking friends and co-workers what their hobbies are might reveal others, like you, with the recessive "collector" gene (unless they woke up one morning on the wrong side of the bed). You're not alone. *Someone collects it all...*

* Mr. Ackerman has inspired many to begin collecting, and in fact, he is one of Dennis Lynch's roll-models. Dennis, a twenty-plus year collector and one of the collectors mentioned in the June 2004 issue of *Illuminata*, will be highlighted in August's issue.

Are you proud of your science fiction collection? What kinds of things do you collect? How much has it cost you in a year? Is there a favorite type or item that is more desirable? What is your favorite item? How do you store or display your items? What system do you use to track what you have? And, finally, what is the motivating force to collect? Copy/paste these questions with your response and send to: collector@scififan.com Responses will be posted, without names or identifying information, in a later issue of *Illuminata*.

Spider-Man (con't)

Most crossovers do not make it past the first film for one simple reason: comic crossovers tend to suck. Anyone see the original *Punisher* (or the new one)? Anyone remember 1991's *Captain America*? *Howard the Duck*? The list of failed crossovers is long, but the failures themselves can be attributed to a relatively small number of flawed decisions. First and foremost, the final product often bears little resemblance in tone or style to the original story. The hero is drastically changed, secondary players are sometimes eliminated, and plotlines occasionally have nothing to do with the comics. Wanting to make movies that appeal to more than the existing fanbase makes sense; making movies that don't even appeal to those fans is ridiculous. Burton understood that. So did Singer and Raimi. Make a movie that fans of the comic will love, and a lasting franchise is born.

The powers-that-be often make other questionable decisions in "Creation", like casting talentless – but inexpensive – actors in the main roles, employing directors with no appreciation for the story or concept of the appropriate style to use (You hear that, Ang Lee!), or finding writers more interested in using campy puns and sub-par dialogue than writing a truly inspiring interpretation of the comic. When combined, these factors spell doom for most comic franchises.

Those films lucky enough to survive genesis reach the second phase, or the "Crisis of Conscience". This crisis can take many forms, but typically, it revolves around sex. Superman wanted to be a real boy so he and Lois could shack up, Batman and Catwoman wanted to set aside their masks and play house, and Peter Parker just wanted to get it on with Mary Jane. But beneath the erotic overtones there often lies a tragic tale of sacrifice, of heroes who have given so much and gotten so little, and the inborn desire to be normal, to be accepted by others. Giving up what makes one unique, and then ultimately re-embracing it, is a story that appeals to many, and coupled with the knowledge that the first movie was pretty good (and backed by the increased budget a successful movie's sequel earns) it explains why the second movie in the crossover series is usually the best.

Unfortunately, this is where the system falls apart. By movie three, the director wants to move on to other projects, the actors want to explore other aspects of their craft, and the execs don't want to shell out the extra money needed to keep the creative team on board. Changes are made, new actors are brought in. Generally, these actors are bigger names than the original, but less suited to the role. The scripts are often poorly written, and in an effort to 'spice things

up' the writers try new things, like adding more humor, packing the script with a team of villains, or giving the hero a sidekick (whether he actually had one becomes irrelevant). Richard Pryor did not bring much to Superman's table, and even though Robin was supposed to be Batman's sidekick, most would agree that he did not do much to invigorate the franchise. Movie three, for those franchises that make it this far, is the "Change of Life". It constitutes a drastic metamorphosis in the life of the hero, either by adding something new or finding something that was lost. Superman found Lana Lang, who loved him as Clark Kent; Batman found Robin (whoop-de-do!); and from what I hear, Blade – a consummate loner – joins forces with some Vampire Hunters and Whistler's daughter (I haven't read the Blade comics in years, but I don't remember Whistler having a daughter).

Crossovers that make the fourth movie – I can only think of two – have little in redeemable value. Both *Batman and Robin* and *Superman IV* were terrible, as bad as *Howard the Duck*. Just thinking of those movies disgusts me so much, I can't even think of a clever name for this place in the sequence. "Death of A Hero" or "In The End, Hollywood Destroys Them All".

The fifth movie is still a no-man's land, but with filming underway on *Batman Begins*, my hope is that this stage of the crossover's life cycle will be called "Rebirth". The buzz I hear is good. Christian Bale has proven himself as a dark, troubled character, and word on the street is that *Batman Begins* will dispense with the camp and return to Batman's disturbing roots. Then again, does this count as a new installment in the Batman franchise, or, like a Phoenix newly-risen from the ashes of its ignominious death, has a new life cycle begun for Batman? Have we come full circle to "Creation"?

With great heroes comes great responsibility, and it is incumbent upon those who control Hollywood not to destroy everything we love just to increase their profit margins. A part of me wants Spider-Man to go on forever, but the larger (and wiser) part thinks that perhaps Parker and company should take a break after Spider-Man 3. I never want to regret seeing anything Spider-Man, and this I vow, before my readers and all that I consider holy: Hollywood will rue the day they destroy my hero! If they hurt Spider-Man, I will make them pay!

Besides, think how great the special effects will be twenty years from now, when the Wall-Crawler once again graces the silver screen. Wait, what am I thinking? By then, Hollywood will probably dispense with special effects altogether and genetically engineer an actor for the role... CG is fine, but people would pay good money to see a *real* Spider-Man!