



# The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

## (Re)Making Things Worse

By Bret Funk

Making money aside, the concept behind remakes is a good one: to update something once popular and expose a new generation to the grand concepts, comical genius, or whimsical fancy of the original. The optimist in me likes to believe that few people go into a remake with the intention of making it poorly, knowing they can capitalize off an audience drawn by the siren's song of their youthful memories. Surely, no one would attach their name to a remake unless they had a particular love of the original, or sully their names by tricking viewers with promises of something much-loved and much improved.

If only I could maintain my early-morning faith in humanity past morning coffee. Far too often, remakes fail to achieve the lofty heights of a *Reinvention* or the more modest goal of a *Homage*. The majority—intentionally or unintentionally—end up as *Cash Cows*: remakes bludgeoned by bottom lines and foolish decisions until only their cores remain pure.

*Godzilla. The Haunting. The Vanishing. The Whicker Man.. The Stepford Wives. Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. You've Got Mail.* To offer a comprehensive list of *Cash Cows* would be a Herculean task, and a waste of time. There is no avoiding them; try though you might, you will eventually find yourself watching one, wondering why the director decided to do things *that* way, or why *that* actor was cast in a certain role.

Remakes have existed since the early days of film, and will exist

until we stop paying to see them. Worse, most start out as adaptations from other media, so the degradation of concept is already underway before the remake enters the picture. *Ben-Hur. Phantom of the Opera. Dracula. 20000 Leagues Under the Sea.* These and many others have crawled up onto the screen several times already, and will no doubt return again. Why do they come back? Because someone in power remembers the original and realizes enough time has passed that 1) old-timers will be interested in seeing the story again, maybe even from a new perspective, and 2) young people won't realize it's a remake and will flock to see it.

This I understand, and I can't even fault Hollywood for it. Updating stories for the times keeps them fresh. Making money is a core American value. And who has the right to say that a concept has reached the pinnacle of its artistic expression? (I'd like it to be me.)

There does, however, seem to be a point at which a movie is so well made that future remakes should be considered anathema. Any attempt to improve, or even to hold firm against the original is sure to fall short, so why waste the effort? Bogart and Bacall made an incomparable pair in *The Big Sleep (1946)*, so who thought it a great idea to remake the film in 1978 with Robert Mitchum, an often excellent actor who came up a dim shadow of Bogie's Marlowe. Judy Garland and James Mason succeeded in re-making *A Star is Born* in 1937, and they earned acclaim in the process. Why, then, did Streisand and Kristofferson agree to remake it again in 1976, especially after it became evident that the two lacked even a hint of chemistry?

Often, instead of choosing actors suitable for a role, remakes are adapted to suit the chosen actors. Adam Sandler's hammier Paul Crewe of *The Longest Yard* cut a far different profile

### In This Edition

**(Re) Making Things Worse**

**RPG Corner v5.8**

**Realism vs. Playability**

**Online Gaming:**

**Sanity Points**

**The Writer's Block**

**Writing Weather**

### REVIEWS

**Brother Odd**

**Cursor's Fury**

**Dragon Avenger**

**Glasshouse**

**Scar Night**

**The Assassin King**

### ORIGINAL FICTION

**Deconstructing Fireflies**

**by K. Petersen &**

**N. Schoonover**

# The RPG Corner v5.8: Realism vs. Playability

by Doug >|< Roper of EPIC Gaming

Anyone who has any real experience with RPG's will know that there are certain compromises that must be made in order to have a successful game. Even in the more simulation-oriented models, you can't have a smoothly running game without taking certain things and reducing them to a statistic. To do otherwise would bog down the game in deep and probably inescapable minutia. There must be a balance between the realistic detail that some love, and a level of detail that constricts the Players' ability to play.

As with most of the fundamental issues in RPGs, the balance between Realism and Playability stems from the particular philosophies of the Game Master and the Players. In the more casual Models of Role-Play, Playability is the focus, so systems tend to be simple and non-specific. The easiest example to use to illustrate this point is the system for recording personal damage in RPGs, since this is usually where most of the arguments about Realism and Playability begin. Broad systems, like those employed by most off the shelf games use a single number to reflect overall health. Usually called Hit Points, they reflect the amount of damage your character can withstand before succumbing to unconsciousness and / or death. Having a single number for overall health isn't very realistic, as it doesn't differentiate between the types of damage incurred, nor the specific locations of the body damaged, however, it is eminently playable, as the Player is still able to keep track of how healthy his character is, and can essentially keep going until the last possible moment as though nothing is wrong (though most current systems have sub-systems to reduce the wounded character's abilities to reflect the increasing damage he has incurred).

More realistic attitudes toward combat mean that the Players and Game Masters must keep track of a huge amount of detail. Where was the character damaged, how much damage was incurred, what type of damage was incurred, how much damage can that section of the body tolerate, was there any armor or clothing to absorb or deflect the damage...the specifics can go on and on. Some people demand this amount of detail in their games. If a character is slashed across the arm,

can the arm still be used to fight? A character may have 1,000 Hit Points spread all over his body, but getting shot for 100 Points of Damage in the head won't kill that character, because the damage is non-specific? Not likely. However, this amount of detail can bog down the play of the game, and mean that a simple action of punching someone can take many long minutes of dice rolling and chart consultation to resolve.

The over-reliance on detail affects the speed with which things can happen in a game, and can end up causing a substantial amount of grief for the Payers. If character actions must be painstakingly described to the smallest detail, then a small error or omission can cause the collapse of all the PC's plans. Just because a Character is an experienced medical technician, it doesn't necessarily mean that the Player is.

Detail creates the texture of the environment that the Characters inhabit, and a lack of detail tends to create a drab and poorly realized world to interact with. Less overall detail means that when details are supplied, you have an instant clue about what it is you should be doing. Too much detail, on the other hand, creates an overabundance of information and things for the PCs to process and catalog. Players may enjoy savoring a fine detail, but too much overpowers the palate, and everything begins tasting the same.

So how can a balance be found? Short of discussions between the GM and Players, and some play-testing, there really is no way to find the right balance for you as an individual, and your gaming group as a whole. It really is a matter of taste dependent on what Model and what level of depth you are looking for in your gaming experience. What I can offer now is some advice from the point of view of a Game Master and part time Player, about the benefits of each side of this argument.

Game Masters love details, and specifics, because it provides easily understood rules about the world in which the PCs live and operate. PCs understanding the necessity of labeling each item carried on their person will eliminate arguments later on when equipment vital to the mission is found to be missing. Players can sometimes get

Con't on page 17

# Online Gaming: Sanity Points

by Terry Crotinger/montanasing

Doug Roper's article (Illuminata, October 2006) touched on areas my own game master has tried to explain to me. It was a relief to know I am not the only historian/scribe in the world of gaming, because my Iowa rpg group laughed at my diligence and long hand, but came to me for that missing detail to forward the game. My GM and Mentor, Scott, has attempted to make each game/campaign not only an adventure, but personally satisfying for each member in the group. With that delicate balance of back-story, action, mystery, puzzle, psycho-drama and hack-n-slash to maintain, I'm amazed more fen (plural of fandom) bypass this activity.

Just when I think I've figured out this whole roll playing game thing, along comes information that spins me in another direction entirely. I was asked about joining an online rpg. "Online?" I asked. Cyber-rpg? I realize online games (in my day, "computer games") were available, but my SegaGenesis *Sonic*, *the Hedgehog* and *Commander Keen* days were solitary activities, or at least with only one other player. I had never thought about online gaming as an rpg experience other than DOS looking programs where you type in your action and some face-less person counteracted. My total experience included the Classics: my all-time favorite, *Centipede*, *Donkey Kong*, *Mario Brothers Teaches Typing* and the mother of all games, *Pac Man*, and even earlier in cyber cave-man history, *Pong* and *Space Invaders*. I could not even fathom interacting with faceless cyber-geeks and still have a good time.

However, I learned that one reason why online gaming is so popular is that, 1.) you don't have to honor the social contract by being presentable, and 2.) you can play at any time of day/night. While rpg groups quietly go about their business, and can, if desired, play at anytime and wearing whatever, the story and cohesive factor is the brass ring for many GMs and players.

Since I've never had quantities of time/money, I bypassed anything online. While at ICON (Cedar Rapids, Iowa), I pursued my inane questions and found a player proficient in both live rpg and online games. Steve T. explained some of the attraction of online gaming to me saying, "Online gaming is very interactive. You can sit around in your pajamas in your precious own hour of time and join gamer geeks in *their* pajamas. The virtual gaming community is

easier to connect with."

That made sense. When compared to finding a local, compatible group, online gaming would be instantly available, the ground rules established and I'd have action anytime I wanted. In fact, after living in my current location for over a year, I had yet to find a GM/game who was accepting players. Not only were there few open games, there were few games for *anyone*. I was about to cut the cord on any chance of finding an rpg group (much less, a compatible group) when the subject of online gaming sprang up. But as a newbie, I'd be totally lost in the cyber gaming world. Steve T. assured me that if I had questions, all I had to do was ask, someone would lead me through it, even if it interrupts the flow of the game. "Male gamers will [help] too, generally, but the women gamers will not be annoyed [if interrupted]. The women gamers will be the ones to stop and explain something or break off and answer in real time/out of character."

And then Steve T. added something that, as a therapist, totally surprised me. "It's quite the place for research. I even found a guy conducting [psychological] research for online gaming. It's interesting; male/female in the helping professions go online to kill things to deal with the stress of real life and yet will stop if someone is having problems and start to spill them [their problems] to you."

Being a forward thinker, I've wondered what retirement will be like and if rpg/board games will be part of my Shady Pines experience. Always looking for something to keep my older clients and their precious minds active, wouldn't an ongoing rpg game be just the thing? (Hmmm... The real-life guy might pass on before his character.) Those with physical limitations could hack-n-slash, mingle with the real-life players and teach new ones what good gaming is all about. It's cheap, takes up time, keeps one looking forward to the next game day. The generation who invented rpg is aging. I'd hate to think roll playing games are just for a certain age.

Aware the cyber-community won't berate me for my newness, I'm thinking of trying a little online gaming, though I'm told that, like methamphetamines, it only takes a little to get hooked—as in 24/7 obsession. I think I'd like to play games in my PJs, burping and talking to myself, with pizza in one hand, mouse in the other. It may not be live people, but it's another foray into fandom and I'm always ready to explore.

# The Writer's Block: Writing Weather

by Charles Gramlich

In case you don't live here and aren't aware, southern Louisiana has a warm climate. It's mid-November as I write this, and in the 70s today. At night it drops into the 40s, occasionally into the 30s.

We had our first light frost where I live on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, across from New Orleans, on November 20, and tonight it's a little cool to be outside without a jacket. Throughout October and the first part of November, however, I could sit out on my deck most nights in a T-shirt and listen to the rattle of falling leaves on the tin roof. It's almost an imitation fall.

But faux fall or not, even in a Louisiana October I found my energy levels for writing starting to surge. It has always been this way for me. I write better when it's starting to grow cold, and better yet in the dead of winter when the trees stand quiet and barren and waiting for spring.

Something in winter has always inspired me, and I believe it has to do with the edge of melancholia that is wetted in me by the first seasonal chill. I grow just a touch sad. Not depressed. I don't weep for lost summer or contemplate suicide. I'm merely a little more attuned to the darker emotions and darker thoughts that come creeping into my mind like the cold that creeps into our homes. And I find that in writing horror or fantasy those emotions are the engine that drives my imagination.

For me, I also find that rain—any rain but especially if it's icy—makes for good writing weather. If there's a little wind to spank the trees into motion that's even better. And if it's storming, I often turn off my computer and take a notepad and pen and venture onto the deck where the air can bite me. I like to huddle down in a chair, close enough to the world so that I catch a faint mist from the raindrops as they explode against the corner of the roof. The writing comes easy then, or easier at least.

Do you have writing weather? I bet you do. Maybe it's in the spring when a young man's (or woman's) fancy turns to literature. Or maybe you write best in the wet, panting heat of midsummer, with a cold drink to blot the sweat on your forehead and a ceiling fan whispering lazily above.

No more complaining about the weather. Let it help you instead. Find *your* weather and I bet you'll find your muse. One of them at least. I know *I'm* hoping for another frost tonight. And is that rain I hear?

## Illuminations 2006 -- FINAL NOTICE

The Illuminations 2006 SF Writing Contest is drawing to a close. All entries must be submitted or postmarked no later than Dec 31 2006. We have received a number of stories already, but our judges are ready for more. Only one writer will win the hefty \$25 prize, but all highly-scored stories will earn inclusion in the next Beacons of Tomorrow Anthology. For details, visit:

[Tyrannosauruspress.com/Illuminata/Illuminations.html](http://Tyrannosauruspress.com/Illuminata/Illuminations.html)

### Brother Odd

#### Dean Koontz

Bantam, Dec 2006, \$27.00

ISBN: 0553804804

Review by Harriet Klaunser

There are those who see spirits, but Odd Thomas does more than just look at them; without speaking they communicate with him, some demanding justice while others simply seek companionship and comfort. This is a heavy burden for a twenty-one year old man who has been through many traumas. He retreats to St. Bartholomew's Abbey for some needed rest.

He relaxes for a few months until a bodach, a dark creature anticipating large scale deaths arrives. This disturbs Odd because there are many mentally and physically challenged children who reside in the Abbey. He informs the Abbott and Mother Superior what he sees and they believe him because people from his home town whose lives he has touched vouch for him. Odd originally came to the abbey because there was only one ghost there, a monk who supposedly committed suicide. Now a monk disappears, but Odd sees the body before Death claims it. There are creatures made of bones and joints causing chaos at the abbey while more bodach appear; biblical catastrophe is coming to St. Bartholomew's Abbey.

Odd is one of the best characters Dean Koontz has created in his illustrious writing career. He is vulnerable, innocent, and accepting of the supernatural as being natural; though he fears much of what he encounters, he courageously never flees from anyone (living or dead) in trouble. There is plenty of action, and the supporting characters from both sides of the aisle make the tale work. Koontz's latest odd job showcases his extraordinary talent to provide strong suspense with a thought provoking plot.

## Reviews

### **Cursor's Fury**

**Jim Butcher**

Ace, Dec 2006

\$24.95, 448 pgs.

ISBN 0441014348

Review by Harriet Klausner

In the realm of Alera where people can bind elemental furies and use their powers, Tavi is one of the fair who have no magical ability. He is trusted by First Lord Gaius and was once his page; now he is a Cursor, gathering intelligence to protect the realm. However, not everyone is satisfied with the First Lord's rule; High Lord Kalare wants the position, and he makes a devil's bargain with the monstrous looking, magic wielding Canim.

The battleground where the Canim will make their first attack is Cerus, and Tavi, through a series of deaths, is now the captain and leader of the First Alera legion. He is a natural leader, and even though the Canim have fifty thousand troops facing a few thousand Aleran soldiers, Tavi is determined to hold the line until other legions arrive to aid him. What he doesn't know is that Kalare has imprisoned the spouses of Lords Atticus and Placida and neither will make a move until their loved one is freed. If Tavi doesn't find a way to stop the coming horde, they will overrun all of Alera.

Jim Butcher, author of the Dresden Files writes high fantasy in the tradition of Tolkien. The author has created a society with its own culture, politics and values and it seems so real the reader will believe such places actually exist. Tavi is a unique hero who thinks he is losing because he has no fury crafting, but he doesn't understand that one doesn't need magic to be a leader and inspire loyalty. There is much intrigue and political maneuvering in *Cursor's Fury*, but the battle scenes are fantastic because they are easily visualized. Mr. Butcher deserves a Hugo nomination for this fine book.

---

In short, the straw of a manufactured realism with which the sf writer makes his particular literary bricks must be entirely convincing to the reader in its own right, or the whole story will lose its power to convince.

— Gordon R. Dickson

You can't deny laughter; when it comes, it plops down in your favorite chair and stays as long as it wants.

— Stephen King

---

### **Dragon Avenger**

**E.E. Knight**

Roc, Dec 2006

\$14.00, 384 pp.

ISBN: 0451461096

Review by Harriet Klausner

Wistala is a dragonet who survives hatching and is happy to live in a cave with her mother and father, cocooned in their love. The copper dragon stays away from his family; the gray dragon Auron is scale-less; Jizara is shy and clings to her mother; while Wistala is strong and independent. Their idyllic life is destroyed when slave traders of the Wheel of Fire kill Tala's mother and Jizara. Unable to fly yet Auron diverts the hunters so Wistala can have a chance to grow up free.

Tala finds her injured father Aurel near death and tries to save him, but he prefers to die fighting the dwarves. Tala flies away and is joined on her journey by the elf Rainfall who takes her into his home and shows her nothing but love. For years the two live together until Thane Hammar wants Rainfall's beautiful estate. The elf makes Tala his heir, and to avoid Hammar's ire he encourages her to travel with his friends where she sees much of the land of Hypatia. While on her journey she devises a way to take vengeance for her family's long ago destruction even though she risks her own death because she will be in the heart of the enemy.

The second book of the Age of Fire concentrates on Auron's sister and how she copes with being alone in a somewhat hostile world. E.E. Knight is a great worldbuilder who populates his story with humans, elves, dwarves, and dragons. This is a charming and enchanting fantasy with magic though it is not much in evidence. The characters who befriend Wistala love her for her mature view that homids are for the most part not evil. Told from the point of view of Tala, readers will be enamored by this beautiful specimen of dragonhood.

# Reviews

## **Glasshouse**

**Charles Stross**

Ace, 2006

\$23.95, Hardcover, 335pgs

ISBN 0-441-01403-8

Review by D. L. Parker

One of the most intriguing tricks in a writer's arsenal is the unreliable narrator. The narrator may be amnesiac, insane, or delusional (the first a hoary old device of romance, and the latter two, of horror). Or he or she may be simply a liar, to himself, to other characters, or even to the reader. The child's "see but don't understand" is another famous example of the unreliable narrator. The pint-sized angle can be effective; I can rattle off the names of half-a-dozen classics that use the eyes of a child to convey to the reader more than the purported narrator himself (or herself) understands. And of course, there are also those eccentric users of the technique, like Anita Loos, who wrote entirely (and hilariously) from a dumb gold-digger's two-timing, money-grubbing viewpoint.

Charles Stross makes clever use of the unreliable narrator technique in 'Glasshouse'. We meet Robin post-reconstruction, when he's not quite sure who he is, or more importantly, who he was. Humans live on indefinitely in this future, but with age comes not just decay of the body, but boredom, depression, a world as gray as winter. It's not enough to replace one's body for something new, as the humans of this future do as casually as cosmetics; one must also purge the mind. Kill the memory, kill the self just a little bit, and regain the lost vivacity of a fresh viewpoint: it's electroshock for the brain, future-style.

But Robin's past self (or selves, since he remembers several, in chaotic, broken-crockery pieces) has also left him a problem. Someone wants to kill him. There's a war behind him in that lost past, a high-tech war with a killer virus called Curious Yellow (is this a riff on those yellow-jacketed Curious George books?) that monkeys with both human memories and psyches and the intelligent emotional machines that power this future age. Because of that virus, the former integrated civilization, linked by T-gates (worm-hole transport gates) and A-gates (assembly gates, something like Star Trek transporters, which disassemble and re-assemble matter, living or otherwise, from the raw material of atoms) has cracked into a million little fiercely guarded pieces (or polities, as Stross calls them).

But not all enemies of that hard-fought war, with atrocities committed on both sides, have been caught. Half of them have escaped, and they seem to have a grudge for our newly erased and clueless Robin. To hide, Robin checks himself into the Glasshouse - - a deliberately isolated social experiment that wants to mimic the critical period when man moved from the dumb machines of the 20th and 21st century to the emotional machines of the future age. In the Glasshouse, Robin himself will wear a new face and a new name -- hopefully, one that will hide him from his enemies.

Of course, we know his enemies find him. In fact, we soon see that the entire Glasshouse has been perverted to a new purpose. Robin, helplessly immersed in the body of a weak young woman, can only struggle to understand its purpose and search -- with limited success -- for the lover that followed him into the Glasshouse (she, too, has a new form and a new name).

But the hijacked social experiment Robin is immersed in (under his/her new name and persona of Reeve -- are you keeping track of these gender changes?) becomes more and more dangerous. Someone's really monkeying with the human brain now... and Robin/Reeve, who just might be a secret agent, has to find out what the fugitive criminals of the Curious Yellow war have planned for their come-back, if he/she doesn't get killed first...

Stross has written an interesting, somewhat difficult book. Background information is imparted in situ (as it should be) and may take some head scratching on the part of a reader, at times. I was unsure, for example, more or less to the end, what kind of starship a MASucker was, though it's a key to the finale.

On the character side, the romance between the protagonist (as the woman Reeve) and her newly assigned 'husband' Sam is delicately handled and touching. But I had serious trouble reconciling the gentle, sad, ethical, sexually restrained Sam with the hop-in-bed, outgoing, hip-swingin' character that Sam eventually proves to really be (for as Robin turns into the woman Reeve, so too does another key character turn into the man Sam, in the Glasshouse. I won't say who, for fear of spoiling the plot for a new reader, but it's not hard to figure out). I wanted Sam back!

Still, character inconsistencies aside, Stross is one of the few new speculative fiction writers that I remember to always look for. Enjoy!

## Reviews

### Scar Night

Alan Campbell

Bantam, Dec 2006, \$22.00

ISBN: 0553384163

Review by Harriet Klausner

Chains hold the city of Deepgate above a bottomless abyss. The founders did so to worship the God of Chains Ulcis and as a means to keep the raiding barbarians from the city's gates. The Archon, fallen angels defending Deepgate, pray to Ulcis to lead their army in an assault to force open the gates of heaven, shut since Aeyn exiled the other gods and tossed out the angels. Yet Ulcis remains unmoved at the bottom of the abyss where the dead from Deepgate are tossed to feed him with their life-force.

The city uses poisons fired from their airships to keep the barbarians away. However, the greatest Poisoner Devon is dying from the elixirs he invented. Angry at his fate, he currently works on angelwine, a blood and soul concoction that if successful will grant him immortality. The Church leader Presbyter Sypes encourages Devon to continue his effort though that means condoning murder, as the recently deceased are needed to make angelwine. Sypes's motive is honorable; he wants to end the carnage caused by serial killing former angel Carnival, who claims a soul every scar night, but may learn the road to Ulcis is filled with good intentions. Others are interested in Devon's research for personal motives making success dangerous and failure deadly.

More a set up for later novels, *Scar Night* is a terrific opening act that paints a vivid picture of the dynamics of Deepgate. The story is filled with action, though not all comes together by the conclusion, while the cast is fascinating and solid as fans learn whose who is who. Especially interesting is Devon—bitter, angry, and frustrated, he has saved his city at the cost of his life, unless, that is, his fountain of youth experiment proves fruitful. Fantasy fans will enjoy Alan Campbell's fine first tale that creates an intriguing unique realm.

### The Assassin King

Elizabeth Haydon

Tor, Dec 2006, \$25.95

ISBN: 0765305658

Review by Harriet Klausner

The death of Llauron has shook up more than just his dragon kin as the ancient wyrms know it impacts all species by leaving a void in protecting the earth. Dragons hold a rite of passage for Llauron and convene a meeting at the site of his horrific death to determine what to do. At about the same time, the F'dor demons are resurfacing, spreading their evil wherever they walk. Talquist thinks the time is right for him to invade the northern lands. Alliances are forming between the demons and the humans, though neither side trusts the other.

With the death of her dragon "father-in-law", Rhapsody realizes her beloved Middle Kingdom people are in danger from the demons and the southern armies. She and her spouse Ashe begin countermeasures by calling upon their allies of yore, Grunthor and Achmed, for help at a time her "mother-in-law" Anwyn the dragon wants her dead.

*The Assassin King* is a well written epic fantasy, but slower than the previous Symphony of Ages tales as much of the early pages recounts what has passed in other novels or the various sides preparing for war. The story line is character driven as the Anwyn, the F'dor, Talquist, and Rhapsody know a confrontation is coming soon. Newcomers should obtain the previous tales (at least the last one – *Elegy For A Lost Star*), which is an interesting look at a fantasy war mostly from the preparation stages preceding the combat.

Tyrannosaurus Press and the staff of the Illuminata wishes our readers (and everyone else) a Happy Holiday Season.

May your stockings be as full and fruitful as your imaginations!

# Original Fiction

Kristi Petersen's fiction has been featured in *Afternoon*, *Citizen Culture*, *NewWitch*, *Sinfully Twisted*, *MudRock: Stories & Tales*, *The Wheel*, *Barbaric Yawp*, *Chick Flicks*, *I Like Monkeys*, *Circle*, *The Adirondack Review*, *Split Shot Magazine*, *Waxing & Waning*, and a dozen others; Nathan D. Schoonover is working on a novel, is a field reporter for *Ghostly Talk Paranormal Radio*, and is a former stringer for *The Star Ledger* in New Jersey.

## Deconstructing Fireflies

by Kristi Petersen and Nathan D. Schoonover

My son likes to take things apart, and perhaps before The Shortage mothers would have written this off as the typical penchant of boys. But mothers back then did not live on farms populated by Barn Boys who camp in the cement milk house, doing dickens with the whiskey: I hear them howling at night in amusement, re-wiring the chickens. They make bets on how fast they can get them to lay eggs before the birds' hard ruby eyes roll back in their heads and their feather-coverings catch fire in the rain of sparks flying from their popped-open necks. Mothers back then who lived on farms did not have to worry about husbands with byrotechnic degrees teaching their little boys that doing harm to the animals is okay. Not only in the laboratory is there means to breed more, but the metal under their tender skin prevents them from feeling pain.

Despite the influence they've had on little Nate, Jigger, Hap, and Lair are not the worst my husband could've found for Barn Boys. They spend their days doing useful things: oiling the pigs' joints when the mud seeps through their skin (a glitch my Jayce hasn't been able to resolve); feeding the cows and fine-tuning the chickens' groins so there's enough eggs down the market shelves, which keeps us out of trouble with the Government. They fix the tractors and keep the plumbing running smooth. They till the fields every day without having to be told, and they know which chemicals enhance the growth rate of which plants. They need a little policing, but that's good: there's little time for that. We're responsible for feeding all of Cleghern. Have been ever since Collier farm over in Newton burned to the ground last year. Collier had such lazy Barn Boys, you see, that the man himself had to waste his afternoons baling hay and shearing the meat off the cow frames. He could only keep up with his lab production late in the p.m., and one November midnight he passed out from exhaustion and knocked into the AutoWeld. When it tipped over, the whole place went up.

Still, it's at night I really worry about what goes on by the single burning lamp behind the milk house's shoddy, dirt-filled window. If I have to ensure my husband stored my Grandmother's oak-frame bed or Spode china out of harm's way, I go down in daylight. I wouldn't want to be around the Boys at dusk, because that's when the booze comes out, and gargantuan Jigger, hat-headed Hap and hairy Lair, since they don't have dental insurance or go to the doctor much, attribute their rock-solid teeth and robust health to the unique blend of ingredients brewing in the homemade still. Despite what I do, little Nate is always down there at that hour. He is fascinated that Jigger doesn't use the message pad to summon the cows: he calls them in to pen by just cupping his hands on either side of his smeary mouth and making a noise through the neat hole above his upper lip—a hole, he claims, put there by his Daddy's stubbing out a cigarette when he was my son's age. At least, that's what he told Nate, who believed it with all his heart and came running to tell me. Nate's very bright, but he's impressionable, and after that he'd asked Jayce, "Could you make a cigarette hole in *my* upper lip?" Of course, that was out of the question, so the only unsavory habit he's been allowed to pick up from Jigger is taking things apart.

He is obsessed with the workings of the farm—not how things are done, but how things are un-done. How the milk gets drained from the cow's udder, how the big hay rolls get cubed down into bales, how the thin layers of skin over the cow frames are shorn free and become steaks next to his father's six-egg breakfast in the morning, how Hap dissects a distributor cap. He'll watch the Boys clean their stunners, and then come inside and seize something—my mixer, my blender, or the kerosene lantern, for example—and take it apart. He doesn't hang around to watch anything go back together, which is why I spend my afternoons, when I'm not choring, reassembling. But Sunday morning, he took apart his bedroom lamp and shrieked while I scrambled like a short-

Con't on page 9

# Original Fiction

circuited cockroach and barely pulled it together before the dark fell. Now that he's torn apart that lamp four mornings in a row, I will have to curtail his time with the Barn Boys.

Saturday was Sporting Day, and Jigger, Hap and Lair went hunting. They had brought home no fewer than a dozen bucks, all between four and twelve points. (Jayce had created a couple of eighteen-point bucks, as I recall, and that's what they were after, but they've got an endless amount of time to hunt since there doesn't need to be a deer season anymore: people like my husband just make more, and I think honestly Jayce spends too much time breeding herds just so he can keep his good Barn Boys around and sharp. I don't exactly mind, because from a distance they look real, but still.) We're supposed to refurbish the deer frames, heads and all, to use them for next year's herd. So when they carted them all in on the back of the flat-bed truck, singing like they were young men who had just experienced sex for the first time, little Nate ran out to see.

The Boys spread the carcasses out on the lawn and dragged them down to the butchering slab to disassemble them: shear off the skin and meat, buzz-saw into them to tear out their wires, and chop off their heads. I looked out the kitchen window and saw Nate standing there, far enough away as his father had always instructed him to do so he wouldn't be showered with guts, watching. And it was the way he was watching, unmoving, like a topiary, the early summer breeze twitching small pieces of his too-long blond hair, that made me stop preparing the onions mid-peel.

The Boys hurled the heads into a pile on the side, and from a distance, it looked like caramel raisin pudding. I shuddered. There was something sad in those eyes—even if they were diamonds underneath the coal-colored LiquiGel Jayce uses. I wondered what the last image their eyes registered could've been: a field of sunflowers? a white moth? Did it hurt when the bullet ripped through their flesh coverings? Jayce swears it doesn't, but I know better, because he makes them with nerves. They feel something, I am sure.

Jigger crouched down, pointed to the pile and spread his hands wide, shaking his head, and I wondered if little Nate asked him if he was gonna take the heads apart. I expected the Boys would soak them in solvent; that's what you do to clean the skulls before refurbishment, let them soak in bins until the brains and the eyes and the sinews just turn to mush and only the metal frames are left. But they didn't. They piled the heads onto a large tarp and dragged them over to the cold cellar, a stone structure built into the hill next to the house. Hap climbed up and Lair gripped the heads in his stubby-fingered hands as Jigger lit up a corn silk cigarette. The heads were lined up in a row on the roof, where they were going to rot and fester and smell in the sun for three weeks and let nature and the maggots take care of most of it.

Little Nate came bounding inside and dashed up to his room. It overlooks the cold cellar, which meant he was going to see those heads in the morning when he woke up and at night before he went to sleep. At bedtime, I tried to settle down next to Jayce and rest my head in the deep divot on his chest that's the result of a birth defect, but instead of seeing his wiry gray hairs bend in my breath until I drifted to Nether realms, I saw those vacant, soulless eyes staring at little Nate as he slept, clutching his toy screwdriver.

I decided I didn't want them eyeing him, so I crept into his room, carefully avoiding the litter of rusty farm tools and pieces of old cars Hap lets him have, and flicked on the lamp. I squinted my eyes to try to see the deer on top of the cellar, and thankfully, the room's reflection on the glass has curtained them for the moment. On Sunday, the dawning of God's day, the lamp incident happened. It has happened every morning since.

I figure it will pass, but it doesn't. Every morning Nate awakens, takes the lamp apart, and forgets about it until before dusk, and while he screams I scramble to get it all assembled before Jayce comes back from the lab and starts yelling about the way things that cost him good credits are being treated around this house; every night I creep there after he's asleep and switch on the lamp. That is what disturbs me: little Nate shrieks and cries that the lamp *must* be back together before nightfall: "They'll come in, Mommy! But they'll stay!" he screams, but he doesn't want it *on* when he goes to bed. Just having it there, in one piece—even if I haven't put it back together entirely correctly: the harp bent, the shade akilter, the socket crooked on the base where the wires are exposed so it might even spark in the night and set the peeling wallpaper with the green horses on it ablaze—seems to be enough.

Supper is late tonight because I thwarted another lamp incident before finishing the venison. I set Jayce's plate down in front of him and rummage in the drawer of the old metal cabinet—one that had outlived its usefulness in the lab—for a knife and fork.

Con't on page 10

# Original Fiction

"That was quite a lot of nice venison we got on Saturday," I broach the subject.

"Yeah," Jayce answers, lifting his utensils. "This looks good. New formula's an improvement over last year."

I hate the way he speaks of the meals that include meat. It makes them sound about as appetizing as motor oil. Outside, I hear the Barn Boys yowling, and I wonder if they've started their dickens early tonight.

"Lots of venison stew, venison loaf, venison pie?"

"I think you should get used to that. After what the Boys brought in on Saturday, we're going to be eating it into next summer."

He sets down his knife and considers me with a solid gray eye. "What's the matter, babe. You having problems with them killing things again? I can tell them to do any more slicing and dicing down at the slab past the corn field so you don't have to see it."

I hate the way he brings that up all the time, too. While it's true that since the abortion I haven't exactly been keen on watching them slaughter animals, it has nothing to do with the fact that I understand that this is what we do with our lives. We create or slaughter, we donate or eat.

"No, I don't have a problem with that," I say. "What I have a problem with is the heads on the roof of the cold cellar and the stink. Why can't they just soak the damn things in Postmort?" I sit in the rickety chair across from Jayce and pick up my fork. The handle is slowly twisting off it. I reach for the cloth napkin and unfold it across my lap.

"That's not the way Jigger likes to do things, Ilse," he says, shoving in a mouthful of creamed chipped venison. It had looked delicious to me when I'd set it on the table, but the thought of the deer's brains and the white film of maggots in them had repulsed me. "They like to do things natural."

I get up from the table and take my plate to the porcelain sink, which is due up for its monthly bleach and re-bugging. "There is very little that's natural anymore."

He shrugs. "Natural won't work. Cloning the whole animal takes too long." He sips his tea. "These were older models anyway. I'm not even going to refurbish them this time around. I'm coming up with a faster, sleeker design. Just let them have their fun."

"It's sick and unnecessary."

"Ilse, I told Jigger the Boys could keep these as trophies."

The bugs in the sink stretch their elasticized arms and grip pieces of venison from my plate. It's always bothered me that although they're metal, they never seem to lose their appetite; at each meal when they hear the clank of the plates against the porcelain, they emerge like feisty snakes chasing mongooses and snatch their meals as though it will be their last one for many moons. But that's why Jayce had traded for them: expedient models that leave no trace. The fines for wasting food are pretty high.

It occurs to me I'm sick of the metal beasts. "And where are they going to put these ghastly things?"

"Probably on top of the milk house," he says.

I shiver. "When people come in the driveway, that's the first thing they're gonna see."

"I know. But they're proud of 'em. These are trophies, honey. And good trophies means they'll stay around longer."

"I don't like little Nate staring at those things. Do they have to be across from his room? Could they set them elsewhere?"

"It's really the best place. The sun shines intense and hot there, there's no shade." He lifts his glass of orange juice. He drinks it with every meal. For the first time, I notice he's got a gut. A small one, but it's there. I should cut the sugar out of his diet, but it probably wouldn't do any good since I know he's got a few nips of bourbon in the lab just like the Barn Boys got their whiskey. I don't care that he drinks, as long as he keeps the production up and doesn't take the habit out on us.

"Well, Sunday while you were in town doing the goat thing he took apart his lamp and couldn't get it back together. Which was fine, until the sun started to pull down and he was screaming and crying."

Jayce sets down the glass and burps. "His light's been on every night. He's afraid of the dark, that's why he's throwin' a fit."

# Original Fiction

"No." I turn on the water to rinse off the now picked-clean dish. "I've been putting his light on. If the light's on, he can't see the deer heads. He can only see his own reflection."

"Well, stop doing that. You're probably freaking him out. He's thinking there's ghosts in here, or God knows what," he says. Jayce is gentle and although I imagine in his mind he is muttering, *foolish woman, catering to your silly ideas*, he won't say it. He just frowns, squeezes a piece of over-done toast in his fingers, slaloms it through the gravy, and pops it in his mouth. A dollop of juice dribbles over the gold band on his fourth finger. "Kid might not cut it as a byrotechnic. Not the way he's going." He takes another mouthful of his venison. A chunk drops from his chin to the plate. "Maybe I should start having him spend time with me in the lab."

That thought doesn't appeal to me, either. So he will grow up like Jayce, putting things together with no sensitivity? I cast my eyes to the sink. The bugs have retreated to the drain now, but their pointed appendages have left gray scratches in the porcelain that will have to be buffed away before next inspection. "I never should have let him watch them disassemble those deer."

"I told you, it's a good thing for him to get used to seeing. If he doesn't make byrotechnics, he'll be a great Barn Boy. He'll always have work."

I look out the window. The Boys are not in the milk house yet: Lair's sitting on a log, brushing his long hair with what looks like a couple of tines of old pitchfork, shortened and re-formed; Hap is knelt down on the old well cover, blocking his hat with a brick; Jigger spits. "That's what I'm afraid of."

He pushes his plate away and stands up, comes over to me, sets his hands on my hips and kisses the back of my neck. He smells like ammonia, burning hair and a faint something else, his characteristic musk that makes me think of the seven ferrets, his first projects, that we kept in the upstairs room before little Nate was born. I feel him sigh against my back. "Do you have plans tomorrow?"

I think. Just the usual chores, maybe some shopping. "Not really."

"Why don't you take him to the zoo for the day?"

The zoo, where Jayce gets the DNA. The zoo is the last bastion of live animals. Well, live *totally organic* animals. The ones that are not extinct. Each state has one zoo—there aren't enough natural creatures to fill more than that—well, except for Wyoming. Not as many things died there, I guess.

Jayce toys with a curl of my hair, which has sprouted a few gray ones like dandelions in a field. "It'll reinforce that the things we slaughter here aren't real beasts, not really, and that will make him feel better. Maybe it'll even inspire him to come and watch me assemble things."

I don't see how this will make little Nate feel better, because he'll just go and see the deer and then come home and see those empty, haunted, soul-less eyes staring at him in the night. But I concede.

We are naturally up early around here, so I load little Nate, a couple of sandwiches, thirty credits and the Farmers' Card and start the long drive across the state.

The zoo is expansive, as open and wide as the photos I've seen of a place called Africa. We stroll through the aviary. The rocks are spattered with bird waste, and I reach out to touch it. There are still germs, but I don't let that stop me. I haven't seen bird crap since I was a little girl, and looking at it makes my eyes hurt because it is *good* and *real*, the kind of good that oatmeal would be after not having tasted it in a dozen years. The Inca terns, their feet bright as poppy petals, move so *differently*. Warm, squirming, lighter than the ones Jayce makes, and their sounds are notes that make songs, not pre-programmed tunes with clicks at their conclusions.

The flesh on the bellies of the Siberian Tigers sways when they pad across the grass and plunge into their man-made pond, swatting at fish with their paws. To watch them eat, the twist of their heads in one, smooth motion, as smooth as dancers', makes me long for a cat. Not the cat Jayce made me, pretty and white and puffy and perfect Katrina, but a *cat*. One that still knows when it is hungry because its stomach tells it, not because the timer in its brain has gone off.

In the reptile house there are Mata Mata turtles, their flattened heads maneuvering like leaves at the bottom of the spring where we draw the water, and little Nate laughs, because, he says, "the leaves have eyes!" He presses his hands flat against the glass.

Con't on page 12

# Original Fiction

"Mommy, will their eye coverings come off? Do they have diamonds or cobalts or emeralds or rubies?"

"Those," I say, crouching down, "are real eyes. Like ours. When the animal dies, they will rot clean through and there will be nothing left."

A keeper in khaki goes to the door to the right of the diorama all decked out with fake giant fronds and dirt, and when he opens the door, there is a musk-wet-mold smell like carpet in a flooded basement, and that, too, brings me back to that time when there were turtles. Real turtles you could keep in a terrarium. I had a little snapping turtle. Pappy. Pappy the snapping turtle. When The Shortage came, we had to eat him.

I buy little Nate an ice cream at the stand disguised as a giant butterfly, and he bites down into the vanilla, the strawberry sauce coating his chin. He points to the camouflage-netted dome that rises like a giant egg behind a tangled gateway of branches. *Insect World*, the sign announces. "Can we see the bugs?"

"Haven't you ever seen the real ones on the farm?" The outside insects are the only creatures not manufactured; there are special farmers who just breed live bugs. Plant life has become so important, and there have been few successes in imitating pollination.

There are also not many decent parts to eat on most insects.

He shrugs and bites off the point of the cone, sets it on his mouth, and sucks. The ice cream drains like a lowering lake. "Yeah, but I can't catch up with 'em to touch 'em."

So we wander through the magical door, and there is a floral rush of scents, wild geraniums and blue flag irises, blueberries and black-eyed Susans, Mexican sunflowers and mint. Butterflies are in avid flutter, like small colorful confetti. "Welcome to the Butterfly Garden," says the lady in the turquoise uniform with the gold buttons up the front. "Do not pick the flowers and don't touch the butterflies."

Which is, of course, exactly what Nate does. He crouches by a patch of daisies and waits for a harmless Comma or Red Admiral to come by; when one settles on a nearby nettle, it doesn't move when he pinches his fingers together and picks it up. I glance around to be certain no one is looking and then grab his sweaty hand. "We don't want to do that, Punkin. We can't afford the fines. But over here there's a pond. Would you like to see that?"

I know that he wouldn't. He camps by a thistle to wait for a Painted Lady, and after that it is a long afternoon of watching him touch each unfortunate Mourning Cloak, Checkered Skipper, White Peacock as though he were tinkering with a clock, poking their thoraxes and brushing their wings with his pinky.

I sit on a bench to rest as Nate wanders over to look at a glass room where there are pupae hanging from branches, looking like tiny pieces of rice.

It reminds me of the maggots that must have been in those deer heads.

I see him slip on a pair of headphones, and he stands completely still, that same kind of completely still he was the day he'd watched them bring the deer heads home. His pale green shorts have a smear of dirt up the back, and I remind myself to instruct him not to wear his dress clothes when he's out watching the Boys mess with filthy things.

He trudges back to me, his eyes bright with curiosity. "Does the sun carry the spirits like my lamp?"

"Like your lamp?"

"Yeah. The deers come into my lamp at night and light it up, and in the morning, I take it apart to let them all out so Daddy can use them again. Is that what the sun does? Like when I help Daddy? It sucks up the old spirits of the dead things and then puts them back into the butterflies when they're sleeping in the hanging bags?"

I chuckle, not only because it's cute, but because I hear Jayce's voice in my head: *foolish woman!* Turning on a simple lamp to make myself rest peacefully about little Nate not having nightmares has created a regular quagmire in his child brain, and it was so obvious! How come I hadn't seen it? Next to us, a father is hoisting his strawberry-haired tot with flushed cheeks up onto his shoulder, and I hear snatches of soft words, farmers and bugs and real, and I decide I will stop this lamp business, once and for all. "They don't go into your lamp, honey. Mommy was turning on your light for you so you wouldn't be afraid in case you woke up."

He blinks at me, pooching his lower lip out and furrowing his brow so that I can see the miniscule lines that will one day become wrinkles, perhaps when I'm no longer around. Then he looks up through the dome netting, maybe at the veins of canvas that plunge his face into serpentine shadow patterns. "The sun doesn't either?"

# Original Fiction

"No. The sun is—it's gas. It's hot gasses that warm the earth and make the plants grow, and it nourishes the butterflies, but it doesn't carry their souls."

Silence again. He reaches up to slip his sticky hand into mine. "So it's like the AutoWeld that seals the animals together, but Daddy doesn't take the souls back?"

I squeeze his grip. "Sort of."

We walk further down the path, to the display of butterflies that are just beginning to emerge from their pupae. Now they look like long-grain rice, that nutty dark stuff that used to be plentiful in organic stores when I was a child but is now nearly impossible to get.

"Mommy?"

"Yes, dear?"

"So then, where do they go?"

"Where does who go?"

"The souls of the deer. If Daddy doesn't use them and the sun doesn't take them, where do they go? Are they waiting to hurt me?"

There really isn't a concept of Heaven anymore. The churches now teach very basic Reincarnation, perhaps to help people accept the fact that their food is no longer organic and to encourage the byrotecnic farmers to recycle their metals. "You don't have to be *afraid* of the souls. They go—up into the *night* sky, where—where all the twinkling lights are. And they're very, very happy. There's no more pain, and no more sadness—"

"Daddy says they don't hurt. The animals."

"Sometimes, honey, they do," I say. "Like—like when you have a sunburn. When they twinkle in the night sky, they are twinkling because they don't have to be hurt anymore. They are twinkling with happiness, just like when Daddy winks at you."

He seems to accept this, and I want to be out of the heat. "Come on."

The Firefly Cave is welcome relief from the sun's watery eye and we are plunged into black lights and cool smells of green earth and moss. He leaps to grab at them, and I just can't stop him. "We need to go," I finally say. The zoo is closing in an hour.

"No."

"Yes, Nate."

"No."

"We can see these at home. You know the big tree that glows at night? The big evergreen? We can go see them there. Every night for the rest of the summer."

It's too dark for me to see him thrust out his lower lip, but I know he's doing it. Then he slips his hand in mine and leads me to the gift shop, where he plunges his hands into a barrel of colorful projects that he can assemble and take apart, assemble and take apart: insect gliders crafted of metal with moving parts. "Please?" he begs. "I'm not going to take my lamp apart anymore. I understand, now."

I smile, thinking I will have to buy him a new lamp anyway—it's been through the wringer so many times it sits on his bedstand looking as bashed up as though it were the only recognizable object in a tornado-stricken town. "Okay." I buy him ten credits' worth of spiders, butterflies, bumblebees, fireflies and ants. We sit on the park benches and he's eager for me to open one of the packets and put it together. I tear open the red wax paper and empty a small body, black plastic head the size of a large blueberry, two curvy sprig-like antennae, and a set of wings. Slot A goes into Slot B goes into Slot C—much like the gliders I had played with when I was a child except a little more complicated and with batteries—and the butterfly is done. "Look, Punkin," I say, but he has not shown any interest in my putting it together. He takes the butterfly in his sticky hands, pulls wings from body from head from antennae, and thrusts it back in my lap.

"I could show you how to put it together," I say.

He shakes his head. "Can you do another one?"

So packet after packet I open: the indigo of the Red-spotted Purple, the blood red of the ladybug, the chocolate of the brown recluse, the fuzzy blinding yellow of the bumble bee, the putrescent green of the firefly.

Con't on page 14

# Original Fiction

As I do each he takes it apart, and when he is done deconstructing every insect I've lovingly set up, I pile him in the truck for the long ride back across the state's waving grains and lavender sunsets.

"Mommy, can we put the bugs back together again when we get home?"

I want to answer that I think we've had enough of that for one day, but it's the first time he's shown an interest in actually putting something together on his own—shown an interest in putting something *back together* rather than taking it apart, and I take this as a sign maybe he's growing out of his phase. At least I know he will no longer be taking apart his lamp. "We'll see," I say.

"I want you to show me how to put them together."

I smile and pat his pajama bottoms. "You want me to show you how to put them together?"

"Yeah." He peers back out the window, and I wonder if he sees things moving in the woods in the whorling dust; the wolves, maybe. The wolves that Jayce wished they hadn't forced him to make.

Nate falls quiet, and a few bumpy miles down the road, where it begins to turn to dirt and get to our farm, he is asleep.

~~~

The night is close and even sleeping without the sheet on is like being cloistered in a warm bath; Jayce snores but it isn't the noise that keeps me awake. I roll over and look out the window, past the sheer black curtains that flutter despite the lack of breeze, and there is the faint, green aura from the firefly tree a half-mile from the house. When we'd first bought the farm, back before Jayce had driven himself gray and little Nate was still a star in the sky, the tree had been by itself, standing, watching over us on summer nights like an old man waving to a luxury liner pulling from shore; now, it is shrouded behind a decade or so of woods the Boys had planted.

I rise from bed and sneak into Nate's room, click on the lamp, and sidle up to him. "Punkin," I whisper.

He opens his eyes, closes them, opens them again. "Mommy?"

"Come on. I want to show you something, something special." I set aside his yellow plastic screwdriver. "Put your boots on, and we have to be quiet. We don't want to wake your Daddy."

He nods, folding back the pale green sheet and sitting up, letting his legs dangle over the floor. He studies the boards for a moment, then reaches out and turns off the lamp.

We creep down the hall like Jayce and I do on Yule Day at four a.m. when we're drunk and setting out the last of our sons' gifts: toe by toe, hunch your back, avoid the third board from the wall on the right because it makes a pop-splinter sound as though it is about to break. When we get to the bottom of the stairs, I unhitch the thick metal bolt on the door and set a hand on his back to usher him outside.

The lawn is quiet, and the corn rustles and again I wonder why it could be when there is no breeze, everything is moving, alive and breathing. The milk house light burns low, meaning the fire's last flames are licking themselves apart and the Boys, I imagine, are passed out, Jigger's fleshy leg propped up on an old milk can.

"There." I point. "See the glow?"

"We're going to the firefly tree!"

"Yes."

"Really?" He tightens his grip on my hand.

"Yes, really. Now stick close to me." I step barefoot onto the pile of sand below the front step of the paint-hungry porch and wonder if I should have consulted Jayce before doing this: we had decided that the day he was old enough to understand, we would take him to the tree to explain what had happened there. Neither of us had planned on tackling the subject without the other.

"I can't see, Mommy. Turn on the flashlight."

"Just give your eyes a minute to adjust," I say. "We don't want to frighten them." I crush small, sharp blades of grass under my feet, and they prickle like pins. In the barn, the owl Jayce built for me last Valentine's Day hoots his awareness of something moving in the dark that shouldn't be. There is a distant clank of metal on metal, and I imagine Jigger knocking over his foot rest.

The tree looms larger with every step, and then we are at the edge of the woods and I reach up to part the low-hanging branches of a pair of elms that guard the clearing. We step through, and I hear little Nate gasp and

# Original Fiction

he is that topiary still again. His face is illumined, a small pale-green moon, and he reaches to the tree to touch a branch.

The fireflies shimmy and part and spiral up and away into another section of the tree, and he runs in pursuit. I want to chase him, but am stopped when my toe stubs the bottle.

I bend down to pick it up; the label is still legible: *To Ilse. Tenth Anniversary Dandelion Wine. Jayce*. He had vinted this himself, working on it in a corner of the lab for at least a year before the date; I probably hadn't noticed the collection of jugs, tubes, orange peels and lemons in the back corner of the lab because I had been busy cooking up my own surprises: garlic cheese, pear preserves, ground wheat wafers.

Nate giggles and runs around the tree as though he had a stream of bright ribbons behind him, tripping and getting caught in the tall willows of weeds that have sprung up over the years; he falls and gets dirty, leaps into the air and swats the fireflies.

"Come here," I call to him. I set the bottle next to me and sit on the grass. He crawls into my lap and his breaths are quick and loud. "I just want you to look at them all. Don't touch. Just look."

His hair tickles my chin.

"Why are they all here, Mommy?"

"Because this place is – natural. This place, this is where your soul came down from the sky." I can't tell him about that unusually warm first of May; the Boys had been, for once, whooping it up somewhere else on account of the Spring Festival, and we had come down to the tree, the two of us with our much-too-rich gifts to share. The fireflies had not been out yet, but we hadn't needed them, and when we had finished, the last of the wine drained, the cheese gone, sticky dots of the pear preserves at the corners of our mouths, we had set the bottle at the base of the tree in the hopes it would bring good luck. I wonder, now, if I put the empty bottle to my ear, would I hear the echoes of that night, the little wishes that had scaled the tree boughs to the Heavens. "This," I say, rubbing his cheek, "this is where you were given to us."

"What does that mean?"

"Created. Made."

"Like Daddy does with the deers?"

"No, not like the deer. Daddy and Mommy made you together."

He squints. "Is that where I came from?"

"Yes. Your soul came down, and you went inside me, and I kept you safe and warm."

"Did you see what my soul looked like?"

"No. You can't really *see* a soul."

He is quiet for a long time and the crickets fill in the hole between us. Then he climbs off my lap and stands up, stuffs his little man hands into the pockets of his peejays, the ones that are starting to go threadbare at the knees, and heaves a sigh as deep as a frustrated adult trying to sort out a conundrum. "Can we come back tomorrow?"

"We'll see, honey. Mommy has lots of chores."

"But Mommy, you said 'every night for the rest of the summer'."

"We'll see."

I climb to my feet and take his hand to lead him back through the thicket and across the lawn to the house. He rushes a few steps ahead of me, his head down, and for the first time I look at him and realize that he may very well, indeed, grow up to be just like Jayce.

~~

August is ebbing when the Boys finally take those ghastly deer heads from the roof of the cold cellar; the days have pleasantly trundled by in a tumble of little Nate's deconstructing and assembling the animatronic bugs in his room. He doesn't follow Jigger out to call the cows in; he doesn't watch Hap dissecting car parts; he hasn't taken apart the new lamp I had Lair make for him. I am overjoyed about all of these changes—I am even happy to provide him with scissors and all the empty mason jars he wants ("to keep the parts in," he says). However, he has been tired – the kind of tired where trying to rouse him from bed in the morning for breakfast

Con't on page 16

# Original Fiction

or chores is a thirty-five minute affair. When I mention my concern to Jayce, of course he just answers “Probably a growth spurt or something. He’s eating, right?” in between his gulps of orange juice.

But he hasn’t been, not more than usual.

Sporting Day again, and the Boys have killed off the last of Jayce’s herd. They roar in on the truck and scream about eighteen-pointers and how these are gonna be beauties, and I resign to turn away from the scene and go right back to that apple pie I’ve been working on. I pick up the apple corer and set to work, thrusting the round instrument and listening to the blades cut through the flesh of each green apple with a corporeal, wholesome *fffft*.

Nate comes down and runs to the decrepit window that frames the new Fiberlite windmill out in the corn field. He presses his fingers on the sill, resting his chin on the wrinkles of his joints. I hear the Boys whooping and the clang clang of metal deer frame legs and arms clattering against each other as they’re all chucked onto the tarp.

“Would you like some apple?” I take three slices and put them in a bowl.

He turns from the window and walks to me and I see that his pale yellow shirt has some black smears on it. “Mommy, can you put my bugs back together?”

“You know how to put them back together,” I say, plucking the seeds from the core and dropping them into an aluminum pouch to save for the Boys to plant. “You’ve been doing just fine the last few weeks. Eat your apple.” I motion to the bowl. “There’s even some cinnamon on there.”

“No,” he says. His blue eyes hot with defiance, he frowns and folds his arms in front of his chest.

“Don’t tell me no,” I say. I finish peeling another apple; the peel falls into a spiral. “I’m sure you can do it. Why don’t you get your tweezers and your jars and show me?”

I wipe my floured hands on my jeans and turn on the sink, and I hear him tromping into his room, the boards beneath his feet whining like the shutters in a strong wind, that sound that I sometimes hear at night when I know no one is awake and the shadows of the leaves on the trees splatter the walls in camouflage. Then there is a silence.

I turn off the water.

A clunk, like a bag of beer bottles, and a *swoosh*. Silence. *Swoosh*. Silence. *Swoosh*.

I dry my hands on a towel and step to the base of the narrow, crooked stairs.

There is a sudden rush of hot air through the open kitchen window, and I hear Lair’s laughter and Jigger’s command to cut that shit out let’s go down the milk house, and then I see little Nate at the top of the stairs, hauling with all his might a paper bag from a long-defunct department store. The bag slams against every step, foreshadowing disaster, and I think maybe I have been wrong, maybe he’s been out in the milk house and the Boys have convinced him to drink! Maybe that’s why he’s been so tired.

“See?” He gets to the bottom step, and the bag tips over and a few of my mason jars spill out and roll like marbles across the warped floorboards.

I pick one of them up and peer inside at one of his father’s razor blades and a pair of tweezers, and a pile of something that is the wood dust at the bottoms of fireplaces in summers: black bodies shredded like mouse feces, wings splintered into fine gray powder, miniscule antennae crushed and cock-eyed. Fireflies. He’s been going to the tree and getting real fireflies.

“I took the bugs apart like Daddy. I took them all apart and now they don’t work anymore!” He pooches his lip out, like he’s going to cry. “Where did they go?”

“Where did who go?”

“The souls! I couldn’t find the souls! If you put the bugs back together they’ll come back, right?”

I don’t know what to say.

I look out the window at the fireflies in the barnyard, and a river of light flows from the single window in the milk house down the drive. I hear Jigger and Hap and Lair, howling with laughter, louder than they have been in awhile. I’m not sure what it is when I first hear the bang and the glass in the window shatters like so much rock candy. Then I see the gold sparks and the feathers, and I know the inside walls of the structure are tarred in downy flesh from the Boys overheating another chicken.

## RPG Corner (con't)

just as bogged down in the pursuit of detail as the Game Master, and it can lead to a lot of problems. The main source of conflict in RPGs between Players and Game Masters, in my experience, is the misunderstanding of important details. I cannot tell you how many sessions of gaming have been ruined as a Player and the GM argued about the exact number of bullets fired or the precise order in which the items in a book were written. That the argument was taking place is indicative of the dependence the game had on accurate details, but the level of detail required by the GM was ultimately harmful, because he was less than stellar at remembering all of the details he revealed and which we as Player supplied.

Players who want the systems to account for the important details tend to want to have whatever equipment they need for whatever mission they are on. A funny example of this is the “Standard Adventuring Gear” item in the old Advanced Dungeons & Dragons™ rulebooks – it was a single item that encompassed a wide variety of different materials, any of which might come in handy during the course of an adventure. Provided the Player can make up a good enough argument for the inclusion of a device or supply, it could be allowed.

An over-reliance on system to address specifics under broad generalities leads to GM frustration as the Players become less inclined to think their way into and out of situations, and more reliant on the statistics over which their Characters are based. What I mean is, the PC may elect to employ their “Talk my way out of trouble” statistic (whatever you choose to call it) instead of attempting to role-play their way out of the situation. I would lean toward allowing this in a game only if a vitally important plot point hinged on the words and manipulative skill of a notoriously bad role-player.

As I have demonstrated with this particular bit of rambling, there isn't a clear cut best solution to this problem. It has to be handled on a case by case basis within your own group of friends and Role-Players, but hopefully this is enlightening enough to point out a potential problem before it bogs down your game.

## Remakes (con't)

than Burt Reynold's rough-but-lovable inmate. Any remake starring Ben Stiller, Owen Wilson, or Eddie Murphy (*Starsky and Hutch*, *I Spy*, *Dr. Doolittle*, etc. etc.) are tweaked and twisted to suit their particular comic stylings. Sadly, that often dilutes the connection to the original more than it adds freshness.

Directors sign onto these projects with an eye on making a name for themselves. Knowing that even a half-hearted effort is sure to bring in the core audience, new directors (and sometimes even established ones) flock to remake projects. Those who love a concept or are fans of the original can be easily discerned from the others. Compare Raimi's *Spiderman* movies or Nolan's *Batman Begins* to Goldblatt's *The Punisher* (1989). Granted, Dolph Lundgren's awful portrayal of Frank Castle didn't help much, but Jonathan Hensleigh's 2004 version offered only modest improvement.

Why is this important, many of you might wonder, and why have we been wasting the last few months discussing remakes? The lessons learned (or rather, not learned) by Hollywood can serve us in the writing world. The themes, concepts, and grand over-arching plotlines we encounter in our writing have, for the most part, been written before. Thus, we writers are in the business of remakes, though in a more abstract form.

To preserve our vision, to honor the works from which we draw our inspiration, we must strive to remain true to our stories. Once we start making concessions, once we start tweaking our works, not because the story demands it but because a larger audience might approve, we've started down the path traveled by so many producers, directors, and actors before us. A story bent and broken to better approximate the proven formula of Harry Potter is protected no more by its similarities to the popular series than multi-million dollar special effects protected *Godzilla* and *Starship Troopers*. Those two films may have made a profit, but not on their merits.

When you create, be your works literary or cinematic, don't create for an audience. Just create! Your audience is out there, and it will find you.