



# The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

## What Is Skepticism

By Katie Picone

“Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.”

– Carl Sagan

As this is my first column in The Illuminata I wanted to begin by explaining the foundation of what I plan to talk about before jumping into this issue’s topic. Just what is this whole skepticism thing, anyway?

Skepticism (specifically scientific skepticism), which is not in any way to be confused with cynicism, is a principle by which claims are accepted based on observable evidence. In learning to be skeptical there are three key components:

1- The scientific method. Probably the greatest tool we have to discern fact from fiction. It is the system by which ideas are tested, the bad ones discarded and the good ones reserved for further exploration. Note that last point; it’s very important. Science leads us in the right direction but it is a never-ending, always-evolving discipline. We don’t know everything. That’s why we still do science.

2- Logical fallacies. While the scientific method shows us how to learn new things and test hypotheses, logic is how we think through the results and come to a conclusion. It’s essential to become familiar with the common ways in which arguments fail due to leaps or mistakes we may make in pondering our answers. In exploring logical fallacies I recommend starting with some that I observe to be the most common: causation does not imply correlation (my child was

diagnosed with autism after he was vaccinated, therefore the vaccine caused his autism), the appeal to ignorance (I can’t understand how creatures this complex could have evolved, therefore God must have created everything like it says in Genesis) or the Ad Hominem, Latin for “to the person” (he cheated on his wife, therefore he is a liar and anything he says must be untrue).

3- Ways the mind can be tricked. This is why so many professional magicians are skeptics. They understand how easy it is to fool the senses. But it extends far beyond stage magic. Optical illusions, waking dreams, the fallibility of memory, pareidolia, the power of suggestion, and so on. All of these things can contribute to a perception or memory that is incorrect or imagined.

So, what should we do? When it’s so easy to be wrong, what should we do? Think, question, doubt. If something seems incredible, implausible or too good to be true, do some basic research. I know I’m not the only one who’s opened my inbox and found e-mail after e-mail that, if the sender had bothered to check, can be proven false in about a minute and a half on Google. How many times have you heard, “We only use ten percent of our brains,” or, “You need eight full glasses of water every day”? At some point these myths became a part of “common knowledge” and once there it’s very hard to shake them. But if everyone had the ability and desire to skeptically evaluate the claims presented to them we would all become incrementally wiser.

It’s time to look beyond the smoke and mirrors and appreciate reality for what it is.

I’ve decided to pick some low-hanging fruit for my first topic. Let’s examine the common myths surrounding the full moon and Friday the 13th, starting with the lunar effect. It’s uncertain where or when this myth originated. Some speculate that it’s because the approximate time span of the lunar cycle and a woman’s normal menstrual cycle are similar and certain religious or superstitious beliefs

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by Jack Bragan**

Constantly, I am amazed when science, technology and fandom interact. For instance, I am having cataracts removed (yes, I AM very young for this, thank you) and replacing the lens with high-dollar, state-of-the-art implants so I will no longer need glasses—even for reading. (I said they were state-of-the-art!) The dominant eye is in recovery and I must wait two more weeks to have the next implant. In the meantime, even after 24 hours, I can appreciate this new technology. Cyborg-like, I can't wait for the completion so both eyes will work in tandem with 20/15 vision. I have hearing as low as 10 decibel, as well. I feel blessed. Barring complications, I will have two extreme senses to work with. Curbing this invincible feeling is hard. Medical advancements are now implemented, not just in my lifetime, but in mere years from inception.

Overheard small talk during routine office visits often enlighten me. I recently learned some medical procedures that normally take hours in surgery and 4-6 weeks for recovery will be done as an office visit with only days for recovery. The timeline for this? Within the next 9-12 *months*. Technology is astounding! For me, next are the knees—x-rays indicate I will need both replaced in five years. I'm waiting as long as I can; who knows what advancements will have been discovered by then?

Once, I speculated about medical advancements during a dentist appointment. The small-talk dentists and their technicians try when your mouth is open and implements of various kinds are probing in, hopefully, nimble hands make it frustrating. I've always felt it was a cruel joke to ask questions in this situation. However, being persistent, I was able to respond with my hope that science will develop a dissolving strip placed under the tongue that will locate and delete/melt decay so that only restorative work would need to be done. My dentist and his staff laughed—cynically—as I recall. I no longer use that dentist. I believe in what I speculate. As some Star Trek medical technology is no longer speculative, why not for dentistry, as well?

My father passed away in January. My family saw, graphically, how humans and technology failed him. He was misdiagnosed and given poor care because of his age. I dye my hair (and yes, thank you, I AM too young to need this) because of the loss of dignity the elderly and “old” people experience at the hands of the medical profession, unscrupulous caregivers, and society in general. Unless that elder is very lucky to have family or friends with influence (and money), many quietly accept this disrespect and fade into non-productivity, depression and death. They are no longer valued. I fear this will not change, or advance with time. Realistically, I cannot even speculate this

will change as it is a social issue, not scientific.

If technology and science can make and keep us youthful by erasing or removing age spots and wrinkles, replace aging or self-damaged skin, body parts or organs, and indeed, if the average lifespan is 120 years, as mentioned in the Bible, then what occupations or interests will satisfy us while we live the gift of 30-40 extra years? I'm thinking of the eternal body, the Body Electric so many writers provide us with. This blends science with social issues...

Stepping back into the here and now from future speculations, I ordered a window decal for my car: iLoveScienceFiction@gmail.com. Folly, you say? Only pure spam-a-maniacs and kooks will respond! Perhaps. I still long for the fandom connection (social) here in the White Mountains. With an auto-responder that gives instructions and an aggressive screening process, real fandom will be sent a response from another email address that will (hopefully) weed out the crazies and auto-bots.

When dad died, I had just ordered the decal and was unable to get it on the back window for the 2 trips I made from Arizona to Houston down Interstate-10, where I'm sure it would have attracted some attention. Still on my desk waiting its debut; at least I hope locals will venture an email and we can connect. Illuminata readers, feel free to email me.

During the last trip to Houston, my sister and I treated ourselves to the movie, *Watchmen*. I knew this movie was based on the graphic novel; she thought it was based on a Marvel comic—something along the lines of superheroes, aka Superman. She was shocked at the violent, gritty and sexual material. Oops. My bad—should have warned her! I got the sci-fi bug from her. Her “library” numbered 50+ paperbacks of Heinlein, Rice-Burroughs, and Bradbury. She was about 13 at the time I snuck the first end-of-the-world novel out of her bedroom. To me, at the age of 9, what I read was violent, gritty and often, suggestive—my primer for the graphic novel.

While I prepared this article for publication, the electricity failed. I am reminded how dependent society is on electricity to power technology that keeps people alive or improve their lives. I speculate... what would have happened during my surgery if the electricity failed? Was there a backup? Would I now be blind?

Currently, American society stagnates without power—and I know scientists and others speculate how to solve this problem. After all, it is a scientific problem, though has social implications. But unlike medical technology, will the advances be in time to keep the results from mimicking a graphic novel?

# The Writer's Block: Poetry

by Charles Gramlich

I realized that I've never talked poetry in this column, and I do write it. I actually sell it on occasion. I write mostly what is called speculative poetry, which is another name for poetry that falls within the genres of horror, fantasy and Science Fiction. I'm even a member of the Science Fiction Poetry Association (SFPA), and I'm proud of having been nominated for a Rhysling Award three times, including this year. The Rhysling Award is the biggest award given to poets in the genres under the "speculative" umbrella. Of course, I haven't won one yet, and considering the wonderful competition I'm up against this year I won't win this one either.

If you'd known me back in high school, you'd be amazed to find out that I grew up to love poetry. I *hated* it back then. Or at least I thought I did. The poetry we were forced to read in those days never touched me. I thought it was silly, and irrelevant to my world. I found the rules of villanelles and sestinas and sonnets constricting. Hell, I could barely even pronounce the names.

I realized later that there were a lot of things I didn't understand about poetry, and that's why I hated it. First, I didn't understand that it could be *play*, serious play at times, but still play. Second, I didn't realize there were no limits on the language of poetry, that it didn't *have* to rhyme. And third, I didn't know real people could write it, even people like me.

Dylan Thomas taught me the first two things. In graduate school I found his *Collected Poems*, and as they say in the *Bible* the scales fell from my eyes. Consider, "I see the boys of summer in their ruin," or "When once the twilight locks no longer," or "The hawk on fire hangs still." What lines! What lyricism!

Oh, I didn't *understand* Thomas's poetry. I still barely grasp his elusive meanings. But it didn't matter; it doesn't matter. His poetry has resonance. It unfolds wings and you find those pinions attached to your own shoulders. Every time I hear Thomas's poetry my imagination roars from embers to flames.

I also discovered along the way that good poetry is meant to be spoken aloud. The voice is the proper instrument for the poet's mind. As soon as I began to read poetry out loud, and to hear how the rhythm came through even in free verse, I realized that I didn't hate poetry at all. My favorite writers were poets; they just wrote it into their prose. Read Ray Bradbury's "October Country," or anything from *The Martian Chronicles*, and you'll see what I mean. (I didn't discover until many years later that Bradbury also wrote poetry as poetry, but I've since picked up all his collections.)

Robert E. Howard and Robert W. Chambers wrote poetry. Louis L'Amour and Poul Anderson wrote poetry. Poetry was everywhere I looked, and so I started trying my hand at writing some of my own. My first efforts were tentative, stilted, weak, but they got better as I began to loosen up, as I began to let my thoughts flow instead of forcing them. Eventually, I found that some thoughts and feelings are *best* expressed through poetry. I found that poetry can remind, can inspire, can heal. It's not irrelevant.

If you haven't read much poetry before, I don't think you can begin better than with Dylan Thomas. If you're interested in speculative poetry, I suggest you try some of the works of Bruce Boston or Gary Crawford, both master poets in the darker forms. Or have a look at what they offer over at *Spec House of Poetry*, at <http://spechouseofpoetry.blogspot.com/>. Certainly check out the web page of the SFPA, at <http://www.sfpoetry.com/>.

And now I'll leave you with a poem of my own. This one is for my father. It's called "April Again." He died in April.

One day after  
Gray skies turn April  
The weight is here  
Gathered like flood water  
Black behind my eyes

Memories press down  
Like tombstones  
Like leaves piled by wind  
In a hollow

How many miles  
From here to there  
How many years  
And no bridges between

Within lies the dust  
Of faded roses  
A cracked smile  
A whisper of prayer

Eyes of fair blue  
Smokey with the past  
Still he waits  
A ghost in rosary

I cannot reach  
No hand can grasp  
But yet I wave  
Once more in passing  
April again

# Reviews

## **Krrish (2006)**

**Directed by Rakesh Roshan**

Starring Hrithik Roshan

Review by Rachel Olivier

"Krrish" is the sequel to the "Koi ... Mil Gaya," the Bollywood scifi movie also directed by Rakesh Roshan and starring his son, Hrithik Roshan. In "Koi ... Mil Gaya," Rohit Mehra, a young, developmentally-disabled man, son of a brilliant scientist killed in a car accident years before, accidentally stumbles upon a machine his father built to communicate with life in outer space. In switching on the machine, Rohit contacts the aliens and befriends one that is left behind after a space ship lands near Rohit's home. In that movie, Rohit develops extraordinary mental and physical powers.

"Krrish" begins with a young boy who shows evidence of being extremely intelligent. The boy's instructors decide to put him through a series of tests to see where they should place him in his school. He is beginning to show signs of acute intelligence to the instructors when a woman rushes in on the test, grabs the boy, and hauls him out.

The woman is the grandmother of the boy, Krishna, and the mother of Rohit Mehra, from "Koi ... Mil Gaya" (both played by Hrithik Roshan). Frightened that Krishna's extraordinary intelligence will be used and abused by others, she pulls Krishna out of school and flees to a farm in the middle of nowhere to raise her grandson in peace.

The grown Krishna is a fine example of masculinity, racing horses, climbing mountains, talking to animals, as well as people. This wouldn't be a story if his life were perfect, though. He is lonely for companionship other than the young boys who play cricket and the animals in the forest.

When Priya, a pretty young woman vacationing in India, has an accident with her parachute Krishna saves her from what could have been a deadly fall. He has learned to conceal his powers from the outside world at the behest of his grandmother, so has to figure out how to explain her miraculous save through a series of tricks accomplished through a friend, who also happens to be the tour guide. What follows is a story that encompasses love, superhero origins, and family.

This is a typical Bollywood movie in that it is longer than other superhero movies (close to three hours) and has the requisite song and dance pieces. If

you don't like longer movies or musicals, then this will not be your cup of tea. However, if you do like longer movies and musicals (and I do) and you are also a science fiction/fantasy fan who likes a bit of romance (as I am) then this movie is just about perfect. The first half of the movie is very fantasy like, with the second half not only showing Krrish's superhuman powers, but also his father's scientific advances, plus the super villain's maniacal desire to take over the world using those same advances.

In the end, Krishna has to figure out how to exist in the world without either manipulating others with his powers or being manipulated because of his powers. He also has to get the girl and be true to his (and his family's) moral code. It is not surprising that India's superhero would be named after Krishna the divine being. In creating Krrish, the Roshan's did their best to create a true Indian Superman, willing to fight for Truth, Justice, and the Indian Way.

You can find more about it here: <http://www.krrishthemovie.com>. It's available on Amazon and Netflix.

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## **The Tarot Café Novel: The Wild Hunt** **Chandra Rooney**

Tokyopop: Light Novels, January 2009, \$9.95

ISBN: 978-1-4278-1199-8

Review by Rachel V. Olivier

Pamela has what would seem to be the perfect life. On the outside, she's young, attractive, has a cool, hip coffee shop that keeps going, despite her sometimes erratic staff, and she gets to give tarot card readings all day. Hobbies for some; her life's work for her.

But of course, that is not the entire story. And when Bryn McMillan, up and coming young actress, enters Pamela's shop looking for a tarot reading, Pamela knows they have a lot more in common than meets the eye. Like Pamela, Bryn has found her soul mate and her life's work. And also, like Pamela, Bryn has a hard choice to make. It's up to Pamela, through the messages left in the Tarot, to help Bryn discover what choice is right for her.

The Wild Hunt is based on the mangwa, The Tarot Café, by Sang-Sun Park and takes place before the opening of the series. Having never read the series, I was unfamiliar with the world. And I wasn't sure if a book based on tarot card readings would have enough tension or action to hold me through a short novel.

## Reviews

Now, to be fair, though I'm not a Tokyopop fan, and have never heard of Sang-Sun Park or her mangwa, I am a fan of tarot card readings and Chandra Rooney. So, I knew I would enjoy it. Yet, I was not prepared for being so enthralled by the story that I found myself still reading at 3 a.m. in the morning and wondering how I'd make it to work in the morning.

There were some scenes where Bryn seemed to dwell a bit too much on her decision, or indecision, for my liking. And I wasn't sure I would make the same decision she ultimately did. However, I had to remind myself that I am a good 20-30 years older than the typical reader of this novel. And for young women ages 15-20, there is no greater pull than the call of true love. And this story has it all, fantasy, adventure, danger, high stakes, and true love. Whether or not you're a fan of manga or mangwa, if you're a fan of true love, this is a story you'll enjoy.

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### **Let the Right One In (2008)**

#### **Låt den rätte komma in**

Directed by Tomas Alfredson

Written by John Ajvide Lindqvist

Review by Rachel Olivier

This October, while horror and Halloween flicks peppered both big and small screens, a friend took me to see the Swedish vampire film, "Let the Right One In" based on the novel by John Ajvide Lindqvist, who also wrote the screenplay, and directed by Tomas Alfredson. Set in the 1970s in a pre-Internet Sweden, "Let the Right One In" tells what some would call a coming of age story of twelve-year-old Oskar, a blond, skinny, passive boy.

The other boys at school find Oskar easy to pick on and beat up. The teachers, his parents – single mom and a dad who lives a train ride away with his gay boyfriend – don't know what to do with him, though he finds the most peace playing hangman with his father one night. Oskar's Rubik's cube could be his only friend, as he daydreams of some day getting bloody revenge on the boys at school. Many children have similar fantasies when it comes to bullies in their lives. In many ways his silent passivity makes the bullies even more angry, as what they really want from him is a reaction that he refuses to give. When he does finally fight back the adults who have ignored the harassment choose to punish Oskar.

Before the internet, there was television, the radio, books. Writing was done with pencils and pens and

typewriters on paper. If you lived in a place that was dark and cut off from the world during the winter you were left to yourself and your own thoughts; lots of time for introspection, boredom, loneliness. Oskar is too young to get a job, too old to "play" with little kids. He settles for sitting on the snow-covered jungle gym and working on his Rubik's cube or hanging out in his hot centrally-heated bedroom in his underwear waiting for the day to pass. This isn't your typical American action-packed vampire film. The pace is deliberately slow to allow the audience to feel what Oskar feels, what people who live in the heart of a Nordic winter feel.

One night, a girl and her father move in next door. The girl, Eli, is dark and brooding, walking around outside barefoot and without a jacket. Her hair is unkempt and face is dirty. She looks like any ten-year-old urchin, almost. Her poise and sadness belie this outward package as she tells Oskar she can't be his friend.

The tension in the film is built by the slow discovery by the viewer of what Eli truly is and who the man is who serves her and hunts for her. While he goes about trying to quietly serve Eli and keep himself out of trouble, Oskar gets into trouble at school. He and Eli end up forming a friendship despite her reticence to do so, or perhaps because she sees the necessity.

This is a movie about lonely children, human or vampiric, it doesn't matter, and their search for meaning and friendship in a dark, meaningless world.

According to Amazon, the DVD comes out March 10, 2009. I suggest trying it out and prepare to be amazed.

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Congratulations go out to A. Christopher Drown, longtime reader and friend of the *Illuminata*, whose short story "The Swing"—which was featured in *Beacons of Tomorrow*, vol. 2—was selected as a finalist in the 2009 Darrell Awards for best short fiction.

In related news, Tyrannosaurus Press is pleased to announce the publication date of *A Mage of None Magic*, the first novel by award winning graphic artist (and possibly awarding winning short story writer) A. Christopher Drown.

Hurricanes notwithstanding, *A Mage of None Magic* will be available for purchase on September 1, 2009.

# Original Fiction

## DEALING WITH THE BRAIN SUCKERS

by Jack Bragen

The dense, red leafed forest gave way to a meadow of purple grass as the four of us still marched. We all panted from the exertion in the extra gravity, and our nose pieces hissed while delivering extra O2. The smells and sounds were different from anything we knew, yet were strangely familiar. The other crewmember waited for us at base, and had prepared supper.

My legs ached. We had to watch out not to step on trapfish that lie embedded in the forest floor waiting for a new meal. Lieutenant Samuel had already put a foot into one's maw, only to have the entire leg disappear into the ground. When we pulled him up, there was no more leg. There was no way we could give medical treatment of the kind that was needed, so I was elected to shoot him to relieve his misery. I'll never forget how his face looked.

Our expedition for the day was almost done. We had loads of samples from the local life forms. These would be deep frozen and brought to Earth for study. This was supposedly safe.

I walked alongside biologist Susan Phillips, who intently scanned the surroundings. Apparently nothing escaped her. Her long red hair was in a braid and tied back to stay out of the way. I couldn't help thinking about her, and I knew this was a dangerous distraction, as I was responsible for the safety of the group.

Sunset above the distant hills was crimson, violet and green.

We arrived at the prefab shelter that stood beside our space ship. We entered the building, and we took a sterilizing spray bath, were administered immuno nanobot injections, and were checked out for problems by scanner. The machine that did all this for us was automatically switched on by us entering through the front door. There was another machine like it at the airlock to our spaceship.

The machine gave voice to an "all clear," message. It was all I could do to keep from ogling at Susan as she dried herself off.

Intercourse was forbidden on all space missions due to the possible medical complications. I had got no indication that Susan liked me the way I liked her. If it had been mutual, that rule by now would be broken.

We ate our dinner and now it was time for mandatory sleep. We dressed in our night clothes and laid down on our individual beds. It was the most difficult time for me, as I thought heavily about what it would be like to have a visitor in bed.

To put a damper in it, there were three other men in the room, all of whom outranked me, and one other woman, a lieutenant who was married and to whom I wasn't attracted. In fact, there seemed no opportunity for hanky panky even if I could convince Susan of its necessity.

As I stared at the ceiling, I knew my obsession was unacceptable and could interfere with my performance as safety officer.

I had dozed off. A tug at my wrist jolted me awake. I looked up and saw Susan, indicating to stay quiet. She stood up and motioned me to follow her into the other room, where there was a great deal of scientific equipment, but no people. I thought I was going to get lucky.

"Are you trained enough to understand these results?" asked Susan, handing me a sheaf of papers. I looked at the papers, unhappily realizing this was business.

This stack was the printouts of several brain scans done on her and on one other member of the crew. I looked at the numbers and at the pictures of the brains.

"Enlarged ventricles," I said. "You and this other guy have Alzheimer's."

"Take a look at the ones from last week," she said.

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"Same thing only not as bad," I said.

She looked at me, apparently waiting for a conclusion.

"The progression is way too rapid," I said. "And these are obviously the same brains judging by the pattern of furrows. These had to have been taken years apart."

I looked at her and she shook her head. "No, not years apart, try one week and during this expedition."

"So who is this other unfortunate guy?"

"You."

"Shit." I recoiled in shock and then let out a few obscene curses. "If we get off this planet, does that stop the progression?" I continued.

"That is unknown, since I haven't found the cause. It could take six months or even years to find out why this is happening. Meanwhile we become vegetables."

"We have to get off this planet," I said.

"Commander Michealson probably won't go for it," Susan said.

"Then we're finished."

"We can at least try to convince the others," she said.

"What about waiting for the regular launch time in two weeks?" I asked.

"The deterioration will be severe to where we won't be able to operate our ship or any of our equipment by then."

"We have to act, now," I said.

"Not so fast," said Susan. "Do you want to be considered insane?"

"Don't the brain scans prove our point?"

"Not necessarily with Michealson. He will want proof beyond a doubt before he'll abort. I know him; I was in the same flight class."

"What do you suggest? Kill him?" I said, not seriously.

"It has occurred to me," she said.

"I won't go along with that one," I said. "I won't tell anyone you suggested it. We have to just tell the others and hope they'll listen."

"Go for it," said Susan, folding her arms in resignation.

My adrenaline had been started. I couldn't help myself; I summoned the crew to wakefulness. This couldn't wait.

"To what peril do we owe you waking us out of a good sleep?" said Michealson. The other two men and one woman grumbled in agreement.

"We've discovered an urgent threat to our physical health that we need to deal with immediately," I said. "I want you all to study these scans of the brains of two crewmembers. And then I want the remaining crew to get scanned."

Michealson looked at the papers. "This is meaningless." He took the papers and pushed them back at me. He said, "I always thought you were unsuitable for this type of mission."

"Look!" I said. "Can't you see the brain deterioration?"

"It looks like the scanner has been modified," said Michealson.

"Let me take a look," said Shearer, a sandy haired, goateed, middle aged scientist who was second in command.

Michealson handed Shearer the results. Shearer looked at them, periodically rubbing his eyebrows. It was an annoying habit.

"Both brains have tissue degeneration," Shearer said. "The time interval has been tweaked; this

# Original Fiction

would take years.”

“According to Phillips, this happened to two people in our crew in a two week period,” I said. “It at least merits that the other crewmembers have a scan.”

“I say don’t waste our valuable time with this bull,” said Commander Michealson.

“I countermand that,” said Shearer. It was a stalemate. Shearer had enough authority to authorize this, and Michealson, above him, could deny it. It was my role to see to the security of the mission.

“I demand on the basis of imminent threat that we all have a meaningful brain scan,” I said. “If it turns out the results are being manipulated, I’ll drop it.” This was in reference to the possible insanity of Phillips, who I wasn’t sure about after she advocated killing the commander. In fact, it was just the type of insult toward a woman that could get Michealson on my side.

“Dickerson, I elect you to monitor the validity of the results,” said Michealson, involving the one other male crewmember. In his view he was probably saving face by issuing another command. I wasn’t on that wavelength.

“Scan me first,” said Shearer. “I’ve been absent minded the past few days.”

Shearer, Dickerson and Phillips went back into the room that had our equipment. Shearer sat in a chair next to the scanner. Phillips typed some stuff into a keyboard while Dickerson watched. Dickerson nodded at Michealson.

The scanner hummed briefly, and then papers spat out onto the tray. Shearer stood, and Phillips handed him the stack of sheets without first looking at them. Shearer studied the results, this time without rubbing his eyebrows.

“I’m a dummy,” said Shearer. “If I’m still capable of understanding these results, my impairment is probably bad enough to make me semi incompetent.”

“Ronald Reagan performed very well for years with Alzheimer’s,” I said. “It’s not how much you have, it’s how you use it.”

“Still, I’m not too happy,” said Shearer.

“Next,” said Phillips.

The other woman on board, Barbara Chrysler, sat next to the scanner. Again, Phillips typed at the keyboard, and the scanner hummed and spit out papers. Phillips handed Chrysler the stack.

“What is it we’re doing again?” Barbara asked. The crew laughed. Chrysler said, “What’s so funny? I forgot what we’re doing, okay?” A silence followed that statement and the rest of the crew was aware of the gravity of their plight.

“You’re not joking, are you Barb?” said Michealson.

“About what?” said Barbara. Then she stood from the chair and clumsily went back into the sleep room, and laid down.

“Emergency departure!” I declared.

“Agreed,” said Michealson.

The crew, with the exception of Barbara, scrambled to gather up essential items and put them into a cart. Within a few minutes, the crew assembled at the door to the enclosed ramp to the ship. The prefab building that they had called home for two weeks would be left behind, along with billions of dollars in scientific and other equipment. I saw Phillips press some buttons to upload most of the data that we had gathered to the auxiliary computer on the ship. Then she took Barbara’s hand and led her to the doorway where the rest of us waited. I activated the camera on the other side of the door, and saw that the vinyl and steel mesh germproof cover to our ramp appeared intact. I pressed a red button and the door opened. We walked onto the ramp, not wasting time.

On the other side of a thick plexiglass window in the ramp, a creature was looking at us.

## Original Fiction

The inhabitant of this planet had a head that resembled a snail's—slimy, soft, and with antennae. Only this snail was humanoid-sized, and its head had room for some brains. Its bugging eyes were bloodshot, with oval pupils, and had a hypnotic quality. Its gray skin glistened and was translucent, allowing us to see the first layer of its tendons and blood vessels beneath.

"We can't stop to talk to this," I said. "This could be the cause of our problems."

"It won't let me walk," said Michealson.

I unholstered my gun, aimed through the plexiglass at the native being, and fired three rounds. Air gushed out as the ramp enclosure depressurized. The creature's head was sheared off at the neck. "Go!" I yelled. We moved as quick as we could up to the door to our spacecraft. We opened it and got inside. The ship's systems automatically began the decontaminate process on us.

In five minutes we had been soaked with decontaminate foam, rinsed and blow dried. A door opened and we hurried to the control room to the craft.

In the control room were three more of the snail creatures. I drew my weapon and shot several rounds into each of the three. The remains oozed on the floor of the control room, making it slippery. The slime was splattered onto two of the control consoles.

In the dead tentacular limb of one of the three beings on the floor, there was a cylindrical object. Instinctively I reached for it, believing it might be a grenade. A needle on the side of the object and poked my hand.

I was dizzy momentarily and felt my ears pop as though there were a change in air pressure. I suddenly felt very alert and present. I put the object into Barbara's hand, and the needle on it poked her.

"What the hell," said Barbara. "I've been out of it. I feel normal now, though." Barbara's mannerisms were suddenly back to normal, and she no longer appeared to suffer from the acquired Alzheimer's.

I realized I had made a huge mistake.

"The cylinder contains the cure for the brain ailment," I said. "I just murdered our interplanetary friends who delivered it to us."

"I think we've discovered America," said Michealson. "And we've already scalped some of the natives."

## Skepticism (con't)

state that a woman is "unclean" during menstruation. It's a weak argument but I've done some research and that's the best I've come up with. The modern support of this myth's validity is much different and much more pseudoscientific. A proposed mechanism is the Moon's gravitational effect on the water in our bodies. It's suggested that the same force that creates the oceans' tides can also disrupt the normal function of the human body. But this argument falls flat on its face because if the Moon had a tidal effect on people we'd go through drastic mood swings every six hours of the day. Some suggest that the lunar effect occurs because the Moon is closer to Earth when it's full, producing a greater tidal force, but that argument fails too. The perigee (the Moon's closest approach to Earth – or a word in a magical incantation in *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*) is not fixed with its phases. It might be at apogee (farthest away) during the full moon, making its gravitational pull weakest. So, with no physical evidence supporting it, why do people still believe in the lunar effect?

I'm sure we've all heard that emergency rooms are busier on the night of the full moon. This is based on anecdotal evidence and confirmation bias. Hospital workers may have a busy night and think, "Oh, wait! The Moon is full. No wonder!" However, they probably had a lot of busy nights during other phases of the Moon, but since the date didn't seem to have any particular significance they forgot about it. It's only the full moon nights that stick in their memories.

When the hard evidence is analyzed, looking at the number of admissions and the severity of the cases, there is no significant difference between full moon nights and any other time of the lunar cycle. Stories of increased rates of violence, success at the casino, natural disasters, psychological disorders and anything else thrown at this myth have not stuck. Studies have shown no statistical correlation between these events and the full moon.

The same goes for Friday the 13th. The origin of this one is not quite as murky. It's almost certainly a result of both Friday and the number thirteen being assigned an unlucky status sometime long in the past. Numerology dates back to Pythagoras's time, at least (around 500 BCE). While different traditions may attribute different meanings to the number thirteen it is often cited as an unlucky number, perhaps because of legends of the Norse god Loki or of the thirteen participants in the Christian Last Supper. The Friday/

bad luck connection is first documented in the 17th century. It may be because Jesus is said to have died on a Friday or because Friday was named for the Norse deity Frigga, a goddess of love and motherhood, whom early Christians reinterpreted to be a witch.

A bit of trivia: the irrational fear of Friday the 13th is called "friggatriskaidekaphobia." I kid you not.

Many years back, when I was somewhat prone to superstitious thinking, I had a really bad day at work, and I half-jokingly said, "I've never believed in Friday the 13th before, but after today I kinda do." Then after some reflection I thought, "That's silly. How many bad days have I had? And this one just happened to fall on Friday the 13th. Big deal." When you consider that there are 365-366 days in a year and you will most likely have far more than 365 bad, annoying or otherwise troublesome days in your life, *and* that there are one to three Friday the 13ths every year, at least one of your bad days falling on the thirteenth of a month that also happens to be a Friday has pretty good odds. And when you add to that the fact that you *know* it's Friday the 13th and you *know* that it's supposed to be an unlucky day you're going to notice more of the trivial bothers that you might normally overlook because your brain will correlate these events with the day itself. With that factor considered it would be highly unusual if you didn't ever have what you perceive to be a "bad day" on one of these infamous Fridays.

So, have your good days, have your bad days. Observe the phases of the Moon because each is beautiful in its own way, and enjoy Fridays (thirteenth or not) because they bring the weekend. And leave it at that.

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More congratulations go out to Danielle Parker, long-time *Illuminata* reviewer and two-time contributor to the *Beacons of Tomorrow* anthologies. Her first novel, *The Infinite Instant*, won the 2009 EPPIE Award for Science Fiction.

Ms. Parker's book is available for purchase at Amazon.com and as an ebook from Fictionwise. Buy a copy for your collection. She's given you *Illuminata* readers so much; now it's time to return the favor.