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Demystifying Cons

By Terry Crotinger/montanasings

When I go to Science Fiction Conventions, it's my fanish nature to evaluate everything from the location to the programming, security to Con Culture. Recently, while reviewing my good fortune at being able to attend a newer Convention, I was reminded about the dedication required to put one of these on for the general public. Unlike WorldCon, where you must be a member, most local/state conventions are hoping to attract attendees simply because of their love for the topic. Whether vampires, anime, furry Cosplay or hard core science fiction, conventions draw from all over the country, but mainly, locally or state-wide.

Having worked with Mindbridge (.org) who puts on several conventions a year, I am aware what takes place behind the scenes and up until this summer, took it for granted that such involvement was simply expected—until I semi-crashed the Dead Dog Party at OSFES04 (Omaha Science Fiction Education Society 04). I left with a healthy reminder of the phrase, "Long Term Goal".

What is a "Dead Dog Party" you ask? Typically, after everything is put away and stowed in cars, trucks and storage lockers, this holy time is for the staff and volunteer crews to relax after the Con-goers are gone. Sometimes, this time is reserved just for the staff to visit with Guests of Honor (GoH), notable "friends" of the organization sponsoring the Con, and artists before they leave for the airport later, or the next day. Sometimes, it's a drunken free-for-all to wind down from all the tension over the last year, culminating in the last three days. It can be a Bitch-and-Blame Fest of throwing blame on a committee for not doing their job(s). It can be a huge good-bye party, depending on how often each of the crew sees each other and how far they must travel to attend the Con. Basically, the staff is Dead Dog Tired, and this is their time to relax, debrief and begin to plan (or not) for the next Convention. Attending is *usually* a privilege.

As I was not leaving to return back to Arizona until the next day, I had nowhere to go, and so wandered up to the Con-Suite to see if they needed any help and stumbled upon the DDP and stopped to listen after offering assistance. They were Dead Tired and didn't care if I stayed, or not. So I stayed and got an advanced degree in *How To Put On A Con*.

Mind you, there are Conventions that deal with *How To Put On A Convention*. These are incredibly educational opportunities covering topics like programming, security, organization and financing. I think the best thing I walked away from my Mindbridge education was (1) that putting on a Convention is not cheap—money is involved and people need to be paid back, (2) "organization" cannot be too organized and (3) flexibility and patience may just keep one sane enough to survive until next year.

Around the clock issues, like security, never sleep. Depending on the type of Con, this can be everything from a mild headache to migraine. Early in my science fiction education, I was disappointed to learn that while there are always a few inebriated individuals who can't behave themselves when around liquor, some people go to Cons simply for the (hopefully) free flowing booze—Crash-a-Con, RelaxACon... it goes by various names. When a Con is known for its drinking, it's not unusual to have people pay for admittance and just booze from room party to room party for the sole intent on drinking much cheaper for a weekend than if they spent the same money at a bar.

Another security issue is theft. This *really* disappoints me. I was told by an antique dealer that when they attend trade shows, the stealing by other dealers is not uncommon. This happens at Cons, not just in the Dealer's Room but with the hotel/convention facilities' furniture and furnishings, vandalism of property and the always present, pickpocket and purse snatcher. One unattended hotel room door not closed completely is all that is needed.

Pools at Relax-a-Cons should simply be avoided without a designated life-guard.

Last on the subject of security, but always first in my mind is the looking-for-a-good-time offender of the sexual variety. An alert security staff can quickly intervene between someone harassing the Cosplay crowd or trying more menacing activity. I once attended a Con where the "Date Auction" may have been the set-up for a sexual predator. While no one quickly ran the guy's name through the National Sex Offender Registry, alert volunteers and hotel staff realized his behavior and comments were more than simple drunkenness. They alerted Security who was invaluable in preventing a very nasty crime of opportunity. I've seen the good and bad of Con security and know firsthand that a good working relationship with the hotel management makes a difference—and did with that situation.

Kudos to OSFES04 because their security people seemed legion, noticeably professionally dressed and had electronics to keep abreast if there were problems. I felt safe seeing their presence. I attended this Con knowing I had several factors that made me a target: no companion, female, and I was from out of town. I made sure I had at least one person I knew I could call, if needed. I enjoyed myself so much, I'll try to attend next year.

As for the cost of a Con, I admit I balk at spending over 60 dollars for a weekend when I know that some cons charge from 20 bucks for the weekend (preregistration for CyPhaCon) and with "name brand" entertainment—usually something I'm not interested in enough to pack elbow to elbow in a room for 2+ hours—up to 175 (Comicon/WorldCon Membership).

Most science fiction conventions are run under a Non-Profit status. Besides a registration fee, to raise money for the facility use, liability insurance, advertising and office supplies/mailings, conventions sell advertising and charge for the Dealer's room (Huckster's room), they will often promote Art shows and auctions (goods, services, "date" auctions) with

proceeds donated to a local charity to promote literacy or health issues. It may seem like a lot of money is changing hands, but each activity is strictly governed by purpose, and of course, tax law.

Most Convention officers only have their expenses reimbursed. Some don't get that. Some conventions have been run so poorly that Con Officers are seen as just that—Con artists. So being anal with monetary funds and keeping all paperwork in order and all meetings “above board” is imperative for a Con to survive. Scratch a little deeper with the Con staff and stories will likely surface of how they had to review and trash friendships because they had too few scruples, or worse. Sadly, some people cannot be trusted with funds, bought/donated goods and over-inflated promises that could not be delivered. Off the top of my head, I can name no less than five people who have been banned from certain Cons for such behavior—and those were officers.

Finding competent, dedicated, responsible, sacrificial and honest people to put on a Convention is not common. Not rare, necessarily, just not common. Some Officers take on this role as a full/part-time job.—without pay. They must have all of these attributes, and in enormous amounts in order to put on a safe, organized convention.

So next time you find yourself at a (insert your favorite here) Convention you have enjoyed, be sure and tell the person in charge; give them feedback—they crave feedback (especially afterwards, online); and give them the kudos they deserve and a tip of the old hat, as well. And if it really has problems, provide feedback—nicely, if possible. One thing I know firsthand, people who work in the background at Cons, love going to them, and want your experience to be memorable and safe. I respect and appreciate all they do for us; let the fun begin!

I have the privilege of representing Tyrannosaurus Press at ICON (Cedar Rapids, IA) in October!

Author Interview With K.C. Hilton

Flamingnet, the teen book review website, welcomes author **K.C. Hilton**. Hilton was born in Aurora, Illinois, before relocating to Kentucky. Her first published story, *The Magic of Finkleton*, received the Children's Literary Classics Seal of Approval in July 2011. The sequel to *The Magic of Finkleton*, *Return to Finkleton*, will release in the spring of 2012.

Hilton's novel, *The Magic of Finkleton*, follows three siblings' adventures in Finkleton. Secrets they learn from their uncle's shop help them unlock an even bigger secret to their town. As the once perfect weather changes, they must solve the magical mystery to save their village.

Welcome to Flamingnet. Tell us about *The Magic of Finkleton*.

It's a fun adventure involving three children in the village of Finkleton. One clue at a time, the children discover the magical secrets and why the weather is always so perfect in Finkleton.

Did anything in real life inspire this story?

The idea of Finkleton came from a dream. Part of the dream included my visit to Bath, England, years ago, and the Finkle children remind me of my children when they were young.

How did the visit to Bath, England, influence your dream and the book?

When I visited Bath, England, it reminded me of a small village. It's already a mysterious place because Stonehenge is located there. The shops were charming and welcomed visitors with their large display windows protruding outward. The aroma of fresh baked scones filled the air; then, I discovered a small bakery among the shops. All the shops I visited were built with stone, and I didn't see vinyl siding anywhere. Vines grew up the outer walls of the shops, and they all seemed connected, only sharing a stone wall between them. The business owners lived above their shops, just as they do in *The Magic of Finkleton*.

Tell us about the role the mysterious clock plays in *The Magic of Finkleton*.

Jack, Lizzy, and Robert discover the mysterious clock at the end of the book, but it doesn't just tell the time. In the next book, *Return to Finkleton*, readers will discover just how important the special clock is to Finkleton.

What can readers look forward to in *Return to Finkleton*?

Readers will find out what is so special about that mysterious clock! Unexpected events will happen and open up a new adventure for the Finkle children. The readers will also get to meet a few new characters.

Who is your favorite character in the story and why?

Robert Finkle is my favorite character because he's curious about everything!

How long did it take you to write each story?

Prior to actually writing *The Magic of Finkleton*, I had prepared a rough draft from my notes. It took about three weeks to write the story, then the editing process started. I would say less than six weeks in total. I've recently finished the rough draft for *Return to Finkleton*. I plan to start writing it after our family vacation, then start the editing.

Do you struggle with anything as a writer?

It's funny really! I can only write late at night, when everyone, including the dog, is asleep. As soon as I sit at my desk, our dog wants to play ball. It usually takes a while before she calms down and goes to sleep.

What advice would you give an aspiring author?

Write what you feel. It was once suggested that I write something a particular way, but my characters wanted to go the opposite direction. I never argue with my characters... They always get what they want.

What is something most people don't know about you?

I'm a photographer, a Master Barber, and I help run the family business.

Is there anything else you would like to share?

I often laughed out loud when I was writing *The Magic of Finkleton*. The Finkle children could be so funny at times.

Can you give us an example of something funny the Finkleton children did?

Jack was excited to have his very own bedroom for the first time. He's always shared a room with his younger brother, Robert. Lizzy never had to share her bedroom with anyone, and she didn't understand why it was such a big deal to Jack. (See below.)

"You and your books. One day you are going to turn into a book," Jack said with a laugh. "Do you know what the best thing about having your own bedchamber is, Lizzy?"

"Not particularly, no," Lizzy replied, looking confused.

Jack continued to laugh and stepped into his room, then turned around and shut the door in Lizzy's face. Lizzy gasped, utterly mortified with Jack's rude behavior. She stomped down the hall muttering something under her breath.

Do you have any marketing tips to share with readers?

1. Know your target audience
2. Twitter, Goodreads, and Facebook fan page
3. Kindly ask to have reviews posted on Barnes and Noble, Amazon and Goodreads
4. Blog about your book(s)
5. Author Website
6. Offer FREE books for giveaways on Goodreads and send an extra copy to reviewers to do their own giveaway
7. Find non-biased reviewers to review your book. They will post reviews everywhere.
8. Bookmarks - They are like a business card. Leave them at libraries, stores, doctor and dentist offices, etc.
9. Give away signed bookmarks to those to request them with a SASE (blog and tweet and facebook about it)
10. Have drawings for a free signed book and bookmark(s)
11. Contact your local newspaper and notify them of your book. They love local Authors. And have them do a giveaway.
12. Contact your local library and do a book signing or reading.

For fun –

What is your favorite flavor ice cream? Chocolate

What is your favorite school subject? Art Class

Do you prefer winter or summer? Summer

Do you prefer cats or dogs? Dog

Would you rather read paperbacks or eBooks? I prefer to read eBooks because I can read them faster, but I still love to see the actual books.

Flamingnet thanks **K.C. Hilton** for allowing us to interview her and giving us an inside look at the writing process. Look for *The Magic of Finkleton* on www.flamingnet.com, the five star review at Amazon, www.amazon.com (<http://amzn.com/1456570293>), and www.barnesandnoble.com (<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/magic-of-finkleton-k-hilton/1100205139?ean=9781456570293&itm=2&usri=the%2bmagic%2bof%2bfinkleton>). To read more, check out <http://www.flamingnet.com/author/hilton.html>. *The Magic of Finkleton* is available now as an eBook or paperback. Happy reading!

Description: Just the Facts

By Charles Gramlich

I hear readers say sometimes that they don't like description, but every writer knows you need at least some description to make a story work. The problem is, how much and when? The answer is, of course, it depends. But on what?

For one thing, it depends on genre. Science fiction and fantasy require more description than mainstream fiction. Historical fiction requires more description than stories set in the present day world.

The reason why these two statements are true is because of a relatively simple rule for using description. That rule is: describe those things that your reader doesn't already know how to visualize.

For example, if you're writing a mystery or a romance set in the modern day, then you don't need to give the readers a detailed description of a hotel bar, or a shopping mall, or a contemporary dining room. The readers have seen these things before and need only the bare essentials to place themselves firmly in that scene. In fact, as soon as you mention "hotel bar," the reader's mind creates the visuals from their own experience, and most anything you add after that will not only be redundant but will slow the story's pace dramatically.

On the other hand, if you're introducing readers to a non-humanoid alien race, or letting them explore an alien landscape, or taking them to an exotic fantasy world, you darn well better give them enough description to center them in the world you're trying to create. If it's something readers haven't seen before, then the writer needs to do the "seeing" first and relay that information to the readers so they don't get lost as the story moves along.

If we go back to our hotel bar example, you don't need to describe the bar itself, the glasses behind it, the tables and stools, the floor and the lighting. But you *do* need to describe the dead pig lying on the bar with a sword stuck through it. Those things that readers won't see or experience on their own, the writer needs to provide for them.

For the same reasons, historical fiction needs more description than modern fiction. Your readers will have driven or ridden in cars, for example, but they probably haven't ridden in a stagecoach or a Roman Trireme. They need more detail in order to place themselves in the story.

Here are two examples from my own reading where the author's use of description didn't work. The first was in a fantasy novel in which there were numerous references to people riding "horses." We all know what horses look like so I assumed that if it were called a "horse" it was indeed a "horse." Only, it wasn't. Almost eighty pages into the book I finally found a description of one of the "horses," and it had fangs and claws. I got very irritated with the author.

When you name something a "horse," readers are going to get very clear visuals about what you're talking about. Those visuals won't include fangs and claws. If the creature really is a horse then you don't need anything more than that name, or perhaps an adjective like big or black. But if it *isn't* a horse, the writer needs to let us know quickly. To do less is, in my opinion, to cheat and disrespect the reader.

The second example I have comes from a contemporary thriller. The protagonist went into a standard business office to see the boss and had to sit in the waiting room. The next page and a half of the book described the waiting area, from the secretary's desk, to the chairs, to some boxes piled up along one wall. The length of description made me think the office would have an important role to play later in the book, but that wasn't the case. It was just description.

The fantasy novel had too little description about something the readers hadn't seen; the thriller had too much about something they had. Both were errors.

Ultimately, the best kind of description, in any genre, is that which does more than one thing at the same time. It first and foremost must *place* us in the story. Are we in contemporary New Orleans, historic London, or on the moon?

However, description can also be wonderful for creating mood. I see this a lot in horror fiction, and here it is perfectly OK to describe common settings, as long as they are described with a twist. Imagine the common mall scene again for example, but this time there are no people. The stores are open but there are no shoppers. The food dries out slowly under the heat lamps in the food court. The fountain has gotten clogged up and the water is starting to flood over the sides. And then comes a single human sound, a baby crying. The "common" scene is no longer common. Its very difference gives it menace.

Description is not a bad thing in writing; it's a necessity. But it has to be applied at the right time and in the right amounts. In that way, it's kind of like makeup for a Victoria's Secret model. Too much is garish and distracting, but too little fails to project the beauty that is intended. The right amount creates an illusion of angels.

I Blog Every Thought that Wafts through My Brain

By Danielle Parker

Well, actually, I don't. Be very glad, people.

But I've recently discovered that other people do. They record what they had for lunch, and what they shop for. They post endless pictures of pets in cute poses. They air family feuds to dozens, sometimes hundreds, who've never met the combatants. They vent their feelings: "Everyone's been an ass this week!" (Your friends and colleagues thank you for that. They trade risqué remarks with people they're not married to. One wanted to know what cure her "friends" could suggest for "friction sores" in, um, a delicate part of her body. I hated to think about that one. What's next, forewarning of herpes outbreaks? Another gave a running commentary on her day. "It's ten o'clock and I'm doing the laundry." "Twelve noon and UPS delivered a package."

Pass the paint drying DVD, please. If a spot on the wall was good enough for Virginia, it's good enough for me.

And if anyone wonders, no, I'm not making up any of the above. Facebook has truly been an education.

How did I get there? Well, in preparation for the re-launch of my first novel and its new sequel (see Mercury Retrograde Press for more details), the publisher asked me to set up a Facebook account. Guess that is *de rigueur* for writers now.

Is this foray into the attics of other brains an effective marketing tool? I don't know yet. I have "friends" I've never met or talked to now, "friends" who in turn have thousands of "friends" themselves. Do they give a darn about my book launch? I guess we'll find out.

And yet I now have an understanding of the strange fascination of social media I never had before. At one point, I fell into a volley of fast-paced exchanges on a totally stupid topic with two acquaintances. Back and forth we went, and suddenly the day was over. I looked at the exchanges that evening, at the stupid jokes and comments I'd made, and thought: *I wasted a day on this? This is me? Do I want people to read this?* The answer was no.

And yet it was so easy to do. The exchanges had an addictive quality.

I now treat Facebook with the radioactive respect it deserves. I remember the old adages. *A fool is considered a wise man until he opens his mouth. Say what you mean and mean what you say.* I know to beware of the addictive allure of "mouse talk": meaningless squeaking that can expend a whole day.

But I'm still not immune to the great surge to Dump It All Out There. To appease my publisher, I started an author blog on Goodreads, the one social media I am prepared to spend some time on. The purpose of Goodreads is to talk about books. Now that, I can get into.

What's your opinion on social media? Comment and tell us.

Author Interview With L.L. Helland

Flamingnet, the teen book review website, introduces author L.L. Helland. A registered nurse turned author, Helland's first novel, *The Hellandback Kids: Be Careful What You Wish For* is available as a paperback book or an ebook. Born in Des Moines, Iowa, she was raised with her twin sister, two older sisters, and older brother. Helland now resides in San Antonio, Texas with her husband and has worked as an ICU nurse, a school nurse, and a Director of Nursing before becoming a full time mom.

Helland's novel, *The Hellandback Kids: Be Careful What You Wish For*, is set in a Scottish hospital. When four kids visit their great grandmother, they inadvertently find themselves in a world like no other. As they meet intriguing characters, such as the Bundlebobs or an intriguing raccoon, their long deceased great grandfather tries to keep them out of trouble. Through their experience, they teeter on the edge of reality and a wildly imaginative world as they learn important lessons in life along the way.

Welcome to Flamingnet. How long have you been writing?

For several years now, but my life was too full to pursue my writing any further until now.

What was your first story about?

I started with the genre Historical/Romance with the time period during the Civil War. Then a large, unexpected, jump later I found the genre I love the most: fiction/MG/YA (middle grade/young adult).

What inspired your latest book?

My sons inspired my MG/YA. Although they are grown now, their completely different personalities along with their average lifestyle made me think of siblings that are all different. The best way to get over a ho hum drum life is to read.

Do you model your characters off of real life people?

Yes, my sons, Jon and Chris, my niece, Trisha, and Jon's friend for many years, Brittany.

What is your latest book about?

Four arguing siblings ranging in age from eleven to fifteen-years-old. They each have very different personalities: Fifteen-year-old Jon is a brilliant individual. Fourteen-year-old Trisha is a dancer (well at least she tries) and a romantic. Twelve-year-old Brittany loves science and is very focused and responsible. Last, eleven-year-old Chris also loves lacrosse like his older brother and is very popular. The four Hellandback kids live in Boston and travel to Scotland to visit their Mam who lives in an unusual house, a converted old hospital. Mam picks rooms for each of her great grand-children and then the mystical, adventures with wild creatures and creepy circumstances begin. Trisha thinks she has found the perfect guy until she meets Godfrey's odd friends. The large glass jars, maggots, worms, and a brooch, which is alive, make her think twice about the guy that is just eye candy. Jon only thinks about success and money until he gets forced into being a leader for the weirdest group of individuals. Chris runs into the Bundlebobs, who have green fur large heads, and break their nails off, dip them in their ears, and pull out the golden jelly. They are their own parasites, which at times grosses Chris out. Brittany at twelve-years-old gets dumped into a nightmare of her own with the Black Plague. The book moves very quickly and covers a lot of fantasy.

What will readers learn after reading your book?

That the MG/YA need to think about their future. It doesn't hurt to plan things or discover new things about themselves. Go on adventures-read as many books as possible.

The individuals that read the most have the best SAT scores and do better in school. Of course, it doesn't hurt to take Latin as soon as you can for improving those all important national vocabulary exams.

What are some things you learned to improve your writing?

Listen to the experts, and don't take anything to heart. If you don't have a thick skin and you're not famous, you'd better take on something less torturous to do with your time.

What's the hardest thing about being an author?

The hardest thing about being an author or writer is promoting your work. Writing is the easy part. I can also say that reading one's own work many, many times leads to grammar and editorial problems. You'd think the more times you read something the more mistakes you'd catch, but it's just the opposite.

Who is your favorite author?

I like any book dealing with anything medical since I'm a RN, but I would say Rick Riordan because he was my son's fifth grade history teacher. I knew him before he started writing the MG/YA genre. He wrote his adult books, but I think he hit it out of the ball park with his MG series. He was always so creative and imaginative in class. I remember on Parent's Day he told his students to write anything they wanted for five minutes. Anything at all. If they couldn't think of anything to just write, "I can't think of anything" and write that over and over until something came to them. What some of them wrote was quite interesting.

How do you think technology is changing the publishing industry?

It gives the average person the ability to print a book - good or bad. It's their choice. Not everybody has a non-fiction life changing experience or has a celebrity for a relative. It's hard to say though because with over 400,000 books published every year it's becoming an over-whelming challenge to stay positive over promoting your book.

Do you think we will still have print books available in twenty years?

Oh, I hope so. There is nothing like holding a book in your hands, dog earring the corners to keep your place, double folding your favorite pages, and underlining or adding notes in the blank space of the pages.

Flamingnet thanks LL Helland for taking the time to talk with us about her story and share some inside tips about writing. Look for *The Hellandback Kids: Be Careful What You Wish For* available now! To read more, check out <http://flamingnet.com/author/helland.html>. Also, *The Hellandback Kids: Be Careful What You Wish For* may be purchased through www.flamingnet.com (as a paperback), www.amazon.com (as a paperback or ebook), or www.barnesandnoble.com (as an ebook). Happy reading!

Building an Android by Joe Vadalma

It has always been the dream of fans of science fiction (including myself) to have someone build a humanoid robot that would be as intelligent or at least close to as intelligent as human being. Such robots under human control would be enormously useful. Many number of tasks now done by human beings could be done more efficiently by machines. Some jobs are extremely odious; for example, sorting garbage for recyclables. Some are extremely dangerous; construction work on skyscrapers and handling radioactive materials are two instances. Some exist in hostile environments, such as in space or under the sea. Some are just boring. With apologies to housewives, housecleaning is a suitable job for an android. Wouldn't you like to have a robot servant? In addition, as robotic missiles have shown, there are many military uses. Imagine a robot army. Robots could be sent to explore other worlds in and out of our solar system.

But why build a robot in human form? If you think about it a little, you can conclude that few machines are as versatile as the biological machine that nature has taken a billion years to perfect. Take wheels for example. They allow a vehicle to travel rapidly over relatively smooth surface, but what wheeled vehicle can climb a mountain. Look at your hands. What mechanical device has such a large range of grasping abilities?

I'd like to quote from a science fiction novel written by the great Isaac Asimov, the *Caves of Steel*. In the novel, an expert on androids is explaining to a detective why robots should be made in human form. *'Because the human form is the most successful generalized form in all nature. We are not a specialized animal, Mr. Baley, except for our nervous systems and a few odd items. If you want a design capable of doing a great many widely various things, all fairly well, you could do no better than to imitate the human form. Besides that, our entire technology is based on the human form. An automobile, for instance, has its controls so made as to be grasped and manipulated most easily by human hands and feet of a certain size and shape, attached to a body by limbs of a certain length and joints of a certain type. Even such simple objects as chairs and tables or knives and forks are designed to meet the requirements of human measurements and manner of working. It is easier to have robots imitate the human shape than to redesign radically the very philosophy of our tools.'*

My novel *The Isaac Project* is about a computer corporation who set out to exactly that. In my novel the project head divides the project into three groups. The first, the body group, must design and build the mechanical structure, the arms, legs, torso, head, hands and senses. They must also design a power source, such as rechargeable batteries.

The second group was to design the brain, a daunting task, for the internal computer must have the storage capability of the human brain in the same amount of space. Right now, our largest supercomputers which are enormous machines do not even come close to the ability of the human brain to process data.

The final group must design the artificial intelligent software. So far, there is AI software that can do amazing things such as Deep Blue who beat the reigning champion at chess and Watson, the Jeopardy prodigy. But these programs are highly specialized. None of them show the versatility of human thought.

Finally, the designs must be integrated and tested.

Will such a machine actually ever be built? I believe that sooner or later it will. There are many scientists and engineers working on each of these daunting tasks.

Fordlandia

Greg Gradin

Metropolitan Books, 2009

ISBN-13: 978-0-8050-82364

402 pages

Review by Danielle Parker

There's a peculiar fascination reading pride-goeth-before-a-fall true life stories. The Greeks were fond of cautionary tales about pride. Part of the hold the story of the Titanic has on our imagination has to do with how the rich and powerful got it when they, too, sank under the waves with the bilge water crowd. How we boasted we could tame and overpower Nature, and Nature proved us wrong.

The story of Henry Ford's jungle dream, *Fordlandia*, is another story about nature, human and vegetative, fighting back against human *hubris*. And like the Greek myths, this story has vast and tragic dimensions.

On one side we have Henry Ford, the Man Who Could Regiment Anything, founder of the modern factory, the time-punching king. Ford, the man who knew best how man should live his life, to the point of maintaining home inspectors to pry into the personal lives (sex lives, vices, health, and habits of personal cleanliness) of his hapless workers. Ford, the man who personified the American dream of success through hard work, at the same time he was well on his way to destroying his nostalgic dreams of America as G-rated Disney Main Street, Home-Town Clean, hard-working makes-no-waves work-erdom.

In the other corner of this fight, we have the Amazon jungle, with all its vipers, ferocious vegetation, insect and animal life, and tropical diseases. Standing in the same corner are the native Brazilians, representing human nature, which didn't want to fit into Henry Ford's clean living Protestant Baptist life style.

There on the right, Henry Ford's *Fordlandia*, with white picket fences, Michigan-style bungalows that trapped an inferno of heat in the jungle. His diligent doctors and hospital staff, forcing mandatory pills on unwilling workers and regimenting how they could hang their wet clothes up. To the left, the den of sin that sprang up on the island in the middle of the river, with all its brothels, drinking establishments, and uproarious humanity.

In the late twenties, Ford was persuaded to buy a tract of land in the Amazon jungle the size of the state of Tennessee. Rubber for his burgeoning automobile business was the one resource outside his control. That was the purported motive for Ford's jungle adventure deep in the heart of the Amazon jungle, more than eighteen hours (still) up the longest river in the world.

In reality, Ford was fed up. A Nazi sympathizer who'd been forced to recant his anti-Semitism, a fervent opponent of unions and collective bargaining whose representatives fired and killed on a crowd of unemployed workers, Ford felt pressed-in and constrained. The very forces of industrialism he'd released were killing his dream. He longed for a new frontier. The white picket fence, Protestant Baptist lifestyle was out there somewhere. So the Amazon adventure began.

But things didn't unfold as Dearborn expected. The Amazon jungle fought back by sickening the new white overlords with disease and heat prostration. The front line fighters battling the jungle growth died at startling rates from vipers, jaguars and disease. Not only could Ford not enforce Prohibition, some of his Dearborn managers succumbed and frequented the bottle and other vices available just past the picket fences. The trees he tried to regiment succumbed to leaf blight, insects, and other scourges. The natives wouldn't clear off the land he'd bought, so the company had to resort to nasty tactics, like eminent domain, force and intimidation, to drive off lingerers. An attempt to feed workers factory-style in a cafeteria line backfired and led to a bloody revolt and the ignominious flight of the white overlords. Ford's attempts to do good to the downtrodden Amazons and build a new American dream far away foundered in moral and literal slime.

Fordlandia is a fascinating story. How good intentions, at least good intentions in the eyes of Ford and his managers, turn into the worst of disasters makes a cautionary tale. Human nature is tough to overcome. People who believe they know what's best for us more than we do ourselves often do the worst damage. And last cautionary moral? The old one. Pride goeth before a fall. The gods take down the inflated.

How well *Fordlandia* illustrates that one. Recommended for the thoughtful reader.

The Lost City of Z

David Grann

Doubleday, 2009

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338 pages

Review by Danielle Parker

I have to confess I devoured H. Rider Haggard and Edgar Rice Burroughs as a kid. Arthur Conan Doyle's romantic adventures also formed part of my unhealthy but addictive reading diet. Lost civilizations, lost tribes, jungle and desert queens, all that great stuff that you rarely find in books now (though of course, Indiana Jones maintained the spirit). So when I saw *"The Lost City of Z"*, about a real life expedition to find a lost civilization in the Amazon jungle, I had to read it.

The legend of El Dorado and a drenched-in-gold lost civilization started with the Spanish. We know how the conquistadors reacted to the whiff of gold. An early expedition led by one of the notorious Pizarros rampaged through the jungle, torturing (setting on fire, throwing to the hungry dogs) bewildered Indians who couldn't tell the Spanish where the city of gold was. The Amazon jungle took vengeance on the conquistadors in turn.

But reports trickled back, some from seemingly credible witnesses such as priests, of that lost city.

Percy Fawcett was an Englishman with a mania for exploration. Coming from an aristocratic bloodline impoverished by a drunken spendthrift ancestor who lost two fortunes, exploration was also how he earned a precarious living for himself and his mostly abandoned wife and children. The Royal Geographic Society of that pre-war era was intent on mapping the world. The Society trained explorers (you could really *train* to be an explorer) and sent their protégés on various expeditions in remote parts of the world. Fawcett was duly trained and hired to map the border between Bolivia and Brazil. He came back a hero, having completed the work a year early.

Yet disturbing facets of his character showed in the expeditions he led. Fawcett was a physically iron-hard man with no mercy for others. Physical weakness, in his mind, equated to moral deficiencies, cowardliness and lack of effort. He had nothing but scorn for the suffering man. Fawcett drove expedition after expedition into death. On some expeditions, more than half his men died from malaria, yellow fever, insects and parasites. On one, he drove his men into the Amazon jungle until they were dying of starvation, having been a month without food. Only the chance appearance of a deer saved them.

A famous biologist with a Fawcett expedition suffered nightmarish agonies from an infestation of maggots in his rotting flesh. When the man became delirious and could not move, Fawcett prepared to abandon him. But fortunately for the victim, a local with a mule happened by, and Fawcett paid to have his unwanted human baggage carried away.

All expected the hideously suffering man to die. Fawcett returned from his expedition and branded the famous biologist a "coward" and a "weakling". But the biologist was saved by kind people who squeezed every hideous maggot out of his flesh and nursed him back to health.

When Murray the biologist finally made his way back to civilization, he was enraged to hear how Fawcett had libeled him. He told his own story of abandonment and inhuman cruelty in the jungle. But the scandal was hushed up by the Royal Geographic Society. Fawcett carried on, along with his usual expedition attrition rate.

Fawcett's interest in the myth of El Dorado in the jungle turned into obsession after World War I. But times were hard, and he had trouble persuading the Royal Geographic Society to fund his search for the lost city he had dubbed "Z". American backers finally came to his rescue. In 1925, Fawcett set out with his young son, who worshipped his famous father, and the young man's staunch friend, who worshipped young Jack Fawcett in turn. With these two inexperienced companions and his limited funds, Percy Fawcett intended to find that mirage city in the jungle.

But the Amazon swallowed him. Percy Fawcett was never heard from again.

This story is more than anything a fascinating look at obsession. Those men who are driven to challenge the unknown, to push into new frontiers, are a special breed. Vainglory is without a doubt part of the makeup, but there's more. Fawcett sacrificed his family, many lives, and what little money he had to his life-time obsession.

Such men make the history books, but they are never comfortable companions. Percy Fawcett at last received what he had forced on so many weaker men: death in the jungle.

It's strange indeed we have at last found that lost city in the jungle. Recent archeological discoveries detailed by the author reveal an Amazonian civilization that now forms the earliest known in the Americas. A vast network of cities with moats and palisades has been discovered. These earliest inhabitants found a way to develop a rich "black earth" from the Amazon's poor soil.

Percy Fawcett's lost city of Z existed, though it was not gold. Perhaps he reached it before he died.

"The Lost City of Z" is a fascinating book. Read it along with a more modern Amazon adventure classic, "Paddle to the Amazon". You'll recognize that obsessional you-can-drop-like-flies-but-I'm-getting-there mind-set in both protagonists. Read it and think.

Uranium: War, Energy and the Rock that Shaped the World

Tom Zoellner

Viking Penguin, 2009

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337 pages

Review by Danielle Parker

If anyone doubts the power of the idea in science fiction, an anecdote from Tom Zoellner's fascinating riff on everything uranium will settle the argument. H. G. Wells, considered (along with Jules Verne) one of the two great-grandfathers of the genre, wrote a massive antiwar tome about a fictionalized mineral called Carolinum.

His 1914 vintage mineral bore all the characteristics of the infamous ore. Wells was the one who invented the term *atomic bomb*. The hellish mineral turned world capitals into lakes of fire. Maybe Wells really *did* have a time machine. But perhaps not: his tale ends with world powers agreeing to lock up the infernal demon forever. We know *that* won't happen.

More to the point, Wells' fictional Carolinum was described as *unstable and shedding "bits of itself"*. Just like uranium, the heaviest known natural element (so far as this former computer science, not physics, major, knows).

Thus the Hungarian physicist Leo Szilard was the first to realize, fresh from reading the Wells novel, and uneasy with the bad news from Hitler's Germany, the full destructive potential of the unstable uranium and the true atomic bomb it might make.

Case rests. First we imagine it, then we invent it. Can Star Trek's transporters be that far ahead of us? After all, Dr. Moreau's chimeras are already here too.

The book can also scare the pants off you. Zoellner begins with a trip to the fabulous Congo (Zaire) mine, Shinkolobwe, which provided the material for the Hiroshima bomb. The mine's officially closed, but in actual fact, still busily worked by local talent who sell the ore to the black market. A United Nations security force keeps an official presence on the site, but the author walked right in and viewed the obvious signs of busy activity without ever glimpsing any boys in (light) blue.

So away the ore ships. China's apparently one of the major buyers, but the Middle East weighs in there too. Anonymous Lebanese buyers and radioactive materials are a confluence I don't like to think about.

But no point in shouting wolf: the lamb's already down the gullet. Following the same greased-by-corruption trails used by drug smugglers, the ingredients for a dirty bomb are certainly in the wrong hands already. Even the Mafia tried to sell Shinkolobwe's ore to a Middle East buyer—who fortunately proved to be an Italian police officer.

Zoellner's lively book mixes history, eyewitness journalism, and colorful anecdotes to cover uranium mines, the nuclear renaissance, the current spread of nuclear technology, and much more. Of particular interest is his discussion of how Israel got the bomb it still won't admit to having. The dirty espionage aspects of that tale are discussed far more explicitly by Gordon Thomas in his almost-too-racy work, *Gideon's Spies: the Secret History of The Mossad*, which I also recommend.

What can I say? Uranium makes a fascinating and scary story. Just let me know if you ever find that time machine H. G. Wells must have had.

The Rise of Hera: A Futuristic Tale of Survival and Success By Jack Bragen

A medium height, narrow-framed, olive skinned woman walked quickly among the thickness of coworkers who scrambled to get out the giant door of the huge office building, headed for the expansive parking lot that encircled the building, hundreds of feet from ground level. The swarm of people thinned as she got farther away from the main part of the building and closer to her vehicle, which was near the edge of the parking shelf. The air car verbally acknowledged her, and obligingly opened its door for her to get in.

Hera Manheim, exhausted after finishing her first day, stepped into the aircar (an old model but in good condition, which her cousin had provided upon an hour of groveling.) She massaged achy fingers, and reached for the high-priced synthetic bologna sandwich stowed in her handbag that she had bought on credit from the cafeteria. Not having housing to go to, she didn't realize that all of the other workers were in the same situation. As she situated herself in the vehicle, the autopilot knew more than she did. The aircar, without Hera's intervention, rose from the giant parking shelf that cropped from the side of the mammoth office building, and kept up with the pack of other vehicles of the other workers whose aircars did the same. On an instinct, she decided not to interfere with wherever it was going as it followed the pack.

She ended up in a relatively wealthy residential complex that was about fifty miles southwest of the corporate cluster. Hera's vehicle parked at curbside among the vehicles of the other workers. She got out of her car and walked up to the side door of the vehicle nearest hers. Hera knocked on the glass. The worker inside another aircar indicated with gestures that Hera, the new worker, was fine and she ought to get some sleep. Hera concluded that most of the other workers lived out of their cars, as she would now do. The young woman, new to the metro-corporate workforce, wondered what her coworkers did about sanitation. She saw no sign of others getting out of their vehicles to squat, and concluded they were holding it until morning. What about showering?

Hera looked through the pouch her cousin had left in the car for her. She found some moist towelettes in there, and swabbed her face and neck with one. Hera's lips were already chapped, and in the morning she would cover them with lipstick, as well as put on makeup to cover the paleness and acne that were common among workers at or near the bottom echelon of the workforce.

Was this really worth doing? There were countless millions who would give anything to trade places with her. One of these jobs was valuable as gold. Certainly, Hera didn't want to go back to what she was doing before she landed this job. Difficult as the conditions may be, she mused, it was better than barely surviving and living at the mercy of...

Hera put it out of her mind and focused on the taste of the sandwich. Anyone who would prefer that other life would have to be incompetent, lazy, and out of his or her mind. Some day I'll be in charge. I'll be in a position where I have a choice about what to do in a day. Hera's mind went back to her early childhood; her father playing an ancient videotape on a salvaged old-style television; Fiddler on the Roof. Tevia singing "Wouldn't have to work hard..." It was a movie that had represented hard times to an elite and privileged class that lived in the previous century. Now, such a life, among the cornfields and primitive condominiums, and eating chicken soup for lunch, it seemed far better than people fared now.

Tomorrow would be her second day on the job. Hera was nervous, excited and full of anticipation. The ache in her abdomen said she would need to access the restroom as early in the morning as possible. What time did the building get unlocked? Hera tilted back her chair and rested her head on the headrest. She closed her eyes, and vainly attempted sleep.

A sudden movement of the aircar jolted Hera awake. She rubbed her opening eyes and realized she was headed back to work. The orange brightness of morning sun painfully assaulted Hera's retinas. Panicking, she quickly got dressed and put on a little bit of makeup. Her car was following the other aircars and it parked like they did on the huge outcropped shelf that jutted from the gargantuan office building. Hera looked at her chronometer and realized she had fifteen minutes before her shift began. She bolted out the door of her vehicle, sprinted to the employee's door, and got in the line that was forming for use of the ladies' room. As she stood, Hera noticed someone else was emptying a plastic bag into the drinking fountain that had come from the leg of her trouser. Hera now knew how the others made it through the night. In another ten minutes she had access to a stall, and decided she might have to be a few minutes late to her station. Two times late in a month would get a person fired. Knowing she would be late, Hera fought down her panic and decided not to allow fear. When she got to her work chair, she had silently said to herself to "get a grip." Hera could not afford the inefficiency in her work that fear would bring. She forced herself to have composure on both the inside and outside as she confidently walked to her cubicle.

Hera wouldn't settle for being just another employee. By noon, she had clearly accomplished more and better work than any of the others. She received one or two cold stares from coworkers. In the cafeteria, Hera bought two more synthetic bologna sandwiches. One of them, she consumed at lunch and the other she stowed in her handbag.

The type of work Hera performed is not very hard to describe, but to do her job and do it well required an extreme amount of perfectionism and an extreme devotion to the work. It had to be approached as if it was a very strict set of religious practices. Anyone performing substandard work didn't last, and their fate was to try to survive in the wasteland that had at one time been a great city. It was a fate of near certain death.

She had been focusing tightly upon work, and realized it was past six o'clock when she noticed other workers eagerly leaving their posts. She wondered if she were allowed to use the restroom before departing the premises, and her bowel told her she had better take the risk. When Hera exited the giant, glass double door leading to the parking shelf, she realized there were only two or three aircars left other than hers. She felt a hand on her shoulder, and reflexively spun around, preparing to demolish an unknown assailant with the Karate her cousin had taught her. She almost put her fist through the face of a short, emaciated man who held a green plastic bucket. Relieved not to get his remaining teeth knocked out, the little man handed Hera the bucket. She looked and realized it contained toiletries, a folding, mini toilet, a pocketknife with all types of utensils, and a can of chili beans. Hera thanked the little man and gave him a coin from her pocket. He walked away without a word.

Her next week went without incident, and Hera felt as though she had already mastered the job. She received several more nasty looks from other employees. She noticed that there had already been a turnover of several. She had not seen at what point the firings had been done. She did not say a word to her coworkers, nor did any of them speak to her.

Hera sat, her fingers dancing speedily upon the old style keyboard, which she preferred over the voice recognition used by other employees. She heard a sound from behind her of a man's throat being cleared, glanced over her shoulder, and saw the face of the unit supervisor. He stood at the edge of Hera's cubicle and was jotting some notes, with a pencil, no less, on an actual piece of paper! Hera continued to work, not daring to interrupt the work to interact with the supervisor, and hoped that she wasn't in trouble over the lateness to her station that had occurred the previous week.

"You're doing a very good job," said Clarke, the unit supervisor. Hera continued to work, not daring to acknowledge the compliment. Gripped by shyness, the best she could manage was a nod of the head and a half-smile, like that of the Mona Lisa.

(As a young child, she had seen the image of that painting on an old postage stamp in her father's long gone stamp collection, and had fantasized about the life of that woman. When she brought up the name as an adult, no one knew of the painting and no one had heard of Leonardo da Vinci.)

"Someone higher up than me has bumped you up three levels," Clarke paused. Hera's keyboarding hesitated imperceptibly for a moment, and continued. "If you accept the position, that is."

Baffled, Hera continued typing. Was she being quizzed?

Clarke continued: "You can stop typing," said Clarke. Hera had never dared speak to him before, and he was addressing her individually for the first time. Up until this moment, he had been the big bad supervisor by whom you didn't want to be noticed. Now he smiled at her. What was happening?

He cleared his throat and said: "Can I show you your new office? Or do you refuse the promotion? They said your I.Q. tested higher than that of our CEO." Clarke put a hand on Hera's wrist. She froze in terror.

"Sir?" Hera looked up at Clarke's face and saw a look on it she had never seen directed at her. And she realized, at this point that she would no longer be working in "the pit." Hera had been promoted.

"You need not address me as, 'sir,'" said Clarke. "I am your assistant, now. You outrank me." Clarke paused. Promoting this perplexed, but talented employee, and seeing the look on her face, was almost as good for Clarke's mood that day as it was for hers. It was akin to the old time prison guard telling an inmate who had been incarcerated for a decade that he was now a free man. Clarke had seen that happen in an ancient "movie" left over from times past.

Hera stood, cleared her throat, and said, "I guess you can show me my office, then." She smiled.

"The position also offers living quarters," said Clarke, as if what had already been said wasn't good enough.

Hera's office had glass walls with mini blinds that could be drawn for privacy, a large desk with comp machine as they were called, and the desk had drawers in it. Hera noted the luxuriousness of the desk chair, and the sleekness of the intercom unit that sat on the desk beside the comp unit. She pulled out the top drawer and saw a yellow pad of actual paper. It must have cost hundreds. She sat on the desk chair in front of Clarke, and rolled back and forth with pleasure, a feat that didn't get her a reprimand from him, who now, supposedly was her assistant.

A man in a three piece suit who exuded importance walked into Hera's office after a brief knock on the glass. "Are you getting situated ok?" He extended a hand toward Hera. She was confused for an instant, and then extended her hand at the big, important looking man. "I'm your new supervisor. We don't rule with an iron hand around here. You can relax. I'm Jeff, and if there is anything you need, my office is over there, at the end," he pointed. "I hope you'll join us all at CreekBack's Bar after work. Your vehicle has been moved to reserve parking. We took the liberty of moving it, for your safety."

Jeff handed Hera the standard half inch size chip containing the whereabouts of her car, and any other information she ought to have. "Your instruction manual for your new job has also been copied onto here. You probably ought to study it tonight. Tomorrow you will get it easy, but after that, we will expect you to be up to speed."

"Sir," asked Hera, perplexed.

"You can call me Jeff. What is it," he was slightly annoyed.

"What is it I do here?"

"It's on the chip. Study it. You'll have the rest of today and all day tomorrow to learn," he paused. "And then..." he didn't fill in the rest.

The luxurious air car landed oddly in the middle of one of the worst areas of town. A drunkard on a nearby bench observed as a foot extended from the side of the vehicle, booting out a huddled, sobbing, olive-skinned young woman, dressed in a makeshift shirt and skirt that had been fashioned from a fly eaten woolen blanket, its original gray color indiscernible among its filth. The woman had no shoes, and stood with her feet getting jabbed by the broken glass and thorns of the empty lot. She stood, and spat toward the closing door of the air car that was now leaving her behind to fend for herself. She walked, and the rage of a badly wronged good person protected her from an otherwise dangerous neighborhood. The pimps, thieves and rapists marveled at the nerve with which this woman delivered nasty retorts at their catcalls. They left her alone. She had snatched a gps device out of the vehicle, and she used it to finally get to the house of her cousin, located a mile past the bad neighborhood, but still in a poor area. The house had an unlocked gate, but in the yard were two pit bulls that would make quick work of any wannabe burglar. Hera opened the gate and walked in, and called the approaching two dogs by their names. They ran up to her ready to shred and eat the invader, but then became docile when they recognized her scent, even though she hadn't been at the house in several years.

Hera was a little awkward at the bar, not knowing her coworkers. A stocky, dark haired man introduced himself as Brian Wilkes. He offered to buy Hera a drink.

"Keep your money, Brian. I don't accept favors from men I've never met, and I don't give any favors, neither." Hera glared into the eye of the heavy-set man. Certain things Hera was uncertain about as a new employee, but this wasn't one of them.

"Aw, C'mon! Isn't this a bit early for a slap in the face?" The man stared back, and was apparently offended by Hera's directness.

She looked back toward her fellow employees, to whom she had barely been introduced, hoping for some support. And she realized they had left the bar. Without a word, Hera put payment on the bar, stood, and headed toward the door. As she walked toward her vehicle, the man followed.

Suddenly she found herself pinned to the side of her vehicle, being fondled, and her mouth was covered by slobbering lips. Hera bit Brian's protruding lower lip as hard as she could, and drew a gush of blood. She shoved him away, surprising herself with her strength. She stood, upright, and aimed a kick at his jaw. The impact rattled his head and sent a couple of teeth flying. She gave another sharp kick to the man's groin, and then as the man doubled over, Hera grabbed onto his head and twisted. The lesson in self defense her cousin had taught her now served her. The man lay on the ground and was having convulsions.

Breathing heavily from the exertion, Hera got into her air car and drove it back to the giant corporate headquarters that housed her new living quarters. She parked her vehicle in the area where she had been instructed, surprised that there were several feet between vehicles. She walked a short distance to a security gate, which identified her and opened without a hitch. No one was around.

Hera walked up to door 3011C, which was hers, and the automatic door identified her and opened up for her. She realized she had been given a somewhat luxurious apartment, with a good-sized kitchen, a refrigerator in which some food had been left, a room that doubled as a bedroom and living room that had a large soft sofa to sleep on. The unit had a bathroom with a coin operated shower, and a toilet and sink that apparently she could use at any time. Hera whirled around with glee. Without thinking, she put a hand into her pants pocket, and noticed the chip she had been given. She looked at it, and saw there was a 'player unit on a countertop that bordered the kitchen. She felt again in her pocket, and located a coin that would probably work for the shower. It was now or never. There would be no sleep for her that night; she needed to learn the essentials written on that chip for her first day on the job. It was already one in the morning, and she would need to report in at seven.

Hera's cousin Ed was a master of both intimidation and physical assault, when needed. He was a tall, stocky, African-American man unadorned by the body piercing and tattooing, who dressed simply but neatly. He could have been mistaken for a policeman; however, police forces were no longer used in this time period. And if they were, they wouldn't have chosen a large, aluminum baseball bat as their weapon of choice; Ed had it ready by his side. At the moment, he was making sure Hera got her fair chance of waiting in line for the corporate exam.

A man with a hopped up, well-worn, used combat robot foolishly decided to challenge Hera's place in line. Ed's reflexes and power proved better than the sophisticated weaponry of the robot; he demolished the rubberized and chrome-plated unit of offense within a moment, with the baseball bat. Its pieces lay twitching on the ground, sparking and smoking. Ed readied the bat at the owner of the formerly intact robot, and the man hastily chose the back of the line, three blocks back and continuing to grow.

When Hera reached the entrance to the three-story, dilapidated office building of yellow brick, she realized she was the last to be admitted. There was no time to give a hug to her cousin who departed, saying "Knock 'em dead and God bless!"

She exited the building after the three hour written exam, looked for Ed, and when spotting him, lit up in a big smile. Hera was confident she did extremely well on the exam. They returned to Ed's house in the aircar, and Ed's wife surprised them with a meal of pseudo spaghetti, made from scratch.

Hera sat in her office and realized she had a moment to check her makeup. She reached into the vinyl yellow tote bag donated by her cousin's wife, and retrieved a small mirror. Hera realized her skin was better after a week of having a bathroom with shower and sink. Her hand inadvertently touched the side of the printer unit, (rarely used, but handy some of the time) and it reported in its generic voice that it required another load of paper. Hera looked through the glass that bordered her office and spotted a stocky man in light blue overalls. She put a voice projector to her lips, and aimed it at the employee. "New paper for the second room," she said. She saw the man turn about, and she realized he wore a bandage on his lower lip, a neck brace and a dental appliance apparently intended to stabilize new teeth implants. His hair was black and medium length. It was the same man who she had fought with.

The man arrived at the doorway of Hera's office, holding a ream of paper, and she realized he could do nothing to her in the middle of the company's middle-exec offices.

"You don't have to worry any more about me," he said to her, as he gestured with the ream of paper. "The skirmish was caught by surveillance cam, and I was severely reprimanded. I was told to apologize to you. Nothing like this will happen again. If I try anything like it, I'm canned." Hera marveled at the fact that the immorality of what he had tried didn't enter into this person's formula, at any point. It was simply that he could get fired. "And good luck in your new position. I don't have to say that, and I mean it, sincerely. I could still buy you a drink, no strings attached this time."

"Please hand me that paper, and step no farther into this office," replied Hera. "And don't ever speak to me. I am not afraid of you."

"That's why you have a future at this company," said the man, ignoring her order not to speak. "Nothing scares you." He handed Hera the ream of paper and left.

Mother's Good Boy

By Zach Gasior

I peered longingly out the window. Snow was falling again, coating the lawn in a white blanket. I watched flake after flake tumble down, sticking to the windowpane as my breath fogged the glass. My sisters were rolling around waving their arms up and down wildly, creating perfect angelic forms in the weightless powder. I looked back at Mama and she smiled. She kept me in so I didn't get sick. She always looked out for me. That guy from over the fence was standing in the street, gazing at them as they played. He was so scary. He shuffled over through the snow and pushed his own hands up against the glass, so they were even with my own. I recoiled in fear as this man I didn't know came up to our window.

He looked down and shook his head slowly from side to side. I didn't know why he was shaking his head. He looked up and caught my eyes again. He had no hair and his nose was a bit crooked, twisted noticeably to the left like someone had hit him and broken it more than once. I peered into his eyes, but there was nothing there. Two empty sockets as black as the moonless night sky that set the backdrop for the playful event I had just witnessed.

I jumped back a bit, too scared to move any farther. But I knew if I didn't move, this man would get me and take me away. I cried out for my mama who was throwing tinsel onto the fresh cut evergreen that had only been standing in its rightful spot in the living room corner for three hours. But I couldn't make a sound. All I could do was look at that man and hope that I stayed safe. The man just kept staring with his horrific face pressed close to the window. Mama looked over at me and smiled. Her eyes shifted up and saw the man in the window. She screamed and fell backward. I jumped back toward her and grabbed a present from under the tree. With all the muscles I had, I threw it at that man. The present hit the window and I heard something break. He opened his mouth and the words he said floated through the window and caused my legs to buckle underneath me. As I collapsed to the floor, crying my little eyes out, all I could hear were those words:

"You've been a very bad boy..."

She was beautiful. The wedding had ended, but the magic of the evening had not. Her dress still sparkled radiantly as the moonlight poured into the car window. The scent of rose still wafted through the circulating air, reminding me that my last dime had gone into making this night perfect. All that was left now was my reward for being such a great boyfriend.

There was no traffic on the road. We were only seconds from her house and I knew that nothing could go wrong now. I looked over at her and sighed heavily. Her beautiful sky blue eyes caught my own and she smiled. That smile killed me a little inside. All I heard all night was how much she loved me and wanted our wedding to be next. That she was going to make sure I never needed any other girl in my life. There was no way she'd ever take me away from Mom. I knew I could do it again if I wanted to. She could be taken care of the same way as that creepy guy.

I looked back at the road and noticed that I was drifting too far toward the shoulder. My tire hit gravel. There was a crunch of rubber meeting rock as I tried to get back onto the road. I threw the wheel hard to the left and slammed down on the brake to lose some speed. The car made it out onto the asphalt, but the back end kept going where the wheel had told it. I needed to act fast if I was going to make sure nothing would happen to either of us. I hit the brake again, harder this time to stop my spinout. I succeeded, but it only escalated matters. The rear of the vehicle stopped going left and the whole thing went straight down the road.

The passenger door hit the pavement, but only for a few moments. Before I knew it, the driver side was kissing the pavement as well. Then the passenger, then the driver, then the passenger, then the driver. The car came to a stop after three barrel rolls down this abandoned stretch of road. Every ounce of glass was shattered. I could see the glimmer of moonlight as it caught the microscopic pieces that lay scattered all over the asphalt. I looked at her and saw she was unconscious. I reached over to touch her cheek and wake her up, but recoiled just as my fingers touched her flesh. Blood covered them all. That'll teach her. She'll never mess with my happiness again. I looked in my rearview mirror, which was now a handheld, and saw another vehicle coming down the road behind us.

The other car slowed down and came to a stop. A figure got out and walked up to the driver side window with a flashlight in his hand. He held it up high so the light could survey the extent of the damage done. I looked up at the face in the window. I was dazed, confused, and probably bleeding somewhere. I saw the man and felt that I must already be unconscious. He was bald, had a crooked nose, and no eyes. He stared at me with those empty sockets and shook his head. He opened his mouth and spoke to me. As I finally faded into complete darkness, all I could hear were his last words:

"You've been a very bad boy..."

The room was filled with thousands of balloons. Streamers of every color known to man were hung from corner to corner of our living room. A donkey with tails stuck all over its body was hanging up on the kitchen door. A three-tiered cake with a plastic statuette of each Power Ranger in a battle pose was standing on the corner table. My favorite, the Red Ranger, stood on the very top of the cake, protecting it from all of those relatives that would steal a taste of the butter cream frosting that I desired with every ounce of my being at this time of year.

Presents began to pile up on the coffee table at the center of the room. Boxes wrapped in an assortment of paper, with every possible design known to man, littered the whole central area. From Spider-Man to Santa Claus (someone couldn't

get any paper that was actually in season), they were all there, waiting for me to rip them to shreds and take possession of the wide assortment of goodies that lay just millimeters below their surface. I peeked around the corner of the couch, eyeing each package for a lingering second, taking a quick stock of what was there, analyzing both the shape and size of the package so that I might gain a glimmer of an idea as to what was inside of them.

Mama was in the kitchen getting dinner ready. The smell of granny's meatballs came wafting through the air, setting my taste buds on edge and getting the saliva worked up. Only one more hour until we could eat, and then only two more hours until presents. From what I could gather, an hour was exactly 18,722 minutes long. I hope I could last that long.

Daddy called me from the kitchen to come out into the backyard for another surprise. I ran as fast as I could to see what they had for me this time. Maybe it was a big kid's bike. Or a new pool to replace the one the neighbors' dog had popped last summer. As I reached the backyard, I saw the surprise. A man with shoes the same color as Aunt Pearl's lipstick, hair like a big carrot, and a suit so yellow that I thought I was looking into the sun (which mama told me was a bad thing to do) was blowing up a balloon the size of his head. Suddenly, the balloon got a little too big and let out an ear-splitting pop. The cousins around him giggled with delight at the accident that the man had caused. However, I started to cry. The loud noise had scared me so much that I just didn't know what else to do. Mama took me up in her arms and gave me a hug, consoling me and holding me close, protecting me until the tears simply became sniffles. Mama put me down and shook the man's hand. He put his arm around her and began to tickle her. Mama began to scream and I saw tears coming out of her eyes. I ran to the man as fast as my tiny legs would carry me. I gave the man three sharp kicks in the shin. He let go of Mama and I ran back to her. As I turned around to look at him, I wanted to let out a scream of pure terror, but nothing would come out.

All his hair had fallen to the ground around his floppy shoes. What had once been a big red ball was now a nose so crooked it looked like someone had grabbed it and twisted as hard as they could. But he had no eyes. I couldn't believe it. No eyes! Just two, lifeless black sockets, staring right into my soul, reaching down into my very core and pulling up every possible dreadful thing that I might do in my life. The terror was so overwhelming, that I started to collapse into a ball on the ground. As I dropped, I saw his mouth open and the man said something at last. While I lay there shaking and gasping, with tears streaming down my cheeks, too terrified to ever look up again, darkness began to overtake my consciousness, and all I could hear were his words:

"You've been a very bad boy..."

Mama looked down the staircase at me with a look of pure horror. She let out a sharp scream and began gasping for air. I didn't understand what was wrong. She always said that guy had scary eyes. That it kept looking at her like he was going to jump over the fence and attack her. He had made that Christmas so awful. He had been touching her at my birthday. He was so gross and so scary to Mom. I just wanted to help her. I wanted to protect Mom, just like she always protected me. To watch out for her, always make sure that nothing could ever hurt her. So, I made sure he could never get to her again.

I was still clenching something in my left fist. I looked down at him and tried to figure out what was wrong with Mom. The guy was dripping blood all over the new rug. Maybe that's what Mom was upset about. He was just in our yard. I don't think anyone asked him to come over. So he must have been there to hurt Mom like she thought.

The axe had hit him square in the back of the head. It was just lying out there, waiting for me to use it and put an end to him. I just knew that would work. It was sharp, and would go in far enough to get him. He had been using it in his yard. So now he would never lose it. I'd seen it done last night. After Mom had gone to bed, I watched a movie. She wouldn't have liked it if she knew. Once he stopped moving, I took care of what really scared Mom. His hands were still lying in the backyard somewhere. I could throw those back over the fence later. I opened my left hand and held them up to the light in the hallway. The corneas shimmered with a residual moistness from the tears he had been shedding as he was writhing in agony. The irises had become a cold gray, completely dead in my hand.

I held them up and showed them to Mom. She would be proud of me, I know she would. I had made sure she was safe at last. So why was she so scared now? Mom flew down the stairs and slapped my hand. The eyes fell to the floor and rolled underneath the big clock we had. She grabbed my shoulders and began shaking me. She was mad, I knew that. But I didn't know why. Hadn't I done a good job at protecting her? Wasn't I just doing what I was told? She stopped shaking me and wrapped her arms around me in what was the biggest hug anyone had ever given me. As she brought my head into her shoulder and began to stroke my hair, she whispered in my ear:

"You'll always be Mama's good boy..."

I could hear them talking about me. I opened my eyes slowly and saw them both, standing there across the room. He had a bruise over the bridge of his nose. She was trying to tend to it, with some ice perhaps. He just kept cringing in pain and looked at me with a glare meant to kill me. His nose was crooked. It must have been broken. There were teeth marks on his head. Maybe if he had some hair, he wouldn't have been cut. His white coat had a lot of blood on it. He probably got hurt somewhere else too. I tried to move my arms, but the long sleeves of my jacket were buckled tight. They'd never let them go again. I knew that. He walked over to me and looked down into my eyes.

"You've been a very bad boy," he said to me.

I looked up at him and smiled. I knew he was wrong. But where was I? Where was Mother? She would come for me. Then we'd be a family again. I knew it. I hadn't done anything wrong. The man next door scared Mother with his eyes.

That girl thought she loved me, thought she was better than Mother, thought she could take me away from her. Neither of them knew that Mother and I were inseparable. I had to protect her.

He walked back over to her and they began talking about me again. I hope he came back so I could show him that he couldn't keep me away from Mother. They both looked over at me and shook their heads. She left the room with a sigh. As he reached the doorway, he looked back at me and let out a deep exhale.

"You've been a very bad boy," he said again.

"I'm not a bad boy. I'll always be her good boy."

I'm not a bad boy. I'll always be her good boy. She told me so herself. I knew it wouldn't be long before she told me so again.

I'll always be her good boy.

I'll always be her good boy.

I'll always be Mother's good boy...

Another Chance

By Janice Earnshaw

Jimmy rolled over in bed and groaned. His head hurt. His body felt heavy. Maybe he was coming down with something. It was light out so it must be time to get up. He wondered why his mom hadn't been in yet to get him out of bed. Groaning again, he stood up. His feet hurt. He was definitely coming down with something. That could be good because he wasn't really ready for the math test today. The beer party last night probably didn't help any either. He trudged off to the bathroom to do his morning routine.

As he stepped into the shower he looked down at his feet. What the...?? Something very strange was going on here. He backed out of the shower and stepped over to look at himself in the bathroom mirror.

"No way!" he shouted, horrified by what he saw.

He was fat! His face was so puffy and wrinkled, he could hardly recognize himself. Frantically, he began patting his body. His shoulders were hairy. His fingers looked like sausages. His belly stuck out like he was pregnant. His legs and feet were swollen and purple. What happened last night?

"Jim!" called a voice he didn't recognize. "Hurry up. You've got a doctor's appointment this morning."

Who was that? He wrapped himself in a towel and peeked around the corner of the bathroom door. There, in the hallway, stood a woman with frizzy blonde hair, looking annoyed and smoking a cigarette. Suddenly he craved one himself, but he didn't know why.

"Who are you?" he blurted out. The woman stopped smoking long enough to look at him incredulously.

"Jim, are you OK?" she asked, frowning at him.

"Yes, of course I'm OK," he said angrily. "I just want to know who you are, and what you're doing in my house!" Retreating back to the bathroom, he slammed the door and locked it.

"Jim," she said quietly from the other side of the door, "Something is very wrong. You have to open the door. We're going straight to the doctor. Now." She began to cry.

He stared at himself in the bathroom mirror and tried to make sense of what was happening. Who was that woman? How did she know him? Why was she in his house? Whose house was this? Why did he look like this? When he went to sleep last night, he

was seventeen years old, a football star, and dating the hottest cheerleader, Sheila Conlan. The other guys all wished they could be him. He closed his eyes, willing this nightmare to go away. When he opened them, nothing had changed. Maybe this was a time warp. If it was, he just wanted to get back to real time.

"Jim, please!" she entreated again. He sighed. If he was in a time warp he wasn't going to get back to real time locked in the bathroom. He opened the door and the woman rushed in to hug him. She drew back and framed his face with her hands. She smelled awful, like stale coffee and cigarettes, but her eyes were full of love and concern.

"Jim, you don't look very well. I'm afraid you've had a stroke. We have to get you to the doctor right now. Can you walk?" Gently, she led him out of the bathroom.

On the way to the doctor's office, between bouts of tears, she explained to him that she was his wife, Sheila. They married in 2014, twenty-four years ago. They had been high school sweethearts. Had been? He was married to hot Sheila Conlan? What happened to her? What happened to him?

"Jim, why can't you remember? I'm so afraid!" she fretted.

The doctor he didn't recognize stood beside the examination table, arms crossed, frowning at him. "Jim, we've talked about this before. You've got to change your lifestyle."

Change his lifestyle? There was nothing wrong with his lifestyle. He said as much to the doctor, who smiled and shook his head.

"What's your favorite food?"

"Chicken wings."

"Favorite drink?"

"Beer."

"Favorite sport?"

"Football!" Jim grinned. He was a defensive end on the school team because he could run, and he was big. No, wait a minute. That was before...whatever this was. Did he play football now?

The doctor snorted. "Jim, you couldn't play football to save your life! Look at you! You're morbidly obese. If your blood sugar goes any higher I'm putting you on insulin shots. You can't walk more than twenty feet without your calves cramping up. Quite frankly, I'm afraid to put you on the treadmill for a stress test. You smoke like a chimney, and your diet is brutal. You're a heart attack waiting to happen. I can't help you until you decide to help yourself. It's up to you now." With those ominous words, the doctor left the room.

Jim sat on the examination table and thought about what the doctor said. He did love chicken wings and beer, but he didn't know when he started smoking. Morbidly obese? He glanced down at himself. He couldn't really argue with that. He was disgusting. Suddenly he craved a cigarette. He stepped off the table and began to put on his clothes.

Back at the house, Sheila showed him his favorite chair in the TV room, and brought him a beer, two corn dogs, cigarettes and an ashtray. Did he spend a lot of time

in this chair? It felt like it. It fit him perfectly, and there were stains on the arms, like someone had spilled more than a few drinks. Suddenly he felt a little panicky. What happened to his past? Why couldn't he remember it? If he had been married twenty-four years, he must be in his forties now. He felt sixty. Thoughts whirled around in his head as he tried to sort it all out. He was so tired.

When he opened his eyes it was dark, and he had to pee. Desperately he wished himself back to real time, but he knew he was still stuck in this freaky time warp. He levered himself out of the chair. It was hard to get up. His body felt so heavy and sore. Slowly he lumbered down the hall to the bathroom. As he fumbled with his zipper, he began to feel a pain in his chest, like heartburn. Maybe he shouldn't have eaten those corn dogs. He burped, but the pain didn't go away. It was moving, growing. It started to shoot down his left arm and up into his neck. He broke out in a cold sweat. He couldn't catch his breath and when he tried to call for help all that came out was a tiny wheeze. He was unconscious before he hit the bathroom floor.

He heard voices.

"Jim Malone. Yes. Massive heart attack. Only forty-four."

He was in a hospital bed and an IV tube was in his arm. Yellow roses stood in a vase on the stand beside the bed. Sheila slept in a chair beside him. She looked so tired and old. Her once shiny blonde hair was dry and brittle. In real time, they were the couple everyone wanted to be – athletic, attractive, popular. Their whole lives were ahead of them, shiny with promise and possibilities. Again he wished fiercely that he

could get back there. If only he had a chance to do over, he would change things. He would take care of himself, and he would make Sheila take care of herself too. They would have an amazing life together. They would live until they were ninety, run marathons, and climb mountains, inspire other people to be healthy and strong. A tear slipped down his cheek as he thought of all that he had wasted. He drifted off into sleep.

"Jimmy, wake up! You'll be late for school! Don't you have that big math test today?"

He opened his eyes and saw his familiar room. The floor was covered with discarded clothes. His math text was open on the floor beside the bed. He must have fallen asleep studying.

Suddenly he remembered! Almost afraid to look, he slowly pulled back the covers to look at his body. With a whoop, he bounded joyfully out of bed. He was back to real time! Gone were the swollen, sore feet, the big belly and aching legs. His body felt SO good. How had he not noticed that before?

His mother had his favorite breakfast ready. Every morning he ate the same thing. He looked at the greasy eggs, bacon, and white toast slathered with butter. He got up, walked across the kitchen, and scraped his breakfast into the trash.

"Never again," he said to himself. "Mom!" he called, "Buy some yogurt. Fat free."

He went to the fridge, pulled out an apple and took a big bite. As its tart sweetness filled his mouth he walked out the front door and into the sunshine.