



Journey Planet #59—The Hugo Awards

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Please join me in welcoming Jean Martin to Team Journey Planet! I have missed working with her since our turn on *Science Fiction San Francisco* in the dim dark past. She's a blast and I of all the people I haven't seen since *The Before Times*, she's one of the ones I've missed chatting with most.

As is our custom, we've back-loaded our year publishing, so we released one early in the year, and it's looking like 4 late in the year. Go figure?

Big news is I've got a new job, I'm an Archivist, and we've all made it through the heart of COVID at least relatively unscathed. Sadly, the world lost Erle Korshak earlier this year. He was around forever, and I never thought there would be a time we'd be without him. We're down to a single attendee of the first WorldCon still with us—Bob Madle. I'm glad I've gotten to meet so many First Fandom members.

A Hugo issue used to be tradition for *The Drink Tank*, but not this year. The long time-frame, mixed with my own employment scenarios and the like, meant that the Handicapping the Hugos issue wasn't gonna happen (and, for the record, I was 39.7 percent over the 7 years I ran that issue)

Mo did all the art with her article, and I have been playing with DeepDreamGenerator and ArtBreeder at the same time working with my collage. It's the best a guy who can't draw can manage!

We're going to be doing One Day on Journey Planet, an issue done in one day, November 27th. Keep an eye on Facebook and the like! We'll have prompts and other fun things that will make it a little easier for you to come along and join us!



Diversity in Hugo History

By Cheryl Morgan

Fannish memory tends to be fairly short. Each year, when a new Hugo controversy erupts, people tend to assume that whatever caused it has never happened before. While it is certainly true that the Hugo Finalists are more diverse now than they have ever been, particularly in matters of ethnicity, they have not always been the cock forest that people assume. That assumption can erase some remarkable people, and it is those people I intend to write about here.

Mostly I'm going to focus on the fan Hugos, partly because it is what I know most about, and partly because those are the categories where the biggest controversies tend to arise. However, before I dive into that, I want to briefly mention Judy-Lynn Del Rey.

Judy-Lynn Benjamin was a successful editor in her own right before marrying Lester Del Rey and, with him, setting up Del Rey Books. She was well respected by writers such as Philip K. Dick and Isaac Asimov. She won a Locus Award for Best Anthology in 1976, and a posthumous Hugo for Best Editor in 1986. Lester refused to accept the Hugo, saying that Judy-Lynn deserved to have been honoured when she was alive. She was born with dwarfism.

On now to the fan Hugos. I think that one of the reasons we tend to assume a lack of diversity in the past is a long desert period at the end of the 20th Century. Between 1992 and 2003 Best Fanzine was won by one of these: *Mimosa* (eds. Richard & Nicki Lynch), *File 770* (ed. Mike Glycer) or *Ansible* (ed. Dave Langford). Between 1984 and 2007 Best Fan Writer was won by either Mike Glycer or Dave Langford. Langford had an unprecedented 19-year winning streak. No wonder people talk of “the usual suspects.”

And yet, further back in time, things were quite different. The first thing that you notice is that fanzines have long been a group effort. Langford and Glycer might have been sole editors, but many other successful fanzines were created by teams of three or four people.

The other thing that you notice is the women. The first woman to win a Hugo of any sort was Elinor Busby who was part of the editorial team for *Cry of the Nameless*, the Best Fanzine winner in 1960. She was followed by three other fan editors: Pat Lupoff (*Xero*, 1963), Juanita Coulson (*Yandro*, 1965) and Felice Rolfe

(Niekas, 1967). The first woman to win a Hugo in a fiction category was Anne McCaffrey whose *Weyr Search* tied for Best Novella with Philip Jose Farmer's *Riders of the Purple Wage* in 1968.

Something that is notable about these early women Hugo winners is that several of them were married to other members of the editorial teams. (Rofle, the exception, was not married to her co-editor, Ed Meskeys). It is easy for misogynists to assume that they were simply the little lady who made the tea on the editorial team. Or at least it would be until you read their writing.

Nowadays the history of science fiction fandom is a subject for academic study. Kate Heffner, who has a PhD in *Women's Participation in 20th Century Science (Fiction) Clubs*, has written about Coulson's work for *Femizine*, an early feminist fanzine published from 1954 to 1960. The women who produced it described themselves as "femme fans," proudly distinguishing themselves from both male fans and from the non-fannish wives of those male fans. Coulson claimed that she'd rather have a duplicator than a dishwasher.

The Best Fan Writer category was rather less friendly to women, being one that required a single winner rather than a team. I won it in 2009. Prior to that, only one other woman had won. Her name was Susan Wood. She won in 1974, 1977 (tied with Richard E. Geis) and in 1981. She also won Best Fanzine in 1973 for *Energumen*, which she co-edited with her husband, Mike Glicksohn.

Wood was, by all accounts, a remarkable person. Her middle name was Joan, making her an actual SJW. She is credited with organising the first feminist panel at a Worldcon (MidAmericon in 1976) which, among other things, helped lead to the creation of WisCon. Outside fandom she was a lecturer in literature at the University of British Columbia. One of her students was a young man called William Gibson.

Best Fan Artist is a category I know rather less about, but it too featured some women in the early years. The first woman to win it was Alicia Austin who won in 1971. She went on to have a successful career as a professional artist and was Artist Guest of Honor at ConFrancisco in 1993. Victo-



HUGO AWARD SM

ria Poyser won the category twice in 1981 and 1982, and she too has had a successful professional career. LGBT+ identities are harder to discern because it was much less safe to be out and queer in the early years of the Hugos. However, one notable case has come to light. I have occasionally described myself as the first openly trans person to win a Hugo. I use that “openly” for two main reasons. Firstly, given the nature of some of his fiction, I have a strong suspicion that a certain Robert A. Heinlein spent some time questioning his gender. *I Will Fear No Evil*, in particular, bears a strong resemblance to the “forced feminisation” narratives popular in some parts of the trans community.

Secondly, I am definitely not the first trans person to win a Hugo. That honour probably goes to Vaughn Bodé, who won Best Fan Artist in 1969. Bodé’s passion for exploring their feminine side wasn’t fully developed at the time. Biographies suggest that Bodé did not start cross-dressing until 1970 after they became friends with fellow artist, Jeffrey Catherine Jones, who did go on to transition. Bodé tried taking oestrogen for a while, but apparently stopped because it affected their erections, which is why I have chosen to use non-binary pronouns. They did come out in some of their later comic work, describing themselves as a “transvestite,” that being the language of the day. This work appears to have been unpublished until after their death in 1975.

A queer identity and writing about queer themes were clearly no bar to success in the Hugos as a writer. Samuel R. Delany was a Hugo finalist on seven occasions from 1967 to 1970, finally winning in 1970 with the short story “Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones.” His 1977 novel, *Triton*, was a Nebula finalist. It features a black trans man as a major supporting character and a main character whose arc proves conclusively that gender transition will not cure you of being an Incel.

While queer fans were mostly reluctant to be out in the mid-20th Century, some did go public and one place it was comparatively safe to do so was in San Francisco. Jerry Jacks was a prominent member of the Bay Area fan community. He chaired two Westercons in 1971 and 1973. He also chaired a small con in 1970 at which he is credited, along with his head of programming, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, with introducing multi-track programming to North American conventions. Jacks never made it to the Hugo ballot, though he did edit the first two issues of *Winnie*, the magazine of the Peninsula Science Fantasy Association. Yarbro, of course, went on to a successful career as an author and has an impressive collection of lifetime achievement awards. Jacks died in 1986, one of the many victims of the AIDS epidemic.

My guess is that a more detailed dive into Hugo history will turn up other examples of diversity among the finalists. I have mainly focused on winners, and there are plenty of non-winning finalists to check out. Also I know next to nothing about the lives of most of these people. Hopefully people with far more knowledge of fan history than I have will add to the above. I’m very pleased with the amount of diversity on the Hugo ballot these days and hope it will get even better. But let’s not forget those early pioneers.

Editor’s Note: Cheryl Morgan has been nominated for several Hugo Awards and has won four: Best Fanzine in 2004 for Emerald City, Best Fan Writer in 2009, and joint wins with the rest of the Clarkesworld team for Best Semiprozine in 2010 and 2011. She and her colleagues who produced ConZealand Fringe are currently nominated in the 2021 Hugo Awards Best Related Work category.

The Heights of Humor and the Depth of Grief: "Ill Met in Lankhmar" by Fritz Leiber by Cora Buhlert

When I saw the call for submissions for this issue of *Journey Planet*, I immediately knew which past Hugo winner I wanted to write about, namely "Ill Met in Lankhmar" by Fritz Leiber, winner of the 1971 Hugo Award (and the Nebula Award) for Best Novella.

Why this particular story? For starters, it is definitely my favourite Hugo-winning novella and probably my favourite Hugo winner of all time. It is a brilliant story that will make you laugh out loud and sob like a baby, sometimes both at the same time.

But "Ill Met in Lankhmar" is also significant in other ways. For even though it was already the sixth Hugo for Fritz Leiber (he would go on to win one more Hugo as well as two Retro Hugos), it was the first and only Hugo win for Fafhrd and Gray Mouser, Leiber's most popular series. Furthermore, "Ill Met in Lankhmar" is also the only Hugo win ever for the sword and sorcery genre (a term coined by none other than Fritz Leiber himself in 1961), unless you count the two Hugo wins for the sword and sorcery fanzine *Amra*.

"Ill Met in Lankhmar" was first published in the April 1970 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, though like most readers post-1970, I first encountered the story in *Swords and Deviltry*, the first of six paperbacks collecting the adventures of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser.

So who are Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser? Fafhrd is a brawny but good-natured barbarian from the far north of the world of Nehwon ("nowhen" written backwards). He's a trained skald, great fighter, excellent storyteller and heavy drinker. Physically, Gray Mouser is the exact opposite of Fafhrd. He's short, slight, comes from the south of Nehwon and always dresses in gray clothes. He's a master thief, excellent swordsman and occasionally dabbles in magic. Gray Mouser is also one of the comparatively few characters of colour found in mid-century SFF, for he is repeatedly described as brown-skinned and hails from Nehwon's equivalent of the Middle East.

Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser are best friends forever. Together they travel the world, have lots of adventures and survive by their wits, their blades and by stealing from those who can afford it. Whenever someone laments the lack of SFF focussed on strong friendships, I inevitably point them at the Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories. And yes, Fafhrd and Mouser really are "just" friends. Fritz Leiber lived long enough to come across slash fiction featuring his characters and decisively settled that question in "The Mouser Goes Below", the very last Fafhrd and Gray Mouser story, published in 1988, by pointing out that Fafhrd and Gray Mouser have never been sexually attracted to each other, though there's nothing wrong with same sex attraction. Unfortunately, Leiber decides to prove the latter point by inserting a cringeworthy lesbian sex scene.

Fritz Leiber and his friend Harry Otto Fischer created Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser in the mid 1930s for an early roleplaying game played via exchanging letters detailing the adventures of the characters. Fafhrd was Leiber's alter-ego, Mouser was Fischer's. Both Leiber and Fischer eventually transitioned to chronicling the adventures of their characters in fiction, though due to the vagaries of life, only one and a half of the more than thirty stories published about the pair are by Fischer, the rest are Leiber's work.

The Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories were published over a period of almost fifty years, between 1939 and 1988. Our genre has many series, but there are very few series by the same author that span such a long period of time. And so the stories not only chronicle the adventures of Fafhrd and Gray Mouser from their late teens to approximately their mid forties, but also demonstrate how the SFF genre has changed and evolved from the pulp era to the 1980s with regard to the depiction of women, characters of colour and LGBTQ characters as well as attitudes towards sexual content. This alone makes the Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories relevant to scholars of the genre, because they allow us to watch the genre change in real time. However, the series is not solely of interest to genre historians. It is also a lot of fun.

The Fafhrd and Gray Mouser series can be divided into three distinct periods. The early period begins in 1939 with the publication of "Two Sought Adventure" in John W. Campbell's fantasy magazine *Unknown* and lasts through *Unknown*'s demise in 1943 and scattered appearance of the pair in various venues in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The middle period ranges from 1959, when Cele Goldsmith-Lalli, editor of *Fantastic*, rescued Fafhrd and Gray Mouser from oblivion and published a run of new stories featuring the pair, until 1970. This middle period coincides with the second sword and sorcery boom and the general fantasy boom triggered by the (unauthorised) publication of *Lord of the Rings* in paperback in 1965. The Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories were among the many fantasy works to be republished in paperback during this time, introducing the characters to new audiences.

The late period, finally, lasts from 1973 right up to the publication of the final story in 1988. The later stories are darker and gloomier, as Fafhrd and Gray Mouser – and their creator – deal with aging, grief and disability.

The middle period is generally considered the highpoint of the series. And "Ill Met in Lankhmar" is the capstone of this period. It also answered a question that had gone unanswered since the pair first appeared in print in 1939, namely just how did Fafhrd and Gray Mouser meet. And so "Ill Met in Lankhmar" chronicles how Fafhrd and Gray Mouser meet the most important person in their lives, namely each other, on the day that they lose everything for the second time in the space of a few months.

A word of warning: I will spoil the novella in the following, because it is difficult to discuss the story without spoilers. Nonetheless, if you want to read "Ill Met in Lankhmar" without foreknowledge, do so now and then come back later.

"Ill Met in Lankhmar" opens with two thieves on their way back from a heist in the city of Lankhmar, setting of most of the Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories. However, these two thieves are not Fafhrd and Gray Mouser but two members of Lankhmar's Thieves' Guild (a concept that Fritz Leiber introduced in the early story "Thieves' House" in 1943) named Slevyas and Fissif.

Fafhrd and Gray Mouser show up soon thereafter, having independently decided to attack and rob the two thieves at exactly the same spot. It is there and then, standing over the unconscious bodies of their victims, that Fafhrd and Mouser fall in friendship at first sight. They promptly decide to team up and split the loot "sixty-sixty", as Fafhrd suggests, math not being his strong point. Their newfound partnership is further strengthened, when Fafhrd and Mouser find themselves fighting three thugs the Thieves' Guild sent to guard Fissif and Slevyas and the loot. However, Fafhrd and Gray Mouser miss that Fissif and Slevyas had another escort, an intelligent rat named Slivikin, familiar of Hristomilo, a wizard in the employ of the Thieves' Guild. This oversight will come back to haunt them.

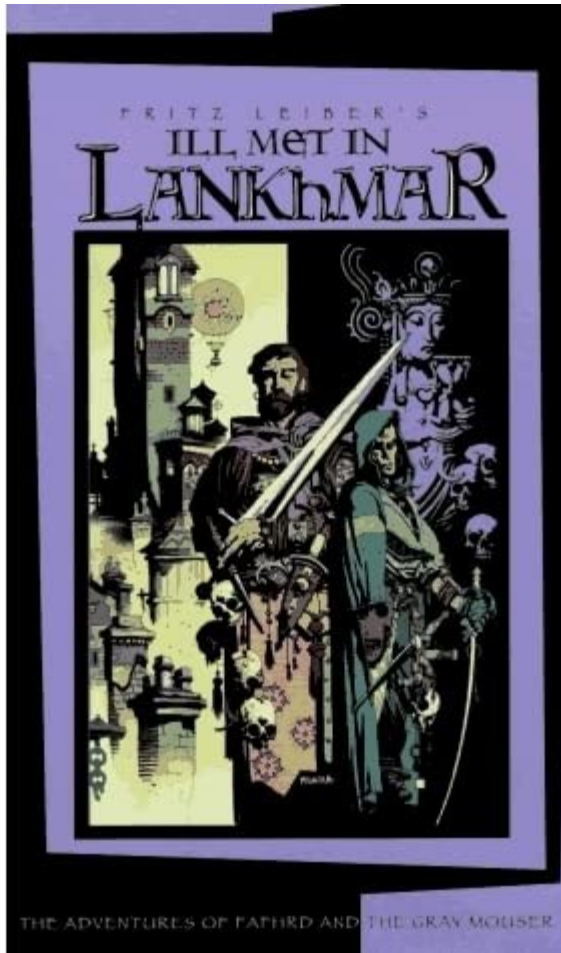
A successful heist and a new friendship calls for celebration and so the pair get pick up Fafhrd's girlfriend Viana and head for the apartment Mouser shares with his girlfriend Ivrian. Fafhrd and Mouser are young at this point – Fafhrd is eighteen and while Mouser's exact age is never specified, he's around the same age – and very much in love with their respective paramours. Nonetheless, it quickly becomes clear that neither relationship is particularly healthy.

Ivrian is the daughter of a villainous Duke who murdered Mouser's mentor, the wizard Glavas Rho, and tried to kill Mouser as well, until Mouser and Ivrian turned the tables on him. As shown in the 1962 story "The Unholy Grail", Ivrian is a survivor of physical and possibly sexual abuse and deeply traumatised. Mouser's response to his girlfriend's trauma is to lock Ivrian away to protect her from the world. Indeed, Mouser's ridiculously luxurious apartment, furnished with stolen carpets, draperies and candles, is very much a golden cage. And just in case anybody does not get it, Mouser has even stolen two songbirds in a literal golden cage for his Ivrian.

Fafhrd's girlfriend Viana is a far more worldly character. She is several years older than Fafhrd, an actress moonlighting as a thief. To Fafhrd, Viana represents the allure of civilisation and induced him to leave overbearing mother and the repressive matriarchal society of his home village, as told in "The Snow Women", Fafhrd's origin story, which was also published in April of 1970, albeit in *Fantastic*. Viana not only introduces Fafhrd to a life of crime, but also drags him into her personal feud with the Thieves' Guild of Lankhmar. Because the Thieves' Guild is not only sexist and bars women from membership – and indeed, it is no accident that both "The Snow Women" and "Ill Met in Lankhmar" were published in 1970, at the height of second wave feminism and the battle over the Equal Rights Amendment – but also punishes freelance thieving by death. This is why the Thieves' Guild murdered Viana's previous (female) partner-in-crime. Viana wants revenge and Fafhrd is the one who will get it for her.

Fafhrd is satisfied with stealing from the Thieves' Guild – and indeed, both Fafhrd and Mouser are courting death merely be working as freelance thieves. Viana, however, wants more. She wants to take the Thieves' Guild down. The romantic and naïve Ivrian sides with Viana – especially since these two very different women strike up a friendship as quickly as their male partners. And so Viana and Ivrian persuade Fafhrd and Gray Mouser, who are both very drunk by now, to infiltrate the Thieves' Guild headquarters.

Up to this point, "Ill Met in Lankhmar" has been a frothy and light-hearted tale full of delightful banter between the brand-new best buddies Fafhrd and Gray Mouser and their respective girlfriends. However, once Fafhrd and Gray Mouser leave Mouser's cozy apartment behind, the story takes a much darker turn.



The gathering doom becomes tangible in the form of Lankhmar's ever-present smog – the foremost city of Nehwon has a serious air pollution problem – literally coming together to form a dark cloud over Mouser's apartment, while Fafhrd and Mouser note in wonder that they can see the stars, a rarity in Lankhmar.

Fafhrd and Gray Mouser infiltrate Thieves' House, headquarters of the Thieves' Guild, by disguising themselves as beggars. They explore Thieves' House and witness the guild sorcerer Hristomilo and his familiar, the rat Slivikin, conduct a sinister death ritual, before they are caught by Krovas, grandmaster of the Thieves' Guild himself. It seems our heroes are doomed, but Gray Mouser manages to bluff his way through the interrogation that follows. Finally, the pair make a daring escape.

By this point in the story, both Fafhrd and Mouser and the readers are convinced that the worst danger is over and that our heroes have gotten away scot-free. So Fafhrd and Gray Mouser head home to Vlana and Ivrian to brag about their exploits. And this is when "Ill Met in Lankhmar" takes an abrupt turn into pure horror.

The dread gradually mounts as Fafhrd and Mouser find the door to the apartment locked and bolted and the two women not responding to calls. Once they finally open the door, they find Mouser's cozy nest in disarray and overrun by rats. But things are about to get even worse, for once our heroes

have chased away the rats, they find the remains of their lovers, strangled to death and partially devoured by rats, described as graphically as anything found in a horror novel.

At this point, both our heroes and the readers also realise the true significance of the mysterious ritual they watched Hristomilo perform, a ritual that was actually the murder of Vlana and Ivrian.

Overcome by grief, Fafhrd and Gray Mouser decide to take revenge on the Thieves' Guild. This time, they storm rather than infiltrate Thieves' House and kill both Hristomilo and the rat Slivikin, using Vlana's silver dagger as a weapon. Though they only kill the sorcerer and his familiar and leave the rest of the thieves alone. For unlike many other protagonists residing at the intersection between heroic and dark fantasy, Fafhrd and Mouser will kill, if necessary, but they're not killers.

The novella ends with Fafhrd and Gray Mouser leaving the city of Lankhmar behind, vowing never to return. It's a vow they will not keep, for the bulk of the more than thirty Fafhrd and Mouser stories are set in Lankhmar.

"Ill Met in Lankmar" oscillates between the light-hearted adventure of the first half and the darkness and horror of the second. It is far from the only SFF story which veers from humorous fantasy into graphic horror halfway through. However, "Ill Met in Lankmar" is the only one that works. For most stories, which abruptly change direction only leave the reader with whiplash.

Leiber, on the other hand, pulls off the balancing act between humour and horror, probably because the banter and levity of the first half of the story is steadily interspersed with signs of impending doom. The horrific deaths of Vlana and Ivrian are a gut punch, but they do not come out of nowhere. What is more, the very reason for Vlana's quest for revenge on the Thieves' Guild – a quest that gets both her and the completely innocent Ivrian killed in the most horrific way possible – shows that the sword of Damocles in the form of getting murdered by the Thieves' Guild for freelance thieving is also hanging over Fafhrd's and Mouser's heads.

For a subgenre that is often considered pure entertainment and adventure, a remarkable number of sword and sorcery stories deal with trauma, grief and recovery. This theme show up in C.L. Moore's Jirel of Joiry stories, Michael Moorcock's Elric stories, Charles Saunders' Imaro stories and the tales of Karl Edward Wagner's Kane. Even Robert E. Howard's Conan the Cimmerian deals with grief and loss in "Queen of the Black Coast". The Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories sit on the lighter end of the sword and sorcery spectrum and yet a lot of their adventures deal with grief, loss and trauma. "Ill Met in Lankmar" is one of those stories.

It is not necessary to have read the two solo origin stories "The Snow Women" and "The Unholy Grail" before reading "Ill Met", though they shed more light on Fafhrd and Mouser and their respective backgrounds. In "The Snow Women", a young Fafhrd not only has to deal with the loss of his father – who, it is implied, was murdered by his mother – but also with the stifling society in which he grows up and from which he escapes by the end of that story. Meanwhile, Mouser finds his mentor and the closest thing to a father figure he had brutally murdered in "The Unholy Grail" and nearly loses his life and his soul in the quest to avenge him.

But Fafhrd and Mouser are not the only ones experiencing trauma in those prequel stories. Ivrian is a survivor of physical and possibly sexual abuse at the hands of her father, while Vlana is dealing with grief caused by the murder of her friend and partner-in-crime (and possibly more, since Leiber's stories frequently feature lesbian and bisexual characters) at the hands of the Thieves' Guild, a grief which sets her on a quest for revenge that will eventually cost her own life.

Chronologically, "The Unholy Grail" and "The Snow Women" take place only a few months before "Ill Met in Lankmar". This means that at the opening of "Ill Met", Fafhrd and Mouser have both lost everything – their home, their family and the future they thought they had – and are just in the process of rebuilding their lives in a new city, when they loose everything again on the night of their fateful meeting. And yes, it is ironic that the best thing that ever happened to Fafhrd and Gray Mouser – meeting each other – occurs on the worst night of their lives. Because at their heart, the Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories are an ode to lifelong friendship (and were born out of the lifelong friendship between Fritz Leiber and Harry Otto Fischer), which even outlasts many romantic relationships.

Even though Vlana and Ivrian only appear in two of the more than thirty Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories, they nonetheless cast a long shadow over the series. Because Vlana and Ivrian are not quickly forgotten – indeed, Fafhrd and Mouser spend years mourning their first loves and are literally haunted by their ghosts at one point.

Fritz Leiber himself was no stranger to loss and grief, for 1969 Jonquil, his wife of more than thirty years, died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of only 62. "Ill Met in Lankhmar" was published in April 1970, i.e. Leiber wrote the story around the time his wife died. Like Fafhrd and Gray Mouser, Leiber was plunged into grief and alcoholism. He also abruptly left the Los Angeles, where he and Jonquil had lived for years, and moved to San Francisco.

Fafhrd and Gray Mouser eventually come to terms with their loss and find a home, new partners and even children they never knew they had in the final few stories written in the late 1970s and 1980s. So did their author, for Leiber managed to overcome his alcoholism, remarried and apparently lived a peaceful life until his death in 1992.

Short fiction Hugo winners tend to fall out of print quicker than the novel winners. "Ill Met in Lankhmar", however, has been almost consistently in print since 1970 and you can still easily find the novella in the collection *Swords and Deviltry* or the *First Book of Lankhmar* Gollancz Fantasy Masterworks omnibus edition. If you've been intrigued by this article, go out and read the actual story. Trust me, you're in for a treat.

The Fafhrd and Gray Mouser collections are in chronological rather than publication order, so the first collection opens with the two solo prequels, "The Snow Women" and "The Unholy Grail". You can skip those – and indeed, "The Snow Women" is one of the weaker stories in the series – and start with "Ill Met" instead. If you're like me, you will then want to continue reading your way through the whole series.

A word of warning: The Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories were published between 1939 and 1988, so like all older SFF, they do contain the occasional problematic bits. Thankfully, there's very little racism compared to many stories from the same era and Leiber was actually progressive in matters of sexual orientation and included LGBTQ characters in his stories long before others did. However, the sexual revolution did not do Leiber good and so the later Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories from the mid 1970s on contain some cringe-worthy or downright squicky sex scenes.

However, if you can overlook the fact that these stories are between thirty or eighty years old and works of their time, read them and prepare to meet two fascinating characters and experience one of the best friendships ever depicted in SFF.



Interview with Hugo-Award Winning Artist Maurine Starkey By Jean Martin

Maurine Starkey is an artist based in the San Francisco Bay Area. She has been nominated four times for a Hugo Award for Best Fan Artist and won in 2012. I had the honor to ask her about her background as an artist as well as how she feels about the Hugos in general and her winning one specifically. She also shared some of her wonderful art for inclusion with this article.

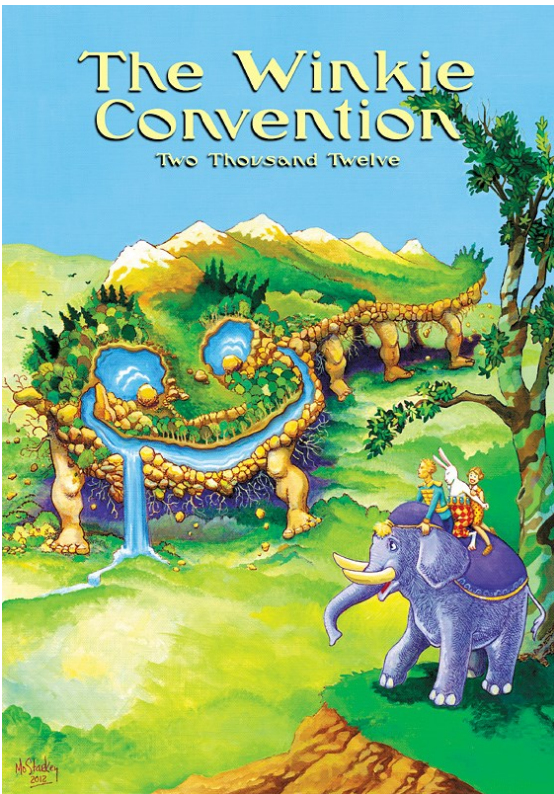
Jean Martin: How did you get started as an artist? Who are your main influences and what inspires you to create art?

Maureen Starkey: I never thought of being anything else but an artist. I wanted to experience all phases of art, painting, drawing, sculpture, illustration, everything. It got serious when I was living for 12 years in Alaska. I had space to work in the basement, under the stairs, between a stack of C-Rations from the Korean war and the severed head of caribou. Dad did get the antlers off before it started to stink. I will always be grateful. Under the stairs was where I could make a mess. I could splash paint, carve Styrofoam, play with clay and draw to my heart's content. Ft. Richardson had a library close by and a small natural museum with a lot of taxidermy animals. I filled my sketchbook with drawings of them. The library had books on drawing. Of course, there were the Andrew Loomis books. Those I sketched from and worked on my own cartoons. I loved comics. Mom only wanted my sister and I to read *Classics Illustrated*. I thought they were awful, except the "Last Days Of Pompeii." I was fascinated by the storytelling, even though I had no idea what that was at the time. The panel composition was powerful and wasn't muddy like the other *C.I.* books. Then it happened, there was an auditory hallucination.



When the Roman soldiers grabbed the poor blind woman, she moaned a heart wrenching moan. I heard it. “Wow,” I thought. Of course, it was me who was so absorbed in the book. But the artist who illustrated this was amazing. I wanted to tell a story that people would hear in their heads. Like that. But I couldn’t find any more *C.I.s* by this artist. My sister and I started buying our own comics after a while. But I couldn’t find anything like “The Last Days Of Pompeii.” But that’s about the time I saw the issue of *Fantastic Four*, “This Man, This Monster.” It was the same guy. Jack Kirby. “Wow!” He was my earliest inspiration.

For the longest time I wanted to illustrate comics. But I was drawn away to other forms of art over the years. I minored in Art History and majored in Studio Arts when I had the money and the time to attend school. I’ve always been drawn to 19th century art and illustration. Somewhere along the way, I discovered Science Fiction and the jeweled covers of *Analog* by Kelly Freas. His painting style gave me a punch to the head.



Being so damn curious about one art form and another. About 1981, I was introduced to computer graphics. This was something I could do that employed all my interests in the arts. I could mix storytelling with so many games. From *Dungeons and Dragons* to Mickey Mouse. I could model in 3D and animate my sculptures. Computer graphic fed all my curious notions. I still do gigs. 1981 turned into a 40-year career. While I’ve made a lot of other people rich, I’ve been really lucky and I’ve done a lot of cool stuff.

J.M.: What do you think about the current Hugo ballet in the art categories specifically and in other categories of interest to you in general? Anything that surprised you that was included or not included?

M.S.: Since the Pandemic, I haven't been involved as I would have liked. Not on top of things. I am concerned about the Best Fan Artist category, especially the clamor to detach the fan art from fanzines. Folks who belly ache about it, don't know, nor appreciate the history of both.

What I’ve seen is young artists think this is a stepping-stone to the Best Artist category. It’s been said, “it’s low hanging fruit.” It’s not. This remark is a disservice. I’m a professional artist, but I am a fan of a lot of things. The art I donated to various fanzines were for the love of the genre. I also understand the history of Fanzines and how they grew in fandom. Every so often an artist will capture the imagination of a large group of fans and the fans award the artist. Honestly, it was the collaboration between myself, *The Drink Tank*, *Argentus*, *Journey Planet* and more that gave me the boost. It wouldn’t have happened otherwise. I didn’t contribute art as a

stepping-stone. I loved the magazines. I've been nominated four times and won once. Feeling that folks looked forward to seeing one of my illustrations is heartfelt. That was good.

J.M.: Do you have any thoughts about how today's nominees differ or are similar to those from the past?

M.S.: On the negative side is seeing artists and writers gaming the system. I've seen one particular participant piss and moan they never won a particular award, that they have nothing but contempt for. I'm seeing a certain sense of entitlement from those who want fan art chosen out of DeviantArt's website. DeviantArt is a for profit and has no connection to WorldCon fandom as a whole.

On the positive side. I'm loving the diversity. It must be encouraged, always. I want to see more stories from other countries, nations and ethnicities. What do I think about the artists? Amazing. Superb work. Most of it's painting on computer. That's OK, but it's not the end all and be all. Remember. Computers as a medium is a "Fairy Gift." You can create great moods and beautiful images. But without electricity, it's just in your head. I'd like to see more off-line art. I would like to see sculpture. We have great sculptors in fandom. More art.

As for the Fan Artist category, I believe that art created for fan websites, podcasts and blogs should be recognized. As long as it's pro-bono it should fit nicely.

J.M.: If you had the power, who would like to see walk away with a Hugo this year in the art categories specifically an in other categories of interest to you in general?



M.S.: I don't know who the nominees are. I'm sad that my circumstances won't allow me to attend WorldCon in Washington, DC. After Alaska, that is where we settled down. I used to go into work with my Dad (he was Capitol Hill Police) and then walk through the museums along the Mall. Dad would pick me up at the Lincoln Memorial at the end of the day. So, I'm bummed.

I have some issues regarding the Best Computer Game category. It may work out. *Animal Crossing* is sturdy and long lasting as games go. *The Last Of Us* is superb. It's my favorite to win. I've worked the computer Game Conference for years. They have their own awards.

I'm thrilled to see the YA category. Wishing all the nominees good luck.



J.M.: What has winning a Hugo meant to you? How has it changed/affected your life and how has it changed how you see the science fiction field today?

M.S.: It hasn't changed my life really. If anything, I've been reluctant to commit to doing more because of waiting for the other shoe to drop. It's made me a super flake. What changed my life was getting out of a bad relationship. I'm still building up from that horror.

Winning a Hugo was the best. And what was cool that year, Chuck Serface was my plus one and I got to introduce him to Peggy Rae!

J.M.: Do you keep your Hugo in an interesting place in your home or somewhere else?

M.S.: Because my life is chaos and I'm moving, my Hugo is living at my friends' house. There it is safe and makes a nice conversation piece. Of course, it's available for play dates with Chris Garcia's Hugos any time.



Comic Hugos - the view from the gutter.

Well I have to say it's an incredible year for Comics in the Hugo awards, I was pleased to see a number of comics which I had nominated going forward to be finalists but also I was very pleased to see that the Comics I didn't nominate which went forward to be finalist happen to me on my shelves!

It's very interesting to see how the Hugo voting constituency, which obviously changes every year to a degree, really has got a good sense of what is brilliant. The relevance of the Hugo Awards is becoming stronger within the Comics community. People are aware of the award's importance who may not be fully aware of elder aspects, which is fine because I'm not fully aware of every other awards aspects, but it's always nice to see that recipients of the Hugo Awards have also been recognised by other awards, like the Eisners and Harveys.

Of course, there are number of titles which didn't make this list and that was somewhat disappointing for me because I thought they were very deserving, but with a bit of reflection, this is a phenomenal short list of comics and I have to say 'hey, if you wanted to to read some really good comics getting volumes one or two or in some cases one, two, three, and four, then reading them is something I would really highly recommend, especially if you haven't read comics for sometime or if you've just drifted away. These comics are telling very different stories, mixing genres that are always directly associated with comics, even though they've always existed and in a number of cases are very far away from the easily pigeonholed superhero comics people know more broadly.

So—to the comics.



DIE, Volume 2: Split the Party, written by Kieron Gillen and Stephanie Hans, letters by Clayton Cowles (Image Comics)

Die continued to be brilliant and has only just completed in September with issue #20. Kieran is an inspired writer and here he takes the concept of Roleplaying a step further. As noted by Gillen, the idea formulated from a conversation with artist Jaime McKel-

vie and the potential ending of the 1980s *Dungeons and Dragons* cartoon but with the characters older, having lived through an adventure and then looking back. It's considerably darker and hauntingly brutal in places, not viscerally, per se, but in regard to the horridness of humans, the incisive eye to personal interactions and returning to ones youth, which let's be honest is fun, fragile and yet fraught.

To face or confront horrificness from one's youth is something that is so very of the real world current time, when so many young people have been badly damaged, transgressed, abused, now these decades able to confront the power and their stories be told.

The series came to an end in September, and while the finalist nomination is for Volume 2, itself a brilliant collection, the reader can now get the whole story. Kieron said he was "Sad that the adventure is coming to the end, but the wicked glee of finally being able to reveal all the bleak secrets we've been keeping."

Without doubt a fabulous read, the last volume was noted as being characterised by 'regrets and screaming'. Stephanie Hans' artwork is unbelievably fluid, dynamic and captures action and interpersonal moments brilliantly, while bringing this world to life fantastically. It's such a nice clean line, so well drawn and just makes the comic sing. There was also somewhat of a community built and essays appeared, including one by Jeannette Ng (later in the series) which was great to see and read.

Ghost-Spider vol. 1: Dog Days Are Over, Author: Seanan McGuire, Artist: Takeshi Miyazawa and Rosi Kämpe (Marvel)

Volume one of *Ghost-Spider* are issues 1-5 of the comic, and are a good point to get into *Ghost-Spider*, a lot has occurred to Gwen Stacey, but suffice to say she had been bitten by the spider that bit Peter Parker in Dimension 65 and things went not so well for her, to the degree that she opts to go to college in Dimension 616, the Marvel Universe. Here, Peter Parker is older, in college but also, alive, yet distinctly not her Peter, who she lost, tragically. She is still learning, and her suit is symbiotic, and so a diet of cellulose is required to feed the suit and there is much fun and humour to the writing there. Gwen's dad is a police captain, in 65 and has that world to worry about, with its own issues. The story weaves nicely, there is carry over from the previous run, but it is presented in a way, that wonderful comic book way, that it might be worth going back, but the pace is upon you and one can read on.

There is crime fighting, and all is not actually safe for Gwen in Dimension 616, as The Jackal is hunting her, stalking her, and indeed is invagelated into the College, and has set up a college student to form a friendship with, and I suspect ultimately to betray Gwen. It's a cracking bit of fun, a lovely read, and McGuire does a fabulous job with Gwen and all the characters. There is a lot going on, which Takeshi Miyazawa and Rosi



Kämpe really deliver on, with clean dynamic art, a nice style to it, while capturing action and fights scenes with lucidity, protraction movement well, and also delivering on the smaller facial interactions that a story requires. You will need to crack onto Volume 2, or read all ten comics, it's up to you for this story is not yet over. I should note that Ig Guara worked with Rosi Kämpe on issue 5 of the comic, so I'm not sure why their name is not included.

Invisible Kingdom, vol 2: Edge of Everything, Author: G. Willow Wilson, Artist: Christian Ward (Dark Horse Comics)

G. Willow Wilson is a phenomenal writer, and this is an inspired Science Fiction epic set in a solar system, told over three volumes, roughly fifteen comics. We continue the story of renegade Captain Grix, an experienced and tough freighter pilot, and the younger religious acolyte, Vess, who following on from their discovery of the massive conspiracy between the all powerful Megacorporation and the most dominant ubiquitous religion are now on the run, being hunted down, but there are more issues and challenges facing them, and they have few friends and many enemies.

The first five issues were incredibly dense with ideas, a new world, a huge conspiracy, that is thoughtfully developed and cleverly done, reflecting the now in many ways into a fantastic world. The pace here evens out as the Sundog faces peril and pirates, and there are some very interesting sexual aspects explored, although there is a subtlety, and indeed in some regards, relationships do not progress as a reader might expect. Christian Ward does space, crikey, he does it in amazing style, and takes the reader with the story. He is incredibly competent at brilliantly putting the story into images, and it's stunning. This feels like a building interval, and only makes one desire the third volume released as a complete graphic novel even more.

Monstress, vol. 5: Warchild, Author: Marjorie Liu, Artist: Sana Takeda (Image Comics)

Monstress is such a wonderfully-realised world, so fantastical, but never too much, and with such incredibly beautiful art, it is continually a joy to read this comic. Its amazing to think that it has been running now for six years, and yet it delivers. Volume 5: *Warchild*, collects issues 25 to 30. The comic is destined to have a 'Long Run' and to be honest, I do not mind the pace of release of issues, although sometimes I have to work as I realise I missed one. It is such a pleasure to turn to, to read and enjoy. Issue 36 is due early next year. These issues, well, many aspects are coming together, importantly there is War at hand, the city of Ravenna is to be taken, but there is also so much unpacking and understanding to be shared in these issues, and it really went at it.



The Federation are going to war with the Arcanics, and this will be brutal, with the fear of mutilation, slavery, and ultimately, death facing the Arcanics, but we also see and learn about the past with flashbacks, where we see what occurred with Zinn and Maika, while helping us understand what is going on in more depth at Raveanna. It is so intricately woven, it is brilliance, although brutality and the horror of war, are vitally important to this story, while allegiances and loyalties are as well. The pieces all coming together to show broader understanding, be it philosophy or ethics, or the true nature and how horrible beings can be to one another, all are touched upon, allowing the reader to find a depth that can be fascinating as well as a cracking read. Sana Takeda's artwork, complements the brilliant writing of Marjorie Liu, the wordsmithing is only matched by such a fine and detailed line, artistically done, always bringing the reader deeper in, yet dynamic and ferocious when needed,



Once & Future vol. 1: *The King Is Undead*, written by Kieron Gillen, illustrated by Dan Mora, colored by Tamra Bonvillain, lettered by Ed Dukeshire (BOOM! Studios)

Bridgette McGuire is so much more than a brilliant character, I loved so much about her, that her past was murky, a Monster Hunter, knowledgeable in the matters of Britain and of course, intelligent and wise, and able to drag her young academic nice grandson Duncan

into this wonderful Arthurian story at gunpoint if needed, and Rose, who is incredible, all really round this story as fab. The power of a story or legend can be vitally important to people, so when a Nationalist group uses an artifact to summon a being back from the dead, once lost and thought dead in Myth, to usurp power, the fight is on. What is it to be a 'Pure Briton' and to desire 'Britain Back', well, its interesting what a mythical king might consider to be pure. Arthurian Legend is now Arthurian fact to be dealt with, the mysticism and mayhem violence.

With only 6 issues in this volume, it is a wonderful collection, but the story grows quickly and the characters are wonderful. This is Dark Fantasy with a really pungent level of science fiction when it comes to time, reflective of the now, without doubt, influenced by Brexit Britain, and also having a wonderful roster of characters. This is refreshing, with British Asian, gay, and non binary characters, and a female protagonist. It's a nice perspective that uses the story to make one think.

Dan Mora's artwork is so clean, but he does medieval and armour fabulously, so much so, I went out after enjoying these comics and sought other works by him. The action and colours are brilliant. This comic was a huge hit when it came out, issue no 1 having multiple editions, I think I have a sixth as well as a first as I liked the cover, with Bridgette holding a sub machine gun...

Parable of the Sower: A Graphic Novel Adaptation, written by Octavia Butler, adapted by Damian Duffy, illustrated by John Jennings (Harry N. Abrams)

Octavia Butler is experiencing quite the resurgence amongst readers with these adaptations. Anyone familiar with her work knows she is one of the greatest SF writers we ever had, and here the comics are reaching a new readership and proving hugely popular.

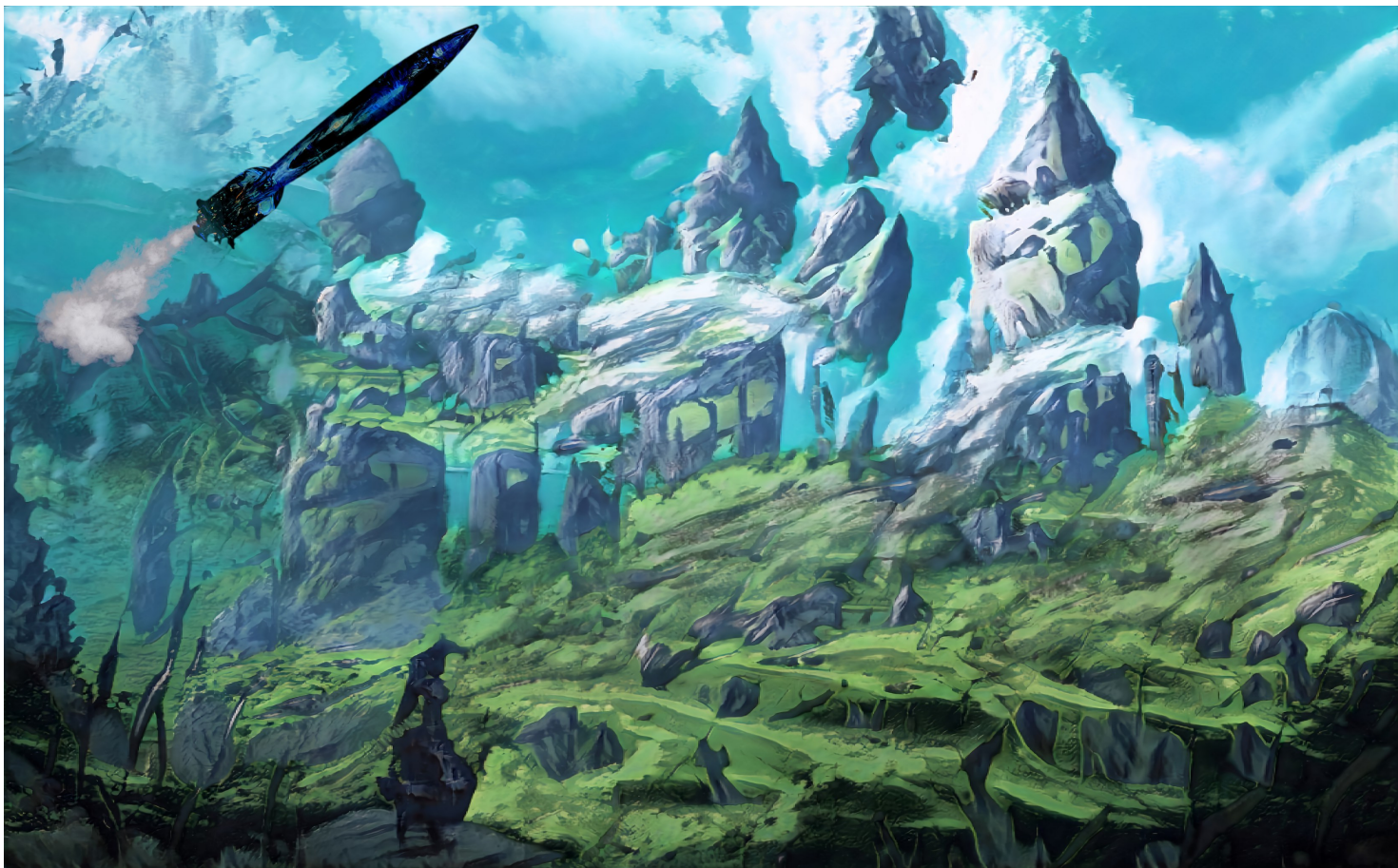
The incredible team of Damian Duffy and John Jennings who gave us *Kindred*, continue to bring brilliance to the comic reading world. This is an emotional and strong work, deserving thought and reflection, the art complements the words brilliantly, capturing, one would hope, the author's vision with skill, while the human interactions portrayed with understanding to ensure sharing the interpersonal effectively. There is, of course, that amazing relevance. Set in 2024, the book is a stunning read in 2021, so much is of the now, which in a way is inspired. Given where we were in January this year, and the previous four years of Trumpian lies and nationalism, the vision of financial, and crucially environmental, meltdown, with a total erosion of societal norm, is utterly believable. Of course, the causes, be it the inequality, corporate greed, or climate change, has never felt so of the moment.

Our journey with Lauren Olamina, contains an epistolary element, as we read her thoughts as written in her journal,. She lives in a gated community, where people strive hard to live in this grim world, but that is going to get terribly upset. Lauren has hyperempathy, a condition brought on by her mothers use of the Paraceto, a drug. This means she shares extreme emotions with others. It is interesting as there is ambiguity to this condition, a blessing or a curse, an ability, or in some ways perhaps offering metaphorical thoughtfulness.

We see her in an existential fight, facing horror and destruction, and of course carefully bringing in religion. I love post-apocalyptic stories at the best of times, but this is fresh, even though it is 28 years old. I loved how Laurens father is a Preacher, allowing a very interesting view of religion, which is a key area of speculation as we follow Lauren as she fights through the horror, but not only for herself.

The art is wonderful, John Jennings does a really good job of portraying the world, as it could be, and there is real beauty in certain panels, while it is unflinching in its darkness when needed to complement this story.

It is really nice to feel that the stories I enjoyed, have been enjoyed by so many others, that there is a collective passion and pleasure from them, and I hope that this will transcend into the Worldcon at Washington itself. I am unsure who will be at the convention, but I hope that some of the creators involved get along and feel the appreciation from fans, because part of be genuinely feels, that no matter who wins the award, all are winners in this category.



Chris and Kristy Talk the 2021 Hugo for
Best Short Story Nominees

Short Story, *Short Podcast* looks at a variety of short stories every week, and has since last October, when a displaced Dot.Com worker and his favorite True Crime Podcaster got together to start talkin' about stories. In the weeks following the Hugo announcement, they tackled a series of episodes, one on each story!

You know **Chris Garcia**, one of your editors here at *Journey Planet*, has a couple of Hugos, and is a 2021 nominee, for *Journey Planet*, and has been podcasting for a decade. He's done a couple of literary podcasts in the before times, notably *The Drink Tank Review of Books*.

Kristy L. Baxter is a brilliant writer, and her podcasts *Old Timey Crimey* and *Detectives-by-the-Decade* are wonderful historical true crime podcasts. She lives in Pennsylvania, and either loves or hates, chowder. Chris can't remember which and is too embarrassed to ask.

Badass Moms in the Zombie Apocalypse by Rae Carson.

Chris:

And let me start by saying, we're going to be looking at the six nominees for the 2021 Hugo award for best short story. And I'm really excited about this project. One, because it means I will have read them all, which will make my voting so much easier. And two, these stories, as the two that I've read so far, are great. And this is actually a super fun adventure story. It's a zombie story that barely talks about zombies. And it's also one that you can attach a whole lot of where the science fiction and particularly the horror genre is today.

Kristy:

Agreed. Absolutely. Yeah, it's a very unique zombie story not only in that it is focused less on the zombies, but in that it focuses more on, well, A, we'll go ahead and say women. And B, how hard it is to not only even just consider, but to actually in practice bring life into this world even normally. It made me think about, wow, this is such a brave thing to do even under normal circumstances. To bring life into this world in the zombie apocalypse is downright daunting and to the point of heroic.

Chris:

And when we are given the story at the very beginning, we are plopped into a world where we're not entirely sure what's happened other than, one, there are fricking zombies. And two, it appears that a group of women have formed an enclave. And there are no men in this story who aren't either zombies or children. And that's actually a very important part of the story in general because of how it progresses things. I think one of the things about focusing a story on an enclave of women is that we are looking at how relationships form when you have removed a major part of the fabric of society. We have this lovely, loving relationship between two women who are having a child. Though I think one of the actually interesting things is this is a story that at first I felt was 100% referring to COVID-19 and all the changes that are coming around and having to sort of isolate ourselves. And then I realized it was published in January 2020. Again, pre-saging what is on all of our minds.

Kristy:

Yeah. It's amazing how all these things stay. We look at them in such a different light than we did even a year and some change ago. So yeah, I can understand. I didn't quite go there, but I can understand why you would have gone there. I didn't really necessarily think of recent events as much as one would expect. I was just so pulled into the zombie world that I don't think I was able to really have that foot back in reality to think about that. Because the action really pulls you along. I mean, it's right from almost from the start, this just action, action, action. But it's not like it's just action for action sake. It's action that is for the sake of saving lives and preserving lives and bringing a new one into the world. And so there's so much at stake that that manages to really get you invested in the story pretty quickly.

Chris:

I think that the stakes in this are incredibly high and the writing style actually not only amps it up, but it does something that is really, really difficult to do. It makes the characterization less about their struggle than about their relationship. I find that fascinating because every step that you went through in the story, you were getting more about how the two of them react to the world as a couple. And I thought that was great. I absolutely adored that aspect. I mean, these are incredibly likable, incredibly tough characters. But the world building that has gone on, there's obviously a ton of world building that we were not privy to. And I hope that this is a series of stories in both directions, forward and backwards of it.

Kristy:

That's a really good point that you made about their relationship. The action being focused, not necessarily for action sake, but on how they react to it. How they support each other, how they spur each other on, how they're willing to sacrifice for each other if necessary, how they're willing to fight. And that is a thing that I think many people, especially women in recent years, have been calling out because we're supposed to be getting strong women characters in so many different things, but too many writers think strong woman

character just means badass as in an ass-kicking kind of way. When it can also, it should also mean emotionally strong and able to support those around you and help those around you and ask when you need support. So I think that that is something that this particular story gives us that we are so desperate for because we're giving kind of lip service as far as strong women are concerned because it's only muscles and not emotions.

Chris:

True. And I think one of the other things here is that I am not a 100% certain I would say that this is not a damsel in distress story. It's just the damsel happens to be a little baby boy. Who is named Eileen, which I love.

Kristy:

Yeah. I was very interested in the author's choice to make it a boy. I almost felt like Carson almost had to because it feels like... Even though the chances are 50/50, it feels like the world is so female oriented that you did have to have that one male in there. But then she twists it by giving him a woman's name, and, or what is traditionally a woman's name. And I really, really like that choice. It feels intentional, but not in an obvious way.

Chris:

And I think one of the beautiful parts of that is that they call out you're giving him a woman's name. You would assume that this is the classic Monty Python bit with, "you mind if we call you Bruce to avoid confusion?" That the idea that everyone now has a set of names that tend to be what we would connotate as female names, but now they're just names. And I think that's actually a really neat little aspect. I also think one of the other things that is fascinating about this is that it is about not only the relationship between the couple, but about the relationship within the larger group.

Chris:

And what's fascinating is when you get books like this, and there are so many of them out there right now. Everything from the Minecraft series that's currently on Netflix. Watch it, it's great. They all have the sort of same group dynamics. Here they're a little bit changed. I think that that little nudge in a different direction. There's the old David Letterman bit "The Strong Guy, The Fat Guy, The Genius" and that group dynamic plays, but here, we see a very different Strong Guy, or woman, as it were.

Kristy:

There's such a wonderful connection between what you're saying and the story we just read. But yeah, I liked how they turned that trope on its head. I also liked the sort of use of zombies here and something that... I mean, I'm not super into zombie literature. I haven't read a ton of it, so I don't know if this is used very often.

I can't speak to that. But the idea that they are attracted to blood. And that makes perfect sense. It's like sharks, and that's brought up in the story too. But it makes perfect sense because blood equals vulnerability. If you're bleeding, you're injured. If you're injured, you're easier to take down. And probably one of the most vulnerable times in any human being's life is giving birth.

Kristy:

So that makes perfect sense that they'd be attracted to blood and be attracted to birth. Not even just because of the bloodier aspects of birth, but simply that they're attracted to it already as soon as she starts having contractions. So I was really fascinated by that idea and from a biological, evolutionary, whatever, perspective, if zombies evolved into something, yeah, I can totally see that. It's so interesting because it gives it different levels to this world that you don't even think about until you take a step back, like the fact that these women are all in an enclave. Well, why are they in an enclave? Probably because the men were all like, you guys keep bleeding. Every month, every month you bleed, and it's not all even all at the same time and you're attracting the zombies.

Kristy:

So they had no choice. They probably either were like, well, stop giving us hell for something that we can't help, or were kicked out or whatever. And, or abandoned, however you want to put it. And so it adds that other level to it that it's just such a multifaceted concept. That at first when you say, oh, zombies are attracted to blood, it seems so simple, but then it really gets complex and adds those different layers to the world that I really appreciate.

Chris:

Oh, yeah. This is actually a story about vulnerabilities. She's incredibly vulnerable because she's pregnant and about to give birth. The child is incredibly vulnerable because it can't open its eyes. Mari is incredibly vulnerable because of her love. And of course, all of them are vulnerable because there are fricking zombies. What I love is that they are probably at their most vulnerable when they are giving the zombies what they want. When they're giving them the afterbirth. They've opened themselves up completely at that point. If you think about that sort of metaphorically, when you are giving them a little bit to try and capture a lot of safety, you are making yourself more vulnerable to the things you hate the most. The things that hurt the most. All of these things. There are so many things you can tie to this that I just, I think it's one of those real thinky, thinky stories that I really like.

Kristy:

Yeah. That attempted distraction can so easily turn into bait. And that's true in a lot of different areas. So, yeah, that's another fascinating aspect that in order to protect themselves, they have to become at their most



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vulnerable.

Chris:

Yeah. Well, I think this is a phenomenal story. I am so glad it was on the Hugo ballot. Along with me as a Hugo nominated fanzine editor. I am going to mention that a lot.

Kristy:

You just can't stop, and I'm going to encourage it.

Chris:

You'll get there someday. You keep reaching for that rainbow. But yeah, any other thoughts on this one?

Kristy:

I think it was perfect that a group of zombies, let's call it a murder.

Chris:

Yep. A murder of zombies.

Kristy:

I love it, love it, love it, love it, love it. So that is my other thought.

[Click here to read Badass Moms in the Zombie Apocalypse by Rae Carson.](#)

A Guide to Working Breeds by Vina Jie-Min Prasad.

Chris:

Let me say one thing just off the bat, this story is adorable.

Kristy:

It is. It's delightful.

Chris:

And this is a story that if you go in unable to appreciate this form, you are going to not enjoy this story. It is in the form of a chatlog. As some people may believe or not, I actually use things like Messenger continually throughout the day, so this is a natural forum for me, but I can understand others having trouble with that. But regardless, we are given characters who are absolutely, fascinatingly human in their roboticism.

Kristy:

Yes they are. They have personalities and those personalities are disparate and they're capable of change and they're capable of insight. It's just so wonderful. It makes me feel really bad about all the times I've yelled at my Google machine.

Chris:

It had it coming. Once you give personality to an object of any sort, that has any sort of functionality that it can interact with you, some are going to be good, some are going to be jerks. It's fascinating that all the jerks are Google.

Kristy:

Yes they are.

Chris:

The best part of this story, though, I think for me, is how fascinatingly human these characters are and how they constantly keep changing their aspects and their name.

Kristy:

There's almost sort of a teenage quality to it. You know that thing that you do and... Not everybody's done it, but I think a lot of people have done it when you're trying to find your identity, and one of the most vital

things to your identity, one of the most basic things, is your name. Either you change your name or ask people to call you a nickname or you change the spelling. I can remember fooling around with seeing how K-R-Y-S-T-Y looked, and thank God I decided that I did not like it. They have that same sense of searching for identity, which I feel is the most human thing.

Chris:

Absolutely, and I think that this is, I honestly, 100% believe this is a coming of age story, and thus fits in with so many other coming of age stories we've talked about. Less murder in this one, which is nice.

Kristy:

Eh, I think there's some murder.

Chris:

Yeah, maybe. But is it really murder? Can you really say that?

Kristy:

We don't see it. It's just kind of alluded to and mentioned, so it's not like bloody or gory or anything like that. It doesn't really change the tone, it's just kind of abstract. Maybe some murder or killing for purposes. I didn't quite understand that aspect of this particular society, but it was fine because the robots were so adorable.

Chris:

Exactly. There's this whole progression. This is one of the stories that seems to be taking game, and in particular in this case MMORPG themes, and playing with them. Which I think is really cool, that you have these elements that definitely seem to refer to stuff that people do in gaming. I mean, a chat log definitely speaks to that. The names do fall into that category, too. I think this story really does something phenomenal that stands out among recent Hugo nominees and Hugo winners, is that it is so much about the type of person who is reading these stories. And it's because it's sort of adorable. It has this almost stream of consciousness to it that works within the voice of the people... Because this story definitely appeals to a younger reader, and I think that's one of the things that, while I wouldn't say it's YA, I will say that it definitely assumed certain things of the people who are going to connect with this story. That they can parse a chat log type situation, that they have the ability to actually believe that you can connect as humans through a textual interchange like this. It makes me think of the film *Her*, where there's a great discussion between the AI programs, and that sort of thing. Although here's what I really love about dog.

Kristy:

Dogs, yes. The doggos make an appearance, the good boys. They're sort of this secondary character that brings these two robots together in a way. It's the first thing they sort of are able to really bond over, I think. I think bringing dogs into it, can you imagine if the author had decided on cats instead?

Chris:

Actually it was a couple of years ago there was a story, I think it was nominated, it might've even won, called *Cat Pictures Please* by Naomi Kritzer, which won back in 2016. It's an adorable story, so great. She's from St. Paul, I had no idea.

Chris:

This is nothing but asides.

Kristy:

There's just a series of asides.

Chris:

If we titled episodes, this would be called A Series of Asides.

Kristy:

Yes, it would, but that's fine. You've got to have those episodes every once in a while.

Chris:

Oh yeah, absolutely. But I love the things that definitely mark this as a very knowing of the millennial and post-millennial crowd, some phrases that are used, that definitely proved that to me. "Oh, that old chunkster." definitely be like, okay, that sets a tone you know for a fact that it's going to be appealing to a group that would use the word "chunkster" as a signifier of a chunky cat.

Kristy:

Chunky cat. I have a chunky cat

Chris:

You have a chunky cat? My cats are somewhat chunky. They are mostly sleepy, which is the fascinating part.



Kristy:

I was just to say, shockingly, my Hemingway is a chunky cat.

Chris:

There's also something here that's a little bit deeper about encapsulation, about what informs who and what you are. In this case, it's exactly these robots and how they can sort of form themselves, their own identity. That plays of course into the coming of age concept, it plays into how do two seemingly disparate approaches towards being what they are, how do they come together? I think that becomes a really fun theme that she plays with in this one.

Kristy:

They are. Honestly, it actually is kind of a trope in older YA, especially those with romances, which, let's face, it's almost all of them. Particularly dystopian, post-apocalyptic, stuff like that, that you have naive, innocent, generally a female. A girl who's heading out into this world that she doesn't know, is more than she thought and more dangerous than she thought. And then she always finds the reserved taciturn man, boy, whatever, and he teaches her about the world and I'm starting to get kind of grossed out right now.

Kristy:

But it is sort of that, but in a more weirdly wholesome way because it's robots. They fill those roles, the two robots here, the one that starts out as Default Name and the one that starts out as Constant Killer. Really, writing a young adult novel with some romance where the love interest is named Constant Killer is now my new goal.

Chris:

And the ending, I think, is just exceptionally fun, because it's just a brief little glimpse of those sorts of changes that are happening that make it so much, I guess, more relatable that "The teacher has become the master" idea, I guess.

Kristy:

And there's a companionship and sort of a homeliness together that they have achieved by leaving and finding another place to live where there are more dogs, apparently.

Chris:

Yes. I also love that when we get to see the exact phrasing. "Oh, right. That mentor thing! Guess I'm one

now. Wait, that wasn't very mentoring mentor-ly. Okay, okay, let's try it again. Yep, I'm your new mentor, been around for ages, super experienced. Howdy mentee." I mean, that is straight up first time on your first shift at the Wawa, meet the new person you just hired.

Kristy:

That sounds right. It's like first stepping into a managerial role where you're like, "Are you sure I'm adult enough for this? Because I was just watching cartoons and eating frosted flakes like, two days ago."

Chris:

I think that little exchange just made me smile a lot because it's so familiar.

Kristy:

I personally, if we're picking out favorites, I loved when Default Name was talking about learning the ways that the coffee shop and being a barista, and reported back to the mentor that, "So it turns out you have to be mean, but only in strangely specific ways that appeal to humans and don't threaten the status quo." Oh, food service.

Chris:

I never had to do it. Nope.

Kristy:

Ah, lucky, I have, I have served people food and, it's a job.

Chris:

I had a dream of being the overnight guy at a 7-eleven. That was a dream of mine, it never happened. I consider it my greatest failing.

Kristy:

I mean, all those slushies.

Chris:

I know, right? Does the phrase, "I know right?" Ever pop up in here? I don't think it does.

Kristy:

I can do a quick control-F. "I didn't know about humans" and then... No, "I know, right?" does not pop up. It's interesting to me also that there's not really, she chose to stay from the internet abbreviation acronym worlds that we live in. There weren't any LOL, there weren't any IKR, BRT, BTW. I could go on, obviously. There's none of that, that I think was probably an intentional choice because that might have been too distancing for the readers who aren't in this specific millennial, gen X, whatever generations, that might've been a step too far. It's already a little, I'm sure, probably terrifying to write something without capitalization or most terminal punctuation.

Chris:

Which, man, terminal punctuation has a place, and that place is anywhere but the story I'm reading. What we need is good endings and declensions, that'll help the language. Any last thoughts on this one?

Kristy:

As we are delving into this draft of Hugo nominated works, I'm starting to feel very daunted by the idea of voting, which is not something that I'm even qualified to do, so it's not a problem. But I have a feeling that at the very end of this, you're going to ask me, "So if you were voting, what will you vote for?" And I'm just going to sit here like, "I don't know." Because this is so far so good. These have been excellent, excellent stories. We've only read two so far, but I have very high expectations now going forward because these have been really wonderful, wonderful tales. Well-told.

Chris:

And don't you worry, we're going to get you a supporting membership so you'll get to vote. We'll force your hand.

Kristy:

Oh boy. All right, get to hold me hostage, gun to my head, "Vote for a story."

Chris:

We won't use a gun, we'll instead just use critical gaze.

Kristy:

Well, I'm pretty much just as susceptible. Hard glare or a bullet, either one can take me down.

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Journey Planet #59—The Hugo Awards

Little Free Library by Naomi Kritzer.

Christopher J. Garcia:

Now, let me say about this story several things: it's a story, it's online, and it's good. The beauty of this is, this is a type of story that sometimes gets accused of being fan service. This is something you write for people who are of the sub community that you're a part of, the sub-culture.

Kristy:

See, there's a little issue with ever being accused of fan service in that if you write something that can be accused of fan service, you're also likely just writing something that made you happy, because you're part of that group too. So, there's something about that that makes it feel like it almost can't be true, because it's sort of the Oraborous is eating itself. Well, how could I be servicing the fans, which really, they need to find a better word for that, when I'm doing this for myself? It's just a happy bonus that other people like me enjoy it, and it is possibly more likely to be published because of that very fact.

Christopher J. Garcia:

I think there's also an aspect that a lot of people say that fan service is necessarily a bad thing, that it's pandering to a community. In this case, if you're pandering to hardcore lovers of fantasy and science fiction, you're trying to gun to get those awards. I will say this though, it still has to be good to pass the first hurdle. I think this is a really, really good, adorable, well-structured story. That really doesn't seem to get weird until I guess about a halfway through, because at first, we think it's just some sort of little fun mind game being played.

Kristy:

Yeah, it's a very good story, and therefore, I think it can rise above that accusation of fan service in that respect. Also, not to drive that conversation on, but I think this is one of the rare cases where authorial intent actually does play a part, because, it's like you said, you're just doing it for the potential of awards or whatever, then I think that is fan service. But if you yourself enjoyed the ride as a writer, I think then that's fine, and you're in the good box. The other people are in the bad box.

Kristy:

So, it is very well-structured, and it is interesting reading this for the first time. You're like, "Okay, I can see references to genre, and that there's different genre books that Meigan, the main character, puts in the Little Free Library that she sets out." But you are kind of like... It's very, very slow to pull the reader or to give the reader those genre elements. In that way, I think that it subverts the fan service accusation, because fans of fantasy are going to be reading this getting impatient. Somebody who was really committed to fan service and just doing this for the accolades that they could potentially draw, would most likely try to incorporate that aspect from the very beginning.

Christopher J. Garcia:

Yeah, and I think that is actually a really interesting point. I think the other part of that when you sort of drill down a level, you see that what she's actually done also is to bring about this idea of a thing like a very simple single aspect of life can be magical, because until the very last three sentences, none of the magic really invades in the world outside of the box.

Kristy:

Yeah, it doesn't invade, and it's not overt at all. There's this exchange of goods through the Little Free Library. She gives this patron of the library books, and they give her notes, they give her things like a circle and a thin carved stone, that was too big to be a ring and too small to be a bracelet. A feather, a leaf, drawings, it's all these things that they are just on the edge of magical. It's almost their whimsicality, is that a word?

Christopher J. Garcia:

Sure.

Kristy:

I really want it to be if it's not, so if it is not, I make it so. If it is, good. So, their whimsicality that gives them that air of magic, that just whiff of magic. But it's not as strong scent, it's not overpowering, it's just barely there. You're just smelling it like, "I think I smell apple pie, but it's all the way on the other side of the house."

Christopher J. Garcia:

You have apple pie?

Kristy:

I don't have apple pie, actually, I kind of wish I did.

Christopher J. Garcia:

You're a liar, promises were made of apple pie nature. It's actually interesting, actually, there was another callback that I love about the too big to be a ring, too small to be a bracelet. Very end of the story, it was large, not enormous, like an ostrich egg, but it filled the palm of her hand. This sort of idea that-

Kristy:

What were you saying?

Christopher J. Garcia:



Was that all we know is that the proportions are out of whack, because there's the callback again to the egg that is not as big as an ostrich egg, but it filled her whole palm. Just like the round thing that's too big to be a ring, too small to be a bracelet. Where that goes is that the only place where they intersect is over in the little library. So between them, the scales change, and that is the sign of fantasy to me. It is where there is a limited dimension of reality that is different between the world that we understand, and... This could easily be with just a little bit of a rewrite, a sort of a mainstream fiction of a Portland exchange between a Little Free Library owner and a well-intentioned hipster, but, instead, we get this little bit of the fantastic out of it, and because of that and how contained it is, it exists within our world, but it is not our world.

Kristy:

I really love the idea... Okay, wait, I guess I should back up and say, so I guess that would make it more along

the lines of contemporary fantasy. But even in that realm, which is the lightest touch of all fantasies. Even in contemporary fantasy, it is still a super light, light touch. This is the kind of fantasy that people who are less of the believers sort or who don't have particularly fertile imaginations, and that's fine, it takes all kinds to make world. But this is the kind of story that those people could be like, "Well, I can explain that, there is no magic there." It's not kind of story, it's not so blatant and so obvious that you can't deny it. There could be naysayers who could put that down, so there is that aspect too. But I also love the idea that it's the miniaturization of the library that connects our world to this smaller world. You alluded to that, I just wanted to state how much I really appreciate that idea of it takes something small to bring something small.

Christopher J. Garcia:

Thus, we arrive at the real meaning of this story, attention to artistic detail. It's because she painted a road, because she put the stones on and did all the little things to make it like a library that it becomes an actual library. That is a theme that actually runs through the history of fantasy, and there's sort of two different aspects there. There is this idea that if you treat a thing or a place as something magical, it becomes magical, this is actually the basis of chaos magic. But then there is the second thing, which also plays into this, which is I have referred to it as the dangerous art of noticing. It is when you have a story like *Night at the Museum*, *Toy Story*, as long as you are not physically viewing it, you are actually enabling magic to happen in that place. One of the great examples of this is Schrodinger's box, which 100%, Schrodinger was a science fiction fan, killed the cat and just left it in the box and used that as a reason to explain it to his wife. I think that that plays here too, and those two aspects play within a sort of an overall realm that I like to refer to as sort of a subset of secret history, or I guess would be secret present. Which is a major part of sort of the contemporary fantasy, urban fantasy sort of realm, it's a branching tree.

Kristy:

Yes, I would agree with that. It is very much a branching tree. You know what you're really good at? You're really good at touching on something that I... You hit on it and I'm like, "I have a thing to say about that." Then you say eight more things, and they're all very smart, and very canny. But I'm still stuck on that first thing, because once I get a thought that I think is germane to the conversation that I'm like, "Hold on, hold on for dear life until it's your turn." So, I'm going to go back to what you said about painting the road. I think there's a really interesting idea that even ties this to the modern world even more, and well, modern and the ancient world, I guess. That's paganism and intent. I mean, she maybe didn't have any intention of pulling in this new other world through the library. So, it's sort of maybe a subconscious intent that she thought, like depicting the journey to the box or the way to the box, and the pebbles, and everything, was sort of... I can't really tell exactly what Meigan was thinking there, she was just being whimsical and cute, but there's also a sense of reading is a journey. There's also a sense of this idea that every book is a different road that can turn and twist in so many different directions. So, she's incorporating that, and so there is this weird sort of intent that comes there this unintentional intent of connecting these worlds.

Christopher J. Garcia:

Correct, I think that idea that... There's some sort of point, I think also here that the world that she's touching on is obviously a world that we would see as fantastical. But what's amazing is that the world that we think is fantastical is still amazed by what we consider fantastical. Let me even rephrase that further, they are just as big Tolkien nuts as we are, although I have never read any Tolkien.

Kristy:

You know what? I should take this moment to admit that as a child I started reading the *Hobbit*, but I was easily distracted. I was also a big reader for comfort, so there was probably a Nancy Drew or something nearby that ended up getting picked up and read for the third time. Actually, much more likely at L.M. Montgomery, so I'm with you there. I haven't I've read much Tolkien. But yeah, there's this idea that the fantastic for us is just as fantastic for them. Honestly, I think that's a big part of the magic here that you feel reading this story. We think about other and the peoples that might inhabit them, and we almost immediately ascribe this sort of jadedness to them. That they would be not only used to their own world, but also used to our world, but that's not necessarily true. There are certain parts of our world that definitely wouldn't be present in theirs, so there would be that magic of introducing each other to the wonderful parts of your world, like Tolkien.

Christopher J. Garcia:

See, here's my theory, I'm going to go out on a limb here and, Naomi Kritzer, if you're listening to this, stop here, because I'm about to tell you what you wrote. I think she is describing a world on the other side of this library that is out of proportion to ours, because it is a smaller world. Perhaps it is a reptile or a bird-like world. It's something that is actually physically smaller, so that the idea of the hominids that inhabit the world of *The Lord of the Rings* are a fascination. That it is actually the aspects of humanity to them that is fascinating our reader. Here's the beauty of that is that we are attracted to this because of the conflicts, less so the characters. Because we see these grand battles, and these small internal battles, and the hero's journey. If you are in a world where that is the norm, you are going to be connecting to the characterizations, the individuals, the strange tree-like things, for the love of God, trees. This idea, I think, is what would appeal across sort of a membrane that separates us from a world that is potentially as weird as *Lord of the Rings* would be to us. It's just that they have a different thing to latch on to.

Kristy:

Yeah, this world is definitely... It's something, and like I said, I think we were both equally fascinated by each other. What I'm really fascinated with is a thought that just popped into my head, the fact that the patrons of

the library, one of the first gifts was a line drawing of a cat. If these creatures are probably bird-like or a lizard-like, I'm really curious about the cats and their world. Are they smaller cats than we have and you just couldn't tell scale, because it was the only thing on the page? Are they enemies? Because I've seen the look on my cat's face when a bird lands on the deck and he's out there, and that is the look of someone who thinks that he's about to have some dinner.

Christopher J. Garcia:

Good point, it could also be that cats in that universe are mythical and they are the great myths of the cat that will come and nap on the world, thus enabling it to hatch the inner universe.

Kristy:

I think this is the new mythology that I'm following as a belief system.

Christopher J. Garcia:

Excellent, any other thoughts on this one?

Kristy:

I really liked it, and again, my imaginary voting has gotten even more complicated. So, really hats off to the choosers of the stories. Yeah, at the end of this, when you forced me or try to force me to say what I would vote for, this is another one that's going to make that a far more complicated endeavor than I thought.

Christopher J. Garcia:

Yes, and you know what's great about that? Is I'm going to do it, and it's not fair, but it's what's got to happen, #America.

[Click here to read Little Free Library](#)

The Mermaid Astronaut by Yoon Ha Lee

Chris:

This is sort of a hard left turn from last week. It's it is at once darker, more personal heavier. And I would honestly say a bit more sentimental at the same time. It is easily the most beautiful of the stories we've read so far, as far as language goes.

Kristy:

Yeah. The language is just so incredibly evocative that there are moments when you just have to sit back and just kind of revel in it. It's, it's wonderfully, wonderfully evocative. And there are so many of those little surprise moments that I love. Those are my little, my little pet moments in the stories that we read. And yeah, it's just, it's so beautiful. And I think, I think that's the big, the big challenge of a story like this. You're taking a) the little mermaid, b) a story of the c) a story of somebody going into space for the first time. There has to be beauty. There has to be beauty, and you have to describe it. You have to give those words to the reader, at least give them something. And so that would probably, for me, it would be the most daunting would be, I would feel like none of my words would be able to do justice to what was in my head.

Chris:

I think one of the beautiful things about it is it's a first contact story. Like it's a whole bunch of things all put together into a story that is, I would argue it is a science fiction fantasy, uh, in that order, um, because the story is of her experiencing of the world, but it is it's motivation. It's push comes from the fantastical elements and it has so many markers of traditional fantasy from the enchanted knife to the witch, to the girl who longs and dreams for a place far away, but it's also stories like this, that to me, show the veil between science fiction and fantasy is so thin. Just a couple of minor changes. If you turn the, the witch into a scientist and the knife into nanobots, it's a 100% science fiction story, except for mermaids

Kristy:

Or lasers, don't forget lasers! Let's make a human out of this mermaid. I've got a lightsaber. Let's get to it.

Chris:

Yeah. And I think that's part of the beauty of this story is that it is, it's a little bit of everything. It's a little calling back. It's a little moving the genre forward. It's a little bit a family story. It's a little bit a coming of age story. It is a dreamer realizing their dream. It's all of these things at once and a very tight package.



Kristy:

It's a paying the price story. You know, we have this, the story of somebody, a dreamer who gets to realize their dream, but you always, you have to wake up and come back to reality. She does very hard, she goes out beyond her mermaid world and she explores space. She goes to space ports and she sees stars, nebulas, all kinds of beauty and wonder, not realizing that she's kind of paying the price all along, which is kind of the, the, the knife to the heart or the, or the flipper, as it were. The fact that she's aging at a different rate than her sister back at home, and that her sister will be, could potentially already be dead. That the fact that she's paying the price all along and every second that she spends is more of a price is really brilliant painfully. Brilliant.

Chris:

I think that's one of the things about this story that is so impressive. One, it's a bit of a tear-jerker that's for sure. You are set up for that. This is the thing that stories like this could super easily be incredibly manipulative. It is setting you up for the realization that achieving your

dreams eventually will kill all those around you. And in this case, it is so well done. You get so much around these characters, but you also get a satisfying ending that is so powerfully written. “I don't need to leave home in order to journey through the universe,” but at the same time that doesn't try and bring the tears about, it just happens to do so while expressing something that is so essential to a story.

Kristy:

Yeah, I absolutely agree. It's not that that manipulation could have come about if, if this was the only purpose, if the destination was the only point and not the journey, but the journey was the point and the destination, we just happened to land there. It was inevitable at the same time. It was also evitable.

Chris:

Evitability it has

Kristy:

Solid evitability

Chris:

I love that we get the characters in here so well. I think it is a story of a universe that is populated with these fantastical creatures and even makes the very smart point of that very early on. “Some of them walked on two legs and some on six, some of them had six fingers on their hands and some had tentacles. Instead. Some of them had friendly waving eyestalks and others, none at all.” I mean, just like in that little paragraph, he has said so much about the entirety of the characterization of this world and how it's not just the universe as we understand it. It's not just the universe as science fiction has traditionally put it where it's everyone is, is some form of bipedal with various colored skin. It's far richer than that.

Kristy:

Yeah. It definitely, it stretches beyond some of the cliches we see sometimes, and you get a little anxious at first because the history of, of literature all too often has creatures who are different coming into contact with each other, and it doesn't go well, at least at first. The merpeople have interpreters and there's a sense of cooperation. There's a sense of not even tolerance, but just like, yeah, you're cool. You know, like even tolerance feels like it's beneath what this is. This is, you know, an acceptance and a not, not caring about, you know, differences. So that's sort of beautiful. You think for a second that it might go there and that would be fine if it, if it did, but it's nice. And it's a sense of relief to have it be like, “oh, no, this is a nice world.”

Chris:

Yeah. And I think one of the things that I look for in a story is loving descriptions of food. One of the most greatest paragraphs in history is about how they had this grand feast featuring their best offerings that were all super rich and different and strange. And I was so excited and the line “and some concoctions that the

mers had no word for other than delicious.” I made a pie yesterday. That was fantastic. But this is better than that.

Kristy:

I was actually just thinking about this recently, when it has popped up in my own writing. There are some times when you can tell when a writer is hungry. I mean, not that it's not organic to the story or anything, but, and you can also, you can gauge the level of hunger. If this has gone on for one or two more paragraphs, you would, you would know that the writer was like, “I need to eat lunch because I have chapters to finish,” I have written out an entire breakfast in great detail and been like, “Hmm. Yeah. Um, I'm starving. My stomach is eating itself. That might be why this is happening.” It's almost like a symptom. So yeah, that, that can sometimes give you a little hint into what the writer is dealing with at that moment. I do the descriptions and stuff like that. And yeah, some, sometimes we have no words for things other than delicious for when you have something that is just such a wonderful, perfect combination of intermingling flavors and textures and everything. That, that's just that moment where it's just like “I wish I had other words, I'm a writer. I feel like I should have other words, but delicious is all I got.”

Chris:

And I think one of the other things that's really interesting, particularly the way things are described, is they are great description to our everyday things like food, like what it takes to maintain your place on the ship. It's all of these sort of almost mundanalia that is just very, very plain, but at the same time, it's utterly important to life. It's utterly important to how these different cultures can interact with one another. Ultimately, I think that's what the story is about. I think it is ultimately about how cultures that are theoretically incompatible can come together, but at some point during that connection, a price has to be paid and that's our, all it pays it. No question. And I think Kiovasa's journey is really interesting because she is willing to take the steps that her sister does, but in the end, doesn't and has a life that is the life of a Mer person. And when Essarala returns, what she is given is a limited view of that life beyond that she could have theoretically had, and that has so much power connected to it. Her character is great because she takes a journey and that means we have to follow her. Kiovasa has the journey that, to me has more emotional resonance because not only was she left behind, but she gets now to know what she missed. And the point of view that her sister brings very, very pointedly. I think that last line, the very, very last line of the entire story, that reminds me how human it is when you've come to the point where you can't experience too much more, but I can still learn from other's experiences.

Kristy:

That is so that is so the human experience, and it also is in a way, and I'm sorry, there's no way for this not to be punny. so I apologize in advance, but in a way Kiovasa gets the best of both worlds.

Chris:

I see what you did there. This is a tale with depths that will continue going on. I think one of the fascinating things also is that a story like this can be read so many different ways. I think that that is why a story gathers a strong enough following to end up on Hugo ballot because it appeals to so many different aspects of folks. If you'd like a good adventure story, Hey, here's some adventure story. If you like a good emotional sister bonding story, Hey, here's a good emotional sister bonding story. If you're a big fan of snakes

Kristy:

Snakes.

Chris:

I think that this is a story that is a prototypical Hugo contender. And I think this is going to do very well if not win because of that, the beauty of the language to appeal to the verbal nerds, the beauty of the story to appeal to the adventure nerds, and the fact that the podcast version of it that they have on *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* is so good.

Chris:

Both of our listeners who listen to Joe Rogan are now turning off. So Kristy, you got any more thoughts on this one?

Kristy:

I really liked it and it's making my imaginary voting all the more difficult. So this, this is getting to be a harder and harder decision every week. Although I must say, uh, I'm a mermaid person. I'm a mermaid person. My thesis novel in grad school was steampunk mermaid. So, it's all right there.

[Click here to read *The Mermaid Astronaut*](#)

Metal like Blood in the Dark by T Kingfisher.

Chris:

This is probably a little less dark than last week's the mermaid astronaut, but at the same time, it's a very similar story sensation. I think it is a story about testing your limits, a story about our connections with the place of our birth. And it's also a creation myth.

Kristy:

I think wrapped up in all things is this deep sense of innocence versus experience, how the two intertwine with when you have creation at the very beginning, you have innocence and the story even mentions Eve and being given the knowledge of good and evil goes right to it. But then given when you're given that knowledge of good and evil, when you're given the facility to both see lies and to lie yourself, you are becoming experienced. What happens is experience corrupts innocence, but we really see it as, and this story shows it as inevitable.

Chris:

I think that is the beauty of this story is that it's an exploration of how, not only how we come to lie, but what's also interesting here is this idea that there is an Eden in this story and it is not an Eden that is sustainable. So instead of being cast out because of their actions, they're cast out, literally because of the creator, creating them in a place that is not sustainable for them.

Kristy:

I'm with you there. I get a little bit technical and persnickety, I guess, in that I have a hard time thinking of their home as a true Eden, just because of that very lack of sustainability. If you have to worry about where your next meal's coming from, you're not eating, that's where my brain goes. I'm like, I'm also hungry 'cause I skipped lunch. So I'm very much thinking about my next meal. So that's probably a fact. Yeah

Chris:

This is actually a great application of a more or less traditional story structure being driven out of the ancestral Homeland into the war, into the greater world where you are then exploited for your talents, using all of the wonderful little science fiction tropes that are so great in particular, excellent use of nanobites which I always love to see in a good story.

Kristy:

It's a really fascinating method of allowing an external change for the protagonist as they go along and even becomes sort of a method of actually pulling the bad guy down, getting the antagonist giving him his dues. That I find really interesting 'cause it's not just used as, "Oh, look at this fun, cool, neat future thing." It's actually, it's very vital to their world and to the plot.

Chris:

I love the sort of time setting on this one. There's lots of expansion of the scale of time in it, which I love because it gives you a sort of a different view of how things in creatures that aren't human, how they view time. I love that aspect in particular. There's a reference to the head, started mining the asteroid belt back when humans were still drawing animals on the walls of caves. The statement of you've eaten my ship. I've been 5,000 years here, building it up and you have eaten it and it will take another 5,000 to repair it. These like ideas that this story is happening at a timescale much grander than a human lifespan, which is ultimately what started the story.

Kristy:

It is the fact that the human life span is shorter than what they have. That that really kick-starts the action because their human has taken care of them has to go away to, to be made better, to be healed. And so yeah, now they have to figure something else out. There's one quote. That was one of those ones that I just, you know, me and surprising phrasing it just, I need to find a better term terminology for it, but I'll, I'll figure it out and maybe I'll surprise myself with it. It really felt like this moment of leaving and growing and understanding that is that it can be very sad and the quote was, "They had loved the planet of their birth, but it had very little glory and seeing this took them out of themselves and spun them around and put them back in a different shape than before." Oh my God. Oh my God. I love that so much. That is a coming of age moment. That is every kid leaving for college, leaving like their hometown for the big city, you know, or just getting out there and seeing the world traveling that is when you leave the little place that is so beloved, but when you leave it, you're finally able to recognize that how I see it, how the rest of the world sees it. And it just absolutely it, that, that I'm going to go ahead and say, destroys me on a visceral level. We're hitting all the classics today,

Chris:

Correct. I think some of the impact of this story happens as it probably should. When we see how a literal betrayal is being used as a positive aspect for the life of these two, I think that the closing of the story just hits home. So well largely because if you look at how once the deed is done and done well, there is this aspect that gets me because one, it does tie into at least somewhat into the story of Eve and the exile from Eden in a much, much smarter way where instead of being talked into eating the apple for self-knowledge and so forth, it is eating the apple to save her brother. One of the keys is that at times causing a downfall like that

is not only for the betterment of all, but specifically for the, I don't want to say perpetuity of, but the continuance of the people that they love. And I think, you know, one of my favorite lines of this entire thing is “His first question was, “Did they work?” “They worked magnificently. She shared with him the feeling of that flight, the joy as the wings took on the winds and won.” Ooh, just so great. And it does. And she also uses a phrase, which I love when authors do this, when they use a phrase over and over that doesn't necessarily reflect on a individual moment, but is on the larger scale of everything in this case, that is “The pebble is black.”

Kristy:

It feels almost iconic by the time you get to the end of the story, it feels like you should be able to walk up to somebody on the street and say the pebble is black and they'll know what you mean like that, that is how I think much of the story, how much effect it had on me that this, and this idea that the pebble is black. Well, that's how sister manages to teach herself to lie by pretending that a brown pebble is black. And yet it also feels like it has so much meaning beyond that. I think there's a reason that the pebble is, is, is black and not, not white or red or, you know, purple and it's because of the associations between good and evil and white and black, and as much as that has been really bad for society in general and we'd love to see that not perpetuated anymore, it's still very much an association that we make in our minds and because she's learning to lie, which is inherently wrong, I think there's a reason that was chosen and it just feels. It feels.

Chris:

I love the fact that when she sabotages the wings that were created for a third drone, who, by the way, a villain in the sense of the Garuda from *Perdido Street Station* by China, Mieville, just a nasty piece of work, I guess, is the best way to put it.

Kristy ([12:03](#)):

He's a bad or they're a bad. The pronoun ‘they’ was used for Third Drone.

Chris ([12:15](#)):

Oh, you're right. You're right.

Kristy ([12:17](#)):

Third Drone is ‘they’, are definitely a they.

Chris ([12:22](#)):

Which I guess makes sense as they are a drone.

Kristy:

Explicate, they'll go further, take it further.

Chris:

That with the drone without traditionally of course, in bee society. And so for there really without gender and thus, since they don't have a gender, they would in, as you apply that I'm going to go into linguistics. And I'm sorry, as you apply a genderless idea into a linguistic layout, you can go with 'they' as the best practice, partly because drones are also so enmeshed with their social structure, that it might even be a non-singular 'they'.

Kristy:

Or one of the other non-binary pronouns.

Chris:

Yeah. But the construct is really fascinating here because I realize both of our heroes are gendered. And that's an interesting, although maybe that's, that's just their names because we're shown nothing of their, of their actual, I guess, structure or form that would indicate any sort of gender and the way that we understand.

Kristy :

Yeah. I think maybe that gender was perhaps applied to them by their maker who has a more binary approach to gender than perhaps the society where there are drones and stuff would have. So since they seem to take that Maker is essentially their father and they seem to take what he says as gospel and run with it. I think they would probably never questioned what gender is or why am I a she, why is he a he? And I also wanted to let you know, upfront that being that we are a literary podcast, I'm pretty sure we just like lost so many listeners by bringing in linguistics.

Chris:

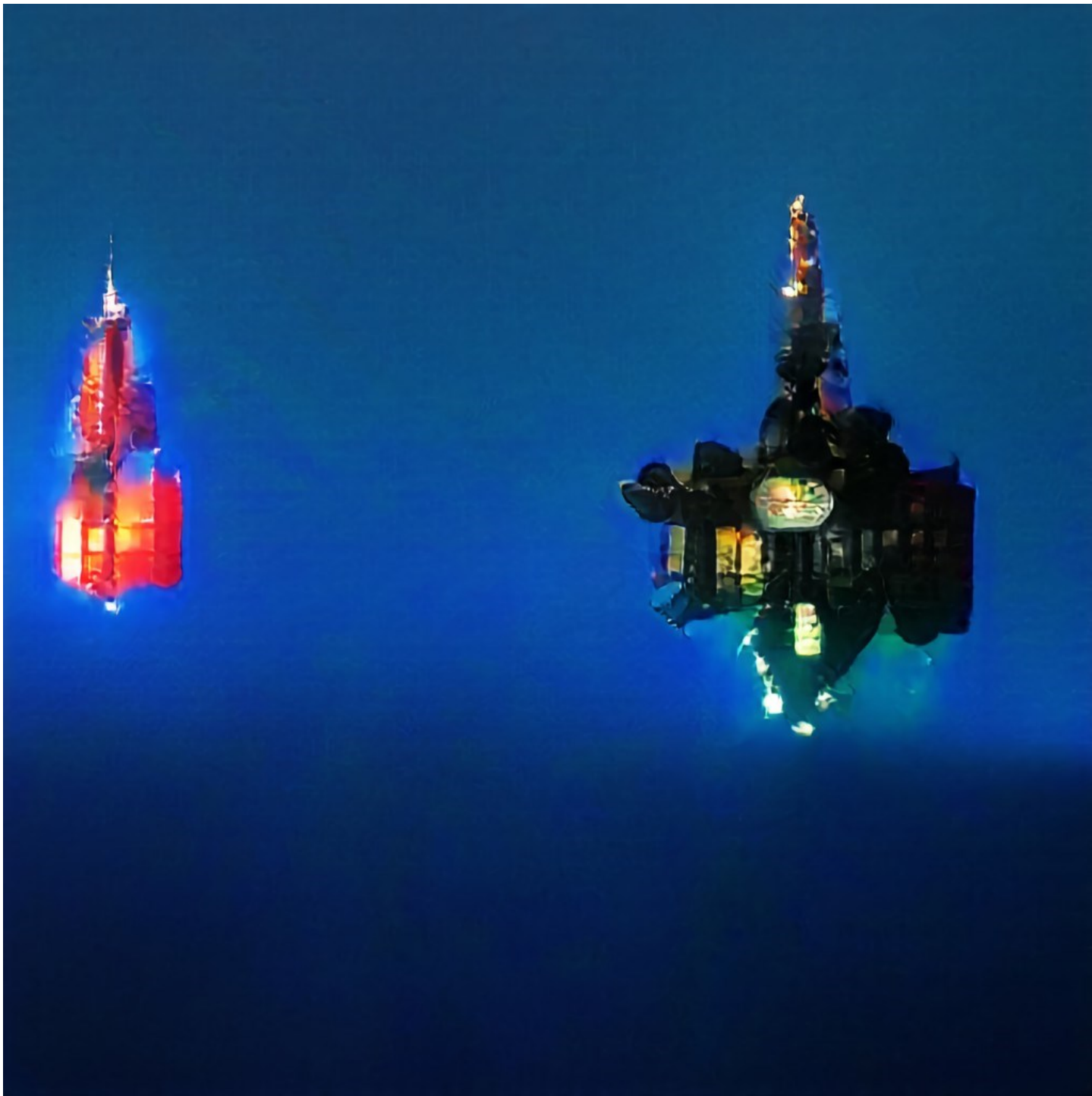
I know, short stories.

Kristy

People hate words.

Chris :

They love words, but they don't love the ideas of words.



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Kristy :

No, they do

Chris :

Don't get me into entomology. Um, wait, etymology, entomology. Oh,

Kristy :

Etymology is words. Entomology is bugs.

Chris :

The difference between etymology and entomology just bugs me beyond words. I'm sorry. No, I'm not.

Kristy :

I wouldn't insect you to be. Truly one of my worst puns ever. And I'm yet I'm proud of it.

Chris :

I also loved that when sister sabotage the wings of third drone, that she couldn't bring herself to sabotage the wings themselves because they were built by her brother.

Kristy :

There's so much love there! It's hard to say because they're machines. So we don't know, do they know love? You know, they're only just understanding lying and love is such a complex concept, but whether they know it or not, there's definitely love there. It's amazing that a story about two machines who are so, so very inhuman that they don't know how to lie, which is basically like one of the most human things then to find that humanity in them I think it's a Testament to the talent here.

Chris :

I think that that's, what's fascinating about this story and why I kind of wish it was the last of the six we'd be looking at is in many ways it is so tied to these other stories' themes. It's very much, there's a whole lot of *A Guide to Working Breeds* in it. There's a whole lot of *The Mermaid Astronaut* in it. There is absolutely a ton about the idea of what your duty is to your partner. Uh, in this case brother, in the case of *Bad-ass Moms* and *Zombie Apocalypse*. And this is one of the things I love about this ballot is how well it holds.

Kristy :

That definitely, a ballot that holds together very well and is just full of fantastic stories. Makes my imaginary vote really easy to cast. I wanted to bring up another line that I just had to copy and paste and put it in my little document of little notes. Okay. So for me, there's levels of the surprise line. Sometimes it's just like admiration and sometimes it's why can't I say things like that. This was why can't I say things like this and what this is. "It's space opened up with a brittle scream of light and then closed again. And the ships were gone. Dust continued to annihilate itself in modes of brilliance for a few minutes, then that two faded away." Well, knock my socks off and call me Sally.

Chris:

This is also as beautifully written as, and as wonderful as the plot is, there's one element that always gets me. It is the idea that this is a story which features a Dyson sphere that also at the same time does the exact right thing and says Dyson's spheres are impossible, which they are.

Kristy:

I'll leave that to you because I don't have that particular hangups. That's the new thing. I'm just going to be over here, admiring the pretty words that are put together, pretty ways, "Hidden knives behind their smiles." Crap.

Chris:

There's so much here. That is just so great. And this is one of the things that T king Fisher does so well in everything I've read is just such great wording. Ah, I love things

Kristy:

Too. I love pretty things. And I love things that I get jealous of because I wish I could do them, but I still love them.

[Click here to read Metal Like Blood in the Dark](#)

“Open House on Haunted Hill” by John Wiswell

Chris:

We're sending our look at the Hugo nominated short stories off to school! Here's my thing about this story. It is a story that I love, in a genre that I love, of the real, concrete, physical things be anthropomorphize, which they hate, and given sort of attributes of high strangeness. There is a story by China Mieville about the streets and how the streets and the map will change as they start to wander around each other that this very much brought to mind. That's one of my favorite stories ever. And maybe someday we'll read it on a podcast. Maybe we'll start one just to read it because it's short and we can talk about it for a little bit, but this house sounds at once highly, highly bitter and at the same time, more than a little passive aggressive.

Kristy:

It's definitely a house with personality. Whether that personality is necessarily one I'd want to be friends with, I don't know, but it does have a heart. It feels like as far as haunted houses go, that maybe it's not living up to the reputation of actual haunted houses out there. The haunted houses out there that the people are terrified of and the children run from on Halloween and so on and so forth. And 133 Poisonwood Avenue, which is essentially our protagonist here, it just feels like, "I'm not really that. That's not me. I don't have that killer instinct." And it is quite passive aggressive, the house does direct people in a way, but I'd say passive aggressive feels a little too uncharitable because it frequently is nice. Like, it helps the father realized that his daughter's having an attack of vertigo and go help her on the stairs. You know?

Chris:

So it's passive regressive.

Kristy:

Sure. Why not?

Chris:

I think one of the reasons why this has gotten so much attention is it's a strange story. Again, I think it's an adorable story. I think it really does ride that line. It does have a lot of the elements that the... The one about the robots and the chat thing and that one from earlier whose name I've already forgotten, because my memory is a guide for working breeds. Ahem. That sort of idea that something that is obvious and known to us that we sort of understand, has a more complex life that also touches something that's very human.

Kristy:

You're right to make that comparison. There is that feeling of these inanimate objects and ones that we tend to personally... When we're not anthropomorphizing them, we're at least personifying them, we're at least performing personification where we're like, "This thing has a personality. My coffee maker, he's a very stubborn little bitch." No, actually, I barely use my coffee maker, but I had to come up with an example and I couldn't think of any... Oh, my TV, it's a smart TV but we call it the dumb TV because it is stupid and it's stupid,

Chris. It's a stupid TV.

Kristy:

And so we tend to describe these very human things and feelings and attributes to inhuman things, be they houses, be they robots, et cetera, and I think that's an aspect both of them share. Houses, we tend to get really attached to as well. If you live in a certain place for a certain amount of time, then leaving it can be difficult, it can be sad, it can be nostalgic. And then there's also that possessiveness we feel over our territory, the idea of somebody else coming in and making themselves at home, which in 133 Poisonwood is an interesting concept since there are rooms that exist, but don't exist. How do you decorate that?

Chris:

I'm going to say Mary Kondo. But what's really fascinating though, is that if you sort of... To quote one of my favorite podcasters, "Boom, flip it." When you get a house, you think, "I am buying my forever house." What you're also doing is you're occupying a space that may or may not, and in this case does, have a set of desires, a set of wishes. And one through 133 Poisonwood definitely has a set of, I guess, expectations is really a good way to put it. And I find this to be a first date coming together story.

Kristy:

Aww. It's a meet cute.

Chris:

It is a meet cute.

Kristy:

It's a realty meet cute.

Chris:

Just one of the best lines in this entire thing is, "133 Poisonwood leaves the secret room open in the hopes that someone will come back. It squeezes the cracks in its floor closed, popping the locket out without scratching it. Inside is a picture of a woman with a thick nose and proud eyes. She must have made an excellent ghost. The house would take a phantom for an inhabitant at this point." It's lonely and it's making itself look as presentable as possible. And I want a secret room so badly.

Kristy:

I know. See, we have one in our house that it's not secret room, but it's a room where I don't go because I think just the general aesthetic of the room where the furnaces are, the general aesthetic of the room is a murder has been committed here or will be in the future, so I think it's my best bet not to go there. But I guess that could be considered a secret room because I tend to frequently forget it exists. There's a lot of delightful moments here and a lot of very human moments, which is really, really a credit to the author, considering that the protagonist is, again, a house, so therefore, is not human. I enjoyed this world where it sort of describes some of the things that other houses do to haunt and torture their residents. Although I nearly got up and walked away at the line, "Some houses give their residents visions of slaughters or trauma." And I was like, "I don't need to know what my house is doing to mess with my head, man. It's already weird enough up there."

Chris:

Yeah, well, that's true. Also, I do like the fact that, "The house cannot cry, there is just a little air in its pipes." It's with that line, "A wave rushed over and dropped water on his swarthy cheek." From, I think, that's Cooleridge. That idea that, "Oh, I'm not really crying. It's just some air in the pipes."

Kristy:

Yes. Somebody's cutting onions in here, stuff like that.

Chris:

Yeah. I'm not crying, you're crying.

Kristy:

I'm not crying, you're crying.

Chris:

The whole house is crying. They can't cry, it's just some of the pipes. But what I love is that there's so many points in this story that I relate to because I live in a house that if it is not 133 Poisonwood Road, and it's not, so don't try to look it up, it feels like that type of house, that it has that sort of not quite perfect and hiding its imperfections from the world until you're actually six months into your lease sort of feeling to it. And I love that I can sense this house as the house in the story. This house being I'm inside, because contrary to popular belief, I am not a bridge troll.

Kristy:

Chris, you probably should have told me before you moved into literally my house. There were so many



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things, that until we moved in, we didn't quite notice. Like, the fact that one of the doors from the deck opens inward to the kitchen, but the basement door is directly across from it and that opens outward, so they meet in a big V. Unless you have one closed, the other, can't open all the way. And it's just those little things you don't notice until like, "Oh, well. Hey, let's try this door over here." There was a sliding glass door on the other side, so that was the one we used. So some point we try that door and we're like, "Whose idea was this? This is so stupid."

Chris:

Yeah, I live in a house that actually has a ridge under the floor, so there's actually a continental divide, which makes it really funny for playing Hungry Hungry Hippos. I think this story connects with a lot of people, because there are a lot of fun, little elements that you can latch on to. I think some might say it was insubstantial. I disagree. I think it has an emotional substance to it that a lot of stories sort of gloss over by having more heaviness to them. I don't think it's weighty, but I think it is deeply felt.

Kristy:

You're right. It has feeling. It's not just gossamer and froth. There's reality here. There is pain, both from the house as the protagonist and the other characters. The man and daughter, they have their pain. I think, really, Mrs. Weiss is the only one who she's kind of like, "I'm here for the ride." Or maybe for the commission, because she's the realtor. So they have pain. That pain is explored a little bit and it's really the house that helps them explore that pain a little bit and helps them also to sort of reconnect with the loss that they have suffered. And so this isn't a, "Oh, there's nothing to it." Story. There's definitely something here.

Chris:

Yeah, no doubt there is something here. And the great thing about having something here is that it is something that plays so well in the stories that we've read, that it has both things to bounce off of and things to stand in stark contrast to, and it has play friends, and it has golfing buddies, but also they have mortal enemies who turn out to be friends, who in the end learn a little something about themselves. You have any more about this wonderful little story?

Kristy:

Of course, there was the classic moment between father and child – “Daddy closes his eyes for a moment. “Please just put your shirt back on.” Ana immediately attacks her own pants. “Clothes are for the weak!”

Chris:

That is my kids to a T.

Kristy:

I thought you would relate to that at least a little.

Chris:

Yeah. I can think of many, many times that things like that have been said. That line might be my favorite single line of any of the stories we've read so far. "Clothes are for the weak." I don't say that. I remain dressed at all times.

Kristy:

That's what no man actually ever says. You people are out of your pants the second you're in the house, but when the door is close behind, you are not.

Chris:

See, I, on the other hand, I wear pajamas at all times.

Kristy:

See, that's the way to live. I can agree with that.

Chris:

Comfy clothes and murder shows.

Kristy:

Hey, I have that mug!

[Click here to read Open House on Haunted Hill](#)

Our Conclusion!

These are exceptional short stories that show both the breadth and depth of the field at the moment. This speaks strongly to the ways in which Hugo voters are looking for the kinds of stories that move them. This set will be one of those that we go back to as an indication of where the field was at this moment in time, and it'll remind us just how robust the short story field is.

Enditorial by James Bacon

It is always wonderful to consider the Hugo Award finalist list, to see favourites and know that others share your love and appreciation. Of course, it is frustrating to also see titles, stories, works not included, and therefore not as loved as much. I noted when the announcement was made, that while *The Mandalorian* was nominated, for instance, and that was great to see, if I were to write about just my favourites, I would have a very odd view, and then do the other finalists a disservice, while I also recognised that I want to dedicate some time to reading full categories, I may not be able to, or time may allude me. When it came to the comics category, or to give its correct and oddly idiosyncratic World SF Society title, Graphic Story Category, all titles were well-known to me, as a reader, as opposed to a fan who may have known of stories, which has occurred before.

Although I dug out the issues to re reread and consider the finalists, and to assist in writing for this issue, and that gave me great pleasure, and I think that comics are currently in an amazing era, we have some fabulous stories, I doubt I can as effectively and objectively view film or TV series, indeed, I have been spending so much time since Dublin 2019 watching TV series that I have missed and while that has been amazing, it often has meant

Of course we are incredibly grateful to be Ffinalists ourselves this year, and I would like to thank Michael Carroll, John Coxon, Sara Felix, Ann Gry, Sarah Gulde, Alissa McKersie, Errick Nunnally, Pádraig Ó Méalóid, Chuck Serface, Steven H Silver, Paul Trimble, Erin Underwood and Chris for all their hard work, and the contributors, who number in the dozens, readers who enjoy what we do, and voters, who we are thankful to.

I would especially like to wish Sara Felix and Iain J. Clark best wishes, they are two favourite artists and to see them as finalists is fab.

It has been a tough time, people have been busy and time has seemed odd. As conventions return, it is not a return to normal, as has been coined, it is new normal, and that will take some getting used to, while social aspects are possibly harder. It will be interesting to see how attendance and engagement is, as the schedule of conventions returns. Will Eastercon be a smaller event? Does that mean more hotels are worth looking at? How will Worldcon members respond to the return this December? Will new technological solu-

tions help, or build more workload and expectations, on an already pressed and pressurised fan group, with too much to do and too little time? Maybe also an appreciation for other pass times since the curtailment of their fannish life. Of course new aspects have flourished, and I welcome aspects of fan activity that welcomes more people and sees more enjoyable things to do and experience, but it is still a strange time.

Jean had this wonderful idea, and I loved it, and I am very grateful for her patience and hard work, with this issue, and I am pleased we have got this one done. If any reader would like to contribute, or suggest a theme, and importantly, if you would like to send an EMAIL OF COMMENT, on this issue or for that matter any previous one, we would love to hear from you at journeyplanet@gmail.com - which is Chris' address. We normally do not do LOC's but Chris felt that an issue looking back would benefit from some letters, and so do send them our way. 20 Hollycomb, Englefield Green, Egham, TW20 0LQ for post, and journeyplanet@gmail.com for email.

Best as ever,

James





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