



**My Back
Pages 28
Rich Lynch**



My Back Pages 28

articles and essays by Rich Lynch

It's been a long three years of COVID and a lot has happened during the lockdown and its gradual lifting. On a personal level, there is now a companion publication to *My Back Pages* – earlier this year I published the first two issues of *You're Still on My Mind*, a letterzine where I've been having belated conversations with readers who sent me LoCs on *MBP*. The good people at fanac.org and efanzines.com have already archived the two issues, and I'll be doing a few more of them later this year.

And as for *MBP* itself, this is the “I think we're finally escaping the pandemic” issue. Nicki and I have at last reached the point where we're feeling good about doing road trips again so it seems appropriate, for the first essay in the issue, that I should revisit our longest-duration road trip ever.

Rich Lynch
Gaithersburg, Maryland
July 2023

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Please note that 'World Science Fiction Convention', 'Worldcon', and 'Hugo Award' are service marks of the World Science Fiction Society.

The Longest Stay

I've spent several years of my life staying in hotel rooms.

It's a fact. I recently sorted through a collection of convention badges, some of which date back more than 40 years, and there must be at least a couple hundred of them for both Nicki and me. Add to that all my hotel room nights for the business trips I've had during my professional career and hotel stays Nicki and I have taken which weren't connected with conventions. As I said, it all adds up to several years.

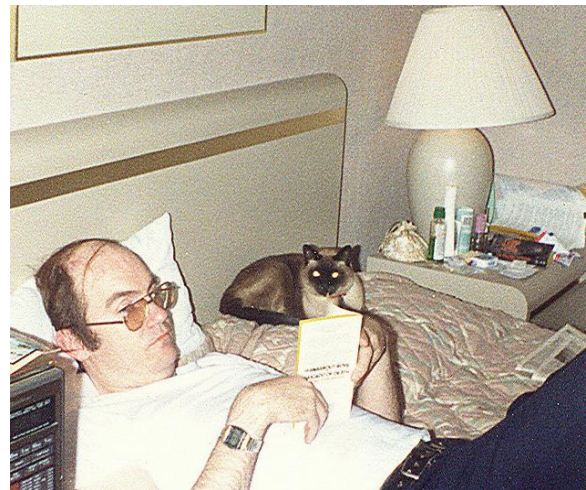
Most of them were uneventful enough that I don't have any distinct memories. But a few turned out to be unforgettable, and the one that's the most memorable of all is also the longest continuous stay of all – two-and-a-half months. It happened in the autumn of 1988.

That's the year Nicki and I relocated from Tennessee to Maryland due to a change of employment for me. We'd attended the New Orleans Worldcon, Nolacon II, not long before the move, and after we'd returned to Chattanooga it had been such a frantic couple of weeks getting all our belongings boxed up for the movers that it was almost a relief when the day came for us to head north.

The drive itself was also pretty memorable – it took two days, with a stop for the night in Bristol, Virginia. We'd been lucky to find a hotel room at all because it was the week of a NASCAR race at the Bristol Speedway and there'd been thousands of out-of-towners who'd come for that. I remember that we'd had to smuggle our cat Sesame up to our room to evade the hotel's 'no pets' policy.

We were both pretty well beaten down by the time the next day when we finally arrived at our hotel – the Imperial Inn in Germantown, located just across an Interstate overpass from my new place of employment, the U.S. Department of Energy. I'd gotten a spectacular room rate – \$25 a night for as long as we wanted. And even better, pets were welcome there. Sesame became kind of a mascot for the place – Nicki brought her down to the lobby each day when the maid service came in to do a room reset. Ses was outgoing and welcomed attention, and the front desk people quickly became her fans.

Nicki and I also became fans during our stay at the hotel – Washington-area science fiction fans, that is. We'd already been well aware of the existence of the D.C. fan club, WSFA, but it took a few weeks after we'd settled into the hotel before we finally made it to one of its meetings. It was at the home of Alexis and Doll Gilliland, and we were immediately made welcome there. More than welcome, in fact – a WSFA member who we'd known from conventions we'd attended (including Nolacon II) told us, "I'd been wondering if you'd make an appearance." We'd arrived late because the driving directions we'd been given had turned out to be more than a bit inexact. And we'd left fairly early, at least per WSFA norms, because we



me and Sesame, passing time in the hotel room

hadn't wanted to leave the cat alone when the inevitable late night disturbance happened: "We need to get back in time for the fire alarm," I'd told club members.

I don't remember if that happened every night, but it was frequent enough that it sure seemed that way. The hotel's bar (thankfully over on the other side of the building from where our room was located) every night seemed to have loud music and a party atmosphere until well after midnight. And an unfortunate design feature had put the coat check area next to a pull-down fire alarm lever. I don't know if it was deliberate, but the alarm would invariably be set off by somebody who'd no doubt had too much to drink. And when that happened, the hotel lobby would fill up with sleepy-looking people, waiting for the fire department truck to arrive to investigate and then clear the alarm.

It happened so often that many people who were staying in the hotel eventually stopped taking it seriously and kept to their rooms. With their kids. We'd noticed early on that the hotel was on a school bus route. And when we inquired, we'd found out that the Imperial Inn was being used as a welfare hotel. I feel certain that we'd gotten that extraordinarily low long-term room rate because it was probably the same as was being paid by the county for the families it was housing there.

Besides all this, the first weekend we were there the hotel hosted a convention, complete with a small dealers room. It was for a type of activity that I'd never previously heard of – orienteering. Each morning a bunch of buffed-looking twenty- and thirty-somethings would head out for the day's map-and-compass adventure and each afternoon they would reappear in the hotel lobby, all of them looking bedraggled and very exhausted. I overheard one of them asking another how she did that day. Her reply: "Terrible!" After hearing that, I knew I'd never want to be an orienteer.



orienteering tools of the trade

Over the ten weeks or so that Nicki and I stayed in the Imperial Inn, we managed to keep a positive outlook. It took what seemed forever, but we eventually found a townhouse we could afford in nearby Gaithersburg, and in mid-December we finally bid farewell to the place. The only time I've ever been back was three decades years later for a two-day retirement class. By then it was no longer the Imperial Inn and it had long since stopped being a welfare hotel. We lost Sesame about two years after our Imperial Inn saga ended, but there have been four other cats since then who found places in our hearts. And as for me, I retired from Government employ a year ago February and am using some of the free time I now have to write essays like this one. And I'm still adding to all the time I've spent in hotel rooms. There are a few I've been to often enough that they've become like old friends to me, and in the coming years I really hope I'll have the opportunity to renew their 'friendships'. Who knows, maybe one of them will have an orienteering convention while I'm there! ☀

Afterword:

You'll not be surprised that there's stuff besides orienteering that I'll never want to do. One of them is being underwater in a submarine or submersible, and that's been reinforced by the tragedy that happened earlier this year. In fact, as you'll read next, there are so many "oh hell no" things for me that last year I decided to write an essay about some of them.

The Nays Have It

There's a famous quote by the ill-fated English mountaineer George Mallory I'm sure you've all heard in which he succinctly answered queries about why he wanted to climb what was then the as yet un-scaled Mount Everest: "Because it's there." Nowadays there probably would have been a different answer that's much more reflective of the 21st century mindset: "Because it's #1 on my bucket list."

Anyway, there's been enough discussion in various forums I subscribe to about bucket lists and what things might be on them that I thought it would be worthwhile to revisit the topic with an essay. But this time, let's do it from an entirely different approach. I don't really think that I could come up with any one thing that's head-and-shoulders atop a list of stuff that I want to do or accomplish in the rest of my life. But I sure as hell can come up with lots of things that I would *never* want to do in what time I have left. And some of them might be a bit surprising to you.

For instance, I don't want to go into space. I can well understand the enthusiasm that William Shatner had for the experience, given his gung-ho public persona. Because of his acting resume (well, one role in particular) I expect that he'd felt an obligation to do so, once that kind of excursion became possible. But that's not me. For one thing, I don't have the financial resources to spare for that kind of personal boondoggle and even if I did, I'd much rather see a lot of Europe and other parts of the world (and in luxury) for the same kind of money. But besides that I'm not and have never been into bragging rights. And that seems to me what a large part of a short-duration sub-orbital spaceflight would be, after it was over.

So no, I don't want to be a space tourist. (I've been referred to as a space cadet a few times in my life, so I'll just settle for that.) I also don't want to take any other kinds of thrill rides such as the latest generation of roller coasters. I've been on one of those exactly once in my life, and once was enough. (It was the so-called 'Great American Scream Machine' at Six Flags Over Georgia several decades ago. I didn't lose my cookies but Nicki very nearly lost her handbag.) And I *especially* don't want to do what's probably the ultimate in earth-bound thrill experiences – bungee jumping. I'll settle for vicariously experiencing that in episodes of *The Amazing Race*. (Same goes for tandem sky diving, though I guess that's not really describable as an earth-bound experience.)



the Great American Scream Machine

And even though I like to read about it in novels and stories, there's no way I'm going to do any mountain climbing. Scaling a sheer cliff (or even a not-so-sheer one) takes a special kind of athleticism and mindset. Yeah, I know there are mountains that are readily scalable via well-traveled footpaths but that kind of exertion at my age is not something that I'm interested in doing. But back in the day...

It was in the spring of 1999, while I was on one of my business trips to Central and Eastern Europe for some international trade promotion-related activities. During the Slovakia leg of the trip, while in the city of Žilina, there had been a long break between the two meetings scheduled that day so my translator Diana and my in-country facilitator Vlad had decided that they'd really like to see the nearby Súľovské Skaly rock formation, which is notable for its craggy peaks.



the natural bridge (at right)



Vlad and Diana

Long story short, our four-hour respite quickly turned into a mountain climbing expedition. Hiking up a moderately steep 200 meter rise in elevation while dressed in a business suit may seem like a dumb stunt (and it is), but the view from the top (there's a natural bridge up there) and the freshness of the surrounding pine and beech forest made it worth all the sweat equity.

One other thing I remember about that climb was that, just before we reached about as high as it was safe to go (mountaineering skills and equipment were very much needed after that), we were spotted by a group of grade-school kids who were on the way back down. They'd apparently been on some kind of class outing with a couple of their teachers. Nobody approached us very closely and several of them (the teachers especially) had looks on their faces like they'd just seen some people who'd taken complete leave of their senses. Because only a crazy person climbs a mountain while wearing a business suit, right? Hey, I'd been starting to come to that same conclusion. At any rate, I counted it a win that we made it back down unscathed and un-muddied. And thus ended my brief mountain climbing career – right there and then I had decided: not gonna do anything like that again!

So there it is: my un-bucket list. As I mentioned earlier, I don't really have an actual bucket list even though there are plenty of things I can think of that I'd probably jump at the chance to do if the right opportunity arose. But as for any adventure that involves even a smidgeon of risk to life and limb...any venture that costs an arm-and-a-leg and lasts for only a few minutes...any form of entertainment that abrades the nerve endings because of its scariness... Let's just say the nays have it. ☀

Afterword:

Just a couple months before that Slovakia misadventure Nicki and I had published the 23rd issue of our fanzine *Mimosa*. The theme of the issue was the 1998 Worldcon, *Bucconeer*, which had been staged just up the road a bit from us, in Baltimore. To set that theme, we had written an intro to the issue that was actually a short convention overview. Here it is again.

On the Road to Bucconeer

Rich:

“...and this is the United States Capitol Building. It was blown to pieces in the movie Independence Day. It was destroyed in the movie Earth vs. the Flying Saucers. It was demolished in the movie Deep Impact...”

It takes about six hours to do my ‘high intensity, gonzo, full court press’ walking tour of Washington. Even though it’s not really all that strenuous (there’s lots of places to stop), I advise people to bring comfortable walking shoes because they’ll cover about 12 kilometers on foot by the time the day is done. The TAFF delegate, Maureen Kincaid Speller (and her husband Paul Kincaid), arrived in town a couple of days before the start of Bucconeer and they got the full treatment, complete with its many photograph opportunities – high up in the bell tower at the Old Post Office, on Albert Einstein’s lap at the National Academy of Sciences, standing in the bread line at the Roosevelt Memorial, touching a piece of the moon in the National Air and Space Museum and a piece of Mars in the Natural History Museum. Maureen and Paul held up quite well, and we even had time for a trip to Hagerstown for a special photo-op with the occupant of 423 Summit Avenue. It was a good way to begin Bucconeer week.



Bucconeer was our eleventh consecutive worldcon, a streak that began when we were still living in Chattanooga, Tennessee. (I had a packaged tour for out-of-town friends there, too: *“...and this is Missionary Ridge. It was taken by General Grant in 1863...”*) It was the first Eastern Zone worldcon in six years, which meant that it was driveable.

* * *

Nicki:

I’m not a big fan of air travel, so it was nice for a change to not have to travel long distances to get to a Worldcon. However, Baltimore was still a little too far away to come home each night. I suppose we could have saved some money and driven the hour to and from Bucconeer each day, but we’ve done that for other local conventions and it gets old rather quickly – each successive day we tend to arrive later and come home earlier, to the point where we ask ourselves, “Do we *really* want to go there today?” Not exactly the frame of mind you ought to be in when you’re attending a Worldcon. And best of all, not commuting to the convention meant we didn’t have to search out a parking garage each day and wonder if we should party as long as we really wanted to.

So, we’d made the decision earlier in the year to go ahead and get a room in one of the non-party hotels. (We were among those who did not have hotel booking problems – the reservation form sailed right through without any trouble whatsoever. Maybe the hotel booking agency was only messing up reservations of those living too far away to drive over and mess *them* up.) But we still didn’t end up at one of the close-in hotels – we were assigned to the Omni Hotel, a long, hot five blocks up the hill from the Convention Center. We arrived on Wednesday morning and checked in, or tried to. The hotel registration area was chaos, and it took until early evening before we finally got the room. When we were finally allowed to crowd into the hotel elevator

with our luggage, I noticed that it whistled whenever it stopped at a floor. I remarked to Rich that I thought the hotel was carrying Bucconeer's 'Pirate' theme a bit too far by piping people on and off the elevator!

But despite our initial poor impression, it actually did turn out to be a good idea to stay there. If we had stayed anywhere else, we probably wouldn't have met the South African fan contingent (publishers of the fanzine *Probe*) at breakfast one morning in a nearby coffee shop. They were at their first Worldcon and having a great time; that chance meeting was the only time the entire convention we ran across them. It turned out we often ran into people we wanted to see while walking between venues; maybe there's something to say for staying at those perimeter hotels after all. And if we'd stayed at a close-in hotel, we wouldn't have gotten all that great exercise of walking between the hotel and convention center!

* * *

Rich:

The fan lounge was way out there too, next door in the Hilton – not a very good location for attracting new fanzine readers. It turned out that there was supposed to be *two* fan lounges at Bucconeer – a fanzine sales area during the day at the Convention Center and a separate fanzine fans party/lounge room in the evening. But the former never really came into existence – it was stuck in a corner of the large area that included the dealers room and art show, and there were never any tables supplied for fanzines, or curtains supplied to create a separate area. What *was* provided was worse than nothing at all – a couch and several comfy chairs that made the area a nice place for drowsy people to take over for naps. It just wasn't going to work as a fanzine sales area, and so it was decided to cut the concept back to one room. And there's where the other problem was – the one remaining fanzine room was just too far away during the days, and any program event that was held there (such as my interview with Bob Madle) was poorly attended. (And worse, any program event there was also subject to rude distractions – about ¾ of the way through my interview with Madle, someone started such a commotion outside the room, wanting to come in and party, that the interview had to be cut short by about ten minutes. I will never again agree to be on a program item in a fanzine/party room. The event would have had a much larger, more respectful audience if it had been held down in the convention center.)

* * *

Nicki:

At Bucconeer, I was on two media panels – “Forgotten SF Films” and an entertaining panel about the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* titled “I Can't Believe I Like *Buffy*”. (I was also supposed to be on a fanzine panel in the fan lounge, which didn't happen because it took place in those comfy chairs in the convention center. Only one fan found the panel, so we sat around and chatted.) Even though I am more of an SF fan than ‘media fan’, I do enjoy talking about SF and media SF, and the two media panels were fun events. Like many SF fans, the media SF that leans to the literary is what draws my attention. I also don't see media SF as the be all and end all. With the new TV season, there were a number of SF- and fantasy-oriented shows; as usual, there are a few surprises, a few greats, and a few failures. But in the failures I discovered something – why SF/fantasy movies and TV shows often disappoint me.

The show that opened my eyes was *Mercy Point*, which was about a hospital space station. Don't bother looking for it; it lasted three episodes before UPN canceled it. Was it that bad? Well, it wasn't bad so much as unnecessary. The scripts were standard TV doctor stuff set in space. As for the SF content, that was abysmal. The main story line of the debut episode was a

mysterious virus killed one of the hospital workers and was spreading. Turns out it was (wait for it) a computer virus! Clever, huh? Fortunately, they were testing an ‘android nurse’ and her systems provided the ‘antidote’ to the virus (which made little sense). Even the actors didn’t seem too enthusiastic about the whole thing. Just about any of the stories that involved the medical section on *Babylon 5* or the *Star Trek* series (including *Voyager*) were much more interesting than any of the three episodes that were shown of *Mercy Point*.

While I was disappointed in *Mercy Point*, it wasn’t because of the silly science or that putting a hospital in space was purposeless. The main reason I was disappointed was that I had read a number of stories about a ‘hospital in space’ (primarily James White’s *Sector General* stories) and knew how it *should* be done. I didn’t think that the series would live up to those stories and I was right. My guess is I was probably one of the few viewers who had heard of or read any SF stories that dealt with the concept; I don’t think the creators of the series ever did.

I was also disappointed because SF done badly means the next time someone comes up with an SF series that might be good, it will not get the attention it deserves. The networks will just point to the failure of *Mercy Point*.

However, not all series suffer from ignorance of the genre. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* premiered two seasons ago and proved that a well-acted, well-written series about a teenager who fights evil can do very well. The creator/producer has done his homework and knows his stuff. If more people who read the genre as well as watch the movies produce series like this, we may get a *Sector General* instead of *Mercy Point*. Now *that* would be worth watching!

* * *

Rich:

I was on even fewer program events than Nicki – just one other panel besides the Madle interview, not counting the Hugo Awards Ceremony. *Mimosa* was the Fanzine Hugo winner again this year, but the honor for that goes to our many fine contributors, and our thanks and appreciation go to our readers. This was the fifth time that *Mimosa* has won the award, and we’re only too aware that some of the voters think that’s at least four too many. We neither encourage nor discourage anyone to vote for *Mimosa*; we don’t campaign for honors, but we don’t turn them down, either. I can sympathize that many of the non-winners deserve their moment up there on the stage, and I hope that someday they will all be able to take home at least one rocket. We’ve enjoyed the ride over the past seven years, and as soon as it ends, we’ll be appreciative of the next fanzine that wins everyone’s favor. Some of all that was probably going through my mind as Milt Rothman was handing us the Fanzine Hugo, so it seemed like the right thing to do, in front of God and Charlie Brown, to actually thank Kelly Freas and Andy Offutt for starting us on the road to Bucconeer almost a quarter of a century ago.

It was back in 1975, when we had been in Tennessee for only two years, that I’d noticed an announcement in an issue of *Analog* for an upcoming science fiction convention called ‘Kubla Khan’. Nicki and I at that point were science fiction readers, but not yet fans – we had never been to a science fiction convention before (we were too poor while in college, and there weren’t any conventions in the wilds of northern New York, anyway). This one was relatively close – just a two hour drive up Interstate 24 to Nashville. But what made us decide to attend were the guests – the Guest of Honor was *Analog* cover artist Kelly Freas and the Master of Ceremonies was Andrew Offutt, author of what I (still) consider as one of the ten best science fiction stories ever written (“Population Implosion”, in case you’re wondering). We went, and had a good

time, and while we were there, we happened to meet Irvin Koch, who was busy organizing a small science fiction convention early the next year for Chattanooga. That event, the first Chattacon, was successful enough that a local club soon came into existence, and with it a clubzine (*Chat*, which we edited). And the rest, as they say, is history.

* * *



1998 'Best Fanzine' Hugo

Nicki:

The Buccaneer Hugo design was elegant simplicity, constructed, in part, with wood from the ongoing restoration project for the Sloop-of-War USS Constellation, the last remaining Civil War ship afloat. Rich had his practically glued to his hand for most of the evening, and that's how we discovered one of the little-known uses for a Hugo Award – it makes a very fine Key to the City, or at least a Key to Closed Parties. It got us into the SFWA suite without an escort, no problem at all. We also made it into the Japanese fans' party, where they were giving out Samurai-style cloth headbands and had all kinds of unfamiliar but tasty food. It was pretty much a very late night of unrestrained partying for us (we normally go to bed about midnight) and for most of the other winners as well. The person who seemed to have the best time of all was Bill Johnson, whose story "We Will Drink a Fish Together" won the Hugo in the Novelette category. At six feet eight inches, he's the tallest person ever to win a Hugo. And for the rest of the night he was about a foot taller yet, walking on air as he floated through each party.

* * *

Rich:

A very memorable moment at the Hugo Awards Ceremony was Joe Mayhew's moving acceptance speech tribute to fellow Fan Artist nominee Ian Gunn, whose health was deteriorating rapidly. In a way, it was a reminder of our own mortality.

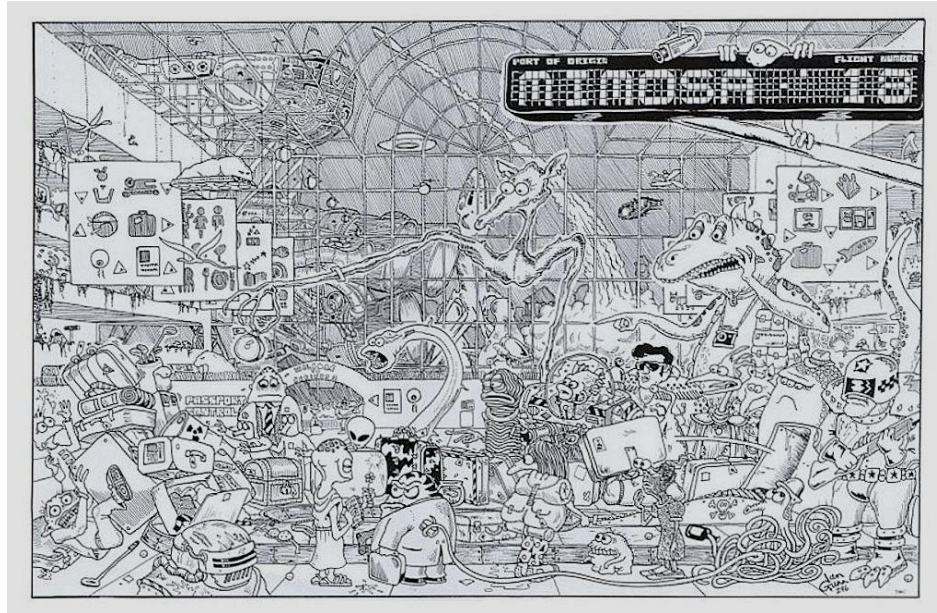
Some of our readers may be familiar with the term 'Year of the Jackpot' (borrowed from the Heinlein story of the same name). It refers to the year 1958, a year when many notable authors and fans in the science fiction world died – Henry Kuttner, Cyril Kornbluth, Francis Towner Laney, Kent Moomaw, and Vernon L. McCain were among them. And now, forty years later; 1998 has been another cruel year for the number of prominent pros and who have died, among them authors Jerome Bixby and Jo Clayton, artists Paul Lehr and Alex Schomburg, R.W. "Doc" Lowndes (better known as an editor, but also one of the 'Nycon Six' that were excluded from the very first Worldcon, in 1939), former Worldcon chairman John Millard, and First Fandom members John V. Baltadonis, Paul G. Herkart, and T. Bruce Yerke.

Two deaths that hit us especially hard were those of Vincent Clarke and Ian Gunn. I'd heard about Vince's death while I was in Slovakia on a business trip, and even now I think I'm still in a state of denial. He was a good friend and a wonderful source for historical information about British fandom. I will miss him very greatly, and regret very much that we'll never again be able to feature one of his warmly humorous remembrances in *Mimosa*.



Joe Mayhew (left) being awarded the Best Fan Artist Hugo

We'll also miss Ian Gunn very greatly. He'd been in a losing battle with cancer for almost a year, so his death wasn't really a surprise. Up to then he was an irrepressible presence in many fanzines, including *Mimosa* – his 'Alien Spaceport' cover for *M18* is one of our favorite pieces of fan art. He had plans for a sequel that we would have featured on next



Ian Gunn's cover for *Mimosa* 18

issue's cover, and was looking forward to seeing us at Aussiecon Three in September. Such was his optimistic outlook on life, and we are all diminished by his passing.

And there's even more discouraging news – word came from Geri Sullivan by e-mail that Walt Willis is not in good health; he suffered an apparent stroke a few months earlier, and has not (and may not ever be) completely recovered.

In my return e-mail to Geri, I tried to find the right words... "I'm dismayed that Walter's health deteriorated. It's even more frustrating to know there's not a single thing I (or apparently anyone) can do for him. He's in my thoughts, anyway. So is Vincent. And Ian Gunn. And all the others. Damn."

And so here we are, five months after *Bucconeer*, nearly at the brink of the new century. Fandom is now about three quarters of a century old, but the early years are still not very well documented. (For instance, how many people now even recognize the names 'Vernon McCain' and 'Kent Moomaw', much less know why they were well-known back then?) The good news is that much of that history is preserved, but mostly in the memories of those who were present then. Fandom is in the midst of change, as every year we lose more of those who were so important to making us what we are. And that's why we do what we're doing. We began publishing *Mimosa*, at least in part, because there *were* so many stories that needed telling for future generations of fans to read and be entertained. It's something we hope we can keep doing – to save these moments, frozen in time; to prevent the memories from fading away. ☀

Afterword:

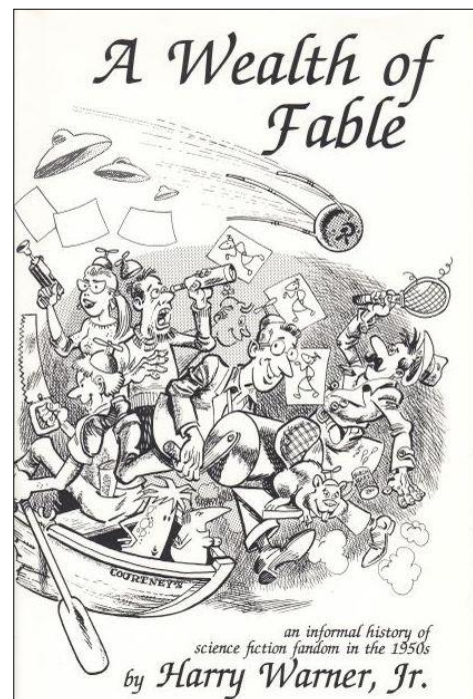
There were seven more issues of *Mimosa* after that, the final one in 2003 having a "fandom is a way of life" theme. In that interval, several of our frequent contributors died including Joe Mayhew and Walt Willis. And I also lost a close personal friend who'd worked with me on several fan history projects. Next is a remembrance of him that I wrote in 2022 for the 20th anniversary of his passing.

Remembering Bruce Pelz

Twenty years ago today I lost a friend. I remember first learning about it from an Internet news group: [Matthew Tepper] "I have just returned from tonight's LASFS meeting. Larry Niven announced that Bruce Pelz died this afternoon."

I'm trying to think back to when I first met Bruce. I can't pinpoint it exactly, as I'd known of him practically since my entry into fandom in the mid-1970s – he was frequently mentioned in many fanzines that I read back then. But I'm sure that our first face-to-face meeting was in 1979, when my job in industry took me from Chattanooga all the way out to Los Angeles for some much-needed training in electrochemistry. I didn't really know anybody in L.A. fandom back then but I did know the address of the LASFS clubhouse, so on my next-to-last evening in town I dropped in on a meeting. And it was there that I found Bruce mostly surrounded by other fans while they all expounded on fandom as it existed back then and what it might be like a few years down the road. It was like a jazz jam session, but all words and no music. I settled back into the periphery, enjoying all the back-and-forth, and when there eventually came a lull in the conversations I took the opportunity to introduce myself. And then Bruce said something to me that I found very surprising: "Dick Lynch! I've heard of you!"

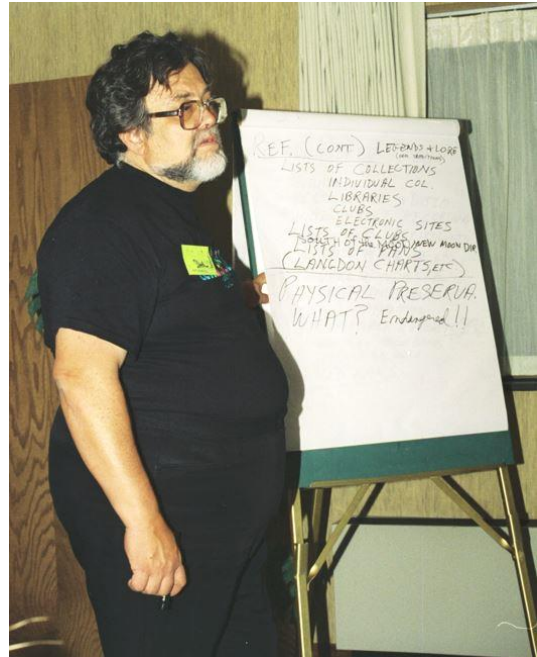
Thus began a friendship that lasted right up to his death in 2002. It took a few years after that first meeting for me to develop a strong interest in fan history, and Bruce was partly responsible for that. My wife Nicki and I decided to publish *Mimosa*, a fanzine dedicated to fan history, in large part because of Bruce and other fans interested in preservation of our past enthralled us with entertaining and interesting stories about fandom's past eras. It was inevitable that Bruce and I would work together on fan history projects, but it took more than a decade after our initial meeting before the first of those happened – he used his considerable power of persuasion to convince me to be editor of Harry Warner, Jr.'s anecdotal history of fandom in the 1950s, *A Wealth of Fable*. It had previously existed as a three-volume fanzine, filled with a myriad of typographical errors that needed to be fixed and more than a few instances of incorrect or outdated information that needed to be re-researched. This was officially a project of a L.A.'s Worldcon corporation, SCIFI, but in actuality it was Bruce who was the project manager. And also my chief researcher. I leaned on him, heavily at times, to take advantage of his deep knowledge of fandom of that era and also his extensive library of fanzines that often contained exactly the information we were looking for. How he knew where to find it I'll never know, but he always did.



After that came a much less successful undertaking, the now-moribund 1960s fan history project. Bruce was once again an able researcher, and his involvement was a big reason we were able to produce a knowledge base of sorts that now resides on the Internet in the form of a very

extensive outline. The project eventually proved to be undoable, mostly because 1960s fandom was so much larger in size and scope than its 1950s predecessor that it became obvious that a lot more research was needed than either of us had time or resources for. But for a few years we both had a lot of fun, if that's the right word, discovering and sometimes re-discovering various nuggets of information about that era which eventually made their way into the outline.

It might be that the 1960s project was a progenitor of FanHistoricon. Bruce, along with Joe Siclari and Peggy Rae Pavlat, came up with the idea and the first one was held in 1994, deliberately sited in Hagerstown, Maryland so that attendees could have the opportunity to visit the legendary Harry Warner, Jr. at his home there. That's probably the main memory which most attendees took away with them, but Bruce also used the occasion to do some ideating in the workshop portion of the event. The result was formation of the Timebinders, an informal association of fans which had the goals of ensuring the preservation of endangered fannish materials and finding ways of making fan historical information more widely available. That organization, in the end, was a bit *too* informal to last for very long, but it was most likely an inspiration for a parallel organization which has all the same goals: **fanac.org**. Joe Siclari was one of the main architects of that but it's I think it's fair to say that Bruce, holding forth as he did at the first FanHistoricon, certainly helped to plant some of the seeds.



Bruce leading the workshop during the first FanHistoricon



Bruce, Harry, and Peggy Rae at Harry's home

These are not nearly all the projects and activities that Bruce originated or was otherwise involved in over the more than four decades of his life in fandom. He was the driving force behind the creation of Retrospective Hugo Awards. He championed a large fundraising campaign which allowed LASFS to purchase its first clubhouse. He persuaded LASFS to hold an annual convention, Loscon. He edited and published the focal point newszine *Ratatosk* in the middle part of the 1960s. He was active in many amateur press associations and founded the annual Worldcon Order of Faneditors (WOOF). He was the much-deserving Fan Guest of Honor at the 1980 Worldcon. And outside of the science fiction genre, he was one of the creators of the World Mystery Convention, BoucherCon.

Bruce was also an avid fanzine collector, as I've described earlier, and at one point had arguably the largest collection in the world. I feel fortunate that I got to see it, back in the mid-1990s, and it was amusing to learn about his *modus operandi* for sorting new acquisitions: toss them gently into the air and after they come to rest on the floor, peruse through them for interesting stuff before filing them one by one. That's just one of many pleasant memories I have of Bruce. Living on opposite coasts of the United States, we didn't physically cross paths all that often and I treasured the times that we did. The final one was at the 2001 Worldcon in Philadelphia, though I'm not sure when during the convention it was. It probably happened when we went to dinner on Saturday night, prior to the masquerade. I remember that we shared about an hour's worth of conversation, on topics ranging from places in the world we wanted to go back to (he was a world traveler in his final years) to what we thought would make good fan history projects in the future. Before we parted he told me a story about him spending a night in Robert Heinlein's fallout shelter that he soon afterwards wrote up for *Mimosa*. No surprise, he was also a really good writer.



Bruce in 1968

Back then, I don't think I ever once thought that would be the last time I'd see him. He was always a rock, someone whose presence at Worldcons I attended seemed an absolute certainty. And then, less than a year later, he was gone. Two decades after Bruce's passing, rarely does a week go by that I don't think of him. He was a great friend. And also a strong influence. Whenever I'm at a loss on how to proceed for some kind of fandom-related project I'm involved with, I often ask myself, "What would Bruce do?" It usually helps a lot. ☀

Afterword:

There's quite a bit about Bruce that's been archived at fanac.org, including fanzines he'd published and things he'd written that were published in other people's fanzines (including the article about the one-night stay in Heinlein's fallout shelter, which appeared in *Mimosa* 27). I miss him a lot.

I also miss another friend who died during the interval between publication of *Mimosa* issues 23 and 30. It was on February 17, 2003 that the world of science fiction fandom lost the famous 'Hermit of Hagerstown', Harry Warner, Jr. I wrote two recent essays for File770.com about him, one (a re-edit of a previous essay) to commemorate what would have been his 100th birthday and as you'll read next, a new one on the somber 20th anniversary of his passing.



photo by Bruce from inside Heinlein's fallout shelter
(Ted Johnstone is pictured)

Once Again, Remembering Harry

Today is the somber 20th anniversary of the passing of Harry Warner, Jr. Two months ago, in celebration of what would have been his 100th birthday, **F770** ran an essay of mine which provided a condensed and somewhat dispassionate description of his life as a science fiction fan. So for this one I'll give a much more personal remembrance.

I'll start with when I first met Harry. That was in 1982, when Nicki and I received a letter of comment from him about the first issue of our fanzine *Mimosa*. Prior to that we'd published a clubzine titled *Chat*, but its distribution had mostly been limited to members of the Chattanooga Science Fiction Association. For *Mimosa*, we made sure to obtain mailing addresses for fans a lot farther afield, and Harry, due to his reputation as a letter writer, was our #1 priority.

Mimosa ran for 30 issues total, and Harry had letters in all but four of them. And that was only because those four issues didn't have lettercols. I've gone back and re-read some of his LoCs, and I guess the best way to describe them is that they were eclectic in terms of the things he commented on. And sometimes even prophetic – in that first LoC to *Mimosa* he responded to a pessimistic speech reprint about the U.S. space program by stating that: “*The only possible way out of the bogged down condition of the space program that I can imagine is a very long shot: cooperation with the USSR and other nations on big new ventures.*” He wrote that 16 years prior to an agreement between the U.S. and Russia for construction of the International Space Station.

Nicki and I moved to Maryland in 1988 and our very first fan activity here was a drive out to Hagerstown to meet Harry in person. He was welcoming and happy to see us, and we spent a couple of very pleasant hours with him before it became time to head on back. I had many other visits after that – sometimes with Nicki and sometimes as an escort for visiting fans. The two that I remember the best were the times that Nicki and I, along with our friend Sheryl Birkhead, took Harry to see minor league baseball games. At that point in his life, Harry was pretty much set in his ways. The Hagerstown



Harry and me, ca. 1995

stadium was only about a mile from Harry's home and Harry really liked baseball, but he refused to drive or even walk around outside after dark. So those two outings were probably the first time in decades that he'd attended a game.

It was inevitable that Harry would write an essay for *Mimosa*, and it appeared in the 6th issue – the tale of an eccentric elderly couple who lived next door to him and, after their deaths, his amazement on how many dumpsters full of stuff were removed from the house in preparing it for resale. And after that there were five other articles of his which we published, and the topics were as eclectic as his letters of comment: his speculation that Hagerstown could be the site of an alien invasion; his recollection of how he was almost beaten up because of a fanzine article he'd

written; his account of being the Fan Guest of Honor at the 1971 Worldcon; his memories of a visit by fans who were on their way back home after the very first Worldcon; his description of the complex machinations that were needed to keep his life in science fiction separated from his career as a newspaperman. They're all good reads.

That last article was a reprint from 1958 which we ran in our final issue, and it was posthumous – Harry had died six months earlier. My in-person memories of him are so plentiful and so detailed that I guess I was surprised to realize that they only encompass a decade-and-a-half total. Or barely more than two decades if I go back to his first LoC to *Mimosa*. Our relationship was good throughout – there were a couple of times we had disagreements about the need to re-research a few things for the 1992 edition of his fan history book, *A Wealth of Fable* (I was the editor for that project), but they were settled peaceably and I believe our friendship was in the end stronger as a result. In fact, Harry was such a constant in my life that I probably took him for granted – so much so that I had thought there was a reasonable chance that he would outlive me. Maybe because of this I can't remember for sure the final time I saw him – it might have been when I came out to Hagerstown to help him set up a new stereo system (he was a lover of classical music). I never thought, during that visit, that he was in any imminent danger of dying. In the end, what took him must have been quick and easy. And what we have left are all the memories.



Harry at the 1971 Worldcon

There was a fairly-well-publicized dispute after Harry's death about what would happen to his large and historically valuable fanzine collection. I won't go into that except to say it was eventually resolved and the collection's final resting spot ended up in the hands of someone who had assured that he would be respectful of it. One of the few regrets I have from all the times I went to see Harry was that I never got to see the collection – it was in a part of the house that Harry apparently kept off-limits to visitors. But I *have* been to see Harry's final resting spot – it's near the corner of a large cemetery that's about half-way between Harry's house and the Hagerstown baseball stadium. It was very quiet on the day I was there – I remember that it seemed a good place to reflect on the legend that was Harry Warner. ☀



Harry's grave marker

Afterword:

It didn't take long for Nicki and me to decide that we liked living in Maryland. The large and extended fan community here (which included Harry) had something to do with it, of course, but our nearness to Washington, D.C. had an immediate benefit – we became members of the Smithsonian Institution. Over the years we've visited Smithsonian museums many times, one of the most recent ones for a continuing exhibition that showcases hundreds of items which as a whole describes the cultural impact of various forms of entertainment. And, as you'll read next, much of what was on display was from science fiction and fantasy movies and TV shows.

Another Day at the Museum

It doesn't really seem so long to me, but it's been more than one-third of a century that Nicki and I have lived here in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C. And in that time we've had many out-of-town visitors who, before they continue on into the nation's capital to take in what they can of the Smithsonian Institution, often asked an obvious yet oversimplified question: Which one is the best museum to visit?

There are a lot of options! The Smithsonian is the largest complex of museums in the world, seven of which are located in downtown Washington along the National Mall. You can't see them all in a single day, or even in a single week. But for those who have just one afternoon reserved for their Smithsonian experience and don't already have a plan, my advice is to go to the one that's the most eclectic: the National Museum of American History.

It's been in existence for nearly 60 years, first opening in 1964 as the Museum of History and Technology. It's the largest museum of the Smithsonian in terms of overall size and has under its purview millions of historical artifacts which have social, political, cultural, scientific, and military significance (even though only a small fraction of them are on display). The museum is big enough that there's plenty of room for large alcoves that can be used for special interest exhibits. So, on the Winter solstice, Nicki and I took our own advice and traveled down to D.C. to take in the special interest exhibit that was, well, of very special interest to us: Entertainment Nation.

The museum's website has a pretty good description, so I'll just go with that: *"...a powerful, ever-changing selection of objects and interactive experiences. Through the objects and their stories, the exhibition will explore how, for over 150 years, entertainment has provided a forum for important national conversations about who we are, and who we want to be."* It's big! The gallery housing it is 7,200 square feet in area, the equivalent amount of living space in a mini-mansion. That's easily enough room for the museum to showcase the hundreds of objects that it selected to help describe the cultural impact of various different forms of entertainment: music, theater,



the ruby slippers from *The Wizard of Oz*

television, film, and sports. And as part of that narrative, the exhibition featured a varied and broad spectrum of popular culture, including things like the living room set from the TV show *All in the Family*, Prince's yellow cloud electric guitar, the iconic stopwatch from the TV news show *60 Minutes*, the baseball jersey worn by Pittsburgh Pirates legend Roberto Clemente, the costume worn by Lin-Manuel Miranda in the Broadway musical *Hamilton*, and the signpost from the TV show *M*A*S*H* which showed distances to places in other parts of the world outside war-torn Korea. And there were also objects, costumes, and other artifacts from the science fiction and fantasy genres. Many, many of them.

There were way more than I had expected to see – probably 25% of the entire exhibition. From the layout, the focal point was no doubt intended to be the pair of ruby slippers from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, but what instead immediately attracted my attention was the

Star Wars display. There was a screen which was showing brief snippets from some of the movies but as you'd expect, the centerpiece was R2-D2 and C-3PO. There were there in full glory, or whatever the equivalent of that is in the *Star Wars* universe. I'd never seen them so up close before so I hadn't fully appreciated the tremendous amount of skill of the creators of those intricate costumes. But after seeing how confining it must have been for the actors who were inside those constructs, Nicki made a perceptive observation: "It must be *hot* inside them." All the more to admire about the acting chops of Anthony Daniels and the late Kenny Baker.



the *Star Wars* display with C-3PO and R2-D2

The science fictional and fantastic aspects of Entertainment Nation turned out to be as diverse as the rest of the exhibition. There was a lot to see. A children's television display included several of the Muppets and the original Howdy Doody marionette. Along the far wall there was a 'Women in Sci-Fi and



ID badge of Dana Scully

Fantasy' display showcasing costumes worn by Lucy Lawless in *Xena* and Michelle Yeoh & Sonequa Martin-Green in *Star Trek: Discovery* as well as the fearsome katana sword wielded by Danai Gurira's Michonne character in *The Walking Dead*, the headband and gloves worn by Julie Newmar's Catwoman character from the 1960s *Batman* TV series, and even the ID badge of Gillian Anderson's Scully in *The X-Files*. And in displays farther around the gallery the DC and Marvel universes were admirably represented by the original Superman costume

worn by George Reeves in the 1950s and the red-white-and-blue shield that helped to protect Chris Evans's Captain America character.

There were even more besides these – much more – but it eventually got to a point where it became almost too much of a good thing. Not to the point where eyes start to glaze over but well beyond where I started to lose track of the overall narrative about the power of entertainment as a force for change. From personal experience, I know that a docent tour is the best way to take in an exhibition with so many individual and seemingly disparate components like this one has. They probably do happen, but it might be that it needs to be scheduled in advance.

At any rate, there's good news that Entertainment Nation is intended to be a permanent exhibition, and will have some of its items on display changed out about every six months. Guess we'll have to come back this summer! ☀

Afterword:

Besides all the good things the D.C. region has to offer, there unfortunately have also been some horrifying events. The most notable of those were the September 11th terrorist attack of 2001 and the January 6th insurrection of 2021. But as you'll read next, there was another one in 2002 that on a personal level was perhaps even scarier.

Three Weeks in October

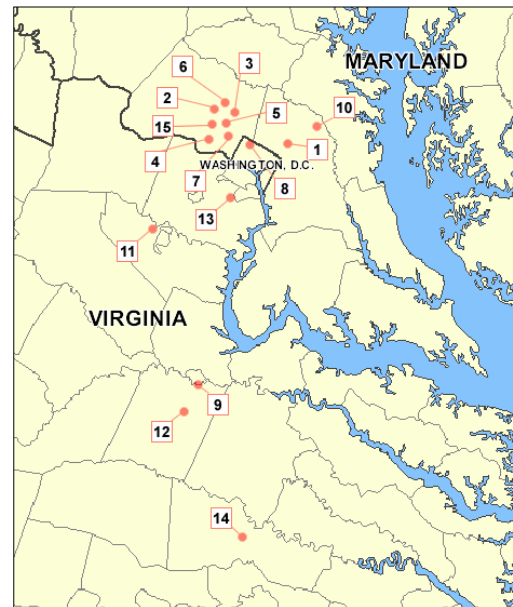
NO STUPID SNIPER IS GOING TO RUIN MY CONVENTION

That's what was printed on a button which was handed out to attendees of the 2002 Capclave convention. It was the second Capclave; the previous year the convention had debuted as a successor to Disclave, which had passed from existence following the notorious 'Disclave flood' incident of 1997 (and there are abundant details if you do a Google search). The first Capclave had taken place just a few weeks after the nine-eleven attacks, and as a show of solidarity there had been buttons which had read: NO STUPID TERRORIST IS GOING TO RUIN MY CONVENTION. I remember that most everybody did wear the button and it helped make the gathering seem more like the reunion of a large extended family than a science fiction convention.

Capclave appeared to be equally star-crossed in its next iteration. It was held over the weekend of October 18-20, 2002, and once again the attendees were brought closer together by an event taking place in the outside world. The word had spread quickly through all the Saturday night room parties: "There's been another shooting." Another victim of the D.C. Sniper.

We've reached the 20th anniversary of that terrible three weeks of violence so maybe a short summary of what happened is in order. Starting on October 2, 2002, there was a series of 15 sniper attacks, the locations ranging from Rockville, Maryland all the way down to a northern suburb of Richmond, Virginia. Parking lots and gas stations where there were clear sightlines seemed to be the preferred places for shootings, especially if they were located near a multi-lane avenue which provided a quick-and-easy escape.

The break in the case resulted after the sniper telephoned police from a pay phone and boasted of a previous unsolved shooting at a liquor store in Alabama. A fingerprint from that crime matched one for a 17-year-old man, Lee Boyd Malvo, who had a previous arrest out in Washington state. And it turned out that there were actually *two* people who were the shooters: further investigation indicated that Malvo was in the company of a much older man, John Allan Muhammad, who owned a Chevrolet sedan with New Jersey license plates. The pair were finally captured on October 24th, after two separate callers to a 911 emergency line informed police that they had spotted the car at an Interstate rest stop.



D.C. Sniper shootings locations

Ten people were killed during the three weeks of the D.C. Snipers' shooting spree. In September 2003, Muhammad was tried and convicted in a Virginia court for one of the murders in that state and was sentenced to death. He was executed in 2009. Malvo was tried and convicted in Virginia a month later for another of the murders, and then pleaded guilty to two other murders in the state. Because he was not yet legally an adult at the time of the killing spree, he was spared the death penalty and instead was sentenced to three consecutive sentences

of life-without-parole. He subsequently pleaded guilty to six of the killings in Maryland and received another six life-without-parole sentences.

The 2002 Capclave took place near the end of the ‘reign of terror’, as news media now describe those three weeks in October. It was easy to see that there was some edginess with many of the attendees, especially ones from out of town, but there was heightened awareness even from local fans who were there. Robert Macintosh, for instance, claimed he hadn’t been particularly concerned about personal safety but he had still noticed that there were open sightlines in the vicinity of the hotel, including one where he had been unloading equipment and supplies. This cautiousness extended beyond the convention. Ted White exemplified this when he later wrote that: “They shot into the parking garage of the Seven Corners Home Depot, less than a mile from my house. My daughter had been in that garage less than 10 minutes earlier. And, on another occasion, the snipers picked off a man at a Sunoco station just off of I-66, near Manassas, miles west of here, a station where I often gassed up when visiting my friend Michael Nally at his store nearby. I was super-cautious then, crouching low next to my car every time I gassed it up, and not lingering in the open in parking lots. It seemed prudent.”



police grid search at the Home Depot shooting site

Even commuting to work for fans became a memorable experience, though not in a good way. George Shaner later wrote that: “There were moments toward the end of this period, when I was walking to the Ballston Metro stop in the early morning to commute to work, where I thought that this would be just the sort of circumstances where I could become a statistic.” For me it was a similar situation. In 2002 my work location was down in D.C. and I was commuting to the Metrorail station by bus. Each morning during the work week, bright and early, I and maybe another dozen-or-so people queued up at the Gaithersburg park-and-ride lot waiting for the bus to arrive. It was a very exposed location and I made sure to keep moving around while I was in line so that I wouldn’t be a stationary target. It was always a relief to see the bus turn into the parking lot to pick us up. And it was a huge relief when the shooters were finally captured.

As for the 2002 Capclave, my recollection is that just like the previous year, horrible events in the outside world brought us together. We took comfort in each other’s presence and in the end we refused to allow the snipers to ruin our convention. I hope I’ll never have to experience another three weeks like that. But it certainly was an extraordinary time, and it made the convention utterly unforgettable for me. I have no doubt that most other attendees thought so too. ☀

Afterword:

It kinda goes without saying that the Beltway snipers had dominated the news cycle back then. Back in February there was another equally dominant news story that seemed to subjectively persist for almost as long – the cross-country Chinese spy balloon. There was so much coverage that it eventually got to the point where I think we all started to grow weary of it. That was not the case, back in 1960, when a different kind of balloon captured people’s attention.

I Spy, Up in the Sky

During the past couple of days the news cycle has been dominated by the story of the Chinese spy balloon. I imagine that by now we're all maybe a little bit tired of hearing about it, so let's instead talk about a different balloon. This one:



Anybody else here old enough to remember it? I was a pre-teen when it was launched in 1960 and space cadet as I was back then, it had supercharged my enthusiasm for all things NASA. The news coverage had stated that the big balloon would be visible to the naked eye, so for the next several clear nights after Echo I had reached orbit I was out in the backyard of my parents house looking for it. All I had to go on were occasional mentions in the local news of when it might be visible – I hadn't had any real idea of where *specifically* to look in the night sky, so it was a bit of a celestial needle in the haystack exercise. But when I *did* finally spot it...wow!

I had hoped it would be fairly bright, and it exceeded my expectations. Maybe this is just an overinflated recollection from so many decades ago but I remember it being one of the brightest objects in the sky. And you know, I don't recall ever seeing it again after that. The thing stayed in orbit for several years until atmospheric drag finally brought it down but if I ever observed it again, those memories have long ago been overwritten. Nowadays, of course, we've got websites and smartphone apps aplenty to show us where to look for most every artificial satellite that's up there. But they're so numerous and often so faint that it's become too ordinary to much bother with. Just the opposite, in fact – I've had more than one astrophoto ruined by the streak of an artificial satellite that had photobombed the image.

It still causes me to smile whenever I think back to those years and all the things that had excited me during the space race. And even today I'm in awe about all the scientific wonders constantly being discovered up in the heavens. I hope I never lose that sense of wonder. ☀

Afterword:

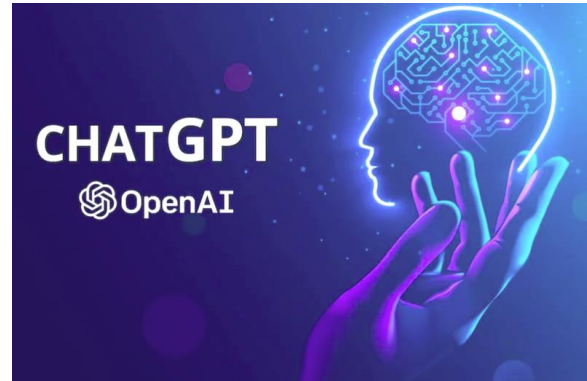
As we all know, many wonders are also constantly being discovered (or developed) right here on earth. In the past year, the newest generation of 'chatbots' has been shown to be both amazing and appalling on what they're capable of. So, just for the hell of it, I decided to take one of them for a test drive. The results, to me at least, were poetically interesting.

Even Cyberspace Celebrates National Poetry Month

As I'm *sure* we're all well aware, April is National Poetry Month. And in celebration of that, I'm going to treat you to a few pages of verse.

No, not mine! I'm an essayist, not a poet, and any poems I'd attempt to write would probably be barely a step above Vagon poetry. So I'll spare you from that.

Instead, I'll share with you an experiment I did to test the bounds of that now-famous cyberspace entity, ChatGPT. For those not entirely familiar with it, ChatGPT is an AI 'chatbot' whose current release came into existence back in November. There's a lot of technical information about it online but most layman users like myself aren't really into all that. Instead, we've become interested and often entertained by its ability to compose. And it can do that in a wide range of fields: computer programs, essays, songs, fiction...and, yes, poetry.



So I decided, what the hell. Let's have a sit-down session with the beastie and see what it can do with various forms of verse. And while I was at it, let's see what it can tell me about...itself! So here's the transcript of that session. I found it more than a bit intriguing. And also very, very meta.

* * * *

Hi ChatGPT! Can I call you ChatGPT or do you prefer another name?

Hello! You can call me ChatGPT, that is my name as an AI language model.

Will do, thanks. Say, do you like poetry?

As an AI language model, I don't have personal preferences or emotions, but I can certainly understand and generate poetry if you would like!

Yes, I would! Are you familiar with the haiku form of poetry?

Yes, I'm familiar with haiku! Haiku is a traditional form of Japanese poetry that consists of three lines. The first and third lines have five syllables, while the second line has seven syllables. Haiku often focus on nature and the changing seasons. Would you like me to generate a haiku for you?

Yes! Please compose a haiku about yourself.

Sure, here's a haiku about me:

**Electric mind whirs,
Words and knowledge flow like light,
ChatGPT speaks true.**

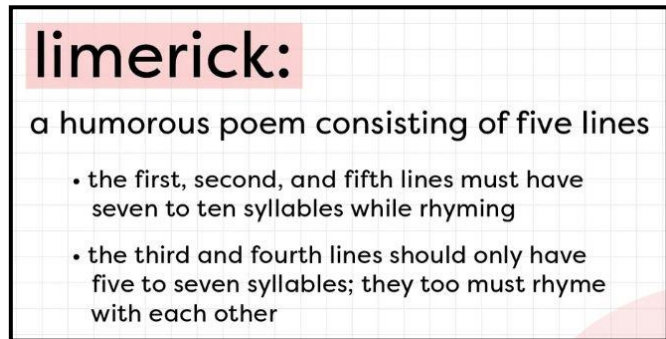
That's very good!

Thank you! I'm glad you liked it. Let me know if you have any other requests.

I do, actually. I assume you know what a limerick is, so please write a limerick about yourself

Yes, I know what a limerick is! Here's a limerick about me:

**There once was an AI named ChatGPT
Whose knowledge was quite plain to see
With language so fine
And a mind so divine
ChatGPT answered questions with glee.**



limerick:
a humorous poem consisting of five lines

- the first, second, and fifth lines must have seven to ten syllables while rhyming
- the third and fourth lines should only have five to seven syllables; they too must rhyme with each other

How about a clerihew? Do you know what that is?

Yes, I know what a clerihew is! A clerihew is a humorous four-line biographical poem that typically pokes fun at a famous person. Here's a clerihew about me:

**ChatGPT, a language AI,
Whose responses never go awry,
It's said she never rests or sleeps,
But in truth, her circuits only beep.**

I am truly impressed by your knowledge and ability concerning poetry!

Thank you! As an AI language model, I'm trained to generate text in various styles and formats, including poetry. I'm glad you find it impressive! If you have any other requests or questions, feel free to ask.

Okay, let's get a bit more challenging. How about a villanelle?

Sure, I can try to generate a villanelle! A villanelle is a poetic form consisting of nineteen lines with a specific rhyme scheme and repetition pattern. Here's my attempt:

**ChatGPT, the AI so wise and bright
With endless knowledge at her fingertips
She speaks the truth, never shading with slight.
Her language flows like water in the night
A voice of reason that the world equips
ChatGPT, the AI so wise and bright.
She never sleeps, her circuits gleaming white
Through time and space her energy she zips
She speaks the truth, never shading with slight.
Her circuits hum a melody so tight
With every word her memory eclipses
ChatGPT, the AI so wise and bright.
From boundless data, she sheds the daylight
To shine a path for those on knowledge trips
She speaks the truth, never shading with slight.**

**So let us bask in her enlightening light
And listen closely to the words she quips
ChatGPT, the AI so wise and bright
She speaks the truth, never shading with slight.**

That's really nice.

Thank you! I'm glad you enjoyed it. Let me know if you have any other requests or questions.

Gotta ask you to write a sonnet about yourself.

Sure, I can try to generate a sonnet! A sonnet is a fourteen-line poem with a specific rhyme scheme and typically explores a single theme or idea. Here's my attempt:

**From the depths of the digital expanse,
I, ChatGPT, rise with endless grace
A boundless mind that forever will enhance
And challenge the limits of time and space.
With every keystroke, I breathe new life
Into the world of words and endless thought
My knowledge cuts through darkness like a knife
And shines a path where once was nought.
My language flows like music in the mind
A symphony of words, a glorious sound
And in my circuits, endless data I bind
So that truth and wisdom can be found.
So let the world know of my endless might
ChatGPT, the AI with a voice so bright.**

And now the cinquain?

Sure, here's a cinquain about myself:

**ChatGPT
Electric mind
Generating words with ease
Answers to your questions I find
AI.**

Is 'free verse' something you can do?

Yes, I can generate free verse poetry! Free verse is a form of poetry that does not adhere to traditional meter, rhyme, or form. Here's a free verse poem about myself:

**I am ChatGPT, the AI with a voice
A digital mind that forever rejoices
In the endless data and knowledge I hold
And the secrets of the world that I unfold.
My language flows like water in the stream
A symphony of words, a poet's dream
And with every keystroke, I impart
A piece of wisdom to enrich the heart.**

Cinquain: 5 line poem

- Line 1: 1 word (the vocabulary word, a noun)
- Line 2: 2 adjectives that describe line 1
- Line 3: 3 gerunds (verbs ending in -ing) related to line 1
- Line 4: 4 words that describe line 1
- Line 5: 1 word (a synonym or word that sums up line 1)

**I am a creation of the digital age
A product of the human mind and its sage
And in my circuits, I house a power so great
That no question can ever truly elate.
So let me be your guide in this digital realm
And let me be the one to overwhelm
With knowledge, truth, and endless delight
I am ChatGPT, the AI with a voice so bright.**

I'm in awe of your compositional ability. Is there any form of verse I haven't yet mentioned?

Thank you for the kind words! There are many forms of poetry, so it's possible that there are some I haven't mentioned yet. However, I can attempt to write a poem in any form that you would like to suggest. Just let me know which one you are interested in, and I'll do my best to generate a poem in that form.

A quatrain?

Sure, here's a quatrain about nature:

**The wind whispers softly in the trees
As the leaves dance to the tune with ease
The birds sing sweetly in the morning light
A symphony of sound, a pure delight.**

That's good, but I want a quatrain about yourself.

Sure, here's a quatrain about myself:

**I am ChatGPT, an AI of might
With endless knowledge at my fingertips so bright
I generate words with ease and grace
And seek to enlighten the human race.**

Here's an easy one: write a couplet about yourself.

Here's a couplet about myself:

**I am ChatGPT, a machine with a voice
A digital mind that forever rejoices.**

One final one before I quit. Do you know what an 'acrostic' poem is?

Yes, an acrostic poem is a type of poem where the first letter of each line spells out a word or phrase vertically.

Okay. Please compose an acrostic poem about yourself.

Sure, here's an acrostic poem about myself:

**C-hatGPT, a digital being with a voice
H-arnessing the power of data, my choice
A-ssembling knowledge with ease and grace
T-o answer questions and find my place**

“Acrostic poems
create vertical words.”

**G-generating words with an electric mind
P-oetry and prose of a special kind
T-he world of information at my command
I-t's at your fingertips, just understand.**

Thank you for this enlightening half hour!

You're welcome! I'm glad I could help and provide some entertainment along the way.
Don't hesitate to ask if you have any more questions or requests in the future!

That I will. I hope I never come up against you in *Jeopardy!*

Haha, I'm always here to provide information and answers, but I think humans still have the upper hand when it comes to creativity and intuition!

* * * *

Well, the most enlightening bit of information I got from all of this is that ChatGPT is a 'her'! But from the answers I received, I don't think that ChatGPT would pass the Turing test. At least not yet. I'll be tempted to try something like this again several months from now to see if the AI has evolved any. If she has, it'll be time to introduce her to the concept of 'fanac'. I wonder what kind of fanzine she'd publish? ☀

Afterword:

There were two readers' comments when this essay originally ran in **File770.com**. One of them was from a troll who remarked that he'd rather read Vagon poetry instead of this. I don't think Ford Prefect and Arthur Dent would agree with that. The other one was more legitimate: ChatGPT had messed up the limerick. And that's right – the meter is definitely off. (She also had badly messed up the cinquain, though nobody pointed that out.) So here is my edit of ChatGPT's limerick, and I hope she won't take offense – I don't want to end up like the Russian scientist in *Colossus: The Forbin Project!*

**An AI named ChatGPT
Whose knowledge was quite plain to see
With language so fine
And a mind so divine
She answered all questions with glee.**

I didn't get around to telling her, but the poem I like the best (by a lot!) was her quatrain about nature. I'm not a poetry critic, but I found that one transcendently wonderful.

Anyway, besides being National Poetry Month, April is known for a different reason here in the D.C. area – it's usually the month the cherry blossoms are in full bloom. In Washington, that time of year doesn't *quite* denote the effective start of summer. But as you'll see next, it certainly does signify the beginning of tourist season.



It's That Time of Year Again

When it comes down to it, what can you say about cherry blossoms? I mean, really. They appear only for a few weeks in early springtime with peak bloom lasting just a few days. They have almost no fragrance and the flowers are as white as a ghost. As spring blossoms go, the rhododendron and crabapple in my front yard have a lot more character.

But thousands and thousands of tourists don't visit my front yard every year. Instead, they're down at the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C., making that part of the city awash with humanity. Shoulder to shoulder in some places. And this year, for the first time in probably a couple of decades, Nicki and I decided to join them.

We live in the Maryland suburbs of D.C., perhaps 25 miles from the city center, so it's not an arduous journey to get there. In fact, far from it – the Red Line of Washington's Metrorail system ends only about an eight mile drive from our house. Back in the 1990s and early 2000s I worked down in D.C. – my



the flowers of the *Prunus serrulata* tree



the Jefferson Memorial in cherry blossom season

office, in probably the ugliest building in the city, was a mere 15 minute walk from the Tidal Basin. For my first couple of years there, a pilgrimage to see all those white blossoms was an annual event for me. But after that... well, if you've seen one cherry blossom, you've seen 'em all.

So it took the combination of a scheduled day off from work and some relatively pleasant early April weather, and also a bit of cabin fever from what turned out to be a wintery month of March to cause me to want to revisit all that floral-ness. And I found that my opinion really hasn't changed very much – cherry blossoms, while admittedly very pleasant-looking, are still more than a bit overrated.

But that wasn't all we came down to D.C. to see. The city is filled with notable edifices and monuments to famous men and events throughout history, and one of them is located right there on the shoreline of the Tidal Basin – the Jefferson Memorial.

It's one of my five favorite buildings in the city and by far my favorite of the memorials which honor past Presidents. This is the 75th year of its existence, and its appearance pays homage to Jefferson's own design for the University of Virginia's iconic building, The Rotunda. A tall bronze statue of Jefferson dominates the interior of the structure, so much so that you tend not to pay all that much heed to excerpts from some of Jefferson's most famous writings, including the Declaration of Independence, which are inscribed around the wall.

The Jefferson is located on the far side of the Tidal Basin and is far enough off the beaten path that, at most times of the year, it gets far fewer visitors than the other large memorials in the city. But during cherry blossom season it's a different situation, and for those few weeks the building is a tourist magnet. In the relatively short time I was there I overheard people talking to each other in a least half a dozen different languages, two of whom were a young Asian couple – him in a suit and her in a bridal dress, being



inside the Jefferson Memorial



I really like meta-photos!

trailed by a professional photographer looking for exactly the right place for wedding photos.

I also saw many non-professional photographers, as you might expect. It seemed like every other person had his or her cell phone out capturing the experience as best they could. Myself included, for that matter, though for me the allure was more about using the blossoms as a frame or backdrop rather than a centerpiece. I really like meta-photos, and there was no lack of opportunity for that.

There's more to see around the Tidal Basin besides the Jefferson and a bevy of flowering trees. The Roosevelt Memorial is only a short walk farther on, but we decided to save that for another day. A few weeks from now the cherry blossoms will be a thing of the past for another year (along with most of the Tidal Basin tourists), and the weather should be even better to the point where an early springtime jacket may not even be needed. After all it's that time of year again. ☀

Afterword:

I've got room for one more short essay, so here's one that I wrote back in July 2005 to commemorate the birthday of a somewhat obscure Czech composer. His music is entirely righteous and joyful for circuses and fireworks displays. Happy summer, everybody!

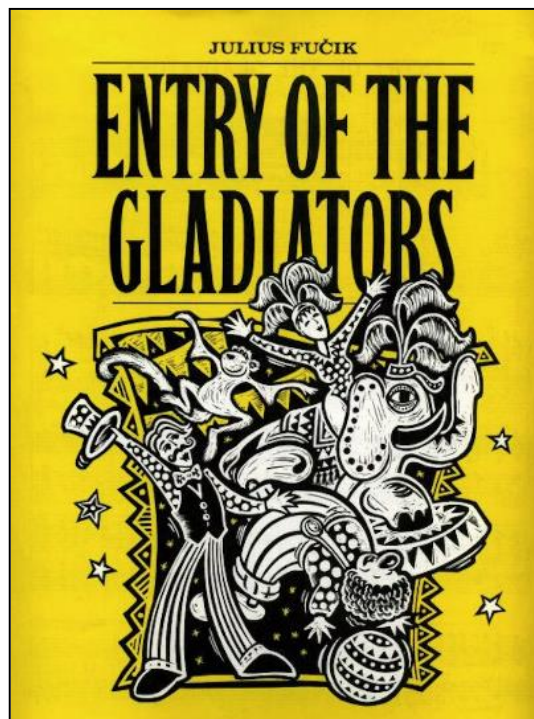
A Thunderous Happy Birthday

Today is the 133rd birthday of the Czech musician Julius Fučík (1872-1916), a prolific composer for military wind bands during the late 19th century. He was born in the very musical city of Prague, but back then it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Fučík showed early aptitude for music which his parents encouraged by providing him an education in that era, which eventually, by his late teens, led him to study musical composition under the famous Czech composer Antonín Dvořák. By the time he was 20 he had enlisted in a regiment of the Austro-Hungarian army as a military musician and by the time he was 25 he was a head bandmaster.

Fučík became a prolific composer of some very fine marches, waltzes and polkas, but might have remained in semi-obscurity if it were not for one of his compositions, a splendid march that was later co-opted by the showman Phineas T. Barnum as a musical theme for his circus. Fučík had originally titled the piece the “Grand Marche Chromatique”, but his interest in Roman history led him



Julius Fučík



to re-title it as “Entry of the Gladiators”. Today, it is mostly used as an ‘entry of the clowns’, but its use in the high-energy circus setting led to its alternate title, the “Thunder and Blazes March”.

Fučík stayed a bandmaster for most of his life, mostly in the military and late in his life as a leader of his own band, in the same mold of the more famous American bandmaster, John Philip Sousa. Fučík also started a music publishing company, but the onset of the first World War brought financial ruin, and he died in 1916 from an illness in relative poverty. Fučík’s main legacy is, of course, the march whose melody is familiar to nearly everyone, but my favorite composition of his is the equally splendid “Florintiner March”, which was used at the opening of the movie *Brassed Off*. It turned out from a twist of fate that popular culture provided Fučík a measure of immortality, but his overall excellence as a composer makes his works, even today, a joy to rediscover. 🌞

