

READERCON

Jeff VanderMeer

Justina Ireland

L. A. Banks

Ann VanderMeer



#32, July 2023

READERCON

33

**July 11 to 14, 2024
Quincy, MA**

Save the date!

Readercon 32

Boston Quincy Marriott, Quincy MA
July 13-16, 2023

Introductions

Message from the Conchairs	4
Readercon Code of Conduct	6

Our Guests

Jeff VanderMeer	11
Justina Ireland	31
L. A. Banks, Memorial Guest	40
Ann VanderMeer	44

In Memoriam:

<i>Peter Straub, Suzy McKee Charnas</i>	49
<i>Our Committee</i>	53
<i>Advertiser Index, Bookshop List, Map</i>	57



All souvenir book art by Lisa Hertel

Message from the Conchairs

Welcome to Readercon!

Whether you're an old friend or attending for the first time, let us welcome you to Readercon 32. We are so glad that you're here.

Since the last in-person Readercon, our world has experienced cataclysmic changes. Virtual Readercon 31 allowed us to stay in touch, but now we are so excited to see you all back in person.

Our wonderful Guests of Honor are Jeff and Ann VanderMeer, and Justina Ireland; stop by and talk to them after a panel. L. A. Banks is our Memorial Guest of Honor; come to the panels about her to find out why. We have an exciting group of panels, readings, and Kaffeeklatches. Our bookshop has dealers of all types of reading matter to get to know our guests even better.

The volunteers who run Readercon are the smartest and hardest working people we know. They have dedicated untold hours to putting this conference together year after year so that we can all get together and have a magnificent time. We are grateful to them for their time and effort. Readercon could not happen without them.

This year we have had a team of volunteers acting as the Conchair, but it has still been a lot of work. We are so grateful for all the volunteer work that everyone has done from a few minutes of sitting at a door, to everyone on staff.

So, if you enjoy Readercon this year, consider next year volunteering at the conference or even better, joining our volunteer staff — we could really use your help. Contact us at volunteers@readercon.org.

Your Conchair Team

Lisa “Opus” Goldstein
Merryl Gross
Thom Jones-Low
B. Diane Martin
Lori Meltzer



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Readercon Code of Conduct

Policies for in-person conventions:

- No smoking in programming areas or the Bookshop, by state law and hotel policy. Smoking is permitted on the hotel patio, but please do not smoke under awnings or overhangs.
- No eating or drinking by anyone in the Bookshop.
- Cell phones must be set to silent or vibrate mode in panel discussion rooms.
- The only animals allowed in convention areas are service animals.
- No weapons in convention areas.

Policies for all conventions:

- Individuals over the age of 15 need a membership to attend Readercon.
- Young children who are always with an adult are admitted to Readercon for free; others need a membership.
- Any disruptive or inappropriate behavior may lead to being asked to leave the convention.
- Readercon reserves the right to revoke membership at any time for any reason. No refunds will be given.
- Readercon reserves the right to refuse membership.

Policy on Addressing Reported Violations of the Code of Conduct

This policy is in effect as of 6/10/2016. Readercon's safety committee (safecom) and convention committee (concom) will annually review the policy and amend it as needed. "We" and "Readercon" in this document refer to the members of Readercon's committees and the corporation. This document describes our policy on handling reports of unsafe behavior and other code of conduct violations. Readercon's primary concern is the safety of our attendees, and we appreciate the assistance of all of our attendees in creating and sustaining a culture of safety at Readercon.

Each report will be handled in accordance with the policy and procedures effective at the time the report is received, taking into account the Readercon code of conduct that was in effect at the time the incident took place.

Who can report a problem?

Anyone who was directly affected by or witnessed a code of conduct violation at Readercon can file a report, and is encouraged to do so.

What sort of problem can I report?

Any behavior or pattern of behavior that violates our code of conduct. If you feel someone's behavior is dangerous or harmful to you or others, if someone's behavior makes you feel afraid or very uncomfortable, or if someone is actively making it difficult for you or others to enjoy or fully participate in the convention, we would like to know about it.

Who can I make a report about?

Anyone whose behavior causes you concern. We will give all reports equal consideration. Our handling of reports will not be influenced by factors such as the social status or convention role of anyone involved in the situation.

When can I report a problem?

At any time; however, we request that reporting take place as soon as possible during or after an incident, especially if you believe that someone may be causing problems for multiple people at the convention. Reports will be taken seriously and handled appropriately regardless of when they are made.

How do I report a problem?

At the convention, approach any concomm member (identified by a red badge stripe) or speak with a staffer at the information desk or consuite. You can also call the posted number at any time during the convention, day or night, and your call will be taken by someone trained in handling reports of problematic behavior. The phone number to make a report is printed on the back of your badge. After the convention, email safety@readercon.org.

What will happen if I make a report?

The following is a brief summary. See the document titled *Readercon Procedures for Handling Reported Violations of the Code of Conduct* at <https://readercon.org/procedures> for detailed information.

If you make a report at the convention:

Two responders will offer you the use of a private space, explain in detail what the possible outcomes are and what will be asked of you, listen to your report, and interview other people (witnesses, the person the report

is about) as necessary. They will then bring all collected information to the safety committee chair, who will decide whether immediate action needs to be taken. After the convention, the report and any actions taken will be reviewed by a working group that will include the safety committee chair as well as both responders. This working group will determine whether multiple-year action also needs to be taken. You will be informed of any action that Readercon takes in connection with your report.

If you email a report in after the convention:

The safety chair will receive your report and assign two responders to you. They will explain in detail what the possible outcomes are and what will be asked of you, read your report, and interview other people (witnesses, the person the report is about) as necessary. They will then bring all collected information to the safety committee chair, who will convene a working group that will include both responders. This working group will determine whether any action needs to be taken. You will be informed of any action that Readercon takes in connection with your report.

What will Readercon do in response to my report?

Readercon will always prioritize the safety of all our attendees over a single person's desire to attend or participate in Readercon. To this end, Readercon reserves the right to:

- request that someone who is causing problems change their behavior.
- revoke access to some or all convention spaces.
- revoke convention membership.
- involve hotel security.
- via hotel security, involve local law enforcement.
- deny membership for a period of one or more years, or permanently.
- choose not to take action.
- make a public statement regarding actions that Readercon takes in response to a report.

If Readercon makes a public statement regarding actions taken in response to a report, the statement will safeguard confidentiality as much as possible. Readercon will inform all parties involved in the report about the statement, and will provide them with links to the statement on the Readercon website and/or any relevant posts to social media.

If we believe someone needs to be immediately removed from the premises for the safety of our attendees, Readercon may enlist the assistance of hotel staff.

If we believe someone is in need of immediate medical attention, Readercon may call for an ambulance or other medical services.

If a person under 18 makes or is the subject of a report, we will take any steps necessary to ensure the safety of that person and other attendees, but will not take other action until that person's parent or guardian (as listed on their Readercon membership materials) is present-unless the person under 18 is making a report against their parent or guardian, or their parent or guardian is alleged to have mistreated them, in which case we may notify the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families and/or ask hotel security to involve law enforcement. While involvement in Readercon does not legally require anyone to report allegations of child abuse or harm, some Readercon staff and attendees are mandated reporters in their professional lives. We all take such allegations extremely seriously.

Readercon's representatives will follow this policy and internal procedures with the safety of all the convention's attendees in mind, which may require us to take certain actions without the consent of the person making the report. We will do our very best to balance the needs of all involved parties and the needs of the convention when they conflict.

What won't happen if I make a report?

We will not reveal your identity or the substance of your report unless it is absolutely necessary to obtain information about the incident or take action related to the incident. See our procedures for a detailed explanation of our confidentiality policy.

We will not take any sort of retaliatory action against you for reporting or not reporting a problem.

We will not provide mediation or intermediary communication services.

While we will always err on the side of safety, and treat all reports as true, we will not assume that a report being made automatically means that action needs to be taken.

We will not respond to general requests for a list of all parties whose memberships have been revoked or denied. However, if anyone inquires as to whether a particular person's membership has been revoked or denied, Readercon will provide that information. We will not keep any kind of list or database of such requests, or consider a membership status request tantamount to a report.

What will happen if someone says I caused a problem?

If someone tells us that you have violated the code of conduct, two convention representatives will ask to speak with you about it in a private place.

If you decline to be interviewed, we may ask you to leave the convention. If, after speaking with you, we believe that you have violated the code of conduct, we may ask you to change your behavior or leave the convention, or take other actions. We will not take action until we've spoken with you and anyone else involved and done our best to get a clear picture of what happened. See the document titled *Readercon Procedures for Handling Reported Violations of the Code of Conduct* for detailed information.

If we believe that no violation occurred, you are welcome to go about the convention as usual. We will not attempt to mediate or carry messages between you and the person who made the report. If someone deliberately makes a false report about you, that is itself a code of conduct violation and we will take appropriate action in response.



Looking for a supportive writing community?

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We Offer:



- Free & Affordable Classes
- Supportive, private online community
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Join us today!





A Tribute to Jeff VanderMeer (a.k.a. Baby Raccoon)

By Brian Evenson

The thing I like about Jeff’s work—one of the many things—is how decidedly and committedly it feels like only Jeff could have written it. No matter what he writes, it’s zany, a little off-kilter, a little scary, startling, always well written and fun to read. I was one of those fortunate enough to come to stumble onto Jeff early, since we both cut our teeth publishing in a now long-gone magazine called *Magic Realism*. I think the first full books I read by him were *Dradin, in Love* and *The Book of Lost Places*, both published in 1996; both those books

have the committed strangeness that Jeff would later come to be known for. Even though he’s continued to get better and better, I think if you read either of those books you can’t help but realize: “Yes, that’s Jeff. Jeff has always been Jeff. He can’t help it!” (As a sidenote, my first introduction to Ligotti was in the blurb he gave to *Dradin, in Love*, which made me track down my first Ligotti book, so Jeff’s book introduced me to a writer who would become very important to me.)

Reading *Dradin, in Love* I would never have guessed how that novella could reappear and, through juxtaposition, be transformed into something else in *City of Saints and Madmen*. I was impressed enough that I reviewed the book (I called it “marvelously dark and grotesque,” which it indeed is). As early as the first edition of *City* (2001) I was convinced Jeff was willing (or maybe compelled by the baby raccoon inside of him) to pursue a path entirely and eccentrically his own. He proceeded to that path through a number of unique books. Workplace novel in which people have a slug attached to their spine so they can’t remember the path that takes them to their supervisor? Check. A novel containing a sentient assassin meerkat? Jeff has you covered. Plus, it’s a very good novel—if I gave you the elevator pitch for it, you might think WTF, but Jeff is an expert at taking the weird ideas that others reject and making them into something meaningful, original and profound. Spore-based detective SF noir written in a kind of stripped down telegraphic style? That’s Jeff’s *Finch*, which is powerful and strange and weird and deeply satisfying. And we’ve only reached 2009.

The amazing thing is that even once Jeff’s work started being made into movies and being optioned for TV, he kept doing this. Instead of writing to what he thinks the market is going to become, Jeff writes what he wants and makes

the market catch up with him. The fact that it has makes me have a little more faith in humanity. He'll give you the biotech apocalypse that you suspect may be coming for us, but his version also includes a giant bear. Not only includes: the bear is central.

The reason I keep reading Jeff's work, the reason I've read everything he's written to date and will continue to read him, is that, despite his success, he remains always willing to take risks, is eager to surprise us and, I suspect, himself. His is vibrant, exciting fiction, and I wish there was more out there that was as exciting. Congrats, Jeff, on being a Readercon Guest of Honor!

Jeff VanderMeer Biography

Jeff VanderMeer has been profiled by the *New York Times*, *Audubon Magazine*, and the *Guardian*, in large part for his environmentalism and his exploration of the nonhuman world in his fiction. His NYT-bestselling Southern Reach trilogy has been translated into over 35 languages. The first novel, *Annihilation*, won the Nebula Award and Shirley Jackson Award, and was made into a movie by Paramount in 2018. Other works include *Dead Astronauts*, *Borne* (a finalist for the Arthur C. Clarke Award), and *The Strange Bird*. These novels, set in the Borne universe, are being developed for TV by AMC, and continue to explore themes related to the environment, animals, and our future. His most recent novel, *Hummingbird Salamander* (MCD/FSG), a finalist for the Shirley Jackson Award, interrogates the foundations of our modern world in an environmental context, and is his most urgent call to action to date. Called "the weird Thoreau" by *The New Yorker*, VanderMeer frequently speaks about issues related to climate change and storytelling. His nonfiction about wildlife and nature has appeared in *Orion Magazine*, *TIME*, *Esquire*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, among others. In January of 2023, VanderMeer founded the Sunshine State Biodiversity Group, a nonprofit devoted to rewilding, biodiversity education, and environmental journalism. He lives in Tallahassee, Florida, with his wife Ann, cat Neo, and a yard full of native plants.



This World is Full of Monsters

By Jeff VanderMeer

I Did Not Recognize What Sought Me

The story that meant the end arrived late one night. A tiny story, covered in green fur or lichen, shaky on its legs. It fit in the palm of my hand. I stared at the story for a long time, trying to understand. The story had large eyes that could see in the dark, and sharp teeth. It purred, and the purr grew louder and louder: a beautiful flower bud opening and opening until I was filled up. I heard the thrush and pull of the darkness, grown so mighty inside my head.

I grew weary.

I grew weary and I fell asleep on the couch holding the story, wondering what it might be and who had delivered it to me. But there was no time left for wonder. As I slept, the story gnawed its way into my belly and then the story crawled up through my body into my head. When I woke, gasping my resistance, the story made me stumble out the door of my house and lurch through the dark down my street, giddy and disoriented, muttering, "Do not stop me. Do not stop me. Story made me this way. Story made me this way."

I felt a compulsion to turn to the left, and then to turn to the left again. Until the story made me stop at the end of the block, where the last fence meets a forest. By now I knew that the story wasn't a story at all. It had just made me think it was a story so it could invade my brain.

And while I stood there in the shadows of the moonless night, beyond the street lamps, beyond the circling moths and with the nighthawks gliding silent overhead... while I stood there and pleaded, the story-creature sprouted out of the top of my skull in a riot of wildflowers, goldenrod, and coarse weeds.

The explosion smashed through me. I screamed out, but the story-creature clamped down on my throat and the scream turned into a dribble of whispered nonsense rhymes in a code that crawled across my skin and inside my mouth. My head itched, and there was an uncomfortable weight so my balance was off. But somehow it felt right.

Even the midnight bumblebees circling my head like a halo felt right, or the things like bumblebees that had erupted from my skin, my mouth.

There were so many things I had already begun to forget.

How This Came to Be and What Came Next

I am a writer... I was a writer. It is easy to fool a writer into thinking a creature is a story. The doorbell had rung earlier. When I had opened the door, a bulky little envelope lay on the welcome mat, under the glow of the porch light. When I opened it, a booklet crawled out onto the kitchen table. The booklet smelled like moist banana bread. It was filled with strange words, but somehow I understood that language. I read the booklet from cover to cover like it was a wonderful meal and I was a starving man. I devoured every word.

I had read a story. I was sure of it, even though I couldn't remember what the story had been about. Nor could I recall who else had been with me in the house,

except that there were two of them and they had become mere shadows on the wall.

Now, by the fence, the wildflowers and goldenrod and the weeds twined together and became something else and roots splayed out into me, and atop my head grew a sapling. My balance was terrible—I had to hold the sapling with both hands because I knew that if the sapling snapped it would kill me. But soon the weight would be unsupportable. Soon I would be beyond repair.

The story-creature that had sprouted from my head was restless and had tasks to accomplish. So I plunged deep into the forest in the dark of night, raging across the paths there, smashing into trees, backtracking, unable to know where I was or trying to wrest control from the thing that wanted to control me. But soon I adhered to paths despite myself. Soon I cohered and came to know balance and lifted my hands from the atrocity jutting from my crown. Soon I walked smooth and slow and no root tripped me and no false trail fooled me. I could see in the dark by then, or It could, and what, really, by then was the difference?

By dawn and the calls of birds, I recognized, through the grayness, the side of a hill and a clearing and there I turned once more to the left and pitched face-first into the grass and dirt and crawling beetles. The story-creature's roots plunged greedily through my brain and through my soft palate and through my lower jaw, seeking the soil. While above me the swaying sapling had become a young tree. Or had taken on the appearance of a tree. It could never have been a tree.

I lay there, face-planted, with some *thing* growing through me and I let It soak up inspiration from the earth and from the air and from the new sun. I was awash in dreams of chlorophyll and photosynthesis...

We lay like that for a long time until the story-creature had used all of me It needed. Then It withdrew, and cared not how harsh that might be, for even in that short time I had become dependent, and the retreat was like screaming against an addiction. A hole had been left behind and my consciousness ached and jumped through the hole again and again like it led to hell or to nothing, and all my atoms frayed at the edges or spread out wide, or seemed to, and I did not know if I was dead-alive or just dead.

My left leg was a withered thing now, a wet pant leg wrung out to dry, and my left arm I left in the soil—it broke off when I tried to rise, and the stump refused to bleed but after the snap became just like an old rotting tree branch. I think I carried it around with me, waving it around with my other arm, like something demented and foolish and out of date.

I was in the world but I was not in the world, endless and numb yet in agony.

I was shooting through an empty sky with the stars all fallen to the ground, and every star cut whatever it touched, including me, and all the stars that fell touched me.

I could not stop reaching out to make contact even though it made so little difference to my fate.

I Did Not Wake for One Hundred Years

I did not wake for one hundred years. This was truth.

This is the truth.

When I woke, a century had passed and the hillside had folded in itself and become overgrown with vines and the story-creature appeared to have long left and perhaps passed on its message to others, and now beyond the hill lay a vast and unyielding desert and facing me on the fertile side, my withered leg pointing at it, was a waterhole from which drank any number of disquieting animals. They held shapes my eyes did not want to recognize although some held no real shape at all, but I knew they were other story-creatures and had spread more than one story.

Some I could only see out of the corner of my eye. Others had the right number of legs but no symmetry and trailed across the ground at odd angles, drawing deep lines in the mud. They snorled and snuffled and grunted at the waterhole. They fought and died there, too, raising tusks and claws and fangs, and turned the edge of the water to a bloody froth... only to come back to life and forget a moment later their conflict.

The sun above seemed strange, as if it came to me through a filter, but I found that my eyes had a film over them that created a slight orange tint. I did not know how it came to be there, but it seemed protective or at least not unfriendly.

With help from a dead tree branch I could hobble along, and I made my way past the waterhole into the remnants of the forest, back into my neighborhood. Overhead the things that flew should not have been able to fly, for they did not really have wings; they just had the suggestion of wings, like some careless creator had not drawn them in right. My mind made them into insects, because my mind wanted stories it could understand, stories that would not frighten it. But still I knew my mind was tricking me, and for a second I loved my mind for the deception.

My old street, which I felt I had left just hours before, lay in ruins. The pavement had not just cracked but become so overgrown it had no agency, left hardly any impression and my memory had to place it there—along with street lamps that now were just nubs of concrete columns that stood little higher than a foot tall. Among the houses of my neighborhood all roofs had been staved in and few walls remained and even of foundations there were only a handful in evidence.

One of those belonged to my home, and because I had had a basement, that is where I retreated to. I slid with relief into that space, which was flood damaged and filled with debris and overgrown with grass and vines and much worse things, but still provided shelter. I slid into that space on the strength in one arm and one leg and I stared up at the sky until the things that must be messages but were also creatures curling through the air, written there and then dispersed, tormented me too much.

I dug into the dirt and grime, bereft. I dug there searching for my past, for something that had once curled around my wrist, for people that I had known but now existed like a reflection in murky water. Why were they no longer there? How could I no longer know them? Their rooms had been there. Their lives had been here. And were no longer.

“It was just a story,” I croaked, and lapped from a dirty pool of water I was so thirsty.

This was a mistake because in that water were still more fragments of story like the one that had been left in an envelope on my doorstep. Phrases and words that were neither phrases nor words absorbed into me and changed me even more, so that my withered leg became a kind of thick, flat tail and of my two eyes nothing remained but in their place were several eyes, but only one of them could see in the regular way and the others looked across the sedimentary layers before me in that basement and saw the past and all the changes that had been wrought, and because I could not accept the mighty judgment and wrath of that, for a time I rebelled and I shut all of my eyes but the regular one.

Thus I squinted at the world that it might look more like the regular world, the one in which I had been a writer and not believed in God and lived alone in a house writing and thinking that being written meant one thing when it meant so many other things as well.

My World Was Irretrievable

The world as it had become held a strangeness too vast for me to understand. I could only comprehend the space mapped by the edges of the basement and so I lay there, hungry and thirsty, for three days and three nights and watched the passage of time as would a rock or a scorpion or a blade of grass. The clouds were curious and not as I remembered and they did not form shapes that I could recognize but shapes I didn't recognize that were still recognizable as something, even if that *something* was beyond me.

This troubled me greatly, more than most of my situation, and the way too that the clouds seemed to *be* something now, that they were looking down at me and that they *saw* me. I did not like this, and this fact was how I came to know that the past was irretrievable. For some part of me had thought, perhaps, that all I saw might be undone, be unraveled. That I might recover my true sight and my old home and go back to when the story creature lay in an envelope on my porch, and that if only I never brought it inside all of the new-terrible would go away, be put back in some kind of box, perhaps even into my brain.

But it could not be put back.

What Happened As I Lay in My Basement

After three days and nights, I sensed the approach of unlikely kin, although the sound of Its passage was unfamiliar. But still, the story-creature that had sprouted from my head, now a century older, leaned in to look down upon me and unfolded Itself before me and in all ways and throughout all times looked down upon me and unfolded Itself before me and kept unfolding and I could not stop It from doing so.

Even though I wanted to so badly.

Even though I would have given anything for the story-creature to go away or to stop doing what It was doing, because I had lost so much already and this new world could not replace that.

But still the story-creature revealed Itself to me, until I understood that now It covered every surface, every space, and even though I thought I had been

alone down in the basement among the rat-things and the other things I wanted very much to be rats and weren't...I had not been alone. The story-creature had always been there, silent beside me, breathing beneath me, waiting for me to wake to its presence, to understand where I really was. But I would never understand. How could I? I had not understood the story to begin with.

When the story-creature knew, when I revealed to It by my demeanor how much I did not understand, the story-creature made a sound like the wind through branches, although the wind through the new branches I had woken to sounded more like a throaty scream being choked off. So this was a sound like the old wind, a lullaby about the ancient times to soothe whatever swarmed and seethed within me, although that was not the problem. Not really. The story-creature bent low and protruded and, there entered into the basement, sack-like, still attached to the story-creature...another me.

I opened my mouth to shriek at the sight, but the sound came out of the mouth of the other me. A me that had been rewritten, so that it resembled me in some ways, down to the wrong eyes and the tail for a leg, but different in others, so that to look at this other me made me feel nausea and claustrophobia until my adjustment.

Unlike me all of its eyes were open—and they saw...so much. So much more than me. Except now those of my eyes that were closed saw what its eyes saw and I fell to the basement floor, unable to process so many incoming images and feelings.

For so long after, I came to understand, I would spend my days listening to part of my own story issue forth from the mouth of another, and still not understand all of that story.

I Began to Have a Brother I Did Not Want

I had not been much part of the story of the world before my awakening and before the creature assigned myself to me. The story-creature told me I had lived alone. I had written alone. I had done odd jobs and been out of the house when I needed to be somewhere else. I had a car and I had a big wooded backyard and I listened to music and I complained about things like everyone else. I believe I talked to the neighbors just enough and I would go over to their houses for dinner on holidays, although I did not invite them over to our house. Others had lived in the house with me, though, stains upon the wall now, lost in the foundations, overtaken by the story-creature's tale.

I knew only that I had killed people and buried them in my backyard. Bad people. People who needed to be ended. This is how I created my fictions.

I killed them by writing stories about them in which they died, and taking the stories and crumpling up the pages. Then I would take a shovel and dig a hole and shove the pages in and cover them up with dirt. Then I would say a few words about their souls and refill the bird feeder or rake the leaves. Sometimes the people died in life and not just on the page. Sometimes they didn't. But always after I buried the pages, my writing would be enriched.

I didn't mind being eccentric in these ways. I didn't mind not having a brother or having parents that I could not remember, and now a century, like I did not mind many things. But I minded having been given a brother by the

story-creature. It might seem like a small thing in a way, since I had been asleep so long and lived in the basement of the foundations of a house that had rotted away decades ago.

It might seem like a tiny thing given the world had been colonized by the story-creature and its brethren and even the sun and the clouds had become so strange. But it was a large thing to me. My brother who was me stared at me and I became the receptor for so much that was alien to me. I would lurch to my feet and run around the basement because my brother willed it, while in my head I would see from my brother's eyes some memory in which he had had to run. Or I would sit quiet as he had sat quiet or I would weep and it was because of some time he had wept. Until finally I realized he was downloading another story into my brain, his story, and soon enough I knew that while I had slept I had been copied and that my brother was almost a century old and had been awake that whole time and now I was to become as like him as possible—and then I raged. I raged and smashed my skull against hard things because I did not want to know about the last hundred years or to be filled up with what might make me not myself. Or too much myself.

If I had still been able, I would have written a story about my brother dying and buried it in the backyard.

The Death of the Brother I Never Wanted

The world is full of monsters and this brother forced upon me was one of them. Even though my brother could see I did not want any of what he brought me, he would not relent and I could not escape, found no way to cut the link, cut the wires, cut the bond—whatever it was that had formed between us, and anyway it is true the story-creature grew agitated or upset at my attempts and became even larger and more terrible and this made me cower and beg forgiveness.

So I suppose I must have wanted to live, even amid this horror.

And there came toward the end of this transfer, this overlay, another realization: that my brother was dying. He slumped there against the dirt wall and made odd quirky motions and hissing sounds. I do not think I was killing him. I think he was old and an imperfect vessel and he would have died anyway, without anyone knowing his life. I believe the story-creature thought it a mercy to give me his memories, to let me have so much information and not be so bewildered about the world around me.

But the memories remained separate from my own, would not mix. They just floated on the top and made me have to concentrate more to remember the old life, the time before the story-creature. They came in jumbled and not all fully formed at first. Instead, they huddled together and made sense slowly. So I was screaming and writhing and then was catatonic for a time, staring into the space where my brother slowly became deflated and desiccated and his face fell in on itself and one by one his eyes closed and rotted away, while his toes flinched and his one leg kicked, kicked, was still, and the tail writhed even after my brother was fully dead.

I should have been sad seeing myself die, but instead I experienced a kind of joy and my eye clusters had all flickered open again at once. Perhaps when I was

killing people in the backyard I had hoped one day someone would do the same for me. Perhaps I rejected this version of myself that did not resemble the me who had received the fateful story-creature on his doorstep. Or maybe I was just thankful that the memory transfer had ceased like a dam had been built to contain a flood. It is so difficult to know exactly why I felt this way, nor why there was such jubilation when the story-creature opened an impossibly wide set of jaws that it had not had moments before and swallowed my brother's body whole. Even though I sat at the bottom of the basement pit, I experienced a sensation of flight and lift, as if I too had been borne up by that jagged black maw.

Yet I was still catatonic, too, absorbing the memories and I lay there for a week becoming in part someone else, so that filaments and roots and vines grew over me and fed gently on my skin and even much later I would still have the faint scars of their affection as evidence of my time in that state.

When it was done, my brother lay corpse-like and yet not corpse at the bottom of the pit and I stood at the lip, staring down at him while all around the sunrise of purple and amber made the seeing difficult. But I could not repudiate him, for most of him now resided inside of me—and because of my brother my leg had recovered and I could walk through the new landscape like I had been born to it.

I Was Taught Against My Will

I headed west, and the story-creature did not follow. Perhaps I thought it would, but instead the story-creature swayed there, crooning soft to the not-corpse in the pit. The story-creature crooned so softly, and yet I heard that sound for so many miles on my journey. I heard it when I tried to sleep in a night that had blinding light hidden within it and the grunting passage of beasts for which I had no name.

I heard it when I was trudging through what my mind interpreted as jungle but was an entirely different story, and one I could not remain sane within if I had really seen it, even with my brother's memories.

For I soon outstripped any place my fake plant brother had yet gone and the terrain became more floating than fixed, the ground covered with a thin stubble of vegetation while the clouds had come close above and turned sea-green and from them tumbled down a forest that hung wrong, the bird-things that were not birds stitching their way through that cover upside down. The smell came to me thick, in emerald mist, and often my forehead shoved up against the physical manifestation of the smell, which could be like mint or could be like a rotted, mossy animal body.

The leaves and branches itched the top of my skull and brushed my cheek and I tried not to look up too often for fear of what I might see, but also because I grew to be terrified that if I took in that topsy-turvy land I would lose my grip on gravity and, slow and inexorable, take my place up there, my feet glued to the cloud cover and my head hanging toward the ground stubble.

But also the ground stubble hid dangers, for some was not vegetable but more like animal, and less like irritant than like mouth. I would look for shadow on the stubble to know the difference and I would not take for granted either the

boulder that might suddenly unroll itself into a beast like an enormous squat centipede, which did not want to eat me, but sent tiny versions of itself that lived in its skin to attach themselves to my skin while burbling like children.

These children wanted to relive my memories. These children, for their own purposes, wanted to know about the last century, to extract it from my skull. This extraction hurt like machetes so sharp and keen that when they passed through my body I might be bisected and trisected without feeling it until I fell away into two or three symmetrical parts. That is how it manifested as pain. That is what it was every time.

Yet I could not elude them, and they came in such regimented columns and also at such regular intervals did the living boulders open up to release their terrible bounty that over time I realized these were indeed schools of a kind and I had been set loose as a history lesson. The story-creature had not wanted me to understand the last century, but instead the rest of the world, which might not know everything. So I endured it better knowing this, that it was not random and they did not mean me harm, but inflicted it as a side effect of the learning. If I were to suffer, then at least let me suffer for a purpose. Although, of course, I would do best should I not suffer at all.

Soon, though, came the final dislocation, for I had not understood the true nature of the school-creature in the same way that I had not understood the story-creature. For, one day, I came to the edge of the cloud cover forest above and the stubble ground below and the way the horizon ahead zeroed to a large dot revealed the truth.

I had walked into the school-creature during one of the night hikes, when disoriented, and all of this time the sky-cloud above had been one edge of the creature and the ground another, a kind of gullet or intestine I had entered at one end—and I was about to jump out of the other. And by the mystery of how the world now worked, the entire entity had been itself moving along, so that when I climbed down the other end to the edge of a giant lake, I had the sense that I had traveled much farther than the distance demarked by the movement of my legs, the walking forward and forward still.

From the outside the school-creature resembled a giant, horizon-consuming fuzzy worm, for while its belly was flat and padded, all along its flanks and atop its blind head, moss and creepers entangled it and disguised it so that the education within could be clandestine and immersive and conducted by light and dark provided by the school creature and the school-creature alone.

I ran for my life then, for the school-creature picked up speed as if it had known I was disembarking but now had its route to follow. With a plunging relentlessness it dove into the giant lake, the whole amazing length and width of it, while I had sprinted as fast as I could for the side, barely leaping clear of being crushed, and then, after it had passed me, of being drowned, for the splash into the lake had sent a vast wave in my general direction and I sprinted as far inland as I could, and still I was buffeted by the water and washed this way and that, one arm trapped by a single-celled creature that kept calling out my name as if I had already told it my name, but... I had not.

Then I was drowning, pulled under the waves, and I held on to the single-celled creature like a life-preserver, even as I rebuffed its attack and screamed

only in my mind for I was holding my breath and thrashing and yet somehow knew I would not drown if I only leaned on new skills, except that it was too unnatural and I would have drowned not for lack of air, but for lack of practice and because I could not understand what I had become or was becoming.

But there came a sigh and a surge and I dashed up on moss-covered rocks, battered, gulping air, still clinging to the single-cell that clung to me. It meant to end me. It meant to do that whether we were drowning or whether we sucked air, together.

There are some beasts that do not care where you are, or if things have changed, still they will attack. Even if that progress came slow, inexorable, for I could feel the cell of it merging with the cells of me, and I knew I could not give it the time.

I Acclimated Despite What I Had Lost

When the water receded, I could only extricate myself by causing harm, and while I did not want to do this, and indeed looked about me to make sure nothing and no person was watching—at least, as far as I could be sure—I battered the single-cell against a rock that was no doubt some other animal lying there dormant, until the single-cell bleated and let loose of me and, bleeding an ichor lighter than the air, floated off into the sky in tendrils and green blood slicks that gripped the sky with a kind of phantom intent.

The blood was beautiful escaping into the heavens; I could barely stand the beauty of it, and what that meant about me.

The single-cell, subdued by my attack and with nothing to tether it to the ground, soon followed its own blood up into the sky, leaving me to contemplate a harsh truth: I had become so acclimated to this new environment that until seeing blood drift away into the sky I had not realized the thickness of the atmosphere of this new Earth. It was viscous, it rippled, and it could not, in a sense, be called air, although as I observed the edge of the giant lake, having returned now that the wave had passed, I could tell that water still was heavier than air, even if the composition of both had changed.

From that point on, I became aware of my breathing and how, although I had no visible gills, my lungs must in some way work different than before. That my weight or my walking must anchor me different. This awareness, creating a confusion like unwanted stereo in my head, made it hard to walk and to breathe without recognizing the effort. It was as if I had all of a sudden become a passenger in a machine body that I was expected to pilot without the seamlessness of before. It was like being transformed from a dolphin to a human upon reaching the midpoint of a swim across a dark and endless ocean.

As painful as it had been before—my brother's memories, the trisection extracted from me for the school-creature—this loss of lack of thought about basic motor functions depressed me. I resolved I would build a boat and float down the lake and when I reached the other side of the lake, I would end myself. For it was clear to me I did not belong in this world.

The memories had become a burden I did not want to suffer, for new memories, like thought bubbles, burst inside my head every night and I would dream and nightmare so vividly that I could barely call what I did sleep, in my

thrashing and muttering and shaking. So that even though it seemed my skin absorbed some sort of nutrition from the heavy air or the weird sun, still I felt weary forever and horizons became a kind of torture, whether near or far.

From these memory bubbles, which were like my forced re-education by some ghost of a school creature living inside me, I came to learn the truth of what had happened immediately after my planting one hundred years before.

My Brother Had Been a Traitor

I watched my “brother” being born from a patch of weeds beside my body where I slept, my head dissected and held in place by the story-creature. I watched my brother rise and walk back to my neighborhood and into the house I had lived in and make it his own. He drank the milk and the water. He put out the birdseed. He ate the steaks and the fish and the vegetables. He ranted at the television about the news.

It was my brother, not me, who put my daughter to bed at night and kissed her on the forehead and read her stories until she slept. It was my brother, not me, who slept with my wife and who laughed at her tales from her work and who took her to the movies and paid the babysitter and, again, drank the milk and drank the water. With my wife. Taking care of my daughter.

But I did not remember having a wife or a daughter, and even now saw them at a remove similar to experiencing senses I did not know I had. My gills filled with air. My lungs filled with water. Nothing lived in the right direction; everything died the wrong way up. Memory must be corrupted, gone bad. I made my hands into claws and I ripped at the ground like it was the flesh of the story-creature. How could I have had a family? What did it mean that I saw my brother had a family?

I was cut into pieces by the school-creature. I was flailing close with the single-cell. But in the blur and the smudge, with the rot coming too close, creeping up my leg, there by the edge of the lake, it came to me, bathing in the memories, that, yes, I had had a family. Except that the story-creature had taken away those memories from me and given them to my brother. That he might benefit and that I might not suffer. Yet still I suffered with the weight of this—that as I slept for a hundred years, my brother had taken my place in my family and done all of the family things indistinguishable from me. But it was true this made me feel worse, and that if I had woken to knowing I had left a family one hundred years behind me, I might have gone mad or become comatose.

Were they buried beneath the dirt floor of the foundation? Had I slept atop them like a faithful dog? I would never know, and nothing in my memories told me. I just knew that I, through the person of my brother, had become a true murderer, for I had helped to end the human species in the form in which we had known it.

Every time that my brother visited a neighbor’s house, my brother left a residue that was an anti-story to the one we all knew, and this residue would grow and accumulate in the mind until it was too late to do anything but *turn to the left* and change and change again.

Everywhere across my neighborhood, my country, and the world, this residue accumulated, extended silvery filaments across the bottom of people's shoes, across their palms and foreheads and elbows and the backs of their knees while asleep or awake, and over time everyone must *turn to their left* and in the turning transform in either mind or body or both. For this was the form the change took: a shudder, a turn, a cringe, a shrug. Every time, I saw in memory, my brother took to walking through the streets at dusk so he could peer in windows and see the anti-story take hold as he spread it farther. And with each new filament extended, more people spread the anti-story until eventually it was just *the story* not the anti-story, and there had never been an anti-story at all, or any other story to rule the Earth.

It did not care about your belief system, your grasp on reality, the excellence of your analysis or your senses, for the anti-story of the story-creature became story by retelling effortlessly what lived at the core of you. So my brother went out walking and thrilled to the thrill of it, made the sounds deep in his throat that sounded like an odd nocturnal bird but were instead the end stages of the anti-story, triumphant.

Now when my brother met my neighbors, all knew all and that all was one. My brother's neighbor was my brother and he was his neighbor. While those they thought might be troublesome head-planted in remote places, as I had, and slept it off—that they might acclimate and hear the song of the one true story in due time. As I was hearing it now, buffeted by it, and yet even though I heard it I was inured to it. But this did not make me hopeful, for it just meant I no longer mattered to the spread of any story or to the plans of the story-creature.

I could roam this world as rebel or spy my entire life but the colonization was complete. All I could do was choose when I ended my experience of the world.

What I Stumbled Upon That I Was Meant to Find

I began my journey across the lake, that I might find the end of my story, which was now the anti-story much as I was the anti-brother. I felt like the captain of my own fate, that I might at least control my own body and how long it drew breath—and I wish I could tell you what I discovered I created by my own roving, my own actions, but chance does not reside on the new Earth as it did in the old.

This is both a terrible and miraculous thing.

I found the dead leathery shell of a creature that might have been like a turtle except a hundred scrawny necks attached to tiny bulbous heads with gaping mouths hung from the inside of the shell, as if these inner heads had eaten the larger creature from the inside out as part of some plan, and I had to cut them all off. They welcomed this art with an eagerness that suggested some maker's plan remained for the rest of their life-cycle, and indeed I watched those I had severed burrow into the ground with squeals of delight and soon they were gone and I never saw them again and I am glad of that. Then I had to sand down the neck stumps to make the shell float and not be disgusting. Although by then not much was disgusting because the word familiar had changed so much since I had woken.

I floated on the black-and-green surface of the lake, with pools of clearest blue embedded in that thickness, and I reflected on my situation. I reflected and refracted my situation, my memories continuing to be absorbed through the epidermis and then into my brain, as if the entire world but me already knew my past. There was nothing else to do, nothing to occupy me, for the lake was slow to travel across, the current glacial.

But then the dead shell that was my boat grew a mouth and began to talk to me, for it too still had a role to fulfill in my life in this world.

The Wonder That Was the Dead-Shell

I was made to understand by the talking dead-shell mouth that whoever should cut the hundred bulbous heads from its undercarriage shall be the feeder that the remaining dead-shell shall converse with, and that by this ritual shall both the feeder and the fed know that learning has taken place. I did not understand the importance of this at first, and considered that it might be a trick by the story-creature, except the story-creature had no part in this.

Dead-Shell grew a mouth at the bow, and it was salty and chalky with unshaven teeth that sprouted up crooked, so that the mouth must speak through a thicket of its own slashing surgery. Although it took time, of which we had plenty in that becalmed fish bowl, I came to understand Dead-Shell very well, even if I never discovered if we spoke in Dead-Shell's language or my own. I suppose after my encounter with the school-creature, I had absorbed a capacity to understand beyond my actual ability to understand.

The weather was deep and porous and full of needles and it pressed around us in a way that invigorated even as it pricked, and even if the lake looked like no body of water I had ever seen, I found it melancholy, reassuring, and calm, and thus although Dead-Shell disturbed me, I had been disturbed worse since I had woken.

How should a Dead-Shell talk? "Maw maw maw," it said, and then "Maw maw maw chaw chaw chaw." And then, "Dam dam dam dam maw maw maw chaw chaw haw."

But this was Dead-Shell throat-clearing and I could feel many eyes upon me from it, except that Dead-Shell's eyes were not on its dead shell but instead flitting through the underbrush and overbrush on the rotting shores, through thickets of trees roving in their hundreds if not thousands. For Dead-Shell's evolution made its sight independent of its self, and those eyes too had their own lifecycle, and were so numerous because of the predation upon them. Over Dead-Shell's span, Dead-Shell would shed upwards of five hundred eyes, and only during the molting could it produce more that would ascend wing-ward to stare down from on-high.

Yet still this effect was unsettling to me, and this is why I took so long to adjust to Dead-Shell's speech. When I turned my gaze to those eyes, I worried for them, for I knew them to be as like to his children, and every hour of every day one or more were eaten, and often I would see this on the far shore to the east or west—I would sense the shriek of the punctured eye from some felon of a predator and you would see the spurt of liquid and Dead-Shell was one eye closer to darkness.

All of these punctured and consumed eyes—even when they lay within the belly of the predator—could still see, for Dead-Shell told me that if swallowed whole, his eyes would report back to him, from that enemy stronghold, sometimes for months, until expelled, which was usually enough to snuff out the remaining life. Dead-Shell’s brain, not fixed in the meat of him but in his shell, contained such a coiled complexity that I could not quite bring myself to imagine it.

“Maw maw maw maw maw may may my breather my bruther my brother,” Dead-Shell said, and I knew by this that at least one of his eyes had seen my story and knew of me.

This did not matter to me in the least now. It did not matter for Dead-Shell was of the new world not the old and my embarrassment and sorrow and guilt was all of the old world and made no difference in the new world, which had none of the culture I had known. I understood this at least. And so I forgave Dead-Shell not knowing that this opening might hurt me. Even as I sailed down the length of the lake on the inside of his shell and he spoke to me from the bow.

The words continued to sound like nonsense to my ears, but to my eyes, my nose, my tongue, my skin, Dead-Shell’s words resonated like the most powerful symphony undercut by the gentlest lullaby.

I was being put to sleep and roused to heroic acts, even as all I did was kneel on the dead shell of Dead-Shell. While out of my ears, as if the words must expel matter, poured my understanding, coating the sides of my body and falling away into the water like thick honeycomb in golden multitudes.

How Dead-Shell Changed Me

Soon I came to realize that Dead-Shell was a sort of scientist-creature on the order of the story-creature and school-creature before him. He communicated to me that the world had been remade against my image and that my form, even much reduced, was the rebellion of the old world against the new, and that this made no sense because the new world embraced the old; that my very presence made the old world manifest, no matter the form, so why was the form important? Why did I hold onto the form?

And why did I, holding my form, insist then on negating myself once we had reached the end of the lake? It would serve no purpose and was impossible because I would fail because I could not destroy my constituent molecules; they would still exist, and thus I would exist as well. As still the golden manna sang as it left my ears and streamed down my body, made of my body a clay that must be reformed and redistributed to make sense.

A sweet and bitter relief.

Better that I succumb to my purpose, Dead-Shell still maw-mawed into me. Better that I become what I must become for a new life and a new journey, for this was the only way to preserve any semblance of the old world...and here Dead-Shell brought to bear all of his thousand eyes all across the land—on the shore, in the trees, in the water, in the belly of myriad beasts and buried, buried deep in the ground, staring up through moss and lichen and rich, thick soil.

That I might see through his eyes, might see how underneath the new world lay my old world still. Like the foundation of my house, there it lay, and I saw it

all in such a confusion and profusion that I could not hold it in my head and the golden honeycomb that was not honeycomb at all but the movement of my transformation spun out and pushed out from inside of me until there was more of it outside of me than inside of me, and that is how I knew that it had been growing inside of me for much, much longer than Dead-Shell had been talking to me.

For Dead-Shell's words had encased me in honeycomb from the inside out and the fortress of my body lay behind a glistening wall, and that wall was attached forever and always to Dead-Shell, and his task was done, as even the space that had been my brain softened and spread out to coat the inside of that entire space I must call separate from the world.

Namely: me.

How I Left My Self Behind

I toppled into Dead-Shell's embrace and the dead shell closed around me and bound me, while Dead-Shell's mouth detached on tiny legs and jumped into the lake. For this was all that was left of Dead-Shell, who must now rejoin his own eyes, or some portion of them and continue on his anointed purpose, his path, which might mean repeating his conversation with yet another person who had slept a century and would reach the lake through the school-creature, but had lagged behind me in his timing.

But, meanwhile, Dead-Shell had brought his teachings up and through me and the golden honeycomb that was so much more bound me and I came out from the lake to a river that roared and gushed its way down to the premonition of a vast sea, and along with this roaring and gushing and thrushing came the bobbing and weaving and floating and gliding and all of the other motions of the Dead-Shell eyes, now watching me, turned on me, so that I still saw through them but they *saw me*. And the weight of that was a powerful thing such as I cannot describe. To be seen in that way.

While I could not move for I no longer had what might be called arms and legs but only the motion provided by cilia and by the thick stickiness of the honeycomb, which was both me and not me, was how I could move and how I could stay. Yet my eyes did not partake of the honeycomb. My cluster of half a dozen eyes was too busy transforming into one eye, one giant eye that was also a kind of helmet, as if an eye had been drawn on the glass of an astronaut's helmet, except that drawn eye could see and the entire globe of glass was the eye. That while I had my hands I put my hands to my face to know that this one eye was enormous, like a world, and that already things swam there like motes but wriggling and alive. I saw so far and I saw so well, and as the many eyes of the Dead-Shell retreated and receded until I saw only through my own face.

Beneath, there came an itching and tickling. I had grown fins so I could steer myself fast down the river, now underwater because I had the gills and I had the encasing of golden sap, which I knew was stronger and yet lighter than any substance humankind had ever known, so that I was my own fish but also my own submarine, and I rushed and darted and frolicked through that water in such a sublime way I almost forgot the sense of me, forgot that I had but one eye now. I sought open water. I sought the ocean. And I blessed the thousand eyes of

the Dead-Shell, and I blessed Dead-Shell himself for allowing me to be this way, to experience this, to be other than human.

I was so fluid in my shell that I could not at times distinguish the water from my self. I could not distinguish a wave from my thoughts. Extinguish me, become me. That is all the river meant to me: a long, thick muscle that would deliver me, and I was that muscle and I wanted the sea. I desired it so badly, more than anything I had ever wanted, and it pushed out all other concerns and I could taste nothing but the sea-to-come and hear nothing and feel nothing but that.

And still I was changing, well beyond the changes that had created my brother. Those innocent days, those hours of being planted by a story-creature on a hillside, a sapling springing from my head, were long distant. I could not return to them even if I had wished to.

The Ocean That Lay Beyond the River

At the ocean, however, my urgency faded. Having reached that place, I no longer worried about ending my life, for my life had spread and swelled and become something other than it had been. Nor did I worry about much else, and I floated in the glistening green water staring up at the sky, which sagged so close and was not yet full of stars but only the ghosts of stars or a haunting of everything that was not-star, so that by the lack I might think of the word "star."

I received this vision through the taut thickness of the air, which had not yet dulled to dark.

Into that calm I was either allowed further knowledge of my wife and my daughter, or these slipped through like silvery minnows of memory darting out of me—still at a remove, but they were true, as if only by turning away so utterly now I could see them, glimpse them back on shore, staring out at me across a century. Who knew where they might be now, if they lived in the world at all?

My daughter had liked to stage plays in her room back in the house that was only a dirt foundation now, and she would make us pay to watch them and then she would do what she had planned to do anyway while we sat there with foolish grins, unsure if she was a genius or just sillier than us. My wife made jewelry in the shapes of all the natural things; spoons that were leaves and knives that were stalks of weeds and metal bowls like ponds full of fish. She made me a coiled snake as a band for my wrist, but I wasn't wearing it when I went to the hillside and though my digging in the foundation may have been to find it, nothing was there. Nothing would ever be there.

Fierce as river rush came to me *love*, came to me many trips to the beach with them, and the laughing and the sunburn and the cold drinks and the sand between the toes, and how when that happened time was no longer there, that everything became one moment, the only moment, and it was as if we had not traveled to the beach or would be leaving soon but only that we had ever been there and ever would be there.

I had worked as a writer of obituaries; I had not buried the stories of the dead in the backyard. I had worked for a newspaper researching people's lives. I had a father and a mother who were still alive when I began my long sleep, but they were more distant still, and I could not recapture them, not in any way that

had meaning, and with that loss was snapped off the whole branch of relatives and perhaps I had never had close ties to them, but in the succor of the sea, surrounded by such seething life, I felt the lack of those connections and the new connections roared into my head in such a joyous profusion.

Touched by the want and need of all of that, I, turning to look back, tried to conquer the new shoreline with the old one. For that would bring more substantial something of old life, old growth. I could almost do it. I could almost revert, for the moment. But not quite.

What would this world have been if I had slept and had returned to find it human?

Would it have been terrible or beautiful?

Would I have recognized it any better, or would humankind have been as banished as if the story-creature had come along after all?

The Sky Beyond the Ocean

All of this I thought in long and short flashes and daggers and circles as I floated, waiting for the next thing. The sky was the sun and the sea was the sky both, and only the thin line between told me of any difference, and the difference meant nothing. I could tell by how the skin of the water lifted below me that the ocean was not the ocean, but instead a great beast, a story-sea that was salt water and not salt water, and that the swells were rising that I might be lifted up into the heavens when finally the sky darkened and the stars came out, and then I might know my destination.

I sensed that while I had been shedding my last ancient skin to become pure, there had swum in quiet those who now bobbed and floated around me, others not unlike me—those who had slept on their separate hillsides and then taken a journey to arrive here, and would soon disperse again. All of us with our huge single opaque eye like a helmet and the compact bodies, from which the fins had fallen off, to drift to the bottom and be broken down and become nourishment for the beast that enclosed us in such a wide embrace.

There was no music, and yet there was such music as I had never heard before. Distant, so distant, and yet so close. Did we make that music or did the world make that music in celebration of our departure?

I did not think I would ever be human again, but I would see things no one of my species had ever seen, and with that thought I began to cry from some excess of emotion that could not go elsewhere.

I began to cry as if I meant to swell the sea and drown the earth...and yet even my tears were purposeful, and repurposed by the story-creature. For my tears encapsulated a chronicle of my story, of this story, and every tear that met the ocean's surface contained all of this tale and every tear shed by every cocooned single-eye to all sides told their tales too, that they might not be forgotten, and might be sheltered and expressed indeed by the sea and the earth itself.

Nothing ever could be lost and all would be used, and that was the way of it and part of what Dead-Shell had tried to tell me to comfort me. And so I wept my story into the ocean and the ocean received it and if you know these words you

have heard tell of them from the drops of water that fall from the sky and inhabit the lakes and the rivers and all creatures across the face of this world have heard tell of it, including the thousand eyes of Dead-Shell, for they too are self-aware and some of them must have watched us far out at sea, waiting for the next part of the story.

The clear substance over my head, the eye of me, had thinned and hardened and taken what it needed from the saltwater, and I was ready. The ocean that was itself a beast began to faster and faster curve upward like the eyes, like the helmets, and in slow-motion began to slingshot us up into the cosmos. But it was not slow motion for long, for the ocean bellowed and sped up and pushed up and its wishes were that we be gone—and at speed.

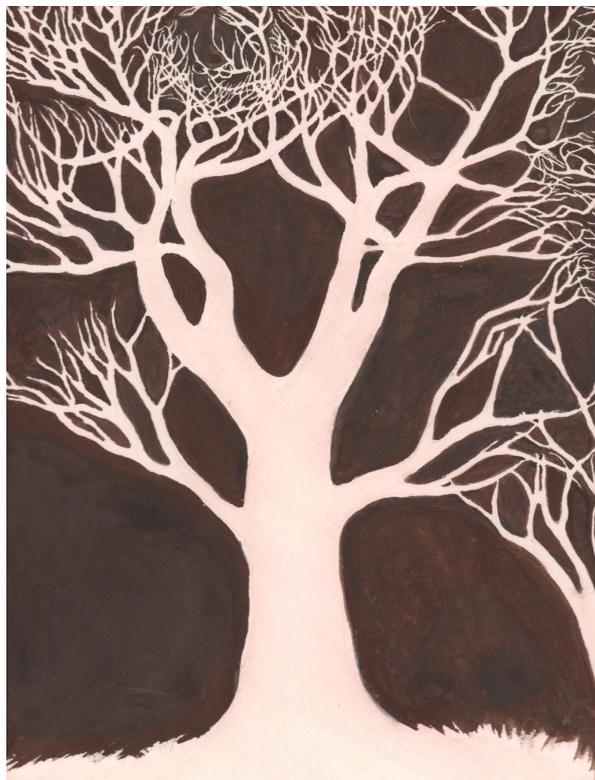
We like children heard and received and as if upon a mighty trampoline were flung up into the stratosphere and then achieved escape velocity in a holy roar and expulsion, through light and dark into dark and weightlessness...until we were all of us tumbling end over end through vacuum, and with each tumble my fellow travelers dispersed farther and farther from me, headed to other worlds than me, to become story-creatures.

For we were joyous. We were ecstatic as the stars came at us, no longer veiled, and we saw them in all of the glory that was both ours and theirs.

What was breath to us behind our helmets? What was time? What was speed?

We could tumble forever and never die, and every sighting of a star filled us like a tiny bliss, a flower opening up and opening up and never fading.

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Justina Ireland, An Appreciation

By Tessa Gratton

I'm going to tell you a secret: my favorite book of Justina Ireland's is one nobody else has read. It's brutal and incisive, a dual-timeline narrative that weaves historical trauma and militarism with a speculative future, through a voice that is filled with both humor and fear. It's a funny, and mind-blowing book, and I hope everyone gets to read it someday. But until then, it lives rent-free in my heart.

I'm telling you this because when most people think of Justina's work they think first of *Dread Nation*, that

sharp zombie-filled reimagining of post-Civil War America. They think of Jane, the protagonist, who is hilarious and big-hearted, determined to not only save people but point out what's wrong with the whole set-up even when it causes more trouble for herself. Jane is great—and I'm not sure Justina knows this, but she's a lot like Jane. Hilarious and big-hearted, willing and ready to save people at her own expense.

Justina and I got to know each other in the social justice trenches of Twitter circa 2015. We were fighting the good fight against fascism, focused on those dreadfully mundane evils of everyday racism and sexism in the book world. Justina is a historian, and she puts it to use with not only a long memory but with *citations* when she decides to analyze a text or conversation or oppressive publishing structure, pulling it apart in order to teach others exactly what went wrong. This sharp analytical brain makes her fantastic at constructing speculative fiction that pulls from layered, interconnected histories and oppressions, with humor and wit tenderizing but never dismissing the anger that simmers at the heart of her stories.

I couldn't believe it at first when Justina suggested we write something fun together. We aren't *fun* writers, I thought. How does one even write a fun book? But Justina convinced me we both needed a break from the heavy work we'd been doing in our own writing and in public lives. So we dove in, both with a collaborative fantasy novel, and in the Star Wars universe.

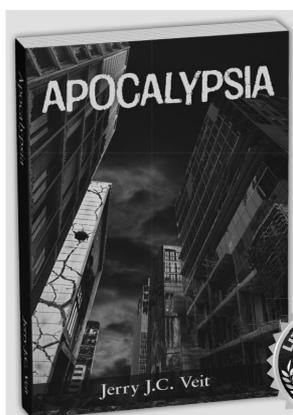
It turns out, Justina was taking care of me, because that's what she does. She gave me space to relax and be silly, be fun—in fact, she insisted on it. Sure, there

are shades of what matter to us in our collaborations: the militarization of identity, anti-fascism, intersectionality, queer normalization, among other things. But at heart, they're books we needed to give ourselves, space we needed to give ourselves. Justina saw that, and made it happen.

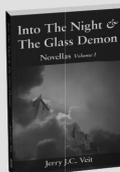
This is what Justina does: she sees what needs to be done, and she does it. She pulls others up with her. Working alongside her is an honor, and I get to see where she's headed before anybody. That's why I always come back to that book of hers only I've read, because the most exciting things about Justina Ireland are yet to come.

Justina Ireland Biography

Justina Ireland lives with her husband, kid, cats, and dog in Maryland. She is the author of both full-length books and short fiction and considers words to be her best friends. She has written a number of books, including *Star Wars* books for children. You can find her books *Vengeance Bound* and *Promise of Shadows*, as well as the *New York Times* Bestseller *Dread Nation* and its sequel *Deathless Divide*, wherever books are sold. Visit her website, justinaireland.com.



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Dread Quarter

By Justina Ireland

First appeared on the Hanging Gardens Story Tumblr

There was, as everyone knew, nothing of merit beyond the walls of the French Quarter. Hadn't been for a long time, but especially not since the end of the War Between the States.

There were the dead, sure enough. They walked through the Louisiana swamps just like everywhere else, only difference was they tended to bloat a little faster in the bayou. There were also gators and ne'er-do-wells, pick-pockets and slavers and the like, the rough sort that had been cast out of the city or had left on their own accord, chafing against the rules of law and civility. And there were plantations, terrible places where white men lived like kings on the backs of the negroes they owned despite the emancipation. Of course there were things beyond those high, stone walls, beyond the man-made channels and pit traps that the city used to keep out the dead.

Just, nothing worth commenting upon.

Which made it all the more unfortunate that life beyond the walls of the French Quarter was the only thing Katherine Deveraux truly wanted.

"Kate! Stand up straight and let out all of that air. Puffing out your chest like that is only making it harder for Marie to tie that corset. You are fourteen years old. Stop pouting like a child."

"Yes, Maman." Katherine exhaled as much air as she could, and schooled her expression to blankness to hide the pain of the whalebone and linen digging into her ribs. Maman would never listen to complaints, especially when they came to appearance. Most especially not on the night of the Full Moon Ball. Maman had gotten both her first and her second protector at the Ball. Even though the dead now walked and the world had gone to ruin, some things continued unchallenged, and the Full Moon Ball was one of them. An annual event for all those who could afford the entrance fee, it was better known as a place for beautiful light-skinned Negro girls like Katherine to find a protector who would care for them and their family, a white man who wanted a city wife who could occupy him when he came into New Orleans to conduct his business.

Maman had not thought to ask Katherine if she wanted a protector, but Katherine was a good and dutiful daughter and did not argue.

Marie, a sullen Creole girl the same age as Katherine with skin the color of bleached bone, pulled on the lacings once more, cinching them incredibly tight. Katherine saw spots for a moment and placed a shaky hand against the corner of the vanity to steady herself.

She would not complain. She never did.

"That's good enough. Now, where's the dress, Marie?" Maman snapped open her fan and waved it, sending a few of her loose curls to fluttering in the breeze. The windows were open, but the air that came through them was fetid with late September heat and the stink of the far off swamps. Not even a hint of a breeze stirred the air, and Katherine took several shallow breaths until she was steady

enough to stand on her own. Her own honey-blond curls were piled on top of her head in a way that made her neck ache, but she tried to ignore it. In a few hours it wouldn't matter. Not the corset, not the ball, not her mother's machinations and definitely not the leering men who would watch her like she was a canape.

None of it mattered because tonight she would finally see what was beyond the walls of the French Quarter.

Tonight was the night she would escape New Orleans.

The music was subpar, the men reeked of sandalwood, and the food was so sparse as to be negligible. Katherine couldn't fit any of it in her belly, anyway. Not with her corset cinched so tight.

But the dancing was absolutely divine.

The floor was larger than any Katherine had ever seen before. The Harvest Ball might be her first real ball, but she'd been to Mardi Gras at San Saint Sebastian, the grand home of the de Talons, the richest Negroes in the Quarter. San Saint Sebastian possessed a lovely parquet dance floor. But the dance floor in the Grand Ballroom here at the Chateau Noir, the finest and most beautiful hotel in all of New Orleans, was at least three times the size of the one at San Saint Sebastian. And no one at the Harvest Ball pretended to decorum like the de Talons had. Here, there were no waltzes or the occasional cakewalk while everyone tittered in delight. Instead, the men and women danced raucous reels, and Katherine found herself lost in the rowdy music, jumping along and laughing, breathless as one man after another asked her to dance.

It nearly made Katherine forget she had somewhere to be at midnight.

"Kate!" Marie called from behind an over-large potted palm as Katherine twirled by, propelled by a tall, blond white man with a sparse beard and hands that were overeager.

"Excuse me," Katherine said to her partner, voice low. She flipped open her fan and made a show of waving it. "I'm afraid I need some air."

"Do you mind if I accompany you?" the man said, his hand still fastened tightly to Katherine's. His smile was full and toothsome like a gator. Katherine could see the calculations in the man's eyes, as though even in that moment he was mentally tabulating how much it would cost him to secure her as a plaçee. The thought made her skin crawl, as though spiders had erupted all over her bare arms.

Katherine widened her eyes and gave the man a rueful smile. "Yes. I'm sorry, I simply must find the comfort room."

That gave the man enough pause that he loosened his grip. Katherine deftly disentangled her hand and exited the dance floor, ducking behind the palm and following the whisper of Marie's skirts.

"Over here," Marie called. Katherine turned and ducked down the hall, glancing over her shoulder to ensure she had not been followed. The last thing she needed was an over-excited beau as she tried to make her escape.

"Is everything ready?" Katherine asked. It had been Marie who had suggested they leave the Quarter nearly a month ago when they'd discovered Maman was looking to secure a protector for Katherine. Maman had made a good life for herself in plaçage, but it wasn't something that Katherine wanted.

She wanted freedom.

Katherine followed Marie down one corridor and then another, her steps light and her ribs straining against the corset. "Marie, please, slow your pace!"

"It is just around this corner, Kate." Marie kept to her quick steps and Katherine sprinted to keep up, ignoring the darkness eating away at the edges of her vision.

Marie had paused at a set of service doors. They were very far away from the party now, the music inaudible in this part of the hotel. Katherine gasped for air and took in what looked to be an abandoned service entrance.

"Where are we?" she asked, her words breathless. She leaned against the wall and tried to fight against the faint feeling. Her head swam and it was entirely possible that her hasty trek from the ballroom had given her the vapors.

"This entrance backs out onto one of the canals," Marie said. "Just a little further and you'll have your freedom, Kate." There was a tone to Marie's voice that gave Katherine pause.

Marie knocked thrice on the doors and it opened to reveal a couple of rough looking white men. Their beards were unkempt and their eyes gleamed with an unholy light. There was no mistaking these men for anyone respectable.

Katherine took a step back but Marie grabbed her arm and pushed her forward.

The men caught Katherine, clapping a dirty hand over her mouth. She struggled ineffectually while the men exchanged a few words of French with Marie. Finally, whatever argument they'd had ended in them dropping a few golden coins in Marie's hand. She leaned forward with a smile.

"Enjoy your freedom, Kate," she said, before strolling back toward the party.

Despair surged through Katherine. She'd been betrayed.

It was the last thought she had before darkness overwhelmed her.

Katherine woke to a gentle swaying. The world was rocking to and fro, and the motion was enough to make her ill.

She opened her eyes slowly. It was dark out and the only light was a lantern hanging from a prow, marking the way as a man with pale skin slowly applied his pole to the dark water that lay beyond the edges of the boat.

Katherine was outside of the Quarter, but she was also a prisoner.

This revelation alternately shocked and excited her. All of her life she'd listened avidly to stories of the world outside of the Quarter, of stories about far off places like Paris and Philadelphia, impossible places where snow fell and gaslights twinkled.

Here she was, finally free, and she was not free at all.

It was a quandary.

Katherine worked herself into a sitting position and took stock of her surroundings. The boat was wide and flat, the style used in the swamps where the water could be very shallow. She'd thought she was alone in the boat excepting for the oarsman and his co-conspirators. There were three of them, the two men who had bargained with Marie, curse her treachery, and the pole man who piloted the boat through the murky water. But there was also a group of

Negro girls next to her, huddled amongst sacks of rice, whispering and crying. Every once in a while they'd cast fearful glances at the knot of men in the prow of the small boat. Only one girl was unafraid. She sat with her back ramrod straight and her bound hands in her lap, her hair a wild halo of curls around her head. Her skin was dark, luminous in the low light, and her eyes glittered when they landed on Katherine.

"Will you cry like these girls?" The girl had a slight accent, as though the English words were unfamiliar on her tongue.

"No," Katherine said. She had been taught to fall back on her manners in times of difficulty, and that was what she did now. "But I cannot see why their tears are so offensive to you."

The girl threw her hands into the air. "Because their tears are wasted. The Laveaus will come for us, and when they do these men will be gutted like fish. This is the Laveaus' swamp, and they don't tolerate slavers," girl said, directing that last bit at the men in the front of the boat.

Katherine frowned. The stories said that Marie Laveau and her daughters had gone missing right after the dead began to walk in 1863. It was rumored that voodoo had numerous spells to animate the dead, and many in the Quarter had blamed the Laveaus and their workings for the undead plague. The Laveaus had fled the city soon after the rumblings turned accusatory and hadn't been heard of since.

"You stupid girl, the Laveaus are a myth," said one of the girls who couldn't stop crying. "You Haitians are so superstitious, believing in your spirits and the like. No one is coming for us. We're doomed."

"If the Laveaus are still alive I'm certain their cursed dead have devoured them by now," said one of the men in the front of the boat, spitting after saying the Laveau name. "Now hush up back there or we'll do it for you."

The girl gave the men a hateful look, but said nothing further. Her split lip indicated that she'd already run afoul of their ready hands and was loathe to do it again.

Katherine scooted over closer to the Haitian girl, since that was the only place there was room. She no longer wore the corset and fine dress she'd donned for the ball; instead it had been switched out for a rough homespun. Katherine felt very naked without the familiar restrictions of the corset, and the Haitian girl must have seen her worried expression, even in the low light.

"Don't worry, they didn't touch you none. I dressed you and got you out of that too tight binding. They wouldn't bother with you anyway, you're worth more to them untouched, especially with your coloring." The girl gave a sidelong look, filled with a familiar envy. "You might even end up a wife, if you're lucky."

"I'd rather end up in the water with the gators," Katherine said, peering over the side of the boat. She was just considering her chances of going over the side and swimming to freedom when the boat lurched.

The girls in the back let out strangled screams, while the men in the boat began to swear in French. The Haitian girl just smiled. "Don't you worry none, it's just the Laveaus."

A hand clamped on the side of the boat and pulled, causing the craft to list to one side. But it wasn't the girl's fabled Laveaus at all.

It was the dead.

The men at the front of the boat sprang into action, grabbing for axes and other bladed weapons, while the creature tried to pull itself into the boat. Katherine threw herself against the opposite side in her panic to get away from the putrid thing. The skin on the hand sloughed off in viscous sheets, and the head that pulled itself above the water line had no eyes, only teeth and dangling gray skin. It made a strange kind of hoarse cry, its jaw working like it would chew the air if it had to. It struck Katherine that the dead thing was just as sad as it was terrifying.

"Get back, get back," the men shouted, herding the girls toward the high back of the boat. The craft rocked dangerously, and Katherine grabbed for the side in order to steady herself.

A cold, wet, slimy hand locked around her wrist, as another undead creature rose up on the other side of the boat. Katherine couldn't bite back her scream this time, and it shattered the still night.

One of the men backhanded her across the face. The pain shook Katherine free of the terror of the dead, and gave her something else to fear. She managed to pull her wrist free of the dead creature's surprisingly strong grip and scrambled backward to sit with the other girls.

"You stupid girl! You'll bring all of the shamblers in the Pontchartrain down upon us," one of the men said. But it was too late.

The waters around the small boat boiled, the dark mirror of the surface flickering as the dead rose up. Katherine's heart pounded, her pulse thrumming through her ears. She'd never seen the dead, not like this, and as they multiplied, seeming to manifest out of thin air, their attention focused on the boat, fear threatened to swallow her.

She'd wanted freedom, but she'd had no idea what that meant. This, this wasn't anything that anyone could want.

"We need a distraction," one of the men yelled.

The slaver closest to Katherine bent toward her, and Katherine tensed. "No, not that one," the man with the pole said. "She's worth the most."

The slaver took a few steps, reached past Katherine and pulled another Negro girl to her feet.

The girl's eyes went wide. "No, no, please!"

She didn't get a chance to say much more before the slaver casually pushed her over the side and into the water.

"Oh my god," Katherine said. The horror of watching the girl go over the side of the boat froze her in place, made her dumb and slow. The girl screamed and the dead took her under, but it was Katherine who felt like she was the one drowning, a hundred hands pushing her below black water. She couldn't breathe, and in that moment she wanted to take it all back, to go back to the Quarter and its gilded rot. She would take a protector and squeeze out his babes, hoping like all places did that he would one day marry her and legitimize her. She would grow old in a tiny house, always fearful that she could be tossed to the side with little more than a small payment and a rueful smile. And when she had nowhere else to turn she would work in a brothel, or maybe open her own small parlor. Wasn't that the life her mother wanted for her? Wasn't the life Maman had lived?

Wasn't that life?

"Help me get out of these ropes before we all end up shambler chow," the Haitian girl said, calm and unaffected. A few of the restless dead had moved away from the boat to swarm the panicked girl, her screams now mercifully silenced, but far too many of the creatures were now trying to overtake the boat.

Katherine took a deep breath and pushed her fear and terror to the side. She quickly undid the knotted ropes while the slavers tried vainly to fight off the dead, but anyone with a lick of common sense could see that there was no way any of them could survive. The dead numbered in the hundreds, and there was only the three slavers and handful of scared girls.

"Stand back," the Haitian girl murmured, jerking her head toward the other girls, who had huddled in the middle of the boat. Katherine did as she was told. The Haitian girl rolled her neck, then her arms, and then she began to move.

She tested her movements carefully, adjusting for the boat and the way it moved through the water. She lowered her shoulder and elbowed the pole man in the kidneys, sending him over the side with a loud splash, his pole landing in the boat with a loud thwack.

That grabbed the attention of the other two men. The distraction was enough for one of the restless dead to lock their arms around one of the slavers, and he was pulled over, screaming. As he splashed into the inky depths several of the restless dead let go of the boat, moving toward the easier meal thrashing about in the water.

The Haitian girl didn't waste any time. She hooked her foot under the pole, lifting it up into the air and catching it. "Hold on," she said, before using the end to jab the remaining slaver in the mid-section. The man fell backward, setting the boat to rocking, causing several of the girls to whimper in terror. But the Haitian girl used the pole liberally, righting the boat and sending them shooting off into the night.

Some of the dead tried to hang on to the boat, but a few whacks and a liberal use of the pointed end released them from the sides. The Haitian girl moved the boat forward before turning it to the left, catching a current that pulled them through the swamp and toward goodness knew where.

The girls in the boat now watched the Haitian girl with distrustful looks, a mixture of wariness and hope. Katherine blinked as she tried to process what had just transpired. One moment, she was about to die, now they gently floated through the swamp, while the girl hummed a little under her breath.

"How did you learn to do that?" Katherine asked. The memory of the girl moving through the boat, fluid as a dancer and deadly as a gator, was the only thing she wanted to remember from this night.

The girl looked back at her and grinned. "It's easy enough to learn if you want to. There's schools. Best one is up north, but there's time to think about that later. We need to meet up with the rest of the Laveaus, find you girls somewhere safe to stay."

"Thank you. I'm Katherine by the way," she said, realizing she still didn't know the girl's name.

"Nice to meet you Katherine, I'm Camille. Now, let's get you to freedom."

“A zany, inventive, and multilayered fever dream of murder and mayhem.”

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Remembering Joy: On Leslie (L.A.) Esdaile Banks

By Tananarive Due



Anyone who knew Leslie (L.A.) Banks will remember her as the epitome of Joy.

Even her email responses were full of joy: large, colorful fonts, plenty of exclamation points and unbridled enthusiasm. Early in our friendship, I noticed that she ended many of her sentences with an acronym I had never seen—LOL—so I finally asked her what that meant.

“Laughing out loud!” she told me. Of course.

So from that moment on, when I saw Leslie write “LOL,” I assumed she was being literal. I imagined her shoulders shaking as she hunched over her computer...and only later did I realize it wasn’t literal. But in my head, Leslie was always laughing out loud as she typed with glee.

I believe I met Leslie when she approached me about writing a blurb for *Minion* (2003), the first book in her phenomenal Vampire Huntress series. I was so excited to see her emerging in Black Horror and I inhaled that book, impressed by her spoken-word artist protagonist, Damali. I also loved the unforgettable cover of her book, so unapologetically Black at a time when many book covers de-emphasized race. I saw her huge potential to make an impact in the genre. At that time, the only other Black horror novelist I knew was Brandon Massey — and we all published the *Ancestors* anthology together in 2008. That same year, Leslie sent me an email celebrating the election of Barack Obama: “*WE WON!!!*”

Leslie had a larger-than-life persona she graced everyone with—whether she was delighting readers at a book event or regaling me with stories as she served me salmon she’d cooked when I visited her home in Philadelphia. (I didn’t think I liked salmon before that day, but I’ve loved it ever since —and always think of Leslie.)

I was so impressed at the way she jumped into the writing field with both feet, learning so much so fast. She was so prolific that she wrote more than forty books! Leslie was prompting *me* to learn about the world of graphic novels back when it still mystified me—more than ten years before I published *The Keeper*.

I grinned with pride when I saw photos of Leslie introducing President Obama in 2010, sharing her challenges as a single mother trying to meet her

high insurance premiums as he pushed for Obamacare. But I had no clue that her true health struggle lay ahead.

Leslie grew severely ill in 2011 (to my knowledge, at least). I only learned of it after I emailed her to let her know that my mother was sick with cancer—and I hoped to see Leslie soon. She responded by telling me she was also in the hospital and was worried about deadlines and debts.

When I emailed her for Mother's Day and shared my sorrow over Mom's health, she never let on that her health had continued to deteriorate. All she wrote was: "Oh lady, Happy Mother's Day to you both and my prayers are with you for her improvement! I love you girl."

She never wrote to me again. My next emails were answered by her dear friend, Tina Wise, who let me know that Leslie was gravely ill.

With my mother also deteriorating, my world was suddenly off-kilter. My mother and Leslie are inextricably tied in my memory: my friend privately fighting for her life while my mother was dying. I lost them both almost at once. None of it made sense then. It makes no sense now.

But whenever I think of Leslie, she is always smiling—so I can't help smiling too.

In Memory of Leslie Banks

By Heather Graham

The best thing about being a fiction writer is our community. Because of a conference I was able to meet Leslie Banks.

She was a wonderful writer. I saw that quickly through her work. Stories that introduced characters that lived and breathed on the page, words that could touch the heart and so many human emotions.

And just as her work was filled with humanity, so was Leslie. Sometimes people say that you shouldn't really see your heroes—that they will disappoint. Leslie was the opposite. She managed to combine a quick wit with incredible kindness. She could make you laugh, touch your heart, and still stand tall.

The world is poorer because she is gone. I feel that I am the richer for having known her.

I like to believe that she is with the angels—buckling down but making them laugh when things get tough.

I met L.A. Banks many years ago. She couldn't have been warmer or more friendly. I had enjoyed her books, and she had enjoyed mine, which is always a great introduction. We had a wonderful conversation. I was so impressed with her openness, her quick thoughts, and her determination to succeed and improve at her craft. I wish we'd had more such meetings. — Charlene Harris

L. A. Banks Biography

A *New York Times* and *USA Today* best-selling author, L.A. Banks penned over forty novels and twelve novellas in a wide range of genres, and is the recipient of the 2009 *Romantic Times* Booklover's Convention Career Achievement Award for Paranormal Fiction and the 2008 *Essence* Magazine Storyteller of the Year Award, as well as the 2008 Best 50 Women in Business Award for the State of Pennsylvania. She was featured as a speaker on the HBO Special on Vampire Literature and Legends as a prelude to the *True Blood* premier.

A native of Philadelphia, Banks graduated from The University of Pennsylvania Wharton undergraduate program, and Temple University's Master of Fine Arts in filmmaking program. She wrote under the pseudonyms L.A. Banks, Leslie Esdaile, Leslie E. Banks, Leslie Banks, and Leslie Esdaile Banks. She won several business and literary awards, and wrote in genres as diverse as romance, women's fiction, crime suspense, and paranormal. She contributed to magazines, newspaper columns, and wrote commercial fiction for a variety of major publishers: St. Martin's Press, Simon and Schuster, Harlequin, Kensington Publishing, BET/Arabesque, Dark Horse Press, Genesis Press, Parker Publishing, Harper, and Tor. Her non-fiction work includes the riveting and motivational story of Bank's life journey in her contribution to the *Chicken Soup for the African American Soul* anthology.

Banks' writing career took a new twist when she won the coveted contract to write a book series for the popular cable network television series, *Soul Food*. Banks was also contracted to write the novelization of the movie *Scarface*, which takes a look at the main character Tony Montana's life two years before he emigrated from Cuba to America in 1978. In addition, Banks penned a four-book crime thriller, beginning with *Betrayal of the Trust*, as Leslie Esdaile Banks. From there, Banks transitioned into paranormal fiction, where she penned a 12-book Vampire Huntress Legend series as L.A. Banks, as well as the werewolf series *Crimson Moon Novels* (a six-book series.) Banks also moved into ebooks, graphic novels, comics, manga, and even a YA, *Shadow Walker*, for her thriving Vampire Huntress Legends series, as well as a young adult paranormal series.

Sadly, Leslie passed away August 2, 2011 after a short but courageous battle with cancer.





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In Appreciation of Ann VanderMeer

By John Chu

Without Ann VanderMeer, we might not know what speculative fiction even is. At least, the speculative fiction we know would be a lot less weird, a lot less innovative, and, therefore, a lot less interesting. Whether she is mapping out the territory or creating it, her influence on the landscape of speculative fiction is pervasive. Her insistence that the map of the field be as vast and varied as life itself is the constant in her highly praised, unfailingly eclectic career. When you survey the field, the brilliant, inventive work she has brought into being stares back at you.

In the 1990s, she founded Buzzcity Press. Ann published the first major works of two writers who would become giants of weird fiction: Jeff VanderMeer and Michael Cisco. *Dradin in Love* became part of Jeff VanderMeer's justly acclaimed collection *City of Saints and Madmen*. *The Divinity Student* established Michael Cisco and won the International Horror Guild Award for Best First Novel of 1999.

She started the magazine *The Silver Web*. It was published from 1989 to 2002. It championed the surreal, slipstream, and eclectic. Over the course of decades, it published the work of writers such as Nathan Ballingrud, Brian Evenson, and Vera Searles.

From 2007 to 2011, she edited *Weird Tales*. She and Stephen Segal revamped the magazine, giving this venerable magazine a fresh start and taking it to new heights of excellence. For their work, they were nominated for a World Fantasy Award and won a Hugo for Best Semiprozine in 2009. The magazine has had many eras over the course of its long life. The Ann VanderMeer era was perhaps one of its best.

She and her husband Jeff VanderMeer started Cheeky Frawg Books. It put out an eclectic line of mostly translated fiction from around the world. They published essential works like the Amos Tutuola short story collection *Don't Pay Bad for Bad & Other Stories*, *Leena Krohn: The Collected Fiction*, and the widely-acclaimed Karin Tidbeck short story collection *Jagannath*. Through Cheeky Frawg Books, Ann and Jeff championed excellent works that might not otherwise have gotten any attention.

Through her work as an editor, Ann has defined the landscape of speculative fiction by illuminating it, revealing all of its hills and valleys, exposing the flow through all of its tributaries. Nowhere is this more evident than in the landmark string of anthologies Ann and Jeff published from 2007 to 2020. Each anthology is a comprehensive survey of its sub-genre. Each anthology floods its portion of the landscape with light, highlighting not just the well-known landmarks, but the ones that have unjustly been ignored.

The New Weird challenges our conception of what the New Weird even is. For *The Weird* and the three *Big Book of...* anthologies, Ann and Jeff VanderMeer scrupulously surveyed the field. For every anthology, they work with colleagues

from around the world. They hunt down work. They commission new translations. They have created a set of indispensable works that chart the evolution of genre just not across time, but across the world.

The first time I met Ann, it was at Clarion in 2010. She and Jeff were the anchor team of instructors, responsible for the final two weeks of the workshop. We, the students, wanted to learn more about anthologies. They spent an entire night telling us how they put together an anthology. There was a lot of talk of logistics and rights acquisition, but also of the story that the anthology itself tells. The decisions of which stories to acquire and their juxtaposition tells a story, advances a thesis of its own. Not being able to get a story may mean having to shake up the table of contents. The details affect the whole.

I have since worked with Ann as an editor, both in helping her acquire work, and as someone whose work she acquired. Just as she tells the story about speculative fiction in her anthologies, she tells the story about speculative fiction in what she acquired for *Weird Tales*, and is currently acquiring at *Tor.com*. Acquisition by acquisition, she has worked tirelessly to tell the story of a diverse field, filled with new and previously under-heard voices. I have worked with her to publish Chinese speculative fiction in English. Her dedication to thoroughly exploring the possibilities to find the best stories is unmatched.

Her commitment to details, with a mindfulness of how they affect the whole, is not just Ann's approach to editing anthologies, but also her approach to editing short stories. She asks incisive questions and challenges the writer's unstated assumptions, all in the service of making the story even more the story that the writer is trying to tell. I have learned so much working with her.

The landscape of speculative fiction is limitless. There are no boundaries save those we place for ourselves. Ann refuses to place any. Over her thirty-some years and counting as editor, she has steadfastly mapped out the landscape, shining light where it is needed. I will follow her to where she goes next.

In Appreciation of Writers

By Ann VanderMeer

How important are writers? They are more important than the credit we give them. We need to take better care of them while they are still around and can reap the benefits of their work. But how important are they to our daily lives and what is it worth to us? I've been thinking about this question a lot recently, especially now since the Writers Guild of America has gone on strike. We're seeing the results of this strike immediately in that our favorite late night shows are dark (or showing reruns). And although we're able to stream and binge-watch many of our favorite shows right now, if this strike lasts a long time, we'll be missing the new seasons, new content.

I was in a workshop just last week where we were discussing learning and society in the future. The subject of AI came up (of course it did), and the pros

and cons to our future well-being. The rapid upgrades to this technology can be both a blessing and a curse. As we discussed the WGA strike in relation to the use of AI, one participant of the workshop said that if the studios can get the same or even better scripts out of AI, then why should they pay the writers? (I held myself back—no one was injured).

It is this type of thinking that alarms me, but also makes me wonder if people really understand what goes into crafting a well-written script, story, novel, even a video game. What is the value that we place on this work? We consume it in great quantities, yet somehow expect to get it all for free, or almost nothing.

Let's take the TV and film writers as an example. Some may believe that writers in Hollywood are raking in the dough. But the reality is a bit more complicated than that. Here's an example from an average TV writer today (paid as a contractor, not under salary, so no health benefits, etc): Staff writer pay for 9 weeks: \$5,000/week for \$45,000 gross (usual length of project, with minimum being \$4546 per week). MINUS expenses: Agent+Manager commissions (20%) = \$9,000; WGA Dues = (1.5%) = \$675; Fed+ CA state taxes (20%) = \$9,000; Take Home pay = \$26,000. Average rent in LA is \$2,800 per month (this covers about 9 months of rent and nothing else. Keep in mind that there could be 6-12-24 or more months between writing gigs.) As you can see by this example, the writers are hurting, even as the industry, especially with the growth of streaming, is bringing in more money now than ever. But the pay for writers remains stagnant.

The WGA strike in 2007 hurt the industry overall as well as the viewing audience. For example, the quality of the second Daniel Craig Bond film, *Quantum of Solace*, suffered greatly. The script for that film was turned in two hours before the start of filming. The production was rushed because of the strike. Later, when some of the producers and actors were interviewed about the lackluster reception for this movie, they agreed that the WGA strike contributed to this sad situation.

During the pandemic, many of us turned to stories—in books, movies, TV shows. All kinds of storytelling. We needed it to help get us through that difficult time. We seem to turn to storytelling often when faced with challenges and we seek out either an escape or perhaps an inspiration. Sometimes we turn to storytelling in order to be seen, to feel that our lived experiences bring us closer together and that we are not, in fact, alone. We turn to the writers, the ones who create the stories we love, but do we really see the creators? They're often invisible to us; as much as we love their output, we don't pay much attention to the writer.

During the shutdown, I started what I called Grandma's Storytime with my three grandsons. Every day for almost two years we would all log in together to read books. This was quite a challenge, as I was spanning three time zones and three age groups (at that time, ages 10, 13, and 15). I had to find books that would appeal to them all. We ended up reading over thirty books together, many recommended by my local independent bookstore (support your local indie, too!). While reading one particular book, I came to a passage that truly overwhelmed me and I started crying with my grandsons. Later, I sent an email to the writer describing what had happened and how much we appreciated the

work. The writer responded that my email came at the exact right moment, as they were having a very difficult day. This is the power of stories.

When I was working on the anthology *The Weird*, I did a lot of research for the authors' biographical notes. I was shocked at the number of writers who died in poverty, in illness, some even by suicide! Continued research for subsequent anthologies over the years uncovered the same sad background for far too many writers. Although today we may celebrate some of them and hold them in high esteem, too often we didn't do that when they were still alive

I was appalled to discover the sad personal history of Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote one of my favorite books, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. When she passed away in 1960, she was destitute and living in a welfare hotel in Florida. This, despite the fact that she had written and published several books, and multiple essays and short stories. As I was examining her life, I found that she was celebrated early in her career, but never well-paid even then, and later largely forgotten. And yet, her work has been rediscovered by new generations, and continues to inspire us. What other magnificent works would Hurston have created had she been better paid?

I can't help but think about Harlan Ellison's famous video rant, *Pay the Writer*, in 2007. His words still ring so true at this moment. We need to support our writers today. We can buy their books (especially on release day or better yet, pre-order). We can spread the good word, write positive reviews online. and share with others why we recommend the books. We can further support them by speaking out when they're not paid fairly, and supporting unions like WGA in their strike for better pay and conditions. And a short note of appreciation to a favorite writer can go a long way.



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In Memoriam: Suzy McKee Charnas

By Jeanne Gomoll



I met Suzy McKee Charnas 1976, at the World Science Fiction Convention in Kansas City. Susan Wood had invited Suzy to participate on a panel on women and SF. Sadly, I heard very little of that panel because I arrived too late to get a seat, but I caught glimpses of Suzy and the other panelists from the doorway where I stood on tiptoes trying to see over the heads of all the people crowding the room. I talked with Suzy briefly after the panel ended, when panelists and audience members flooded into the lounge for an hour of excited conversation and networking. Jan Bogstad and I arranged to meet Suzy and Amanda Bankier (editor of the fanzine, *The Witch and the Chameleon*) for lunch. Suzy and Amanda told stories about Marion Zimmer Bradley. We all shared angry

reactions about the strip tease staged by the concomm during the masquerade while the judges conferred. We extrapolated science fictionally about a scientific breakthrough that Suzy had read about—the manchild pill. We talked about sexism, heterosexism, the generic male pronoun, and unrealistic fantasy novels. The conversation was so interesting that Jan and I taped the conversation and transcribed it for our fanzine, *Janus* 6 (1976).

I had already read the first book (*Walk to the End of the World*) of what would eventually be Suzy Charnas' series, *The Holdfast Chronicles*, and was thrilled to hear that she had finished writing its sequel, *Motherlines*. I was horrified, however, when she told us that Judy Del Rey at Ballentine had declined to publish it and she doubted that it would ever see print. In a later interview, Suzy revealed that Ballentine had rejected it because it was deemed inappropriate for what they considered to be their target science fiction audience: young boys. Impulsively I asked her to send us a copy of the manuscript so we could review and promote it (and, more importantly to me at the time: so I could read it). I didn't actually think it likely that she would send it to me. After all, I was a newbie fan, known to few people. *Janus* had a tiny mailing list and WisCon 1 hadn't happened yet. Suzy had never met me before that lunch at Big Mac. But something of Jan's and my earnest appreciation for her novel, *Walk*, and of the stories she told during our lunch must have intrigued her. A few weeks later, a package arrived in the mail containing a copy of the typewritten

manuscript of Suzy's book *Motherlines*. Jan and I both wrote essays about it for *Janus* 8 (1977).

Suzy changed my life. Her friendship and her books sent me down a road marked with both feminist and science fiction signposts. After *Motherlines* was published I began asking Suzy about the "next" book. It seemed obvious to me that the Riding Women of *Motherlines* must return to Holdfast in a third book to lead a revolution against the men who had enslaved all the women and girls of Holdfast. Suzy agreed with me; she knew that this story of anger and possibly great violence was the next part of her story. But she did not know how to write it yet, she said. And she had no sense yet of what story the fourth and final book would tell. Would reconciliation between the sexes be possible? She didn't know. She said that she still lived in the *Motherlines* stage of her life, and was still working to protect herself from the horrors of misogyny by building supportive networks with women friends and mentors.

Suzy changed my life by helping me see science fiction as a tool that might be used for individuals and communities to change. In 1994 I read *The Furies* and heard her talk about this book of anger and revenge, and in 1999, I read the last installment to *The Holdfast Chronicles*— *The Conqueror's Child*, the book in which women and men strive to build a new society as equal partners. Suzy's writing mirrored both the struggles of her personal life and those of the feminist movement. The series and Suzy's feminist evolution took more than 25 years to write and experience together. *Walk to the End of the World* and *Motherlines* won retroactive Tiptree/Otherwise Awards. *The Conqueror's Child* won the 1999 Tiptree/Otherwise Award. WisCon celebrated her in 1979 as Guest of Honor, and she came back to WisCon for many years, always welcome as an integral part of *Janus*, WisCon's, and the feminist SF community.

Suzy said this at that 1976 luncheon/interview in Kansas City: "What I think I'm doing, you see, is writing from some kind of dream level that's available to all women in one degree or another, a level of imaginary experience that can nourish us all. That's where our visions of a decent future have to come from, I think, tempered with tough and realistic analysis of how to get there and cope with a whole new set of problems when we do."

Suzy and her dear friend Chelsea Quinn Yarbro changed my life in a possibly less earthshaking manner by taking me to breakfast after a convention in Vancouver, where they introduced me to Dim Sum.

Thank you Suzy, for your friendship, your vision, and Dim Sum.



In Memoriam: Peter Straub

By Gary K. Wolfe



Peter Straub was Guest of Honor at the 23rd Readercon in 2012, where I had the pleasure of interviewing him about his already legendary career. Two years earlier, he'd received his fourth and fifth World Fantasy Awards, including one for lifetime achievement and another for his two-volume Library of America anthology *American Fantastic Tales*. The latter demonstrated Peter's impressive breadth of knowledge about the traditions behind his own fiction, while

that Readercon panel gave at least a hint of the breadth of his own influence. Titled "At School with Peter Straub," it featured a stellar lineup including Andy Duncan, Jack Haringa, Nicholas Kaufmann, Caitlín R. Kiernan, John Langan, and Paul Tremblay. But it might as well have included a fair proportion of all the writers who attended Readercon, where Peter had been a fairly regular presence for several years. Few writers, then or now, could claim to have influenced figures as diverse as Kelly Link, Neil Gaiman, and Stephen King, with whom he famously collaborated on *The Talisman*. Whenever Peter gave a reading, at Readercon or elsewhere, you could depend that the audience would be packed with fellow writers.

Peter never boasted of his outsize presence, and was always genuinely flattered by the attention. It's not that he was falsely modest. He knew exactly how important and accomplished his major work was, from novels like *Ghost Story*, *Koko*, *The Throat* and *lost boy lost girl* to shorter work like "Bunny is Good Bread" and "Mr. Clubb and Mr. Cuff." He was always refining control of his instrument, and although he knew his way around the techniques of horror fiction as well as anyone, he was also a great admirer of poets from John Ashbery to Fernando Pessoa, writers from Henry James to Raymond Chandler, musicians from Lester Young to (especially) Paul Desmond. All of that found its way into his fiction. He could introduce us to utterly terrifying murderers and abusers, but could write about a jazz performance as transcendently as anyone ever has.

Peter underwent a series of hospitalizations in the past several years, during one of which his daughter, the novelist Emma Straub, began writing *This Time Tomorrow*, an unabashed love letter to her father as well as an ingenious time travel tale. I'm very glad he got to read it. Peter's memorial service and celebration of his life was held in Brooklyn on what would have been his 80th birthday, attended by many of his friends, family members, and fellow fiction writers, poets, and editors. I was deeply honored to be among the speakers, who included not only Susan, Emma, and Ben Straub (along with their lively kids), but Peter's brother John, his former editor Lee Boudreaux, his fellow soap-opera star (and graphic novel collaborator) Michael Easton, the poet Ann Lauterbach, the poet and psychologist Gregorio Kohon, Stephen King, and Neil Gaiman.

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The Committee

Noah Beit-Aharon is a writer, singer, dancer, homemaker and stay-at-home dad. In his writing life and elsewhere on the program he goes by N.S. Dolkart, author of the *Godserfs* trilogy. His other accomplishments include performing as Darth Vader in an opera, teaching Israeli folk dance, and conducting trainings in dementia care—but not all at once.

Gloria Lucia Albasi likes kaffeeklatsches, proofreading, art, film, writing, travel, and hanging out with fen.

Tierney Bailey is a Libra, loudmouth, and is a dice-collecting gremlin. Currently, Tierney divides her time as Associate Poetry Editor with Sundress Publications, copyeditor at Strange Horizons, and publishing assistant with Escape Artists Foundation. She has earned a BA from the University of Indianapolis and a Masters Degree in Writing, Literature, and Publishing from Emerson College. Tierney is most easily found screaming into the void on Twitter as @ergotierney.

Rae Borman: A lover of things wordy and full of fantastical story, Rae still finds it hard to believe she is 14 years into volunteering with Readercon.

Ellen Brody believes that five of the most important things in the world are reading, writing, friendship, coffee, and dark chocolate.

Josh Burson stayed in school until he ran out of school, and then got kicked out with a degree in medieval history. These days, he does grant administration for a nonprofit, and in his spare time he rereads SFF, writes the occasional poem, sings, and hikes. He also rings church bells as a hobby, and serves as the newsletter editor for the North American Guild of Change Ringers. He's volunteered at enough Readercons that he's forgotten how many it's been, and this year, he's taking charge of load-in.

Lisa Opus Goldstein (not the author) has many years of experience in operations administration and accounting for nonprofits in real life. She is not very funny and helps run local science fiction conventions in her spare time.

Lisa Hertel is an artist who dabbles in convention running. She has found, while doing this souvenir book, that GoogleDocs are unsuitable for such things. She did all the incidental art in this book.

John Hodges is running our 13th Readercon Blood Drive. Massachusetts General Hospital is so appreciative that our community chooses to give at this time of year, annually a time of increased patient need and reduced donor availability. It is his pleasure to serve the convention as Blood Drive coordinator, as he does for other local fandom conventions as a Heinlein Society volunteer. John has been in this role for 20 years. As of the end of April 2023, he made 589 donations himself, whole blood and platelet apheresis, for a total of 1,372 units. John started donating and volunteering in high school in 1976, started coordinating blood drives at MIT in the late 70s, and now, in retirement, has an encore career with the American Red Cross. 1976 was the same year Robert Heinlein first brought a blood drive to a fandom convention.

Dawn & Thom Jones-Low: Dawn arrived at Readercon 1 just in time to respond to a plea for help from one of the founding committee members. Helping at Readercon was so rewarding that she brought another helper, Thom, to Readercon 2. They've both been trying to be useful to Readercon ever since and finally joined the concom in 1999. Thom is currently serving on the Readercon Board and managing a variety of technical tasks for Readercon while Dawn is providing support for Readercon staff organization. They live in Vermont on their horse farm with twenty horses, two dogs, two cats, two pet mice, countless Legos, and thousands of books.

Alan Lattimore (he/him): I'm originally from Washington, D. C. but I've lived all over: Miami, Chicago, Albuquerque, and Vermont. My first Readercon was in the late 80's. I love martial arts, motorcycles, snowboarding, puns, cooking, and acting. My most important job is being a parent. I write software for a living (and because it's fun) and, for the life of me, I cannot tell a joke.

David G. Shaw is, in no particular order: Atheist, Blogger, Cook, Curmudgeon, Foodie, Geek, Musician, Parent, Partner, Reader, Scientist, Skeptic.

William A. Sherman III attended Readercon 11, his first, in 2001, as a Saturday-only visitor. Love at first sight ensued. Since, he has become an annual, full-weekend attendee and frequent volunteer. So much the volunteer, in fact, that ConCom elected him to join itself in January, 2010. An attendee of both M.I.T. and Salem (MA) State University, he has attained two B.S.'s in Mathematics and Business Administration—Accounting; also, two B.A.'s in both English and Spanish, and minors in Economics and Marketing. Coming to ConCom from concomitant careers in long-term health care management and real estate management, he truly prepared for ConCom beginning in 1976, after reading

Jack Williamson's *Trapped in Space*, and continuing from 1983 to 1987, when he joined MITSFS for life. Currently, he resides in Boxford, MA, with his parents, two cuddly dachshunds, and about two thousand SF books and pulps.

Nightwing Whitehead spent her early years playing with books and fabric. She discovered that it was more fun to read the books and create with the fabric. After more than a decade talking to room-sized computers, Nightwing was sent for retraining, and has ever since been reclothing the world. When not busy helping run ReaderCon, she can be found controlling fabric or howling at the moon, sometimes both at the same time. She is also working on making wearable versions (wearable by the author that is) of as many SF/F covers as possible, reading them all first to make sure she gets it right.

Margo Williams: A retired museum professional with curatorial and registrarial experience. Currently mother of dragons daughters and cat. In Sharon MA she has served on the PTSO board, served as a member of the non-profit FAME organization's board, and volunteers at the Sharon Historical Society. She helped run the virtual bookstore for Readercon in 2021, and helped run the dealer room for the 60th Boskone.

Walt Williams: An Information Security executive by day, he has a secret identity as a published author. His publishing credits include: *The Garden at the Roof of the World* (2013) currently being shopped for a TV/film deal, and *The Reality, Mythology, and Fantasies of Unicorns* (2021) with Dragonwell Publishing. His short story "The InfoCoup" was published by Abyss and Apex in 2019 and featured in their [The Best of Abyss & Apex: Volume Three](#). His latest novel, *Johnny Talon and the Goddess of Love and War* is to be published by The Wild Rose Press in 2023. He is a frequent panelist at ReaderCon, Arisia, Boskone, and served as a panelist at the 80th World Science Fiction Convention (Chicon 8) in 2022. He ran the virtual bookstore for Readercon in 2021 and helped run the Huckster's room for the 60th Boskone.



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Our Advertisers

Arisia	30
Boskone	43
MetroWest Writers	10
Mindbuck Media	39
Philcon	56
Mark Pullen	5
PulpFest	52
Readercon 33	2
Terrie M. Scott	48
Jerry J C Veit	32

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