

Worldcon 2012

Prolog: My Big Fat Indian Wedding

Sunday mornings in downtown Chicago are anything but serene. I was loitering on the sidewalk across Michigan Avenue from Millennium Park, waiting for Nicki to return from church, when I was nearly sideswiped by a horse. I had to duck out of the way to avoid being smacked in the face by its tail. A woman who was leading the horse by the reins apologized and told me that it was going to be part of the big, noisy Indian wedding procession that was forming up over at the entrance to the park.



the Indian wedding procession crosses Michigan Avenue

As I was being entertained by all the chaos of the wedding procession, I was accosted by a middle-age woman and her male companion. “Excuse me, you are eager?” she asked. Her accent seemed Russian.

“Pardon me?” I replied.

“I said, you are *eager*?”

I gave her a quick once-over. “Not especially.”

She gave me an exasperated look and said to her companion, “He is *not* eager.”

Bewilderment. And then it dawned on me. The Russian accent... Not ‘eager’... ‘Igor’! They were apparently meeting up with someone named Igor and she had thought that I might be the guy.

I shook my head as they wandered off. But you know, in a way she was right. I actually *had* been eager...to come to Chicago. Very much so.

The City of Wild Onions

There’s certainly a lot to see in Chicago, and a good place to start is where Michigan Avenue’s ‘Magnificent Mile’ crosses the Chicago River. That’s the site where a trader named Jean Baptiste Point du Sable built a homestead in the late 1700s and became the first non-native permanent settler, and in doing so also became the founder of the city. Prior to that the area was intermittently inhabited by a series of various Algonquin tribes, and had come to the attention of French explorers Louis Jolliet and Jacques Marquette in the late 1600s because of the extremely

short canoe portage from the south branch of the Chicago River that connects the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River system. It was these explorers who came up with the name ‘Chicago’, which is the French version of a Native American word for the wild onions that grew along the banks of the river.

Nowadays, tall skyscrapers of many different architectural styles line the Chicago River. Nicki and I were ‘introduced’ to many of them by a very knowledgeable Chicago Architecture Foundation docent during a Labor Day river cruise. The guy was amazing – he had an encyclopedic knowledge about every significant building in the city, and during the 90 minutes of the cruise he described in great detail the design and history of dozens of them. It was both highly entertaining and educational, and I came away enlightened that buildings, just like people, have stories to tell. I’m happy that I got to listen to some of them.



the Merchandise Mart, and kayakers, from the cruise boat



some of the many fragments from famous buildings that are embedded in the Tribune Tower

I think that my favorite building, of all those we saw during the cruise, is the 1920s-era Tribune Tower. It’s neo-Gothic in architectural design, complete with flying buttresses at the uppermost levels, and was the result of a design competition meant to create “the most beautiful and distinctive office building in the world” as the headquarters of the *Chicago Tribune*. But what really makes the Tribune Tower unique and distinctive is the collection of fragments from famous buildings and structures around the world that have been incorporated into the outside wall of the Tower. These pieces had reportedly been scavenged by *Tribune* correspondents in the years before the Tower was built. But not all of them. The newest one dates back only a bit more than a decade. It’s a small piece of steel recovered in 2001 at Ground

Zero from the destroyed World Trade Center in New York.

Seventh in a Continuing Series

One of the buildings that was *not* described during the cruise was a rather pedestrian-looking twin tower structure that was constructed back in the mid 1970s – the Hyatt Regency Hotel. It was the site of the event that had brought me and Nicki to Chicago for the first time in a dozen years – the 2012 World Science Fiction Convention. This was the 7th time that Chicago has hosted a Worldcon, and the





Dave Kyle (left) and Erle Korshak

number of people who have attended all seven is now down to just a single person – Dave Kyle. That, in itself, is a real accomplishment, seeing as how the first Chicon was way back in 1940. One of my favorite program events at Chicon 7 was listening to him talk about the earliest Worldcons with Erle Korshak, who was one of the organizers of that very first Chicon.

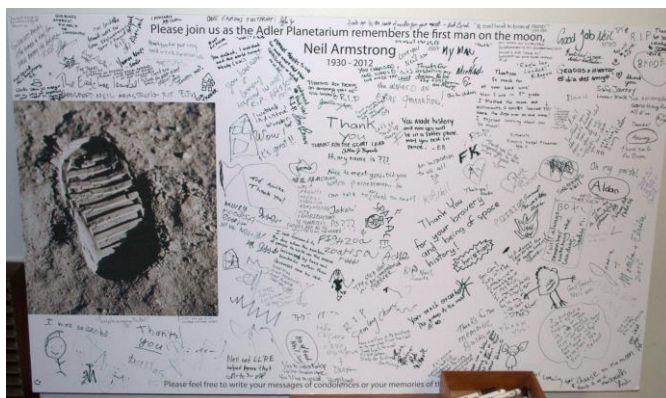
Nicki and I were also on a few program items. The one I had looked forward to the most was titled “Who Do We Honor Next?” and had been intended to single out notable science fiction professionals and fans who had not yet been

honored as a Worldcon Guest of Honor. I and my fellow panelists came up with many deserving candidates, but the panel took place at a time and location that resulted in just a handful of people in the audience, none of whom were part of any future Worldcon bid committees. Nicki did somewhat better in her first panel, about British science fiction television shows. The room was so full that people were sitting on the floor.

The most unusual and memorable program item of the convention happened the very first evening. It was an reception at the Adler Planetarium. The weather was perfect for the event, and there was a long line of people lined up to look through telescopes that had been set up out on the Planetarium’s exterior deck for a sky-viewing session. The big attraction, though, was *The Searcher*, a 30-minute short film about a visitor from another galaxy who is traveling through time and space to seek out his lost civilization. There were some very impressive visuals – a supernova explosion, a supermassive black hole, and the collision of two galaxies – that when projected in high definition on the inside dome of the Planetarium made it almost seem like we were in space.



the Adler Planetarium



in memory of Neil Armstrong

The entrance foyer to the Planetarium had a large placard, for visitors to sign, in memory of someone who once *had* been in space. The first man to set foot on the moon, Neil Armstrong, had passed away just a few days earlier, and from the various short notes I read it was obvious that he was on everyone’s minds. I wrote what I believed all of us who were visiting the Planetarium that evening were thinking: “Thank you for the sense of wonder you gave us all.”

A Century of Futility

The very next day there was another memorable event, but it wasn't actually a part of the convention. My friend and fellow baseball fan Janice Gelb had secured a block of tickets for the Friday afternoon game between the Chicago Cubs and San Francisco Giants, and nine of us made the easy subway ride north on the Chicago Transit Authority's Red Line up to 1060 West Addison Street for a visit to the friendly confines of Wrigley Field.



in the friendly confines of Wrigley Field

Wrigley Field is the second-oldest ballpark in Major League Baseball and it has been the home of the Cubs since 1916. And it has never, ever, been the home stadium of a World Series winning baseball club, because it has been more than a century since the Cubs have been one. To give the proper sense of temporal perspective, Halley's Comet has appeared *twice* since the Cubs last won a World Series title. The last time the Cubs were champions, start of construction on the *RMS Titanic* was still a year in the future. The Indian Head Penny was still being minted. Mark Twain was still alive and Roosevelt was President – *Teddy* Roosevelt!

It's been decade after decade of futility, and this year was no different – the Cubs had one of the worst win-loss records in the National League with no chance of making it into the playoffs. But for *this* particular game, the Cubs were invincible. Their pitching was baffling the Giants, and their batters were hitting the cover off the ball. By the time the seventh inning stretch had arrived, the game's outcome was no longer in doubt. And by then, neither was Nicki's and my decision to head back to the convention early, before the subway cars could become crammed with people heading home from the ballgame.

Don't Try This At Home! (Chicon 7 Edition)

I've been attending science fiction conventions a long time, more than 37 years as of Chicon 7. Back in the day, most of the people I met at these events were strangers to me. But after more than a third of a century there are now many, many familiar faces and indeed, one of the reasons for attending Worldcons is to cross paths with friends Nicki and I don't see at



me trying to look intelligent on the "Magical Musicals" panel

other times of the year. Two such friends were Guests of Honor at Chicon 7 – writer guest Mike Resnick, and fan guest Peggy Rae Sapienza. And, as it happened, I was on programming events with each of them. Peggy Rae was part of my "Who Do We Honor Next?" panel, while I joined Mike and several other knowledgeable theater goers for a panel on "Magical Musicals", about

the use of fantasy-related themes in musical theater. I wanted to be on the latter not only because Mike Resnick was on the panel, but also because I have a strong interest in and enjoyment of Broadway musicals, and I had thought I might have something to add. But as it turned out, I was way, way out of my league. All the other panelists, including Resnick, had immense knowledge of the topic; one of them, Laura Frankos, had even written a *Broadway Musical Quiz Book*. I did the best I could not to embarrass myself, which largely consisted of letting the other panelists do almost all of the talking.

But I wasn't able to indefinitely avoid making a spectacle of myself. My friend John Hertz had assembled a display of book covers by the distinguished artists Leo and Diane Dillon, and had asked me to take a few photos of the display for his upcoming Chicon 7 convention report. But to get a photo looking straight down on the display, I had to stand on a chair that had been set atop a noticeably wobbly table. It was the only way to get the shot, but it certainly wasn't the sanest thing I've ever done – all the time I was standing on the chair lining up the shot I was telling John, “This is stupid ... this is stupid ... this is stupid...” From all the way across the concourse Nicki saw what was going on but decided not to intervene. She told me that she saw John, who is an attorney out in Los Angeles, was standing next to me and if the table collapsed he would prevent me from crashing. Or else he would know who to sue.



with my friend and troublemaker John Hertz

Epilog: Ruminant Curses and Dreamscapes

There were two Chicago landmarks that Nicki and I made sure to see before we came home, mostly because they were only a short walk from the hotel. One was the Billy Goat Tavern, located on the lower level of Michigan Avenue. It was the inspiration of a famous *Saturday Night Live* skit back in the late 1970s where customers were only able to order “cheezborger, cheezborger, cheezborger, no Pepsi...Coke”. It even has a place in Chicago Cubs lore for the so-called ‘Curse of the Billy Goat’ which some die-hard Cubs fans claim is responsible for their team’s continuing bad fortune. Back in 1945, the Tavern’s owner, Billy Sianis, had brought his pet goat to a World Series



the Billy Goat Tavern

Game at Wrigley between the Cubs and the Detroit Tigers, but had been shown the gate when the offensive odor emanating from the goat annoyed people seated near him. Sianis was livid at being ejected from the stadium, and on his way out he shouted, “Them Cubs, they ain’t gonna win no more!” And they didn’t, losing the `45 Series in seven games. It may come as no surprise that the Cubs have yet to make another World Series appearance since then.

A much newer attraction is a shiny sculpture located in Millennium Park just to the south of the hotel. Its official name is ‘Cloud Gate’ but it’s commonly known as ‘The Bean’ because of its shape. What makes it so popular is its ability to distort reality by the weird and wonderful dreamy reflections of Chicago’s cityscape from its brightly polished surface.

Cloud Gate was not yet in existence the previous time Chicago was host to a Worldcon twelve years ago. The way the bidding cycles run, it might be another dozen years or so before a Worldcon returns to this great city, and there’s no telling what even newer things Chicago will have to amaze us all by then. But I know I’ll be eager to find out.

Very much so. ☺



in Millennium Park with The Bean