



# Madison Foursquare

82

This issue of *Madison Foursquare* is brought to you by Scott Custis and Jeanne Gomoll, who live at 2825 Union Street, Madison, WI 53704.

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## Covers—Jeannie Bergmann

[SC] I love your ghost horse cover. The colors are great. I recognize the shadow of Dr. Evermore's Forevertron on the back cover searching for signals from the great beyond.

[JG] I also love the ghost horse.

## Jeanne Bowman

[SC] Wonderful zine. I love how you write about life on "the ranch." I should have tried harder to appreciate my own time in the country. I was a "town" kid who was moved to a 20-acre farm against my will when I was seven. I quietly resisted. To this day I know next to nothing about gardening, have had all the domesticated animals I care to have and prefer wildlife to stay in the wild. You remind me there were lots of beautiful things about rural life, too, and I wish now that I had embraced it more back then.

That two-week quarantine sounded rough. Did they bring you food to cook? At least you knew in advance you were going to have to do it so you could bring something to do. Lovely piece and photo from your visit to Studland Beach.

[JG] I appreciate your description of how you created last month's apa covers, and am very intrigued by the book, *Tales of the Unfinishable*. There has been much written about unfinished works by famous composers, authors, and painters. But I am delighted to think about unfinished works in friends' (and my own) file drawers and attics.

## Greg Rihn

[SC] I'm so sorry about your layoff, Greg. That's a very hard thing at this late date when you are getting close to retirement, but not quite ready. I have not been in the job market since 1988, so I can scarcely imagine what it would be like to be out there at my age. I wish you the best of luck in your search.

We also enjoyed *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*, and will very likely see the third film next year. Thanks for the review of *Nimona*, which was the first I had heard of it. We liked the last Indiana Jones movie, too. It was preposterous, as you said, but Harrison Ford is fun to watch and Phoebe Waller-Bridge was very good. The ending with Karen Allen was the best part, I thought. I think *Chevalier* will have to go on our list to see, too.

Bridge over the Yahara. Photo by Scott

My brother Steve travels the world and sees polar bears!



I don't remember if we have seen an American Players Theater production of *Cymbeline*, but I know they have done it and I can't imagine that we missed seeing it. I just don't remember it, which says to me that I was probably not impressed with the story. Shakespeare's "problem" plays can sometimes be elevated by strong acting and inventive staging, but sometimes not. APT did a hilarious version of *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* some years back that Jeanne and I saw twice and still think it was one of the very best things we have ever seen them do.

[JG] Commiserations on your layoff and the necessity to go job hunting. I am interested in the evolution of job-hunting techniques and how jobs are advertised in this current, on-line age. When I was laid off in 2003 and half-heartedly looked to see what was available (before I decided to just strike out on my own), newspaper listings were still a reliable place to look for job openings. Though I had a LinkedIn page, I don't remember seeing anything worthwhile there. So, I will follow your job-hunting efforts with interest – and sympathy too. I wish I had connections in the industry to offer help!

I loved the central idea in the second *Spideverse* movie that so-called "canon events" have physical power in superhero universes. I wasn't expecting such an excellent \*idea\* to play a central role in the story. I often find the plots of superhero movies rather forgettable (just a lot of Boom! Bang! and Bash!). But I can't forget this cliff-hanger of an idea and eagerly anticipate how the movie-makers will resolve Miles' conflict and conclude the thought experiment.

...Speaking of loud, bashing soundtracks which **Georgie** dislikes, I urge you to see *Oppenheimer*, if you plan to

see it, in a small theater. We went to an IMAX theater to see it, and I have never experienced such an audio *assault* in a theater, as I experienced during that movie. By the time we left our seats, I had developed a blazing headache from the thunderous soundtrack. Nevertheless, I was very impressed and engrossed by the movie and highly recommend it. Maybe just plan on bringing along earplugs if you go.

### Georgie Schnobrich

[SC] Regarding your comment to us, what I like most about the *Spider-Verse* art is that it feels like the closest thing to reading a comic book. The artwork is big, bold, bright, stylized and kinetic. Much like what comic book art does or suggests, only this movie art actually moves. It's fun to watch it. Over-the-top characters like super-heroes actually make sense in this animated world when they never really do in live-action, in my opinion.

[JG] I like how you analyzed the literal idea of the male gaze. Usually when I think of that phrase, I think of it in broader terms, that is, that our culture encourages people to view each other, the arts, society, everything – from a male point of view. Women authors, like Le Guin, tried to extricate themselves from the expectations that the proper story form is "Man vs. nature," "Man vs. man," etc., in order to tell stories that have historically been overlooked because they feature in women's lives. The same goes for women painters. Have you and **Greg** seen the play, *Artemisia*?

Nevertheless, I like your idea of examining what the male gaze means in a granular sense, to individual women day-to-day: why so many young girls avoid looking men in the eyes, for instance. I can certainly remember feeling shy in this way, not because I'd heard that direct eye-to-eye contact leads to sex, but because I was pretty sure that direct eye-to-eye contact meant that the person would expect me to engage in conversation with them. I tried to avoid that sort of thing in those days.

I love the story inspired by the photo of the two very tough-looking girls.

### Steve Swartz

[SC] Thoroughly interesting and entertaining zine once again, Steve.

Regarding your comments to me, I'm not sure I agree with you in a case of refusal to accept cash that "nobody's going to enforce it." A complaint about how someone is displaying a flag might be

regarded as trivial or a nuisance, refusal to accept cash would constitute a confrontation that would be pretty easy to referee from an enforcement standpoint. I think the only way a policy of refusing cash would work is if the vendor is very confident that no one is likely to push back.

I had no idea there were many Buddhas rather than just one, or that you could choose to focus on the one that you find most useful.

I'm not opposed to dense apartment/condo buildings either. It is far better for us here in Madison to build up rather than sprawl out endlessly into the rich farmland. I'm just annoyed at the waste potential of having to replace large buildings every 50 years or so. I agree with you about how hard it is to retro-fit modern tech for old buildings and that the quality and efficiency of building materials can rapidly improve over time, but cheap construction still seems wasteful to me.

I am intrigued by your *Little, Big* reading suggestion. Have you thought about how it might work? Meetings via Zoom, or something else? My late summer/early fall schedule is getting crowded, but maybe later in the fall or winter would work better for me now.

Weather is the prime factor when deciding when to look for morels. A significant spring warm spell (this year we had a stretch of warmer-than-usual weather in April) can mess up the morel season. One year when John and Eileen came to WisCon, I was able to buy morels at the Farmers Market the weekend before the convention and they survived in our fridge until the four of us had them for dinner after WisCon. But they often disappear by the middle of May.

[JG] *Scholomance* sounds interesting. Thanks, Steve.

Re your comment to **Jeannie Bergmann** about AI-composed apazines, I imagined how an AI might compose an issue of *Madison Foursquare*. Given the many pages we devoted in the last couple years to our various home improvement projects, the AI's version of our zine would probably portray Scott and I trapped in a never-ending, but elusively disorganized cycle of renovations, described in the form of humorous anecdotes. Sounds like hell. Though, perhaps the AI could correctly identify the movies and TV shows we would be most likely to have seen and our opinions of them, and that might be interesting.

Re cash and credit cards... Scott and I were waiting our turn for a self-checkout machine at Woodmans. The young man in front of us had already scanned his groceries, but was having trouble paying. A sign over the lane read: "for cash or cards only," but the guy had neither cash nor card. He was tapping on his phone, possibly trying to use ApplePay, I don't know, and becoming increasingly frustrated because he was unable to get his app to communicate with the checkout machine. I suspect that this is the next step in the journey away from cash, and then from credit cards. Perhaps in a year or two, I will be the curmudgeon complaining that machines won't accept plastic bank cards anymore.

I do like the various faces of Buddha. But I must say that when you said, "seeing one can be calming," I laughed, because when I see a Buddha statue, I am reminded that I can no longer fold my legs that way anymore, damnit.

When I designed the Tiptree quilt, I used only solid PMS colors. We didn't make decisions about patterned fabric until we got to the fabric store. My computer back then would never have been able to handle scanning patterns and inserting them into thousands of quilt squares. I brought PMS swatches to the store and we held them up in front of various bolts, squinting to see which pattern best approximated or averaged out to the effect of the PMS swatch. The scene was a bit chaotic as the bunch of us ran up and down aisles, holding stacks of bolts, arguing with one another as to which fabric design most resembled (on average) a chosen color. The store owner closed the store and then leaned against the counter next to Elk and watched us as we swarmed the store. The owner asked Elk if she wanted to kill us.

Thanks for sending the key back to us!

Evil Potatoes are evil in a caloric sense because they have whipped cream cheese (with chives), butter, AND heavy cream (plus garlic, salt, and paprika, but it's the large amounts of dairy products that make the potatoes evil). Mostly I make them for my family on Thanksgiving and when people arrive, their second or third question is often, "did you make Evil Potatoes?" I made an exception for **Luke** and Julie by making them for a non-holiday, non-family gathering. Recipe available upon request.

George Knudsen, the Chief Naturalist at the DNR when I worked there, told me that morels can be found after the first warm stretch in late April or early May that is followed by a drenching rainfall. The one time I went

morel-hunting with George resulted in the greatest morel haul in his lifetime, according to George (3 large paper bags full of gigantic morels). I don't know or remember, however, if he ever explained why morel season lasts for several weeks or just a week in different years.

## Andy Hooper

[SC] I think I learned more about Hip-Hop from your article than I had ever known. Granted, it's not a musical style that has attracted me as a listener (at least until the musical *Hamilton*) but it's been incredibly important culturally for fifty years. Great piece!

I'm delighted that you and **Steve Swartz** are writing reviews of our latest SF w/o Borders book discussion selections. I find both of your approaches very interesting. For my own part, *The Night Circus* was a bit long. A lot of that had to do with Morgenstern's lavish descriptions of places, things and people. Someone at the book group meeting commented that Morgenstern seemed to enjoy writing those elaborate descriptions and I think I agree. I'm reluctant to complain about them. Still, I liked her story and her characters and I'd say this novel worked a little better for me than *Light from Uncommon Stars*.

[JG] I was struck by your comment to **Steve VJ** in which you mentioned the primitive art style being something that Steve would find difficult to attempt because he knows too much. That reminded me of a famous map that was created by someone who didn't know *enough*. Well, of course, most old maps were handicapped by the fact that the mapmaker lacked enough data to make them very representative. But I am thinking of a drawing on Herman Moll's North American map, now better known as "the Beaver Map" (1735). I first saw the map at an exhibit at the Milwaukee Art Museum and then tracked a copy down so I could hang it in my office. I think of it as visual science fiction. Moll drew upon "French accounts" of beavers building dams in the new world and – like an artist whose other worldly painting is based on scarce scientific information – he relied partly on his imagination to produce the image. His informer told Moll that they had seen beavers build dams, so Moll drew the creatures that had been described to him using human builders' tools and techniques.

The beavers in the beaver drawing are building dams in order to turn a little stream into a big lake, suitable for



their lodges. There are lumberjack beavers, carpenter beavers, and construction beavers. One beaver acts as architect; others mix mortar, operate kilns, and build brick walls. I love this drawing. I've seen other speculative drawings inspired by rumor and bad communication, but this is one of my favorites.

I love how your review of *The Night Circus* mimicked the style of the book.

## Carrie Root

[SC] It was so great that you guys were able to stop by for the party while you were in town. It would have been very sad indeed to have missed you entirely. When we drive down to Iowa for a family visit, we nearly always stay overnight in a motel. For a long time, when booking our room, we have had a choice of a reservation with or without the right to cancel. There is about a \$20 difference in the room rate. Whenever we are confronted with this



choice, I always think in terms of the weather. How likely is it that bad weather will force us to cancel? What I should do is bite the bullet and pay the extra to be able to cancel the room because Covid can still always happen.

Regarding your comment to me, I think I'm more optimistic about future long driving trips in an electric car than you are. I expect we will have our hybrid Kia Niro for at least another five years (it's turning four this year), but the decision to go full electric will not depend on whether I have given up long trips. I think the infrastructure to support electric cars across the country will improve greatly in that time. Whether I still feel physically and mentally up for such an adventure (I will be 72 then) is a whole other question.

All your photos are lovely once again, but that baby picture on the last page is show-stopper.

[JG] I'm sorry we didn't get to talk about *Barry*! I don't think any of our friends have watched that series. I was very glad to see you when you (briefly!) dropped by the party at which you and **Andy** were supposed to be guests-of-honor, but I sure wish we'd had more time to talk.

Re your comment to **Jim and Diane** about dying print newspapers and your expectation that print versions of magazines will not appeal to you... I find the digital version of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* more appealing and easier to read than the print versions. I used to subscribe to *NYT*, but never really liked dealing with folding pages to make them manageable while drinking a cup of tea and then having to unfold and find the continuation of the article on another page, and then fold again. Nowadays, I read articles from both papers every day. On the other hand, I hate the electronic version of *The Capital Times*, mostly because the format is so clumsy. Obviously, *NYT* and *WP* put a lot of money into making their formats work well. An easy-to-use format is key.

### Marilyn Holt

[SC] It's good to hear from you. It's great that you are feeling better and getting back to work on your book, and your website. We just finished *Good Omens 2*, we liked it but I think I still prefer the first season. We have been talking about seeing a film version of *Macbeth* with Denzel Washington and Francis McDormand for a long time. We just haven't found the night when we are in the mood for it.

[JG] I will be curious to find out how the audiobook producer reacts to your offer to read your own novel. I have been wondering whether authors are generally encouraged to read their own work aloud, whether the producer makes a decision based on the author's reading-aloud skill, or if they, in general, prefer to work with freelancers they're familiar with.

### Lisa Freitag

[SC] How was it that you were at Convergence and the Minneapolis Antiquarian Book Fair on the same weekend? Were you and Greg selling books at both? I look forward to your comments on Winnipeg, and a full article on *Into the Woods* (one of our favorite musicals) with William.

FYI, as you may have noticed from the top of page-one photo in his July zine, having no opinion on penis size will not save you (or any of us) from **Steve Swartz's** preoccupations.

[JG] It's sad to hear that no one on the WisCon committee is considering reviewing some of the bans, especially since (I have been told) that turnover during the past couple years has entirely replaced the committee that came before it. Another form of "we've always done it this way."

### Elizabeth Matson

[SC] Your national park hats knitting project has turned out much bigger than I expected. They look great!

Life at the library sounds stressful lately. I don't have any useful advice beyond hoping that your board effectively addresses all the matters you mentioned (they must take the lead in dealing with any of these issues), especially to support the staff and insure a safe and respectful atmosphere for all your users. Your former Director sounds like a jerk. Better luck with the next one.

I wish your yurt experience had worked out better. It's certainly been interesting. As before, if you decide to dismantle and store it this fall, I will help if I'm available. Keep me posted. Jeanne and I were among the people extolling the virtues of the Hamilton Wood Type Museum. I'm glad you enjoyed it. Your tea salon suggestion in Green Bay could be a stop for us on a visit to Door County sometime.

You are such a good care-giver for poor old Nick the Greyhound. Such a sweet old boy to be extra-



Flowers on the driveway

hobbled by his fears. We will have to plan a trip down to Janesville to visit you both, since travel for him seems unlikely.

[JG] I learned a trick during my camping days for pots and pans that get blackened on a stove or open fire. Swab the bottoms with dish-washing liquid before setting the pot over flames. Then, after use and after it cools down, you will be able to clean the bottom off with one swipe and it will look like new. Try that with your cast iron pot or any other (lighter) pot you eventually replace it with.

I like the two bottom manifestations of Grand Canyon hats. The colors match my memory of the rock bands much better than the two on top.

### Karl Hailman & Hope Kiefer

[SC] Best of luck to Dee Dee and Forrest. Thanks for keeping us updated. I was last over to the new “Madison Yards” development (formerly Hill Farms, a name that must have been too unhip and rural-sounding for the developers) last year. It must have come a long way since then. I will have to ride over there again and check out their progress. I wonder how close they are to opening the new Whole Foods store. It was clever of you to watch the fireworks from the top of the parking garage. I remember

years ago when I worked at Mendota Mental Health Institute that staff watched the old Rhythm and Booms show at Warner Park from the roof of one of the campus buildings. (I don’t remember which one, I never joined them because I was working.) In recent years Jeanne and I have enjoyed watching fireworks from her brother Steve’s pontoon boat out in the middle of Lac La Belle near Oconomowoc.

Nice report and photo from the Chicago trip. We haven’t nailed down any plans so far for next year’s eclipse-viewing. We will regret it if we don’t make some plans soon. We are equally uncommitted on World Con in Seattle as yet.

### Kim & Kathi Nash

[SC] Thanks for running the page of old *Turbo* covers. I remember a lot of those covers. Jeanne and I met in 1984 and *Turbo* started up in 1986. Jeanne joined pretty early but I didn’t even move to Madison until 1987. I remember seeing copies of the apa when I visited her, but I probably didn’t read much of them (except for Jeanne’s zine, of course). *Turbo* will be coming up on a 40th anniversary in a couple years. Another good excuse for a party.

[JG] Can one sprinkle micro-clover on top of a regular, but weed-infested lawn? Just asking.

Yeah, I’ve noticed that there are fewer fireflies too. In addition, I’ve noticed that our car’s windshield accumulates many fewer bug carcasses than it used to after road trips.

Thanks for posting those *Turbo* covers!

### Jae Leslie Adams

[SC] I liked your piece on reading and writing Cursive.

Regarding Little Free Libraries, isn’t it interesting how LFL’s seem to have different personalities? They can be quite different from each other even on the same street on the same block. This clearly reflects the different approaches the owners take to “curating” their LFL. Some take a very hands-off approach and their library ends up full of crap that just sits there for weeks. Others are much more assertive, regularly weeding out the junk in favor of a mix of actual books. As you say, some even seem to attract better quality books than their neighbors’. Over here in SASY (Schenk-Atwood-Starkweather-Yahara) world, we are surrounded by lots of LFLs, and I have discovered my favorites. They are the

ones I check whenever I'm in the neighborhood and where I go when I have books to drop off.

[JG] I remember those ink well holes in my elementary school desks! I'd forgotten all about that. And the "Palmer Lesson" – right! – I remember that too. Thanks for the tech history lesson. Fascinating.

Re your comment to **Elizabeth**, I also type on my iPhone with one finger, my right index finger. I never learned, well actually I never tried to learn to type with my thumbs. When I imagine typing with my thumbs, it seems likely to cause painful repetitive motion injuries. On the other hand, my speed on a keyboard – touch-typing – has never been faster. I'd be willing to bet that typing apazines has something to do with it.

I will remember that you invented the name, "Zombie WisCon." What a scary idea.

Ah, *Mise en place*, so that's what it's called. I like to gather and measure out ingredients before I start cooking or baking, too. But not so much to emulate Ms. Child – but rather, to avoid the moment mid-recipe when I groan, "oh no!" and Scott calls from the living room, "What? What did you forget?" as he readies himself to drive to the grocery store for the ingredient that I need *right now*. The missing ingredient can usually be acquired in a timely manner. It's finding out that the meat needed to marinate overnight that throws a spanner into the works.

Same memory, different results. I also remember Dad throwing me, into the water – a lake, not a municipal swimming pool. But my memory is a fond one, not a source of trauma. I took to the water immediately and still feel much more at ease moving in water than I do on land.

I just looked at the FB group, NearTermClimate-Extinction, scary stuff. Oops, you said you were a member of the *support* group. What's the difference?

Thanks for the delightful ramble through past issues of *Turbo* via accumulated mailing comments!

### Steven Vincent Johnson

[SC] Amusing Genesis story. Franciscan friar William of Baskerville looks a lot like Sean Connery.

Regarding your comment to me, I'm relieved by your reassurance (and examples) that AI is not ready to overthrow us just yet. Maybe not anytime soon. I am enjoying your comments about your experiments with it.

Regarding your comment to **Georgie** on Trump, I have no doubt that Trump would fail again to win a majority of voters in 2024, but he and the entire Republican establishment are doing everything in their power to pull off another Electoral College win or push the election into the House of Representatives. A path to victory remains maddeningly possible if he becomes the Republican nominee. Democrats who look forward to Trump being the nominee to ensure a Democratic win are playing with fire.

[JG] Once, many years ago, I also had difficulty dealing with the spouse of my roommate's friend. My roommate and his friend went off drinking together and left the spouse behind to hang out with me. She and I had very little in common and I was irritated at my roommate's presumption the first few times it happened. But what I finally did was to suggest to her that we go to a movie together, which worked out fine in that we didn't have to struggle to find common ground for conversation. The movie actually made us relax with one another and we ended up confessing to each other that we would prefer not to spend time together, no offence given or taken. Yay. Maybe you could do something like that with Darlene's friend's spouse. Watch a movie or stream something.

### Jim Hudson & Diane Martin

[SC] You guys have a very busy fall and early winter. I don't envy you. After the flood of four APT shows and our first Forward Theater show all in September, I think Jeanne and I will be ready to hide at home for a while.

I finally rode over the new Observatory Drive bridge on my bike last month. I had to make two attempts because I blew out a tire on my first venture. I was riding through the park behind the swimming pool near your house when my back tire blew. I had to walk my bike over to Budget Bicycle on Regent St. for a repair. Not much of a bike ride that day, but a pretty good hike. I was more successful a few days later. Nice bridge at an otherwise nasty pedestrian/bike crossing.

[JG] I'm glad you've been able to see plays at the Shaw Festival so often. I hope that Scott and I get back there sometime in the future and that our favorite B&B is still renting rooms.

## What's New

### What We've Been Watching

[JG] *Outlander*, season 7 (Starz). Sometime during the pandemic, I watched the first couple seasons of *Outlander*, and then looped back to Diane Gabaldon's novels on which the TV series is based. At the time, Gabaldon's series was not concluded (and still is not), but I read the nine published books, and then went on to read a bunch of the related books – the Lord John series. And then I returned to the TV series. I briefly subscribed to Starz to watch season 6 and just recently signed up for a temporary subscription to watch the first half of season 7. All that is just to illustrate how engrossed I am in both the *Outlander* books and the TV series. You will note that I do not mention Scott; the obsession has so far been mine alone, though I suspect that Scott would like the TV series if he watched it. The story follows a woman named Claire Randall who time-travels from post-WWII Scotland to 1743 where she falls in love with a dashing Highlander, Jamie Fraser. During this epic story, she and later her daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren travel back and forth a couple times between the 20th and 18th centuries. Claire and Jamie live through “the Rising,” a failed Scottish revolt against England, as well as the American Revolutionary War. To my delight, the later novels in Gabaldon's series veered deeper into science fictional territory as the characters explore the mechanism of time travel, and bad guys pursue them for the secret. I'm still having fun following this story and recommend it highly. Gabaldon promises one last novel. I expect to feel sad when we come to the end.

*Foundation* (Apple TV). What an excellent portrayal of Isaac Asimov's series of short stories and novellas this is! The TV series fleshes out Asimov's original idea about the waning days of a future Galactic empire, and the mathematician Hari Seldon who develops the theory of psychohistory, which uses statistical laws of mass action to predict the future of large populations. Seldon foresees the imminent fall of the galactic empire, but devises a plan to limit this interregnum to just one thousand years. Many of Asimov's characters appear in the TV series but are different genders and/

or races than the characters presented in print to a 1940's audience. The TV series is a really compelling and gorgeous epic story, far more thoughtful, in my opinion, than Asimov's original work. The TV series is far more cohesive and – not surprisingly – the characters are more interesting, complex, and believable than Asimov's. The plot is very complex. In fact, if you watched the first season but haven't watched season two yet, I recommend that you go back and re-watch the first season. That's what Scott and I did. This is one of the shows produced for Apple TV, in my opinion, that make the Apple TV platform worth subscribing to.

*Good Omens* (Prime). We were so happy to be reunited with the angel, Aziraphale (Michael Sheen) and the demon, Crowley (David Tennant), not to mention the writer, Neil Gaiman, when all episodes of the second season dropped at once this month. John Hamm was also wonderful as Gabriel, suffering from amnesia. (I loved the scene in which he helpfully alphabetizes a shelf of books by the first word in each book.) Scott and I both enjoyed this second season and would not have missed it, but we liked the season-one story more. I was pleased that Aziraphale and Crowley's relationship became more explicit, i.e., that they recognized their attachment to one another, but the story line felt like the middle act, or the middle book in a trilogy, in which crisis must be piled on top of crisis but not resolved, because the resolution part needs to wait till the third act, or the last book of the trilogy. We're obviously being set up for the main event – the Second Coming – which neither Crowley nor Aziraphale (nor Gabriel) wants to happen because it will involve the destruction of humanity and the Earth. But that will be something that season 3 deals with.

*Marriage* (Apple TV). Despite the fact that I love the actors and their performances in this 4-episode series – Nicola Walker and Sean Bean – I am not going to recommend it. It's a story about a specific, long-term marriage, and to some extent, about all marriages. The message seems to be that no one except the people married to one another can ever really understand how their relationship works or doesn't work. People may think they understand, but even the couple's daughter and certainly the wife's colleague are blind





to how the couple supports and depends upon one another. That much rings true, and I liked that. But the way this story was told was ... excruciating. It wasn't so much those hypnotically dull scenes where Emma and Ian silently filled the dishwasher or brushed their teeth. It was more that when they tried to talk, to each other or anyone else, that you itched for it to stop. The excruciating banalities, the awkward misfires. Well, in the middle of the third episode, Scott said he'd be willing to stop watching it, but I pushed on and Scott went along with me. I suppose for its underlying assumptions and unspoken communication, that scene between Scott and me would have fit right into *Marriage*.

**Hijack** (Apple TV). This is an uncommon sort of action-adventure story, starring someone I've always thought of as a typical action-adventure actor, Idris Elba. But in this series, he plays a corporate business negotiator who employs psychology rather than the more typical fisticuffs. When Flight KA29 is hijacked during its seven-hour journey from Dubai to London, corporate negotiator Sam Nelson (Elba) and other characters on the ground try to save everyone on board. The action takes place on and off the plane as government officials, investigators, politicians, an air traffic controller, and various flavors of criminals struggle to dominate the situation. The main mystery is why the plane is being hijacked. Scott and I thought it was fun to watch. Be warned, however, that nearly every episode ends on a cliffhanger. Lucky for you, all the episodes are now available and you don't have to wait a week to find out what happens next if you decide to watch it.

**Oppenheimer** (theater). Yup, Scott and I went to both of the big August releases in theater, but we did not see them back-to-back, thank goodness. I admired how this movie told Oppenheimer's life story. Some of my expectations were challenged, especially about how Oppenheimer lost his security clearance amid accusations that he was a communist. The movie is based on the meticulously researched 2005 biography, *American Prometheus* by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, so I feel comfortable believing that Oppenheimer did in fact expect that the atom bomb would end the possibility of war. Naïve, yes. But when he realized that research on the Hydrogen bomb wouldn't even be paused after the atom bomb's deployment in Japan, Oppenheimer switched gears, and walked away from research toward activism. He attempted to leverage his fame in order to convince lawmakers to negotiate a non-proliferation treaty. The movie is amazing, really.

But one thing: the sound level was incredibly LOUD, as I mentioned in a comment to **Greg**. Scott and I saw the movie in an IMAX theater, which might have been a mistake, because I left the theater with a blazing headache.

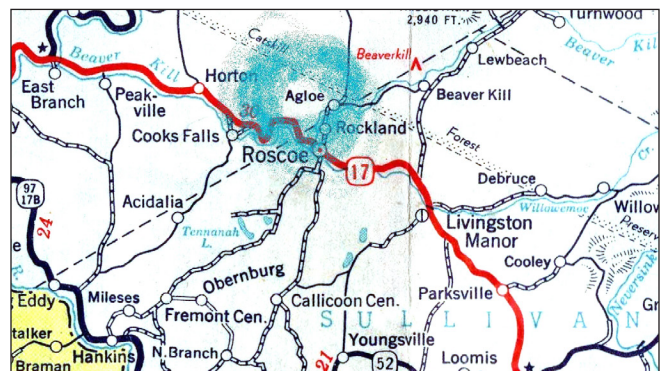
**Barbie** (theater). No over-loud noises in this movie. Just a delight: thoughtful, witty, joyful. Greta Gerwig deserves all the plaudits she has received. I love the fact that this movie is Warner Brothers' highest grossing release of all time, surpassing *The Dark Knight*. I love the opening scene of *Barbie*, modeled on the opening of *2001: A Space Odyssey* – only instead of the monolith there is a giant, looming, original Barbie. And instead of apes, there are little girls taking care of baby dolls who destroy their dolls and tea sets when they appreciate the possibility of an adult woman doll, Barbie. I loved the cognitive dissonance experienced by Barbies and Kens and real-life humans when they try to deal with the conflict between their ideal identities and real-life situations. I loved so much about this movie, at the same time as I remember hating my one and only Barbie Doll, that (if you remember), I burned down inside a Lincoln Log cabin. Recommended.

### **The Cartographers, a review**

[JG] Our book discussion group, SF without Borders, read Peng Shepherd's novel, *The Cartographers*. I was very excited about the choice of this book, since it was about map-makers, maps, and was inspired by so-called "phantom settlements," or "copyright traps," which are places that appear on maps but do not actually exist except as fictions to enable the publishers to detect others plagiarizing their maps. Agloe, New York, is a real-life phantom settlement featured in *The Cartographers*.

I studied cartography. I made maps for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources for 23+ years. I love maps. So, of course this novel intrigued me.

I attended UW-Madison, majored in Geography, and took several cartography classes in Science Hall (that



big, red brick, Gothic building on Park Street, across the street from the Memorial Union) during the early 1970s. Seven characters in *The Cartographers* studied cartography at UW-Madison and attended classes in Science Hall during the early 1990s. My excitement grew as I began reading the book, because it appeared that several of the characters struggled with a conflict similar to the one I wrestled with during my undergrad days – how to reconcile an aesthetic worldview with a data-driven one. In my case, I struggled to find places where the worldviews of modern literature might illuminate the study of geography, and vice versa. (You may recall the essay I published here in *Madison Foursquare*, “If It Can’t Be Mapped, Geography Doesn’t Study it.”) The characters in *The Cartographers* try to reconcile their conflicting conceptions of maps as art or as data. Fine.

I loved the very cool idea of copyright traps upon which Shepherd bestowed magical, extra-dimensional reality. If a person navigates to the place where the phantom settlement is located, making sure to look at the fake place on the map as they proceed, they can actually enter that place. It becomes real to the person or people who possess the map. **Andy Hooper** suggested that this idea would have made a wonderful, short episode of *Twilight Zone*. I agree.

As it turned out, the further I got into the novel, the more irritated I became. Shepherd doesn’t seem to know much about map-making, cartography, UW-Madison, academia, or even human nature. Alarm bells rang early for me when seven freshmen meet soon after their arrival in Madison to begin their first semester – in the middle of winter. One character arrives on a bus out of Milwaukee, which could only have been the Badger Bus, and endures freezing cold wind blowing through a broken window. I rode Badger Buses back and forth between my parents’ home in Milwaukee and Madison many times every year, and never once encountered a broken window. Badger Bus would never have sent out a bus in disrepair. Does Shepherd think that it’s always cold in Madison? Or did she simply reach for a cliché about the frigid Midwest and fail to consider that school terms start in August, when new students wear shorts more often than parkas?

That was the first alarm bell of several. Before they encounter the central mystery of the phantom settlement, the characters work together on a project that appealed to me very much. They proposed to choose two maps – one for a fantasy world and another for a real-world map (I imagined a USGS map) – and to re-draw each map in the style of the

other. What a cool idea, I thought. I imagined a map of Wisconsin drawn in the style of Tolkien’s map of Middle Earth, and Middle Earth rendered using the symbols and conventions of a highway map showing elevation, land use, road types, etc. I practically itched to make a plan for how to draft these maps—using manual, old-style techniques (since none of the characters in *The Cartographers* relies on computer graphics to do their work). I mentally made a list of tools needed – a drafting table, a light table, technical pens, lettering guides, sheets of mylar, etc. But when the gang moves into a house in New York to start the project, they don’t bring any of these tools with them. They simply set up on desks. They take notes. They examine maps. They “conceptualize.”

Once the gang discovers and enters Agloe, the phantom settlement, they abandon the original project and decide to do two maps based on the impossible town—one from within and one from without. I wasn’t clear really on how that would work since Agloe simply doesn’t exist from an outside point of view. There is no space for it. It exists in an alternate or barely attached dimension. There is one mention of two characters doing survey work, but they don’t actually bring along any transits, chains, tapes, compasses, or tripods. They just amble out into the town and ... survey stuff. Two characters argue about how to make a map of Agloe, but never explain how they disagree. (Picture me stamping my foot in frustration.)

The mechanics of how magic maps actually work is also confusing. One character draws a little map on the back of a business card which enables him (and later, the protagonist), to find a phantom street. And yet, in the case of Agloe, it can only be accessed when someone possesses the commercially printed highway map on which it was originally labeled. Only one such map remains in existence in *The Cartographers* ... a fact that propels the suspenseful plot. No one tries to draw their own little thumbprint map of the area, label Agloe, and walk right in.

Once I started looking at the novel’s framework critically, I couldn’t stop. After four years, seven characters graduate with BS Degrees in Cartography from UW-Madison. They share an advisor. And they all get accepted into the same UW-Madison post-grad program advised by that same advisor. This simply would not happen in Madison, or anywhere else in academia.

Still, I must tell you, if you don’t care about the mechanics of map making or whether Shepard faithfully captured Madison and UW-Madison details, you might very well like this book. I will not urge you to

avoid this book. As **Steve Swartz** said in his comments during the book discussion, the idea of map-making can be read metaphorically. For me, this was a book that I expected and hoped I would allow me to share my own experiences with the author, but I was disappointed when the author failed to even Google some obvious background details about her subject.

In fact, after finishing the novel, I read the afterward and discovered a much more interesting real-life story than the fictional one.

From Wikipedia: *"In the 1950s, a general store was built on the map where Agloe appeared in a highway map, and was given the name Agloe General Store because the name was on the Esso map. Later, Agloe appeared on a Rand McNally map. When Esso threatened to sue Rand McNally for the assumed copyright infringement which the "trap" had revealed, the latter pointed out that the place had now become real and therefore no infringement could be established. Eventually, the store went out of business; but the Agloe General Store appeared on Google Maps. Agloe itself continued to appear on maps as recently as the 1990s, but has now been deleted."*

I love it: If you map it, they might build it.

It reminds me of the episode in *Catch-22* when Yossarian moves a string on a war map that designates the front line. Yossarian does this in order to convince his superiors that they've already occupied the area, and thus do not need to send Yossarian out on a dangerous bombing mission the next day. It works.

## I Wrote a Play

[JG] A few months ago, I wrote a novella based on several dreams, which in turn were inspired by a brief obsession with on-line Reddit stories. Some of the subreddits I followed are titled: "Am-I-the-Asshole? (AITA)," "Entitled Karens," "Malicious Compliance," "Petty Revenge," and "Bridezilla" stories. These Reddit stories are all told from one person's point of view. The storyteller usually refers to themselves as OP (short for "Original Poster"). I became interested because I frequently detected parallel stories that might have been told by other people involved in the dramas. I became fascinated by anomalous details that contradicted the reality of the world OP described, and suggested much different or larger stories. The stories I imagined grew from other characters' possible points of view. But most of the anomalous, contradictory information I noticed is ignored or obscured by OP, who almost always portrays herself as the hero or sympathetic victim. The question posed at the end

of each story, "am I the asshole?," is almost always a rhetorical one. Of course, OP isn't an asshole, since OP stacked all the evidence of assholery against a villain or family member or employer who betrayed, cheated, or abused them. However, I was frequently convinced that if we could hear from more characters than just OP, the judgment would have been less predetermined.

The dreams inspired by some of those ambiguous Reddit stories woke me up at night. I scribbled down notes describing conversations between characters, and then I typed up the scenes the next day. I thought I was writing a short story, but it grew and turned into a novella. I named my point of view character Ophelia, nickname Opie. I named Opie's half-sister Giselle, nickname Zilla. (There are a few more Easter-egg type jokes based on Reddit conventions.) Opie is on the autism spectrum. So, as she tells the story, she sometimes fails to understand the emotional reality of the scenes she observes.

The story is set during the beginning of the Covid pandemic, March–October 2020. The pandemic shutdown, Trump, and George Floyd's murder are all parts of the story in which an extended family isolates itself from the pre-pandemic world.

But as I wrote, I noticed that I was telling the story almost entirely with dialog. "Hmm," I said. "This almost feels more like a play than a novella." I had just finished the story when an email dropped into my inbox from Forward Theater (a Madison repertory theater). They sent out a call for new works by Wisconsin playwrights. They're going to do week-long rehearsals and performance-readings of three plays at a festival in the Spring 2024.

Again, I went, "hmmm."

I set about converting my very Wisconsin novella into a play and it fell pretty naturally into a performance time of 90 minutes. It contains four acts (Plus an "Update," which is an essential part of most Reddit stories). I'm trying to round up some friends to do a read-through with me, and I plan on submitting it before the end-of-September deadline. There's not much time left, especially considering what a busy September that Scott and I have, but I'm hopeful that I will be able to set up a read-through party and feedback.

So that's been interesting.

