

Madison foursquare

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What's New

[SC] The start of 2022 was a difficult not only because of my surgery on New Years Eve day. Two of my former co-workers died, one, Sharon, between Christmas and New Years and the other one, Nancy, shortly after I got home from the hospital. Sharon and I did not work in the same work section, but our sections' work frequently overlapped and Sharon was an experienced and extremely knowledgeable processor. I often took questions and problems to her that required technical help from her area. After retirement, she was a principal organizer of retirement lunches

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for those of us who worked in our two sections. Cancer killed Sharon.

Nancy was one of my work group lead workers and trainers within my section at DOT. I had vast respect for her technical knowledge, but also for her skill at overseeing processors and working with managers and supervisors. I worked with her closely when I eventually became the lead worker of my own group. She was the person I most modeled my own attitude and behavior after. We were close colleagues at work and friends after retirement. Nancy was always into doing artistic and craft projects. She used to make beautiful Christmas cards by hand. It was Nancy who invited Jeanne and I over to her house to paint a quilt square for our house, ours still hangs out front. Tragically, Nancy was sick with Parkinson's Disease that robbed her of her ability to do so many things she loved to do. At the end, for someone who was so articulate at work, she could barely speak.

As Jeanne wrote last month, we lost our great friend Jane Hawkins, too.

Finally we lost our neighbor, Ron, who lived directly across the street. He's been our neighbor since we moved here in 1989. He lived on this street almost his entire life. Ron lived alone in the house after his mother died a few years after we moved to Union Street. In the early years Ron was a vigorous guy. He worked afternoons nearby at the Madison-Kipp Corporation. On the weekends, he would usually pack up his big pick-up truck and head to his cabin up North. He liked to hunt, fish and tinker endlessly with stuff. As the years went by he gradually slowed down. After he retired he eventually sold his boat, his cabin and the truck. He had a knee replaced. He got a dog and hung out at home, which filled up with stuff. He considered himself a child of the Depression and could not pass up stuff that people threw away that he felt was fixable and still useful. His house and garage were full of things he was hoping to fix or sell one day.

Ron was a kind and gentle guy, though he could be a bit of a curmudgeon from time to time. He was a popular character and knew all the neighbors and everything that was going on in the neighborhood. He knew about all the houses



Ron Tessiman

and how and why things looked the way they looked on our street. I enjoyed talking to him and I constantly urged him to do more yard sales and get rid of more of his stuff. I even helped him do a few yard sales (though I detest doing yard sales.) I always had to keep a look-out if I set something out on the street to be picked up to keep Ron from coming over and claiming something else he did not need. Sometimes he out-manuevered me.

He helped people all the time, fixing this and that. He'd loan out tools (he seemed to have three of everything.) He'd sometimes come over in the winter with his monster snowblower to blow out the end of our driveway after the plow went through, which often defeated our small machine. He could be relied on to keep an eye on our house when we were out of town.

One of my favorite Ron stories was from our first trip to Hawaii, in 2014. We told Ron about our trip and asked him to keep an eye on our house, which he always agreed to do. Before we left we came up with the brilliant idea of having our occasional house cleaner come in the weekend after we left town to give the house a good scrub. Our cleaner has a key to our house. We left town forgetting to warn Ron across the street that our cleaner was coming Saturday morning. We got a call that Saturday morning in Hawaii from Ron asking for confirmation that this other guy was actually supposed to be cleaning our house. Apparently after the cleaner appeared and got started, Ron came over and confronted him. It got a little tense. We had to explain and apologize, but it confirmed that Ron kept a close eye on our house.

Last summer Ron went to move a motor scooter in his garage. He slipped and it fell on him, breaking his leg at about thigh level. He lay on the garage floor for awhile before he was able to get someone's attention to call for help. They took him to the VA where he spent about a month getting his leg fixed and doing rehab. Eventually they transferred him up to the big VA facility in Tomah for another month or so of rehab. Ron was never quite right when they brought him home. His leg never seemed to heal properly, he had difficulty getting around. Eventually his condition deteriorated so much they took him back to the hospital in November only to find out he had bladder cancer. He never got out of the hospital again. Never got home again. He died just days short of his 80th birthday. He was our friend across the street for nearly 33 years. The neighborhood will never be the same.

Cover art

[JG] The alien on the cover this month is actually something familiar to all of you, though you may not have looked at it in isolation as it is shown here, and altered in coloration. I am betting that no one will recognize it. The background image is...well. let's just call it the Ammonite Galaxy.



We Have Always Been Here

[JG] *We Have Always Been Here* by Lena Nguyen may be one of the worst novels I've ever read. I noticed that one Goodbooks reviewer gave it a 000 on her 1-10 scale, and that seems fair to me.

When I first read *The Lord of the Rings*, I spent a great deal of time looking for clues to the fate of the Entwives because I was convinced that Tolkien would reveal the solution to this mystery at the end of the book. I actually thought I'd solved the mystery but was stunned when it didn't turn out as I expected. A red herring. A similar thing happened to me while reading *We Have Always Been Here*. Please do not misunderstand me: I am absolutely *not* comparing *We Have Always Been Here* with *The Lord of the Rings*. I do not suggest that you read *We Have Always Been Here*, in fact I urge you not to read it. Scott and I read it because it was the February choice of our book club. But about a third of the way through the book, right after Lena Nguyen let us know that the androids in her novel had positronic brains, my own brain struggled

to find some way to reduce the cognitive dissonance caused by all the totally illogical, unscientific, crazy-assed world-building, and just plain bad decision-making the novel contains.

People live on other planets in a so-called “outer ring” of our solar system (beyond Pluto). They journey to a planet in *another galaxy* and complain about the 18-minute delay in communications. They expect to return home from their jaunt to another galaxy—soon, as if they had simply gone out on a month-long road trip. If something catastrophic happens in this other galaxy, they feel confident that another ship will be sent to rescue them. Quickly. A pilot confesses to having made a *wrong turn* and accidentally discovered a new planet. Our galaxy is apparently completely mapped, colonized, and owned by a governmental agency, and yet one of the prime distinctions between people is whether they were born on earth or not. Only a handful of other planets are named and everyone is familiar with them. People trekking across the icy surface of Antarctica refer to it as “tundra.” The main character is severely autistic and yet has chosen human psychology as her career; this is just one member of a totally dysfunctional crew. I could fill up several pages listing crazy stuff from this novel.

Here’s where I began to suspect that there was going to be a plot twist that would explain all the stupid. I noticed that Nguyen borrowed Asimov’s positronic android brains and the three laws of robotics, though she never actually quotes the laws in the book.

(The first law is that a robot shall not harm a human, or by inaction allow a human to come to harm. The second law is that a robot shall obey any instruction given to it by a human, and the third law is that a robot shall avoid actions or situations that could cause it to come to harm itself.)

I thought to myself that there must be some reason that everyone in this book is completely ignorant of science. If it were not for Nguyen’s correct use of positronic brains and the three laws of robotics, I would have jumped to the conclusion that she had never actually read a science fiction story, much less was familiar with basic astronomical principals. But there it was—a *clue*, I thought, to a reasonable explanation and maybe hidden, interesting story.

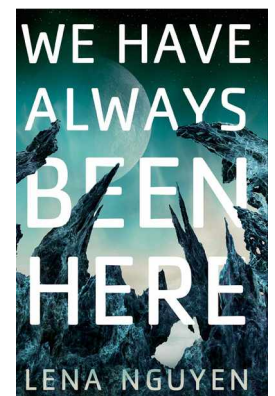
I thought I’d figured it out. None of the characters who were so-called experts seemed to demonstrate any actual expertise, so I speculated that in fact their expertise might not actually be necessary in this world,

that they were merely being humored by the androids who were doing all the actual work. Every human in the book hates androids to one degree or another except for the protagonist, Parks, who is autistic and who therefore thinks more like androids than her fellow-humans. (This was the most interesting thing about the novel to me, though it was not nearly enough to make it enjoyable.) No one seems to actually rely on the androids to do anything, and yet, ever more advanced models keep being manufactured—somewhere, by someone....

Did you ever read Jack Williamson’s classic short story, “With Folded Hands...”? In this story, androids are built that follow the Prime Directive: “to serve and obey and guard men from harm.” Offering their services free of charge, they replace humans in all jobs and professions. Despite the androids’ benign appearance and mission they essentially take over every aspect of human life. No humans may engage in any behavior that might endanger them, and every human action is carefully scrutinized. Suicide is prohibited. Humans who resist the Prime Directive are taken away and lobotomized, so that they may live happily under the direction of the androids. (Thus, “with folded hands...”) I decided that that was what was going on in *We Have Always Been Here*, only rather than taking over all the work in full view of humans, the androids had decided to hide the fact that they were in charge, so as to avoid bruising human egos. After all, deflating a human ego could be interpreted as a kind of harm, thus against the second law. Humans developed weird ideas of how the world works, but it didn’t really matter. The androids let the mis-information and fake science metastasize because it didn’t matter what humans knew or believed anymore; they were no longer running things.

I was totally expecting the protagonist, Parks, to be welcomed into the society of androids at the end of the book. But like the big reveal I expected at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, there was no big reveal at the end of *We Have Always Been Here*. There were no entwines and there were no android overlords.

We finished *We Have Always Been Here* last week, but I can barely remember the plot. My brain may be deliberately attempting to protect itself by forgetting it. I actually remember my own fabrication more clearly than Nguyen’s story. Our book discussion will happen a week



before the *Turbo* deadline, so **Andy** and **Carrie** will probably have heard some version of this screed by the time they get the apa.

Just in case you missed it, this has *not* been a recommendation.

Comments

OE Jim

[SC] Every month you calmly urge us to bring in new members and suggest how nice it would be if we reached 25 members. After last month I have to wonder if we brought in any more members, our output some month might explode your heavy-duty stapler. Be careful what you wish for.

Covers

[SC] Great cover photo, **Catie!** January was a perfect time to show us a lovely sunset shot of a pool and palm trees. Nice photos on the back, too. Did the “resort iguana” have a name?

Greg Rihn

[SC] We also liked *Encanto*, though in my case I was most enthusiastic about the beautiful animation and the lively music. The plot was merely okay. I’m in agreement with you about *Around the World in 80 Days*. I think the actors and the production values are fine but the writing could be better.

I also plan to revisit *The Lord of the Rings* this year, but not the films. I want to read the books again, and only for the second time for me. I read them for the first time back in, oh, 1986? Most books that I love I expect to re-read someday. Looks like I better get started before I run out of time.

[JG] I noticed the thing you pointed out about the balloon in *Around the World in 80 Days*—how the show goes from tethered balloon to crashed balloon with only a brief view of the trio of adventurers riding the balloon. The same thing happens several times in what I could only assume were imaginative ways to cut costs. The bad guy hurls Fogg out to the boat deck, announcing that he is going to throw Fogg overboard and then, with only a few seconds on board the row boat, we suddenly see Fogg washed up on a beach. They get rescued and in the next scene their riding a stage coach in Nevada. Lots of expensive filming skipped. I find myself thinking about the logistics of converting story to affordable film shots, more than the

actual plot. We’ll finish watching the show, but I doubt that I will remember it for very long.

Lisa Freitag

[SC] Regarding your comment to me about the break-in on January 5th, where the thieves made off with four boxes of comics, the theft is puzzling to me, too. In *my* experience in the criminal justice system (16 years in corrections and forensic mental health), I met very few criminal masterminds. Probably your second guess is the right one. That, or they were just getting started when they got interrupted and had to leave.

[JG] Yes, I think you’re right that we share a similar taste in music. Whenever you mention a piece that you like, I’ve always looked for it on YouTube and ... yup, I find that I like it too.

Elizabeth Matson

[SC] I enjoyed your story on your trip home to visit your mom and brother for Christmas. Our flight to LonCon in 2014 took us from Chicago to Toronto to London. I remember two things from that flight. One was that my suitcase got lost for about a week, and the other was the death march they made us do through the Toronto airport to change planes. And Toronto is such a nice place in so many other ways. I was very impressed when your professional public service instincts must have kicked in and you generously helped those people in the Customs area. Bravo.

A train trip across Canada is a very attractive idea.

[JG] Oh yes, the Toronto airport death march maze. Sounds like they haven’t improved it since we toured it in 2014. It looked like they simply divided corridors in half for security reasons, to allow one-way movement through the airport. We may have found it more onerous than others because we had to carry all our luggage through the maze because we were transferring to an international flight.

Steven Vincent Johnson

[SC] Your diagrams were beautifully rendered, but I’m afraid orbital mechanics is beyond me. I liked your stories about the Antikythera mechanism and how you got interested in orbital mechanics.

[JG] I admire your clear rendering of the diagrams and liked the photos fitted in among them.

I'm very glad to hear about your undetectable PSA levels and reduced need for check-ups! Very good news indeed.

Carrie Root

[SC] Congratulations on ordering the new Forester, in red! We would have checked out the Tucson hybrid when we were in the market in 2019, but back then there was no Tucson hybrid option. The only Subaru hybrid back then was the plug-in Crosstek, and we decided against a plug-in hybrid. I also wanted to test drive as many of the cars we were interested in as we could before going out to talk to dealers. The Toyota Prius and Rav4 hybrid were easy because the big Smart Motors Toyota dealer in Madison rented new cars out of their dealership. I simply went in and rented a new Prius and Rav4 from them for weekend trips to Iowa. It was how we discovered that we wanted something else.

[JG] Oooo, a *red* car. I like it.

I think I may already own the kind of goggles that you and **Andy** switched to. For many years I've been buying my goggles from Speedo. They're expensive but are worth the price. Nevertheless, one kind of Speedo goggles works on my face topography and another kind definitely does not. My YMCA doesn't sell goggles, so I'm not sure what kind you were using before. I also use a nose clip when swimming.



Steve Swartz

[SC] Welcome back, old friend. I've missed you.

Thanks for the intro piece. It answered some questions I had about your decision to move back to the U.S. and provided some idea of your retirement plan. I don't know what you will think of medicare when it comes, but I suspect you will enjoy being retired as much as I do.

Interesting piece on religion, I particularly liked the idea of internal and external experience you described.

It's good to see from the Shit Fountain and Shithenge that even as you've reached your '60s, you have not lost your enthusiasm for scatological humor. I was equally interested in *The Door to Hell* and your comments to **Lisa** regarding Capuchin Crypt, a scene which looks like the horrible outcome of some ghastly medieval massacre but makes surprising sense when you find out the actual circumstances of how it came about.

Regarding your comment to me on Zoom. I'm so happy I never had to Zoom for work. Live meetings were tiresome enough. I am interested in how this pandemic experience will affect the nature of work going forward, as you pointed out when you explained hiring people without needing them to move to Seattle. I wonder if, in a few years, the technology of virtual work environments will be so advanced that it will feel perfectly natural and no longer so tiring or irritating to do them.

In your comment to **Steve Johnson**, I loved your expression, "...some of it's an intentional down-scoping of my give-a-fuck engine."

[JG] What a thought-provoking zine, Steve! Thank you.

I loved the coding mine metaphor, especially "semicolon lung."

Hmm, I wasn't expecting anyone to endorse my predilection to play Solitaire while listening to the news. Disappointed teachers docked me for "inattentiveness" when I doodled during class. But they didn't manage to convince me to stop, and in fact I always doodled madly during WisCon meetings (and surreptitiously during meetings at work), which definitely helped me focus on the conversations. The idea of "dual track" brain work makes sense to me—though it only works for me when the thing I need to focus on is listening. Anything I do that involves writing or drawing gets my total focus; I never use a "dual track" then, I think because those creative efforts involve vision, which I need to focus all my attention on.

The thing about movie vs play remakes that stands out for me is the almost instant disapproval that news of a movie remake inspires vs the range of reactions inspired by news of a new version of a play like *Macbeth* that has been staged hundreds of times. (Some critics don't seem to need to know anything about a remade film before they instantly grouse, "why make that movie again? It's already perfect.") But Apple TV advertises the new *Macbeth* with Denzel Washington and Frances McDormand, and we all

excitedly start talking about how *this* version might cast a whole new light on the story.) You asked about novels that have been remade—there are a few. Most of the ones I can think of are based on fairy tales or legends, which have come down to us through time as an endless series of remakes, so we're already comfortable with that. The King Arthur story has been redone for every generation it seems, which points to the reason (perhaps) that fairy tales and legends can be remade without complaints: their elements are all archetypes that can be re-shuffled to mirror current societal changes. Apply that idea to movie remakes, and I think it would be possible, even exciting, to remake some classic films whose elements have become as archetypal for our society as King Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot. When we talked about this, Scott wanted me to be specific about how a classic movie might be remade without simply copying it, and he asked about *Casablanca*. I suggested that we set that story in the US after the Republicans have destroyed democracy and tell the story of the resistance fighters and right wing bigots who meet in Rick's Café...

I once was tested for hundreds of allergens. I had contracted a seriously bad infection from an allergic reaction to something that this test revealed was latex. The test involves drawing a grid on a person's back (with washable ink) after which the doctor applies a bit of material in each of more than 100 grid fields. So, for instance, if you react to something applied in field 6-H, they know you are allergic to dust. My doctor thought the most interesting thing about my test results was that latex was the *only* thing I was allergic to. Apparently, when most people, even those that don't think they have any allergies, are given this test, they will typically react to several substances, at least mildly. I reacted strongly to latex and not even a tiny bit to any other allergen. Which means that it's unlikely that I am allergic to grasses. So, at least for me, the tomato reaction is probably caused by something else.

I like the way you explore museums and historical sites. I think if I visited a museum or a church alone, that's how I would tend to do it too—finding one or two things to look at and contemplate, rather than try to race through a place to see everything briefly. It's hard to limit oneself when exploring with another person though, so it's very nice that Allison and you allow one another to explore separately.

Did you actually see the crater near Daraza? Is that your photo?

I tasted Mexican hot chocolate for the first time when Julie, Scott and I visited Guanajuato, Mexico. I loved it. When Julie and Scott ordered their morning coffee, I drank chocolate. Not sweet, very spicy, lovely.

Andy Hooper

[SC] Regarding your comment to me about how the comparative perils and hazards of cross-country travel today are so much less than such travel historically was, made me laugh because of the timing. I read your comment as I was also finishing Larry McMurtry's fabulous epic novel *Lonesome Dove*, which was largely about a cattle drive from Texas to Montana in the 1870s. Talk about historical travel hazards! They encountered about everything possible on that trip including a vivid experience with a plague of grasshoppers.

Thanks also for your absorbing piece, "Celluloid Fantasia." It'd be interesting to see many of these lost films, some of them may have become classics. I wonder, though, if I would have been drawn in to see a couple of them with unfortunate titles. I mean, who would go to see something called *The Simpering Kind*? Or even *Dead Man in the Gutter* (especially if you knew it was bowling-related)?

[JG] WisCon 2, the meeting of Madison and Seattle fandoms, had an awesome effect on both of us, Andy. Thanks for writing about Jane and including her introduction of Vonda from V-Con6.

Jane was at Armadillocon I? Did you find that program book in her collection? That is so weird. I have no memory of her being there. I just found a conreport from Armadillocon I, and there is not one mention of her in it. Once again, something you mention has led to the excerpt from my book published in this issue: "Jokes and Poison Gas."

You asked if I was ever tempted to write fiction. Well, as it turns out, a couple chapters in my book that started out as speculative essays actually turned into short stories. I am rather pleased with one especially, a Covid time travel story. There's also one about Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. I think I will submit the time travel story to a couple likely sites. We will see if anyone is interested in it.

Kim & Kathi Nash

[SC] RE: winter. Due to my medical issues this year we elected to hire someone to clear our snow this season. Let me tell you, that's something that would be very easy to get used to on a permanent basis.

There was one cold morning when our KIA hybrid turned up dead as a stone. Not a spark of life. After much hassle, we ended up discovering a little “12-volt battery reset” button. If something drains the 12 volt battery, like a light left on, before it goes completely dead, it will disengage itself. When you hit the reset button, it allows you to start the car. I hope we won’t need this feature again, but nice to know it’s there.

[JG] Our first big snow in December ended in the middle of the night. Around 3AM, our snow removal guys showed up and cleared our driveway and sidewalks. Very nice.

Jim Hudson & Diane Martin

[SC] Nice holiday letter and photos. In the photo of your nephew, Sam, and his (Toro?) snowblower, I was intrigued by his windshield apparatus. I don’t think I have seen that before. Always when the wind blew snow back at me, I just had to grin through my face scarf and deal. Maybe not.

RE: your comment to us on Madison transit options, I also applaud a new emphasis on quick service and more coverage. Back when I was a daily bus commuter it often seemed that bus transit in Madison skewed heavily toward serving the U.W. student population. Case in point was the existence of the Route 10 bus (some of us called it “the bus to nowhere”) whose sole purpose seemed to be to transport students from campus back and forth to off-campus apartment units and seemed not to serve anyone else. When the 10 bus came to the East side, it wound through mostly side streets and residential neighborhoods then terminated and turned around at the corner of North St and E. Washington Ave, where the dirty book store, Red Letter News, is located. Who was that supposed to serve?

[JG] Thanks for reminding me about *Door Into Summer*! I remember reading about it and intending to watch it... but then I forgot.

I have avoided *Wordle* so far too. But I’ve been caught by a geographic version of that game called *Globe*, that involves guessing the country with hotter-colder game rules.

We watched the short (6-episode) series, *Unbelievable* on Netflix, and it was excellent. It featured a mostly all-women cast of detectives dealing with a serial rapist, focusing on the different ways female and male detectives handle such cases. Based on the Pulitzer



Merritt Weaver and Toni Collette in *Unbelievable*

Prize-winning article “An Unbelievable Story Of Rapes,” *Unbelievable* tells the story of a young woman who claims to have been raped by an intruder in her home but her family and detectives refuse to believe it. However, hundreds of miles away, two detectives are investigating a series of rape crimes. They believe one man is responsible for all the attacks, leading to a nationwide search despite the police departments’ refusal to believe this person exists. Great acting and a fantastic story. We meant to watch it over the space of a couple weeks, but ended up binging it in two parts and two nights. Very recommended.

We are also liking the ten-episode series, *1883* (Paramount+). It’s apparently a prequel to the TV show, *Yellowstone*, which we haven’t seen, and it’s not necessary to have seen to enjoy this show. It’s a super-realistic view of the immigrants, cowboys, and former civil war officers who lead the wagon train from Ft. Worth, Texas to Montana. There are several wonderful characters. Again, great acting and a fantastic story. We love it and might be tempted to check out *Yellowstone* when it’s over. For a while, it seemed like we were spending all our TV-viewing time in the American West in the late 1800s. We re-watched *Lonesome Dove* in the midst of the *1883* series. (We couldn’t binge *1883*, though we would have if all the episodes had dropped at the same time.) And PBS’s *Around*



the World in 80 Days is set in the same time period, but its version of the American West may as well belong to a different universe.

Walter Freitag

[SC] I enjoyed both your essays this month. It's sure nice to know who I can blame for ruining the world. To be fair, I may share some of the blame. I used to enjoy target shooting with rifles and handguns in a back pasture of my dad's farm when I was a kid along with my dad and my brother. Look what a national hellscape that simple pastime has morphed into.

[JG] It's funny imagining that the wishes of us nerds created the world we now live in, but it's scary to think what world might be created by the wishes of some other large groups—like anti-vaxers or Big Lie adherents.

Matthew Powell

[SC] What a wealth of thoughtful comments you shared with us. I laughed at your rant to *Conjunctive Disorders*, maybe us grumps should form a support group.

I like what you wrote to Jeanne about music. I used to take music sort of for granted when I listened to the radio, tapes and CD's all the time in my car on long driving commutes, but in recent years it often feels to me like I don't take the time to listen to it nearly enough and I'm missing something important in my life. I also found your comments to her on the Duchenne and Pan Am smiles very interesting.

[JG] I think you are right about how teaching soldiers the lesson that violence can solve problems, trains many of those soldiers to apply that lesson after they've returned to civilian life. There's an interesting book there, following up on all the decommissioned soldiers through history and the criminal groups that emerged after the various wars.

Yes, I knew about the two kinds of smiles. I didn't realize that they had names though! Funny. As were the poems.

J.J. Brutsman & Tom Havighurst

[SC] Great con report! I've got to hand it to you, J.J., you were truly a Turbo Charged Party Animal at Worldcon and I'm proud of you. These days I feel like more of a party pooper. It's good to know that a few of us can still party properly.

Lots of fine pictures! I think I was most envious of the party on Doug's boat, though the whiskey tasting events were very tempting, too. Hi Tom!

[JG] Very interesting sales model at the pot store...er. sorry...graffiti art gallery. How did you find out about it?

What a cool con report and great pictures! So many parties! You must have a reputation as an excellent party host! I'm glad your Covid scare turned out not to be a problem. I agree with you that Discon did an admirable job being transparent and careful! I read the daily reports on *File 770*.

Hi Jon Singer! Hi other folks that JJ doesn't remember!

Jae Leslie Adams

[SC] A treadmill would have been a good idea for me, post-surgery, since walking was the exercise most recommended for me in recovery. Unfortunately, Omicron kept me away from the gym so I had to do walking the old fashioned way. There have been some cold, windy days where I finally chose to walk at East Towne mall instead of outside, which was an odd experience. I had plenty of company doing laps at the mall. It seemed safe as everyone was masked up and we had high ceilings and it felt like lots of space for social distancing. But it reminded me of how rarely I shop in malls anymore, along with most other people, it seems. Malls are kind of depressing places these days.

[JG] I am still mulling over your idea that MSNBC is like a live play. It is fun to notice on-camera glitches and off-script comments, yes. But what a short shelf-life news shows have. After a day or two they get stale.

Pat Hario

[SC] It was so nice of you to come over to have dinner with us the night of the apa deadline. Even though you told us you still had comments to write, we kept you here until 1AM and then made you drive home through a fresh three inches of snow. That was rude of us.

Jeanne and I discussed several theories of what job the Woodman's drone was doing. Inventory? Help in picking orders for delivery? I finally asked a staff person and it turns out it just goes up and down the aisles checking prices. It must be a huge job keeping prices consistent between what's listed on the shelves and what's in the check-out data base, when you consider all the sales and other continuous price changes.

RE: your comment to **Andy**, “I’d almost always rather talk to someone than write to them.” I’m exactly the opposite.

[JG] Faking cheerfulness isn’t so bad, especially when (sometimes) it turns into real cheerfulness.

Re your comment to **Jim & Ruth** about age-relevant conversation topics (Middle-aged Dan Aykroyd man talking about insuring his appliances)—I sometimes think it’s easiest to guess the age of people based on their favorite conversation topics. I’ve noticed as I have grown older that my own favorite conversation topics have evolved through standard stages: there was college and relationships in my 20s, job-hunting and career angst in my early 30s, house-hunting in my late 30s, home repair in my 40s and 50s, retirement planning in my 60s, etc. I guess talking about politics

and books carries throughout. But right now, I am doing everything I can do to resist the urge to spend too much time talking about health issues, because that sure seems to be the defining topic for people in my age group.

You mention that you find it frustrating to find 15 emails every morning. I sure wish that’s all that I found when I woke in the morning. Because I ran a business for so long, my email address may have gotten around more than yours, but I throw out 500-700 emails every day. Most of them go into my spam folder, but the algorithm that sends them there is not totally reliable and so I have to scan the list regularly before trashing them.

I’ve been taking my old financial records to Office Depot to shred.

From the Book

Jokes and Poison Gas: Two Con Reports, by Jeanne Gomoll

Texas was a sort of a foreign country to a person like me who lived their entire life in Wisconsin. Nevertheless, when I attended Armadillocon as fan guest of honor, Austin surprised me a couple times for its similarities to my hometown, Madison, Wisconsin. One moment before the con had started, in particular, impressed me.

It was Thursday morning, May 10, 1979, the day after I’d flown into town. My guides, Chris Pasanen and Scott Cupp, led the way to the top of a hill on our way to the Rare Books Library on the University of Texas. As we reached its summit, I remarked that the hill, with its tree-lined double sidewalk, looked very much like Bascom Hill on the Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin. If you turned around once you’d climbed to the top of Bascom Hill, I said, you could see the state capitol building. I turned around as I made this remark, pointing into the hypothetical distance where we would have seen Madison’s capitol, had we teleported a thousand miles north. I found myself pointing at a state capitol building that looked very much like Wisconsin’s capitol building. I wondered if I had entered the Twilight Zone.

The convention grew considerably since 1979, but Armadillocon I was a small con with an attendance of only 300 people, about the same size as the first WisCon. My fellow guest of honor, Herb Varley, and I agreed that the number of people at Armadillocon was perfect, in that we had been able to meet nearly everyone there...that it was one party, rather than

many, disjointed parties. As it turned out, that “one party” phrase literally captured the essence of the con for me, at least during the nighttime.

Armadillocon’s committee did a great job. The program book listed no specific positions after the names of the con members. Everyone pitched in to help with everything. The huckster’s room was organized and staffed by committee members; the registration desk was held down at one point by every member of the committee. Even I fell into the spirit and sold memberships for an hour or so. But a few things were missed, most of which I never heard about, I’m sure, and certainly nothing seriously detracted from a fun and well-run convention. I did find out about one goof, however.

In the course of allotting the motel’s program space for the panels, dealers room, and art show, the committee had forgotten one item—the con party room, which was apparently distinctly different than a hospitality room, but just as essential. Someone noticed the problem on Friday afternoon. “What should we do?” lamented one of the con members with whom I had been chatting.

“Quick, let’s rent another room from the hotel,” said one con member.

“The hotel is sold out! There aren’t any rooms available!” came the reply.

“Maybe we could borrow someone’s sleeping room for the party...” I began, waiting for someone to fill in

the blank, hoping to hear something like, "...Yeah, let's ask Willy if we can use his room." But no one jumped into the breach to solve the problem. I had slipped into convention problem-solving mode, acting as if I was in Madison at a WisCon meeting. I'd calmly inserted myself into the planning session and in my best we-can-solve-this-problem voice had made a suggestion. I noticed that the fans around me were waiting for me to finish my sentence. They'd noticed the dangling ellipses.

"We could borrow someone's room..." I said again, and again no one volunteered their own or anyone else's room. So, I sighed, and completed the ellipses, "...we could use *my* room." Armadillocon I was held at the Villa Capri Motel. My room opened onto a parking lot, but it was one of the larger rooms in the motel, with two double beds.

I spent most of Friday and Saturday nights in that one party in my room and had a fantastic time. The room was so crowded on Friday night that every inch of the floor was occupied by fans sitting cross-legged, or kneeling. Every chair and every bed had been claimed. Most people leaned toward Howard Waldrop and tried to hear the funny story he was telling. Waldrop's story reminded Robert Taylor of a joke, his apparently infamous, "wild lion" joke, and so he stood up and regaled the room with the story. And then I remembered a joke about a moose in heat. I stood up too, as Robert had done, and gave my all to a performance of a love-sick moose and a dopey Swedish hunter in the northern woods of Wisconsin. And we continued. For the next three hours, everyone in the room took turns telling one joke after another. There were rarely more than a few seconds pause between the laughter that rewarded one joke-teller and the sound of another fan clearing their throat and standing up to tell their joke. It was a marathon joke session. I think all of us were astonished at the sheer number of jokes that were told, some good, some bad, but still *so many!* The next day, some of us talked about how, normally, we could never remember more than one or two jokes. That jokes evaporated in our memories almost as fast as we heard them. That as kids we used to remember jokes, but as adults we had forgotten the trick. That night, somehow, we all remembered the trick. After a while, most people ran out of jokes except Howard and me. We continued, taking turns, Howard and then me, one joke after another. It felt like a dream to me even as it was happening. The next day I doubt whether I could have re-told more than a few of those jokes. Sadly, I didn't recall Howard's jokes, either. But

during the party that night, I felt like I'd found a key to the room in my brain where I stored all the jokes I'd ever heard in my life.

I believe that Howard won the competition in the end, as I finally remembered my last joke, and Howard triumphantly told the final joke. I may never have laughed so much in my life as I did the night I donated my room to ArmadilloCon for its party room.

There was another party in my room Saturday night during which we played charades and had a lot of fun. But what I remember most about that night was what happened *after*, not during the party. Members of the concom had efficiently bagged up all the party detritus. After everyone had left, I threw off my clothes and collapsed into bed, exhausted and happy. But then I noticed movement over the door to the bathroom. A purplish gas curled out of the vent. I realized that my secret identity as an international spy had been discovered and that someone was trying to assassinate me! My only hope for survival was to get out of the room before the poisonous gas killed me. I threw off the bedsheets, ran toward the door, turned the doorknob and pulled it toward myself. There was the dark parking lot in front of me, cars reflecting starlight from their rooftops. And there I was, standing nude in the open door of my motel room. There was me, about to run into the parking lot without my room key. There was me, reconsidering. Was I having a nightmare? Yes, let's go with nightmare, I decided, and I closed the door and returned to bed.

Just like being at home.



Two years after Armadillocon honored me as a fan guest, Aquacon did the same for Jan Bogstad and me. Aquacon I was held in Anaheim, California at the Disneyland Hotel, and Philip José Farmer was the guest of honor. The common theme for me, for both Armadillocon and Aquacon, was humor.



People liked to tell the same joke over and over again. But gradually they referred to their favorite jokes by number. Jane would say "#8!" and everyone would laugh, knowing that this was the joke about the featherless geese that attacked the Volkswagen. But some people—like Phil—just can't tell a joke....

My earliest writing in *Janus* sometimes jangled with clumsy, tinny tones of academia. My first article in *Janus*, “The City as Idea,” was in fact, an only slightly-rewritten version of a college term paper on SF. It contained some good ideas about how SF envisions urban life, but I had begun to cringe at the tone and the phrases in that essay. That issue came out only a couple years after I graduated from the UW and I was still auditing classes; it had been hard to wean myself from the school habit. Learning a new writing style, learning to write for an audience containing more than one professor—that was even harder. I knew that I still needed to flush out some arrogant writing habits and some silly rhetorical crutches. It continued to be important to me to write about the world, to write about things that angered me, that I wanted to change, but I changed my mind about the best way to say those things.

I came to believe that personal experience made better evidence than footnotes and bibliographies. It seemed to me that humor worked better than earnest argument, and certainly was more sustainable than anger. Clarity was more important than showing off an obscure vocabulary.

Changing was a slow process. The fact that I had so much fun writing the light editorials (“News Nurds”) for *Janus* should have tipped me off. The positive feedback I received for personal anecdotes in my apazines provided some clues. The truth began to sink in for me when I realized that I had more fun writing, and felt prouder of some of the humorous articles I wrote for other fanzines than I was of my book reviews or serious essays written for *Janus* or *Aurora*. But I hadn’t consciously admitted to the shift from academic to a more whimsical writing style until my first experience as a stand-up comedian.

Jan and I had each been scheduled for a panel in every single program slot of the weekend. The planners hoped to make Aquacon into a different kind of convention than most other Los Angeles area conventions; they wanted to establish a serious literary convention that paid little or no attention to movies or TV. That’s why they invited Jan and I, in fact; we were known to be serious and literary. Unfortunately, the committee couldn’t find many area fans who wanted to discuss books and so Philip José Farmer, Jan and I were distributed onto all the panels in order to anchor them firmly into discussions of science fiction in print

rather than on screen. Ultimately, the strategy wasn’t very successful. I would talk about the importance of Suzy McKee Charnas’ *Holdfast* series to feminist science fiction, and then someone in the audience would hold up their hand, excited to say how much that was just like in *Star Trek* where.... The attendees of a convention always have the power to steer the conversation where they want it to go.

Jan and I had been assured that we would not be expected to give speeches at the convention. With all the preparation we’d already done for our full schedule of panels, both Jan and I were glad to hear that all we’d have to do at the banquet was to thank the concom and attendees.

But just two hours before the guest-of-honor banquet at Aquacon, the concom told us—surprise!—that they wanted us to make speeches after all! If I’d known before we left Wisconsin, no doubt I’d have prepared a serious and earnest speech. But I didn’t think I had

time for that. I reassured myself that there were only a couple of hours of nervous anticipation to be endured. I might have worried for weeks had the committee been more organized. So, up in my room at the Disneyland Hotel, I scribbled notes for “Growing up Catholic,” a biographical story of my parochial school days. I described an eight-foot-tall guardian angel who relaxed on my bed during nap time in the space I left by squeezing my body close to the wall.

I explained how scapulars worked with prayer codes that operated heaven’s gates like clockworks—slide, click, whirr—and you’re sprung from Purgatory the first Friday after you die. Devils and levitating saints. Mysteries and paradoxes and invisible spirits. Hooked on that sort of mythology as children, was it any wonder, I asked, that so many of us fallen Catholics grabbed onto science fiction and fantasy later in our lives?

It was fun to write—but *really* fun to deliver. It was rough in spots and the ending was non-existent, trailing into earnestness and unprepared text. But there were some good lines and the experience taught me new lessons in timing and word choice. I became addicted on the spot, and having once heard the laughter, I wanted to hear more.

I eventually re-created that speech about growing up Catholic in a story that I included in this apazine some months ago. ☐

