

Madison foursquare

65

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

Scott@unionstreetdesign.com
Jeanne@unionstreetdesign.com

This is *Madison Foursquare* #65. *Madison Foursquare* was created using a Mac Pro with InDesign, Illustrator and Photoshop, all CC 2021, and printed on a Ricoh Aficio CL7200 color printer. All contents ©2022 by Scott Custis [SC] & Jeanne Gomoll [JG] March 2022 for *Turbo-Charged Party Animal* #429.

Georgie Schnobrich

[JG] “Sisyphus Doing the Dishes,” sounds like the idea for a hilarious cartoon. Or “Sisyphus Dusting,” or “Sisyphus Answering Email.”

I loved your essay and this sentence: “The same imagination that accepts the Laws of Physics also holds Story: Once Upon a Time.” Your idea reminded me of the two most recent books our book discussion group read: *We Have Always Been Here* by Lena Nguyen, and *The Last Watch* by J. S. Dewes, neither of which I would recommend to anyone who would be bothered by a story masquerading as hard science fiction, written by authors who obviously weren’t clear on the idea of what a galaxy is, or how really big the space between stars and galaxies is, or even the staggeringly huge number of stars and galaxies that exist. I think I already (in the last issue of *Madison Foursquare*) excoriated *We Have Always Been Here*, with its spaceship pilot who “took a wrong turn” and discovered an unknown planet. *The Last Watch* includes even more ludicrous events, with characters guarding the so-called “Divide”—the border around the universe of physical space—against ancient invaders, in order to protect the “core” worlds of “the galaxy” from attack. (Scott and I wondered if Dewes was unable to distinguish between a single galaxy and the universe which contains billions of galaxies.) I won’t hurt your eyes by going into detail about the bad science in this novel, but I do think your suggestion that physics and story can overlap may partially explain where Nguyen and Dewes get their understanding of the universe. Their stories don’t reflect lessons of astronomy or physics learned in school or popular science articles/shows. Rather, they set their stories in the worlds they see in movies and television shows where distances between planets and stars and even galaxies are irrelevant. A universe of infinite story-settings (easily accessible, human-habitable planets and aliens made to order) has become as familiar to consumers of movies and TV shows as the mythical American West. So, as you said, Laws of Physics gets muddled with Story. (I continue to write about this idea later in this zine, to **Carrie**.)

I should note, however, that in spite of the abominable science in *The Last Watch*, almost everyone in our book discussion agreed that if we pretended that the author was describing a fantasy world, just as unreal as fairyland, that its story was engaging and the characters compelling. Scott and I liked the story and characters in *The Last Watch* well enough that we have already started reading the second book in the series, *The Exiled Fleet*. But we are grateful that the series includes only two books and is not a trilogy.

WELCOME

[SC] I admire your candor in writing about your cancer experience. I think I would have been more willing to write about it in detail, except that prostate cancer is not uncommon with men of a certain age and I did not want to make it seem either too easy or frighten anyone unnecessarily who may yet have to deal with it. Already two of us in this apa have had the surgery. I did not want to risk overly dramatizing parts of the experience which, overall, was not that bad for me. I expect not many people, for instance, would have found the biopsy procedure less unpleasant than the MRI, like I did.

Fine essay on imagination. After reading it, I thought of how Putin is acting out on the basis of his imaginary worldview, with devastating and tragic consequences. Exactly what you warned about.

Greg Rihn

[JG] Thank you for your thoughts and poem in response to Jane's death. I am also glad that Jane was able to end her life on her own terms.

[SC] Your dinner at Ristorante Bartolotta sounded luscious. We have only very recently resumed dining in restaurants again. We stopped going out after our pre-Christmas dinner to L'Etoile, which was one of the high points of an otherwise quiet Christmas for us. We also resumed going to movies recently when we went to see *Cyrano*. We both liked it a lot. All the actors were strong, but Haley Bennett was simply luminous as Roxanne and Peter Dinklage has one of the most expressive faces in the movies, I think.

Elizabeth Matson

[JG] Thanks for the recommendation of *The Last Cuentista*. You caught me with the phrase, "a science fiction story about *storytelling*." The idea that

storytelling can change the world is the idea that has always made feminist SF so important to me. But the fact that the storytelling in *The Last Cuentista* is more about the *process* of in-person, out-loud storytelling sounds fascinating. I will have to find it. I see that it is also available as an Audible book; I wonder if that might be an effective format for a story about storytelling.

Thank you for your compliment about my essay on art, and the connections between the idea and memoir-writing!

[SC] I thought your book reviews and your piece on writing about storytelling were excellent. Although I am not a trained storyteller, I was surprised at how right you sounded about how books often get storytelling wrong. I never noticed this before.

I have been missing you in the book discussion group, but I have to admit the last couple book group selections were good ones to miss. Jeanne and I had some significant issues with the latest book, *The Last Watch* by J.S. Dewes, but it's fast-paced enough we decided to read the second (and last) book.

I liked your knitted-Yoda and Stormtrooper photo.

Jim Hudson & Diane Martin

[JG] We hope that Diane's surgery goes well and results in much less pain in her joints!

Re your comment to **Jae**, about the practice of not teaching kids to read before they enter first grade.... Teachers criticized my parents when I started first grade already knowing how to read. Mom accepted the notion that there was a right and a wrong way to learn to read, and so she got angry at me when I taught my brother Rick how to read before he entered first grade. Is this still a thing?

Re your comment to **Andy** about the interest in "old stuff," e.g., fanzines and history/stories of fannish



activity... I really enjoyed the email interview questions the French student asked Diane, Jan Bogstad, and me about *Janus/Aurora*. Coincidentally I was also writing chapters for my book on the Madison SF group, *Janus, Aurora*, WisCon, and the Tiptree/Otherwise Award, so my mind was busily engaged in excavating and tracking down details from those ancient times. So, I had a lot to say. I wish I could read French well enough to eventually read Loïg's final paper.

As I typed this zine, the mail arrived with a contributor's copy of Rox Samer's new book, *Lesbian Potentiality & Feminist Media in the 1970s*—in which *Janus* and *Aurora* and many familiar names figure prominently, especially in the chapter, "Raising Fannish Consciousness: The Formation of Feminist Science Fiction Fandom." Rox quoted me and used several pieces of my artwork in it. In another sign of the surge in interest in the topic, Lisa Yaszek contacted me last month because she is editing an anthology of 1970s feminist science fiction for the Library of America. She will be publishing some of my illustrations from *Janus/Aurora* in the book. Interesting confluence.

Yeah, the essay on art I published last month in *Madison Foursquare* was quite different than the stories I've been sharing here in *Turbo* so far. I've been publishing mostly amusing ones, but there are also serious essays like the one on art in my book, as well as historical chapters telling the stories about Madstf, *Janus, Aurora*, WisCon, and the Tiptree/Otherwise Award. I may reprint one of those here eventually when I'm sure they've arrived at their final versions.

[SC] My sympathy to Diane with her struggle with arthritis. I have osteoarthritis in both my knees and am currently getting by with daily exercises and Voltarin. I hope Diane's hand surgery is successful.

Since my procedure, I have been doing modest regular walks of about 1–2 miles. When it recently warmed up I put on some knee support and managed about a 4 mile hike. I usually end up with at least a little soreness in my knees on these trips. This morning (March 17) I went on my first bike ride of the season. I went all the way around Lake Monona, which I wasn't sure I could do after so many weeks of very modest effort, but I made it. Unlike walking, I'm tired but I have no soreness in my knees from biking. So, I think I will do more of that in addition to putting in time on an elliptical machine. Do what feels good, I think.

I thought Jane Hawkins' Zoom memorial service went very well. Debbie did a great job moderating

a big crowd and there were some wonderful stories. My ex-brother-in-law, Bob, died suddenly and unexpectedly on March 4. Jeanne and I attended an actual old-fashioned funeral in Cedar Rapids on March 12, with casket, a service in a funeral home, military internment ceremony at the cemetery and lunch afterward along with enough underlying family drama to power a TV soap opera for a month. Considering all the people we know who have passed in the last two years, this is one of the only traditional funeral services any of them have had, and the first one we have been able and willing to attend. It was certainly good to finally see nearly everyone in my family (including a couple of very small children we had not yet met) but it also felt a bit weird.

Steve Vincent Johnson

[JG] Sounds like you've identified a good path and tools to deal with trauma. I wish you the best with the work ahead of you!

[SC] What a long dark road you've been traveling down. To be freshly recovering from major surgery when the pandemic hit, followed months later by the return of some old anxiety demons all while under the daily drama of the Trump-a-saur administration, that's a lot of crap to crawl out from under. I'm relieved to see you are making progress. We are here for you.

JJ Brutsman & Tom Havighurst

[JG] What a gorgeous Valentine's cake! It looks like it's decorated with dozens of white butterfly wings.

Love the phrase, "winter caking." More evocative than the oft-heard, "Covid 10."

Re your comment to **Jim and Diane** about pain overriding other pain.... I have used a similar strategy to override neuropathy pain. I haven't had to rely on it since I started using CBD, but before I discovered that remedy, I used to experience pain on my legs at night. It usually started with a few points of pain, as if someone had stabbed me with a needle in one or two spots, but the number of stabs quickly increased until a large area of my skin felt like it was on fire. What I did was to apply a heating pad to the same area, which felt very much like I was distracting the nerves that had been reporting fake pain to my brain, with a much more real sensation of non-painful heat. It worked every time. I find it interesting that it's possible to force nerves to ignore one sensation in order to focus

on a different one. But I'm also glad that I don't wake up in the middle of the night and need to grab the heating pad. The CBD has completely eliminated the problem for me.

[SC] I always love your photos, J.J. Every month it looks like you and Tom are living a perpetual party. Jeanne and I have hosted three dinners with guests in the past few weeks and taken not one photo. Clearly we are not doing it quite right.

The ginger cake recipe looks great and so does the photo. Too bad about the chocolate cake that tastes too much like coffee. If that ever happens to you again, think of us. Jeanne hates coffee and can't help, but I'll have your back.

I have eaten spam and I don't hate it, but I will have to take your word on musubi. As much as I love Hawaiians and their fabulous state, they aren't right about everything.

"Those taste like asphalt and monkey dirt to me." Those may be fighting words. A bottle of Ardbeg and I got acquainted one night a few years ago and I discovered that smoky peaty whiskies are fine with me.

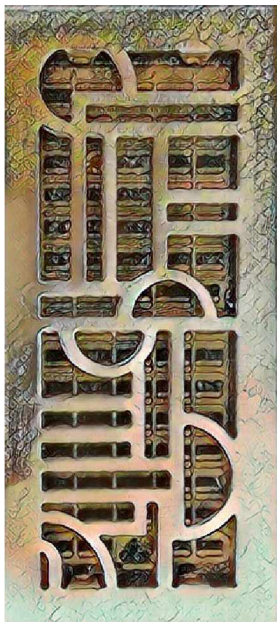
Pat Hario

[JG] Wow, I hadn't heard of the film, *All Is True*. Sounds interesting; I don't know how we missed it. I will add it to our list. Thanks Pat!

You said you hoped that I'd reprint "Barbie's Inferno" here. My immediate thought was that I must surely have done so already. I started publishing stories from my book in *Madison Foursquare* in August 2019 with "Millennium Falcons, Ash Glaze, and Dignity." That was the story of how I attended my high school graduation wearing nothing underneath my graduation gown. Since then, I've published 27 stories, (or 27 chapters out of the 121 chapters contained in my books), but to my surprise, none of the ones I shared in *Madison Foursquare* was "Barbie's Inferno." It's been reprinted a few times in other places and I guess I thought I'd already put into a *Turbo-zine*. So, for you Pat, I include that story in this issue.

"Framed" is a much better title than "The Millionth Shopper." Thank you! I've changed the title.

When we bought a new refrigerator, we had the same problem you had when you went looking for a small refrigerator. We ended up tearing out part of the built-



in cabinet above the old, short refrigerator, in order to make room for a standard-size, but in comparison, much larger fridge. That was before we had our kitchen remodeled.

Speaking of WisCon pubs.... I just sent a set of program books and pocket program books (and other related pubs) from Wiscon 1-38 to Fanac.org, which is doing an amazing job of archiving fan publications. They're scanning everything they can get and making it all available on-line. Ironically, the only WisCon program books I did NOT have were from WisCon 39 and 40, the most recent in-person WisCons. I'd like to send program books from those two cons to Fanac.org to complete the set. ...So, if anyone has copies they don't need to keep, let me know if you'd like to donate them to the cause.

[SC] I used to eat a lot of canned soup and stew back when I lived alone. It was a level of cooking I could handle along with frozen pizza, peanut butter sandwiches and Kraft macaroni and cheese. I ate out a lot.

Thanks for the interesting movie review. *All is True* only just came out in 2018, makes me wonder how we managed to miss seeing it. I think we will find the information you provided in your review helpful if/when we get around to seeing it. Right now, I'd most like to see *The Tragedy of Macbeth* with Denzel Washington and Francis McDormand very soon. We also want to try to see the rest of the 2022 Oscar Best Picture nominees before the awards. As I write this, we've seen all but two.

Hope Kiefer & Karl Hailman

[JG] What a great survey of area ice rinks! Cool. So, I see the cat in the Schrodinger's Cat & Other Thought Experiments Maze. Is the train in the upper left corner approaching the junction where it will mow down a crowd of people or just one person? I couldn't figure out the other thought experiments.

[SC] I'm impressed by your outdoor adventures. Nice pictures, too. You guys get around. I think most of what I know about inline and ice skating I've learned reading Karl's reports. You have also visited way more local parks than I have. Maybe I will designate more parks as destinations on my bike this year. Normally I would get my bike checked out for the season in January or February when the bike shops are quiet. This year I could not do that

as I was still recovering, but I did get it in in early March, so now I'm ready to go on a warmer, clear day (temps in at least the 40s.) When I say temps in the 40s, I mean it needs to be that warm earlier in the day, not just in time for afternoon rush hour.

Cathy Gilligan

[SC] Congratulations on the successful, if time-consuming, shift to a smartphone. As much as I would love to complain about it, I have to admit that my smartphone has more often been helpful and handy than annoying. It's taken me a while to feel this way. I still look fondly at old or "period" movies where characters simply walked away from phones that were wired in place, but then I will be somewhere and need to make a call, take a picture, check the weather or a map, or look up some trivia, and I'll be glad I had my phone with me.

FJ Bergmann

[JG] I really like the idea in "Retroevolution," that some DNA segments that were useful for organisms that lived in ancient, other-climactic worlds, might be selected for again as global warming changes our environment. Is this your idea or is this something actually theorized by genetic scientists?

Let me know if you'd like me to send you the electronic file of the jar art to use with "Things You Can Put in a Jar."

[SC] Congratulations on the Rhysling Award nomination. Also, on your success getting your work placed. You shared a lot of good stuff with us this month, "Retroevolution," "Words Within Words," "An Apology," and "Things You Can Put in a Jar" were my favorites.

Jim & Ruth Nichols

[JG] What a beautiful window garden!

[SC] Ruth, your garden photo came out strikingly beautiful. Jeanne and I have grown so accustomed to our small world sheltered from COVID, that it's been a bit jarring to start emerging from it. We have had a few dinners with friends, hosted one overnight guest (fellow Turbo member, **Lisa Freitag**), gone out to a movie, a couple theater shows and restaurants and, on March 12, we went to Iowa for a full-blown family funeral. This truly tested our post-COVID readiness. We brought masks and took what precautions we could.

Jim, in the process of cutting the cord and getting rid of Direct TV, I think we eliminated most of our access to sports channels. This has not bothered either of us and I keep in the back of my mind that if I feel a need to see a crucial football game, I will probably have to go to a bar to watch it. Oh well.

Marilyn Holt

[JG] Sounds like you are making excellent progress on your Stella series. The screenwriting sounds like a fun and exciting route!

[SC] Scriptwriting (like playwriting) always seemed to me to be one of those writing activities that looks much simpler and easier to do than it actually is. What about you, Marilyn, do you find scriptwriting easier than novel writing?

Carrie Root

[JG] I'm still thinking about what I wrote to **Georgie** about Nguyen's *We Have Always Been Here*, Dewes's *The Last Watch*, and now the Polack book you described, as a kind of fake science fiction. These novels resemble, at first glance, hard science fiction—that is, fiction based on actual science, that speculates from a base of known physics, biochemistry, genetics, or AI, etc. The authors give us spaceships and technologies that nod vaguely at the enormous distances between stars and the impossibility of exceeding light speed. They give us robots and high-tech gadgets. The authors play with the problems encountered by human beings in vacuum and (too little or too much) gravity. But those aspects of setting are simply window-dressing in these three novels and the authors put no effort into addressing even their most egregious world-building mistakes.

Those of us who have been reading SF for many decades may have assumed that hard SF would always be defined as speculative fiction based on cutting-edge science. I did. But it seems to me that *We Have Always Been Here*, *The Last Watch*, and the Polack book that you just read, belong to a (new? Well, certainly *different*) subgenre of fantasy that is set in worlds presented in science fiction movies and television shows. The screenwriters of SF movies might have based their worlds, however tenuously, on actual science and an understanding of solar systems, galaxies and physics. But the novels that borrow the filmed settings pay scant attention to science. Speculating on what kind of impacts that science and technology might have on human beings and cultures is simply not the point in these books. Nguyen, Dewes,

and Polack spin their stories as if they were the alien characters in *Galaxy Quest*, who duplicated a spaceship from a TV show because they are big fans of the fictional scripts and storylines. But they have no ideas or cares about how the duplicated spaceship actually works or how the fictional futuristic world came to be. Our three authors' stories take place on the sets and stages of films and TV shows. Their fiction does not speculate. Their fiction owes as much to science as popular cowboy tales owe to history. The stories may be exciting and well-plotted; their characters may be well-drawn and interesting. (I admit that *The Last Watch*'s plot and characters are compelling.) But one of the main reasons I like SF is for its speculative power, so I realize now that I will need to look past the familiar SF motifs, like spaceships and robots, in order to locate the kind of fiction I want. The genre definitions have shifted.



When I was visiting Jane last year, we got to talking about Kate Schaefer's jackets and vests. Jane ran into her bedroom and found that jacket and immediately wrapped herself in it. (That's when I took that photo of her.) She said she'd almost forgotten that she owned it. It's lovely to think that she wore it so often after that re-discovery!

Thank you so much for your comments on my essay on art! "Required reading!" Maybe I should quote you in the blurbs on the outside cover of the eventual book.

I wasn't expecting so many of us to recognize those email correspondents who answer only the first question in one's emails. I was thinking of my brother who just about drove me crazy with this behavior while I was designing his photo book (about his hike to Everest Basecamp).

I love the Progressive Insurance commercials and the fatherly guy counseling people how to avoid turning into their parents!

[SC] Michael Perry is a familiar figure out this way. I haven't read any of his books (yet), but I've seen a few of his columns and we once saw him perform at the Stoughton Opera House. If he shows up in your area for a reading event or something, he's worth seeing.

I'm sorry you had to contend with two frustrating books one after the other. The Nguyen book was struggle enough by itself. Since then, I have finished an 800 page draft of Jeanne's book, *Pretending*, which was a welcome change, followed by the

graphic edition of Timothy Snyder's and illustrator Nora Krug's *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. *On Tyranny* was a Christmas present from Jeanne and something I've been wanting to pick up for quite a while, especially after the graphic version came out. Powerful, thought provoking and extremely timely.

Great cartoon. Sadly, Option 3 seems the most likely to me.

Steve Swartz

[JG] I often feel depressed at how helpless I feel in the face of everything happening in the world—the environmental catastrophe that now seems unavoidable, the turn towards autocracy here in the US and the world, the hatred and violence turned on people who are *different*, and way too many people who are willing to embrace lies rather than deal with difficult facts. I used to hate the idea of death partially because I would not find out "what happens next." I used to feel more optimistic that human beings would figure out how to deal with the big problems and be able to move forward. Now I frequently feel so negative about the future, that I'm almost glad that I *won't* find out what happens after I'm gone. So anyway...I don't think I can give you any advice of what you should do.

I will continue standing up for what I think is right and hope fervently that Kim Stanley Robinson gave good advice in his novel, *Years of Rice and Salt*. Have you read it? The novel spans several centuries of an alternate history. Its characters are reincarnated over and over again, often feeling upon their deaths that their actions and sacrifices made too little or no impact at all. One of the characters writes an important book that inspires millions, but it is banned and destroyed by a despot who assassinates the author and murders all her followers. Nevertheless, a century later, someone comes across a single surviving copy of the book and is again inspired and helps advance change. The result is a small, halting step forward toward a more enlightened world. I think of that idea when I'm feeling most depressed—that it will only be possible to see the effect of our (cumulative) lives long after we are gone, and that when we are alive, we can only keep going, keep trying to do the right thing, and hope that some part of our efforts proves worthwhile.



I love your description of how your hearing loss seems to have motivated your brain to interpret barely heard sounds. That reminds me of several movies

that I've seen over the last couple years set in a world as perceived by a person with Alzheimer's disease. I can't remember any titles right now, sorry, but one of the scenes that made an impression on me was of a woman (with Alzheimer's) sitting at a table with dozens of little sticky notes arrayed in front of her. Every time something happened or someone told her something that she wanted to remember; she wrote it down on a sticky note. The only problem was that she didn't write down the date or time the thing happened or was said. So, she puzzled over the notes, trying to arrange them in an order that made some sense. The filmmaker jumbled up the scenes in the movie too, so the audience also must try to make sense of a jumble of events and statements.

And there's Coppola's movie, *The Conversation*, too, which actually overlaps more with your situation. The movie features Gene Hackman as a surveillance expert who is hired to track a couple using long-range microphones. He manages to record a cryptic conversation and becomes obsessed trying to figure out if the couple is in danger. Anyway: that's another story about how people perceive the world with limited, or distorted information offered by their senses.

You commented on my essay on art. I had expected that you might recognize my description of the painting of the painter. You actually sent Scott and I a postcard a couple years ago of that painting, though since I no longer have the postcard, my memory of the painting has no doubt mutated into a different image. But I spent a while thinking about the painter within the painting as the visual equivalent of an unreliable narrator. Do you remember sending it to us?

[SC] I thought your zine was delightful.

I tend to avoid political discussions because I'm happy to huddle into my fugheaded personal reality and let everyone else argue it out. Since I'm retired and not running for office or working on a campaign, I don't feel a great need to persuade anyone of anything. If it turns out someone I run into is a paranoid redneck, I'm okay with just walking away. I'm sure there are plenty of people who would write me off as hopeless as well.

As for what to do about the deterioration of the polity, I think this state of affairs is neither new nor something we as individuals can do much about.



Back in the '60s it felt as if the country was coming apart as we were wracked from coast to coast with anti-war protests and political figures were actually being assassinated. Even though I was twelve in 1968, it did not feel to me like we would ever be able to bring the country together again. What is different today is that we have big media and Internet companies that spread rank lies and conspiracy theories to the public for profit. There are no consequences or meaningful pushback to that, so on it goes. I keep voting, making modest political contributions and showing up at street protests which I doubt will fix things, but it's all I can do. So, I guess I'll just keep doing it.

In your comment to me, I was amused by your focus of concern for my penis which, to the best of my knowledge, you have never met. For someone without direct knowledge, you seem to have a lot of extravagant opinions about it. Since you expressed specific concern in light my surgery, I will just say I'm doing about as well as expected.

Regarding your penis fish interlude, unless I find myself starving to death in the jungle, worms are off my diet as a general rule. These do not look tempting. I noticed that you did not specifically say you've eaten them yourself. I seem to recall that you have traveled around Asia quite a bit. Have you tried them? Just wondering.

Andy Hooper

[JG] It's hard for me to imagine someone collecting individual copies of my old apazines without thinking of a serial killer's locked room, on whose walls are tacked photographs of their next victim, along with news articles and screeds all connected with red yarn. Of course, a collector of **Diane Martin's** zines would be an entirely different, much more admirable sort of person.

By the way, I have copies of all my apazines (from all the apas I've belonged to) collected in 3-ring binders. I assume that my executor and brother Dan's impulse will be to trash the whole lot if it is left to him. Do you think I should have the binders shipped to fanac.org upon my demise? I could even include pdfs from most of the apazines published in the post-electronic ages.

I do *not* have a copy of the *Pulp Brighton* zine. I sort of vaguely remember working on the cover art, but have no memory of what was published in its pages. Thanks for printing the image though!

Joe and Edie were delighted to receive the run of WisCon program books (#1-38), pocket program books and WisCon ephemera from me. Mark Olson is scanning the materials. It's ironic that the only years I couldn't supply program books for were the most recent in-person WisCons, numbers 39 and 40.

I think you are right that Borges' "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," did not belong in my essay. Borges was saying something very different than the points I was trying to make.

[SC] I enjoyed your essay, in response to **Matt's** question, about how horror hosts came to be and were so popular all around the country. As a follow up question, I was wondering if you had any idea how these shows acquired or selected the movies they showed. Did the studios make available catalogs of old horror movies that the TV stations selected from or did a station sign up for some sort of movie package of the studios' pre-selected films?

I also appreciated your illuminating comment to **Lisa** on movie "Igor." All very interesting.

Although I don't have much of a connection to vintage fanzines, I enjoyed Allen Krcalik's column because he writes so entertainingly about them. More please.

Cover

[JG] **Steve V Johnson** made two guesses about the thing posing as an alien in last month's cover. Both his guesses were wrong. Sorry, Steve. **Diane's** guess (a plant sepal) wins the contest. Here's how the cover art, both alien and ammonite galaxy, evolved.

[SC] That is one funky alien! I say it (they?) can have that galaxy in the background, which is clearly not ours.

From the book

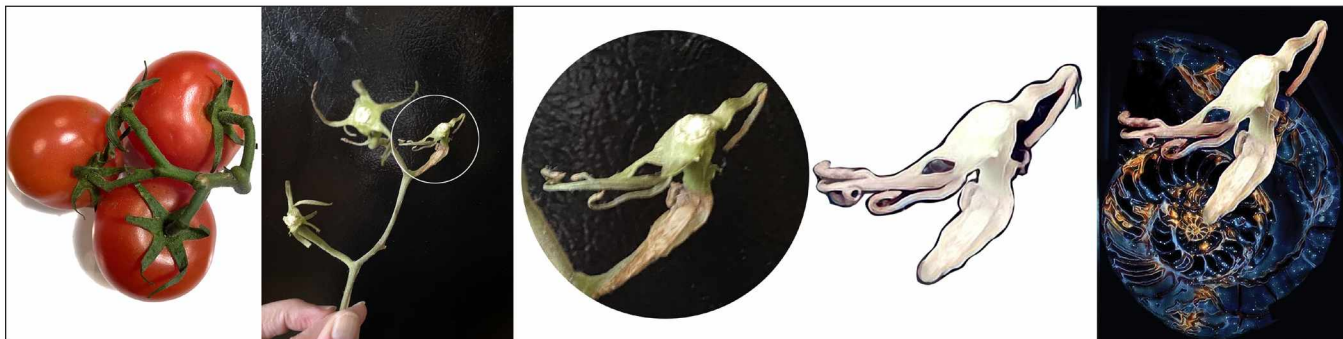
Barbie's Inferno, by Jeanne Gomoll

First published in Harlot, edited by Anne Murray Logan and Avedon Carol, 1983

The Christmas catalogs arrived in early fall and there was a lot of time to dreamily thumb through the toy sections of the Sears' and Penney's catalogs and pick out what I hoped Santa would bring. But I took personal offense at all the girl-toys which involved cleaning up boys' messes, or fixing meals for them, or bandaging them up, or which otherwise disguised work for play. Maybe all toys do that to some extent, but the work that these catalogs implied were appropriate for little girls didn't interest me at all.

Dolls bored me. I never asked for one and made faces when parents or grandparents suggested I might like one as a gift. My favorite game was "spaceship," which my brother Rick and I played downstairs. We would construct a control panel with miscellaneous, discarded bolts and doodads from Mom's sewing stuff, and Dad's work bench, nailing things onto a hunk of plywood, and labeling the buttons "deep space accelerator," or "Venusian slime monster blaster." Then I'd draw a map of a section of outer space on a big blackboard and we'd blast off to our adventure, Rick the captain, me the cap-i-tan. It was great fun.

I did not want anything from the pink section of the toy catalogs in which little girls were pictured raptly observing some automatic process or a holding a boring plastic baby. The blue-toned pages which



showed dynamic little boys drawing, climbing, building or riding seemed much more interesting.

Once, when I was about eleven years old, I lusted after an especially unorthodox toy at Christmas time, and in order to increase the likelihood of finding it under the Christmas tree, I abandoned the old practice of filling a whole sheet of paper with a long list of wishes. That Christmas I insisted that the only thing I wanted was a Lincoln Log set.

"The Deluxe set," I specified.

"That's for boys, Jeannie," I was told. In those days my name had two syllables.

"They are not. That's what I want for Christmas." I stood firm. My reading that fall had included a few novels about American settlers and farmers on the prairies and I was eager to build a covered wagon, cross the Great American Desert (transformed from the basement floor), and build shelters for courageous American pioneers.

My parents probably figured I'd forget by the time Christmas rolled around, and they gave me a Barbie Doll that winter. But I hadn't forgotten, and I was devastated. My brother Steve got a flashy, red fire engine, which he promptly took to a sink, filled its reservoir with water, and squirted our dog Tippy until the beagle retreated for the day beneath the living room sofa. My other brother, Rick, got the Lincoln Log set, the deluxe set, which of course, made me furious since he quickly made it clear that the wood construction set was "off limits" to me.

If my Barbie had survived I might have eventually sold her for big bucks: she was the first of her kind. She had long, blond hair tied in two places. She lacked bendable knees and elbows which her later, evolved species developed. She wore a fashionable, striped, one-piece swim suit, came with her own carrying case, a party dress, a sports outfit, and of course, a wedding gown. There was also a catalog which advertised other accessories and wardrobes for sale. She was a boring toy.

Undressing and dressing her wasn't the sort of pastime that could keep me occupied for long. I failed to identify with this unappealing fashion model, so role-playing games just seemed silly. Barbie languished in her box for a few weeks after Christmas, I got lectured several times on my "bad attitude," and I went back to

Beam
me up,
Scotty!



playing down in the basement with a collection of plywood astronavigation toys. I pretended that the old, lumpy easy chair was bolted into the cockpit of my spaceship and I zoomed through the galaxy looking for adventures. I liked to draw the ship's course on the blackboard and would navigate through clouds of deadly "ions" and "space gas," landing on exotic planets where I would sometimes be kidnapped and forced to eat nails before I escaped for more adventures with strange aliens.

But soon Rick and Steve tired of their new Christmas presents, and the chance presented itself to try out Rick's set of Lincoln Logs.

Cautiously, to avoid interruption, I smuggled the box of interlocking logs, roof slats, clips, signs, chimneys, stands, and gables down into the basement. On impulse, I grabbed Steve's fire truck and the box of Barbie paraphernalia as well. The largest structure I could construct with all the pieces included in the deluxe set turned out to be a two-story house, about eighteen inches high. I dressed Barbie in the elaborate wedding gown (with—I swear—no ulterior motive at this point), installed her into the second story, and crawled back to admire my handiwork. It was an impressive structure, I thought. Barbie, with her unbending arms stuck straight out through the window and reaching toward me, looked as if she were crying for help. And with the fire truck parked nearby, the obvious scenario occurred to me. So I filled the fire truck's reservoir with water from the faucets in the laundry tubs at the other end of the basement, and "made pretend" for awhile.

Barbie was screaming for help. She was going to be late for her own wedding, and now the house was on fire! Oh no! I imagined that fire was leaping over the logs as my fire truck raced across town. Would the truck arrive in time to douse the blaze and save Barbie and get her to the church on time? Bruising my knees in the race to save the burning log cabin, breaking speed limits, stopping traffic, I—the brave firefighter—saved Barbie's life over and over again.

But after a while I got a little bored. Something about the situation lacked drama. I felt a bit cynical about Barbie's sincerity, and looked around the basement for something to make the game more realistic. I found some matches on my father's workbench, lit one, and tossed it through the ground floor window. Quickly I dashed back to the laundry tubs and waited for the

fire alarm. Seconds later I screeched the alarm with an appropriate falsetto, and pushed my knees and the fire truck into another mad race with the clock. Halfway there, my pretended anxiety pulsed into very real horror when I noticed actual smoke seeping through the downstairs windows. When the truck and I arrived on the scene, I could see that the fire had actually caught on inside the log house, and I desperately unwound the water hose, pressed the little spray button, and pointed the hose through the little window opening.

Unfortunately, I'd filled the water reservoir only half-full, and the water only dribbled out the end of the hose. Without thinking, I attempted to blow the fire out. The fire leapt higher. Barbie's lacy wedding dress caught on fire.

Fine strands of plastic hair blackened and curled into kinky, smoking tangles. An awful, disgusting smell filled the basement and the smoke stung my eyes. Abandoning realism, I picked up the fire truck in my arms and ran, not crawled, back to the opposite end of the basement, filled its reservoir to the top, and ran back to the now blazing Lincoln Log building. Barbie's plastic face was collapsing inward with the heat and one of her arms was bending in a way that even the later, more evolved Barbies' would never do. The smell of melting plastic mixed now with that of burning wood, and flames crackled above the scorched roof. If Barbie made it to church now, she was going to have to take her vows nude and disfigured, but I thought at least there might be a chance to save most of the Lincoln Logs. Perhaps I could hide some of the more severely blistered ones.

I aimed the toy firetruck's hose determinedly at the conflagration, but its progress was not much diminished by the pitifully small stream of water issuing from the truck's reservoir. And even that was rapidly losing pressure as I desperately punched the spray button. The Lincoln Logs were providing fine,



dry tinder for the chemically fed fire.

Melting plastic ignited sporadically with hot purple flames until the green roof was totally consumed by flames. I held the ¼" hose between my fingers but now had backed up a little distance from the holocaust, and shielded my forehead from the heat with my hand. With the other outstretched arm, I frantically waved the slackening stream of water at the blaze, but Barbie slid from view as I watched: her surrealistically curved arms dribbling down over the window after her unrecognizably melted and quite bald head. The addition of new fuel created a new flare-up and the chimney collapsed into the crackling fire.

Things were not going at all well.

Then things got worse.

My father appeared at the bottom of the basement steps, perhaps concerned about the wails and screams of the brave firefighter. Indeed, the fight to save the Lincoln Log building and get Barbie to church on time, now appeared to be a minor task compared to that of saving the basement, and I was panicking. Desperation did not obscure my understanding, however, that I was in Big Trouble. Instead of making another run for a refill of reservoir water, I paused to think of a reasonable way to explain the illicit use of my brother's Lincoln Log set. My father declined to wait for the explanation and in a moment had dumped a pail full of ice cold water over the blazing Lincoln Log rubble and me. The Lincoln Log set collapsed into smoldering red lumps, a condition it would soon share with my backside.

Time has blanked out the details of the humbling punishment that no doubt followed that episode. But ever since then I've disliked igniting matches and have been positively antagonistic about dolls of any sort. The experience did convince my parents that no matter how "appropriate" the gift, they weren't going to turn me into a proper girl by that route. ☐