

# Madison foursquare

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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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This is **Madison Foursquare #66**. *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] April 2022 for *Turbo-Charged Party Animal #430*.

## Top Covers

[SC] Gorgeous covers once again, Steve and Darlene!

[JG] Beautiful!

## Greg Rihn

[SC] We also greatly enjoyed the new *West Side Story*. I felt that the excellent singing, spectacular dance sequences and tight story-telling in both *West Side Story* and last year's *In The Heights* might inspire a big new wave of terrific movie musicals but I fear audiences did not turn out for them in big enough numbers for that to happen. I was especially delighted by the renewed emphasis on finding performers for these shows who could actually sing. We had a period there when big-budget movie musicals were being made with some big-name stars who could carry a tune but were simply not equal to the music they had to sing in their film, maybe that's finally over.

I liked your summary of *Cinderella/The Child and the Enchantments*. What an interesting version of the story.

[JG] We also saw *Belfast* and were impressed by the acting, the subtle story-telling and the sense of complex relationships. I'm rather glad we were able to stream it, though, rather than see it on the big screen. The subtitles were essential.

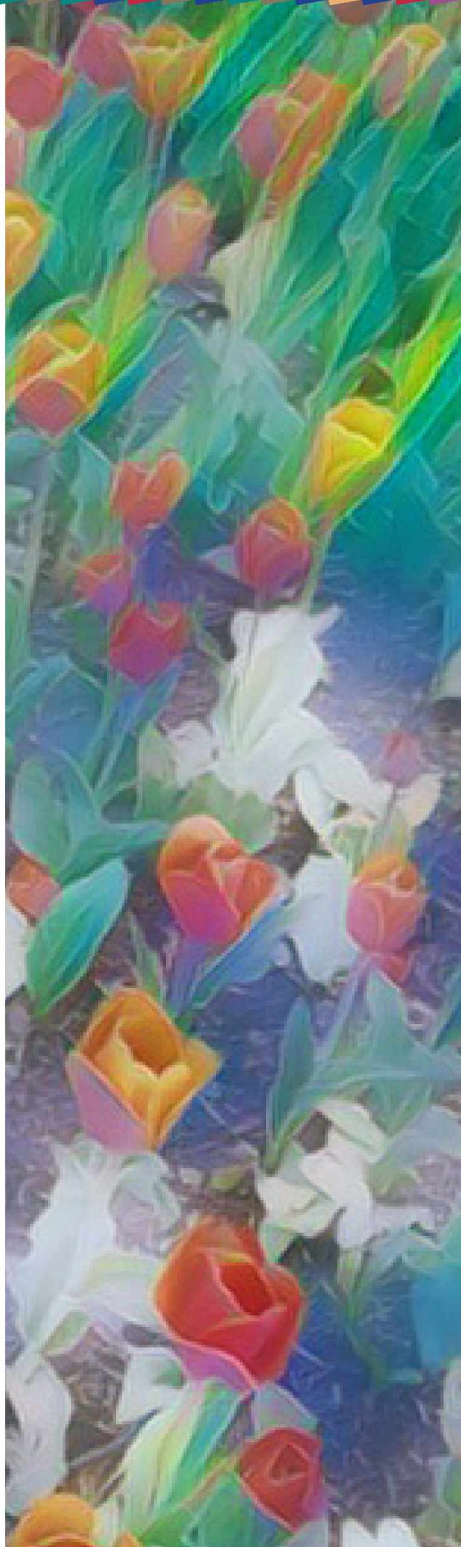
## Georgie Schnobrich

[SC] I found your "Report" to be sad, but honest. Not whining. I sense your feeling of loss, or diminishing, of past skills and abilities to be frustrating, depressing and sudden, but it's something all of us are struggling with in one way or another in our own time. You are still with us, which we all see as a great gift. And I can attest that you can still write compellingly.

[JG] I hope you find enjoyment in creating art again, though I can see that right now it seems that might not be possible. It sounds as if you are struggling with depression, something no one should do alone. Perhaps you could benefit from talking with a counselor?

## JJ Brutsman & Tom Havighurst

[SC] I love the photo at the top of your zine of the two of you. It's positively begging for the perfect caption. I'm trying to think of



what I might say to you guys that would elicit those expressions.

The New Orleans King Cake looks fantastic. Two years ago, Jeanne and I were considering taking a side trip to a post-Mardi Gras New Orleans as part of our Corflu trip to College Station, TX. This would have been just as the country was beginning to close down for the Pandemic. We decided not to risk it, and thus far I have yet to visit New Orleans. I don't have a bucket list, but if I did, visiting New Orleans (not during Mardi Gras) would be on it.

All your photos are lovely. I always appreciate your band recommendations, too.

[JG] You are a wonder. The candy dish display was splendid!

### Walter Freitag

[SC] My MacBook Pro is a mid-2010 model that I bought reconditioned after my last one died some years back. I expect this one is not long for this world either. I have been thinking of saving myself some money on the next one by buying a desktop model next time instead of a laptop. The truth is, I tend to do most of my writing and computer work at my home office desk. I don't lug the laptop with me on trips, or to coffee houses, as I thought I would, I take my iPad instead. I don't write much on my iPad, except for brief emails, for the reasons you pointed out. I mostly use it for reading/scrolling.

Congratulations on the new USPS job and joining a labor union. I am a lifelong union member, mostly AFSCME with a brief period with the UAW and short stints in non-union jobs. I still carry a union card as a retiree. Unions are not perfect, but, as with many things, they are often better than the alternative.

[JG] It seems that conversations about the condition of, the age of, and the replacement of our computers has become a staple of modern life. I am looking forward to replacing my Mac Pro (desktop) with the new version as soon as it is released by Apple. Even with multiple removable hard drives, I am running out of disk space. And with current versions of graphic software and their increased appetite for memory, I will appreciate gains in RAM, too. I've been saving money for the purchase and expect that I will spend it sometime later this year. Knowing that I will soon replace my Mac, I've put off upgrading to the newest OS because a certain piece of software that I have been using intensively

for my book would not be supported by the upgrade. So, in the past year, I too have had to switch browsers occasionally to find one that will access the web page I want to use. Irritating!

### Elizabeth Matson

[SC] Your excellent piece, "Surface Pressure," got me angry at leadership that not only fails to backup and support their staff, they cannot even perceive how demoralized and beaten down their staff feel. That's clueless and inexcusable. The idea (now common in many service-oriented organizations, I think) that any complaint against a staff person should automatically be seen as a failure of some sort on the part of the staff person is pernicious. Not to mention that a library leadership team, of all people, should understand that the pandemic is NOT over. Of course you feel burned out. This is exactly why vast numbers of people are choosing to just abandon jobs that make them miserable. I think that sort of solution would be very hard, but absolutely understandable. I wish I had a good suggestion for you. Time to launch a new job search?

I think you should at least form a new band called "Stressed Blues."

Fascinating news about Olya, Vasilisa and the family's displacement. Please keep us posted on what they decide to do.



Another "little library" – photo taken by Scott on one of his bike rides



I was relieved to see the yurt survived the winter. I will be very interested in your plan to install a stove. A wood stove (vented out the top) or some sort of alternative? Sounds like you will fit right in with your artistic neighbors, which is great.

Congratulations on being forced to become a Professional Storyteller. Cheers!

[JG] I think your connection with your brother's wife and family in Russia are also my closest connection to the war in Ukraine. I wonder how many degrees of separation others in the apa might have to that war.

If you must file taxes as a professional storyteller, I wonder if you are thinking of filing as a limited liability company (LLC). It might save you money, though it will also make your tax returns more complicated. Once I started filing as a freelancer in addition to my work as a DNR employee, even before I went into business as Union Street Design, I gave up on doing my own taxes and had them done by an accountant.

### Steven Vincent Johnson & Darlene Coltrain

[SC] Darlene, both afghans look beautiful. I'm glad that you feel Turbo is helping keep you sane in these insane times. I'm not sure I can say the same (it requires an unfounded assumption that I was "sane" to begin with) but I will say that I've been enjoying the apa more in the last couple years than I think I ever have.

Steve, I'm inspired by the focus you bring to your orbital mechanics project. There were a number of things I planned to dive into upon retirement but have come to realize that avoiding distractions and summoning sufficient focus is not as easy as I thought it would be.

[JG] Though the particular foci of our post-retirement interests are different (Steve's orbital mechanics project, Darlene's textile art projects, my books), I do love the fact that leaving the job market has allowed me and so many of my friends to carry on with creative and productive projects.

### Kim & Kathi Nash

[SC] Your book selling project appears to be even more massive than I'd imagined it. I will be interested in how your bookselling experience at WisCon goes. We have seen some WisCon emails that indicate the convention is suffering a severe shortage of department head-level volunteers and may have to cancel some convention functions. We

have no plans to attend WisCon at all except for possibly slipping into the lobby or bar to connect with someone for dinner. I expect Frugal will miss you guys.

[JG] The last email from WisCon laid out a pretty stark situation: not enough people to fill essential department head positions, not enough money, much-reduced programs, a minimalist hospitality suite, no printed souvenir book, guests of honor that have cancelled their attendance, and even an announcement that if no one steps forward to chair next year, that WisCon might be cancelled. Of course, WisCon has always been plagued by the need for more volunteers, but it seems like the convention's plight is far more precarious than it has ever been before. A previous WisCon email complained about the fact that so few (or no) local Madison fans wanted to join the concomm. I can't think of any concomm members who left in the last few years that might want to step back into the breach. Maybe I'm wrong...especially about people who may not have felt as personally targeted by the 2014 regime change. Nevertheless, I will be very sad if this indeed turns out to be the end of WisCon.

As I mentioned to **Steve** and **Darlene**, I am fascinated with how my friends are using their post-retirement energies. Selling your accumulated collections is another project that I watch with admiration and interest!

### Jim Hudson & Diane Martin

[SC] Best of luck to Diane on her procedure and recovery, as always. Hoping for the best possible outcome. Such sad news about Terry Garey. What a struggle.

Ah, someone in the apa who is actually importing books instead of looking to offload them. Good for you. I will never be able to completely curb my enjoyment of browsing in bookstores, so we will probably continue to have a trickle of physical books into our house, too, but even I understand that the name of the game is to not end up with a vast oversupply of books at the end.

We have finished the first season of *The Gilded Age*. It appears that Christine Baranski has drawn the "deliverer of devastating one-liners" straw in this series from Maggie Smith's character in *Downton Abbey*. ([JG] Another "deliverer of devastating one-liners" is Lady Denham, played delightfully by Anne Reid in PBS's series, *Sanditon* which we are also watching.)

I also liked Forward Theater's *The Mytilenean Debate*, and hope for more like this next season.

We watched the Oscars again this year, only a day late. We signed up for a free month of Hulu under the impression that we could see the Oscars live, but that was not actually the case. We would have needed to have signed up for the more expensive *Hulu Live TV* for that. So, we had to wait and see a recorded version 24 hours later, but without commercials which was okay. We avoided checking the news all day Monday so we would not learn who won (though Jeanne was unable to avoid one headline phone notification of the Best Picture winner.) When we finally watched the show Monday night, we had no idea "The Slap" was coming. Wow, quite a show.

[JG] As noted above, we watched the historical dramas, *The Gilded Age* (on HBO Max) and are in the midst of watching *Sanditon* (on PBS), both of which I admire and enjoy. I can see that my preferences for watching television have evolved to a style dictated by multiple streaming services, and I must say this style works very well for me. Steaming a series within a short period of time feels like reading a novel straight through, as compared to what one reviled teacher in my past tried to get our class to do: read one chapter per week so the whole class could talk about each chapter together. I refused to read a novel like this and got in trouble for comments that would have been labeled "spoilers" if that term had been a thing in those days.

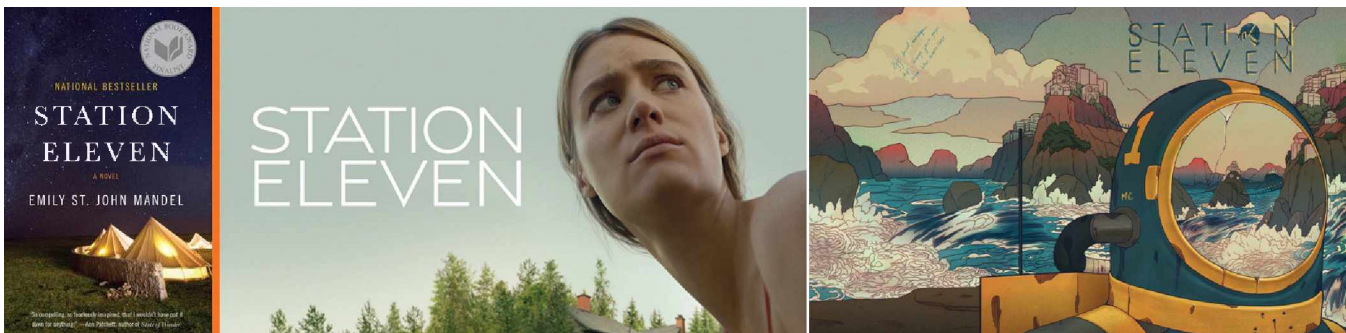
In any given week, Scott and I watch a couple MSNBC news shows every night (Chris Hayes and Rachel Maddow), interspersed with the episodes of one or two streamed series or movies. When we've finished watching one series, we look for the next. Of course, all of us used to watch whatever shows were broadcast by the networks on a particular evening, keeping up with the plots of six or twelve or more shows at a time, tolerating periods of reruns until the new seasons

premiered. These days I don't think I'm even aware of most of the series shown on network television. Fast forwarding through commercials during our DVR days probably began to insulate us from information about new series and shows, but the incredibly high quality of shows created by writers and directors freed from network schedules, encouraged to develop storylines with beginnings, middles, and ENDINGS, have entirely won me over. We are hardly able to keep up with all the high-quality shows that interest us.

The series that Scott and I watched most recently is *Station Eleven*, based on the novel by Emily St. John Mandel. The ten-episode series is very much based on the post-plague-apocalypse novel, but is also very much something more and different from it. (As one of the series producers, Emily St. John Mandel, used the opportunity to enlarge the scope of her novel.) The series plot was changed to allow characters to come together and interact in more believable and complex ways. Minor themes from the book became major ones that knit the story together in a truly satisfying manner. For instance, the Traveling Symphony performs Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in both book and series, but in the series, play excerpts are performed by different characters, each time with different meaning and resonance. But it isn't only *Hamlet* that is interpreted in different ways by each actor and audience member, it's also the text from the comic book, *Station Eleven*. That text also became embedded in the minds of several young characters, grown up in the post-apocalyptic world of *Station Eleven*, read over and over again for insight, and was actually performed like a *Hamlet* soliloquy. I understood the idea of "universal artform" after seeing the series, *Station Eleven*, better than I ever have before.

A side note: I would very much like to know if American Players Theater actors saw *Station Eleven*. I'd love to hear what they thought of it.

There are some wonderful performances by actors in *Station Eleven*, especially Mackenzie Davis who played



*Station Eleven*: the novel by Emily St. John Mandel, the series, and the comic book

Kirsten, and who you might remember me praising to the heavens for her role in the series *Halt and Catch Fire*.



We highly recommend the movie, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. We actually saw this movie in a theater. It's one of the funniest movies I've seen in a while. And it's also a really well-done story about the multiverse. This is a movie that, twenty years ago, would have been made with a 20-something male action star. The protagonist and savior of the multiverse in this movie is a middle-aged laundromat-owner who is living her "worst life," played by Michelle Yeoh. See it!

### Matthew Powell

[SC] Congratulations on your week of success, particularly on the new job.

Regarding your comment to **Jim Hudson and Diane Martin**, I've heard of monist philosophy, but what does materialist monist mean?

I liked Chapter One. I think it has an almost noir-ish feel to it. I liked your dialog and I thought the early sketches of your characters were vivid. A lot of new terms and ideas, I'm wondering if a glossary may come in handier than explaining everything over time within the context of the story. More please.

[JG] I have suspected many times that authors have written stories that deal with problems that the author thinks "will justify the particular solution" they want to write about. Nicely phrased. Recently I wondered if one inspiration for the plot of Andy Weir's *Project Hail Mary*, was a playful attempt to portray carbon dioxide in our atmosphere as a shield against a far greater global disaster than climate change.

A question: Do you avoid names on purpose? You do not name yourself at the top of your zine, and you do not name the people to whom you direct your comments, just their zine titles. Even in your story excerpt, which I liked very much, none of Tag's pissed-off relatives and friends are named. As someone who operates with exactly the opposite impulse—naming myself constantly [JG] [JG] [JG] [JG]... and addressing the authors rather than the titles of apazines—I am curious.

As I said. I liked the story excerpt a lot. Having Tag piss off everyone he knew was a much more interesting way to get him out of town than burning down the place. And I liked the off-hand way you refer to fictional high-tech with a phrase that merely suggests. without

an encyclopedia entry about each thing's provenance. I'm looking forward to reading more.

### Carrie Root

[SC] Thank you for the kind comment on my piece about our late neighbor, Ron. One of the side effects of Ron's long convalescence away from home following his accident was that a group of neighbors pulled together to look after his dog (found a new home for him), his house (including one desperately-needed kitchen cleaning), his mail, and visit him or call him regularly. So, Jeanne and I got to know a bunch of the neighbors we didn't know before and we kind of bonded over Ron's challenges and issues. A silver lining of sorts, I suppose. I cannot see myself as a suitable replacement for Ron in the neighborhood, I'm just not nosey enough. But the neighborhood group together maybe can.

I liked your story about getting to know the Chens. Nothing like a little sickness or crime to bring neighbors together.

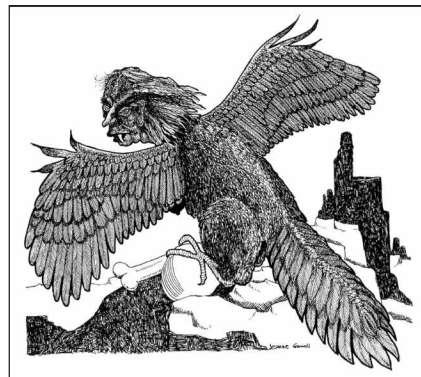
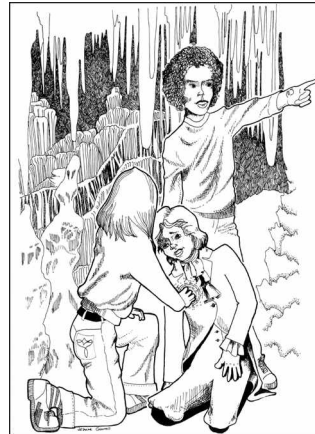
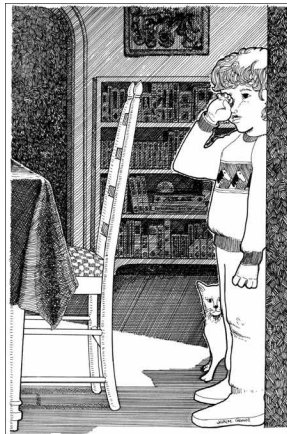
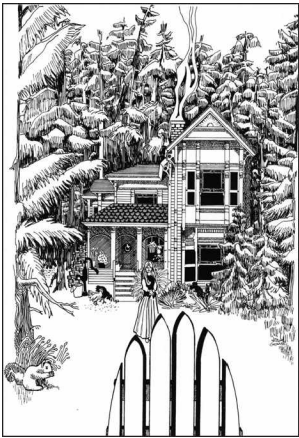
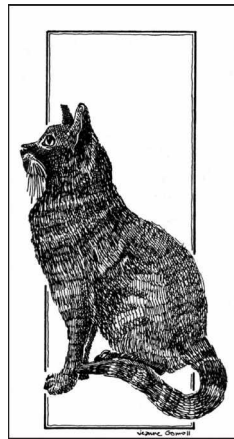
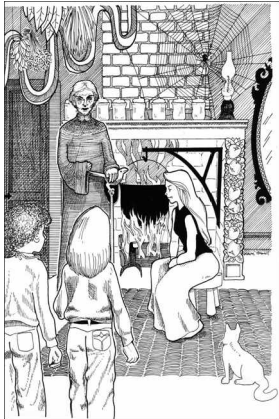
I think **Andy's** relationship to your cellphone is similar to my relationship to Jeanne's. She always has the newer phone and she is always much quicker about reaching for it and doing magic on it just in the nick of time. I'm the one dubiously studying my phone, occasionally stabbing it with my finger, and muttering darkly.

Out-of-the-blue Book Recommendation Department, I deeply enjoyed Madeline Miller's *Circe* last year and, recently, I finished her first novel, *The Song of Achilles*. I think her first novel is just as good. If you have any interest at all in stories inspired by the characters of ancient Greek mythology, I think these are very good.

[JG] What a great idea to catalog *Turbo!* That might be a very useful document. How about including the cover creator's name. and also zine titles and numbers?

Scott and I are currently in the midst of our own clearing-out-and-organizing phase. We had 50 pounds of old financial records shredded at Office Depot. I threw out many folders of clip art. left over from my DNR days. That and a few other sort-and-trash projects has resulted in one and a half empty file cabinet drawers. a big empty space on the shelf in my office closet. and several empty bins. Yay! In the course of that work. I came across the original drawings I did for Lizzy Lynn's book *The Silver Horse*. Do you remember that Harlie and Gwen helped me out with a couple







drawings by posing for me? I'm going to ask Lizzy if she wants some of the drawings. How about you? Would you like one or two of them?

Re your comment to **Jim and Diane** about car keys that opened both your car and Hank Luttrell's—WisCon used the Madison Inn sleeping rooms for a couple years, early in WisCon's history, and we found out that a key to one room opened all the rooms directly above and below it. I discovered this when I accidentally exited the elevator on the wrong floor and opened the door to what I incorrectly assumed was my room.

### Marilyn Holt

[SC] I hope your book sales will improve. I wondered if you have looked into getting someone to review your books either online or in a print publication.

[JG] When you say that Cliff likes duck more than chicken, you mean that he likes to eat duck, right? I'd love to hear how you make it. I haven't done it often.

### Andy Hooper

[SC] Congratulations on the 40th issue, Andy. I'm looking forward to 40 more.

The saga of Hymen Ullner is a peculiarly American story. It's sometimes amazing what contortions people will perform to just make some money in our capitalist society. Despite that, Hymen turned out to be a pretty good guy.

I laughed at your comment to Lloyd Penney that you have already mowed your lawn. The snow is gone and the ice is off Lake Monona, but we are still weeks away from mowing grass here. Today (3/28) I went for a long stroll along the lake on a breezy, beautiful, clear day in my winter parka because it was only 21 degrees outside.

I once again enjoyed Allen Kracalik's column full of familiar names, but I have little to add. Redd Boggs' piece was excellent, thanks.

[JG] Hyman Ullner's career as late-night monster-movie host makes me wonder if Madison's TV Lenny ever tried to graft his huckster schtick into a movie-host gig.

Putin's horrific attack on Ukraine DOES sort of resemble the alien invasion requested by my cover art, something that might bring us all together, allied against a common enemy. Doesn't seem like it's working as well as one would hope.

It's amazing how much we have talked about *We Have Always Been Here*, both in the book discussion and here in the apa, despite the fact that we all agree that it was a horrible novel. There's something significant in its awfulness.

I love the last line (as well as many of the preceding lines) of Red Boggs' bear story: "He did not devour me, but I devoured him." Thanks for including his story in your zine!

### Steve Swartz

[SC] I thought your Paris over Madison graphic was eye-popping. I had no idea Paris was so compact. It would be a terrific place to walk around in. Maybe someday I will make it there to see for myself.

Very nice tribute to the amazing Jon Singer. Your piece on Kuniyoshi was an absorbing dive into the work of an artist I knew nothing about. Thank you.

Your zine was filled with great comments this month. Regarding your comment to me, your two categories for death could not have been more apt for me in the last month. In addition to the people I wrote about last month who died around the time of my surgery, two more deaths in my extended family occurred in March after I finished writing my comments for the last issue. In your category one, was my niece's eldest son's youngest son, Atlas. Atlas was born in April, 2021. In July, he suffered a fall at home that resulted in severe head injury and brain damage. He never recovered and has lived since then in a vegetative, coma-like state. When he started to suffer seizures last month that would require more surgery to try to stop, the family finally chose instead to let him pass. It was very sad. He did not even make it to his first birthday. In category two was my ex-brother-in-law Robert, who was nearly 80 when he was unexpectedly hospitalized and died. Also sad, but really more surprising because Robert had always been in good physical health for his age. Jeanne and I attended Robert's traditional funeral in Cedar Rapids which included a military internment and a lunch for friends and family. I returned to Iowa 2 weeks later for Atlas' considerably less formal Celebration of Life.

You asked about how I feel about death? I feel it's very close to me all the time. I have an acute sense these days that anyone I know could pass at any moment. I don't think that the death of young people are necessarily more tragic or heart-breaking than

older people. The great outpouring of grief for Atlas came after the accident last year when the extent of his permanent injuries became clear. His death was a sort of relief. Robert's passing was a shock especially to his two daughters who lost their first parent long before they were ready while having to grapple with his estate, which he left in disarray.

With both books and movies, during my first experience of them I tend to focus on the story and what happens. If I like it the first time through and watch or read it a second time, I pay more attention to, and appreciate more, the rest of the details. So, I like to re-experience the stories I love. I don't do that nearly as much as I'd like because there is always so much new stuff I'm anxious to start. I'm looking forward to re-reading of LOTR. We have the director's cut DVDs of the films that we have seen and enjoyed a few times, but I remember my one experience of the books as being so much richer than the movies.

[JG] Loved the visual comparison of Madison to Paris; I find this sort of graphic wonderfully helpful. Although Paris and Madison's climate do not correspond well relative to their latitudes, the thing I often think about when comparing France's and Wisconsin's latitude is the similarity of light. I often gaze at landscapes and think about how an impressionist artist would paint the scene. I have laughed a few times thinking about a series of paintings of hay rolls (the modern version of haystacks) by Van Gogh.



Jon Singer is indeed a treasure.

I think I agree with Scott; my attitude about other people's deaths also tends to be affected by many factors, and often those factors make age seem irrelevant. My sister Julie's death affected me, and still affects me deeply. I found it painful to edit an essay for my book, originally written soon after Julie took her life. It wasn't only that Julie was too young to die that breaks my heart, but that she was in mental anguish when she died. My brother Rick died tragically too (of AIDS), younger even than Julie was, but I will

always remember how he talked about his approaching death, with calm and with intellectual curiosity, even acceptance. I cry at MY loss of a brother, who I had hoped to keep as a friend and confidant for my whole life, less about HIS loss. I feel that same loss of a lifetime with my sister, but more than that, her pain torments me for what I could have done or did not do to help more.

Making a connection between how I feel about other people's death and my own is...a stretch. They are very different matters. I'm aware that a lot of my projects these days—my memoir, the organizing and giving away and throwing out—are triggered by a growing recognition that my time is running out. I feel as if I am reviewing my life, coming to terms with things, making some of it into art, consigning stuff to people and places that need it. And that seems like a good thing. I think often about how during the last years of my father's life when he had lost sight in one eye and was finding it difficult to walk very far, that he put so much energy into finding joy in whatever he was capable of doing, in the people and things around him. He refused to dwell on losses. I admired him so much and hope that I can emulate him.



I hope you don't take the book review of *We Have Always Been Here*, as a representative of the kinds of books our book discussion reads. In fact, the SF Without Borders book group evolved from the very same book discussion group you remembered from Madison. And sometimes we

read clunkers. Interestingly, clunker discussions can sometimes be as interesting as discussions about excellent books. We are, in fact, open to new members if you decide you'd like to re-join.

Yes, I saw the *Hobbit* movies. But I never really liked *The Hobbit*, the book. It took me years to finally force my way through that book, and I only did it, finally, because I refused to read *LotR* until I'd read *The Hobbit* and I refused to go to the *LotR* movies before I read the books. So, I had to plow through one in order to read the others, very quickly.



Yes, let's have a series of remakes of *Casablanca*. I'd like that. I can see lots of ways in which the characters Rick and Ilsa could move around and change roles and perspectives. *Alternate Universe Casablanças*, an anthology. What a cool idea.

Re your comment to **JJ**, I have seen celeriac at the Willy Street Coop here in Madison. Also, I think, at farmers market.

I loved your alien's-view of jigsaw puzzles (in your comment to **Pat**). It reminded me of Bob Newhart's similarly alien-view of cigarette smoking. Both things seem totally bizarre when they are objectively described.

### FJ Bergmann

[SC] Poor Fred has had a rough time helping out. I hope he recovers quickly and avoids further injury. "Self-Portrait" was superb.

[JG] Ekphrasis, a new word for me. Thank you!

Before I read your zines, I had no idea that horses could be so dangerous. But I think I did already know not to use the adverb "lightly" when referring to the grazing of a testicle.

I liked your story, "Dead Worlds" a lot.

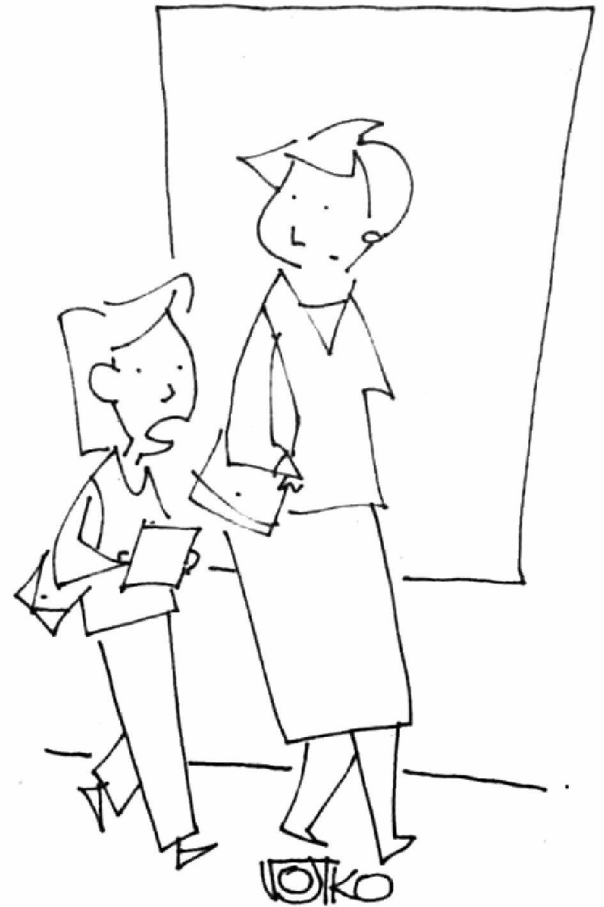
### Jae Leslie Adams

[JG] I think it's very cool that you seem to be finding artistic connections to Ukraine via the learning of the Cyrillic alphabet. Eileen Gunn can speak Russian and she is the partner of famous type expert, John Berry. So maybe they might be able to answer some of your questions about Cyrillic lower case, italics, etc.

### Catie Pfeifer

[SC] Thank you for the lovely report on your trip to Mexico, a welcome accompaniment to your photos. We made one trip to Mexico many years ago, and I loved it. We did not visit a seaside city, however, and you made it sound relaxing and wonderful.

[JG] Your Mexican dining experiences sound delightful. When we traveled to Guanajuato, we were warned not to eat ceviche, fresh salad, fruit, or anything washed in or served with un-boiled water. It sounds like you ignored advice if you were warned similarly, and that you had no problems. Yay! Like Mazatlán, Guanajuato had few English-speakers, but I thought that pushing myself to learn useful words and phrases was actually one of the most interesting parts of my experience. I'm glad that you had such a good time on your vacation!



**"What was the point of thumbs before texting?"**

### What's New

#### Memoir progress

[JG] I have done all the proofreading of my books (*Pretending* and *Becoming*) that I can do at this point. One of those read-throughs were to find and insert missing Oxford commas...what a slog. Aqueduct Press requires the use of Oxford Commas. Debbie Notkin is doing a close reading of the books and has offered some great advice to me along with proofreading notes. But I have noticed that as I reread my books over and over again, I find the stories much less interesting than I used to. Writing was more fun than proofreading. I will be glad to turn my attention to the next project for a while.

The book excerpt that follows is a short story, not at all based on real, waking life.

"I dreamt last night that I traveled back in time," I said to my friend Jackie. It was Monday noon, and we sat at opposite ends of a park bench eating our lunches. Covid protocols. Social distancing. We had never met before the pandemic, but we lived in the same apartment building and after noticing that we each carried lunches out to the park around noontime, we became friends, lunch buddies. I owned a one-person graphic design company, and Jackie was a science journalist, working out of her home office, for *Real Facts*. She was practically the only person I met in person most days. Jackie bit into her peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich and waited for me to tell her the story of my dream.

I dreamed I was walking along a path in the woods with Jane Austen, one of my favorite authors. Jane was an energetic walker and I had to work hard to keep up with her pace. Her thoughts were clearly distracting her and she was ignoring me. I listened to her praise the aesthetic chaos of what she called the "wilderness," and then I interrupted her with a question. What was she currently writing? Suddenly the world around me seemed to freeze. Jane's face fractured and stuttered, froze, and then re-formed as if my dream feed was buffering. With a slightly distorted voice, she told me what she disliked about Fanny Price, the protagonist in her new novel. She didn't know that I was from the future and had already read *Mansfield Park*. I remarked that it sounded like Fanny was exactly the kind of woman that society described as an ideal woman, in contrast to Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*, who was the kind of woman that society disapproved. Wasn't it ironic, I said, that Elizabeth was so popular with readers, while Fanny was so boring? I didn't get the chance to find out whether Ms. Austen found my comments presumptuous or intriguing, or whether I'd made some historical blunder, because at that moment I was suddenly pulled out of the dream. Jane and the woods faded out and a company logo appeared. I couldn't quite read the letters, but the type was a decorative, script font. The spiral clock artwork and letters were colored red and black. Trumpets played. A voice said, "Time Travel Adventures. Call now for the experience of a lifetime!"

"That's cool," said Jackie. "It figures that you'd visit an author. You're always reading. If I time-traveled, I'd rather solve historic mysteries. You know like, find out

how those Celts managed to drag the huge rocks to Stonehenge. Or, maybe I could hang out in that library where Fermat scribbled his theorem. 'Hey, Pierre,' I'd say. 'I see you don't have enough room to write out the proof in the margin of your book. Here's a nice big, blank sheet of paper. Would you write it out for me?'"

"Wouldn't you like to change the past if you could?" I asked.

"Well sure. Starting with a visit to my younger self. I'd tell myself that Dave was gay, and cut my...er. her... losses. Or maybe I'd install some fire extinguishers in the Alexandria Library," Jackie said.

"Yeah, I can think of a few things I'd like to re-do in my life, that's for sure. And there are plenty of catastrophes I'd like to prevent," I agreed. But assuming you couldn't affect the past while you were time-traveling, who would you most like to meet? When would you go back to?"

Jackie was a mathematician and rattled off the names of a few mathematicians and scientists she'd like to meet. I didn't recognize most of their names, except for Isaac Newton.



I had another time-travel dream the next night. This time I was pushing a cart down the aisle in a grocery store. Two people were pointing at a bottle on a shelf of jams and jellies.

"Tiptree!" he said.

"James," she said, laughing.

"Junior!" he said, laughing too.

Oh my god, that's Alice Sheldon and her husband, Ting! They're inventing Alice's pseudonym. This is where James Tiptree, Jr.'s career started! People would wonder who this mysterious, excellent science fiction writer was. Robert Silverberg would praise Tiptree for his "ineluctably masculine" style. I edged closer to see if I could catch any more of their conversation, but once again, the scene froze, stuttered, and faded out. Once again, a company logo appeared. I still couldn't read the letters. Trumpets played again. A voice announced, "Time Travel Adventures. Check out our offer and sign up for the experience of a lifetime!"

Tuesday afternoon, as we ate our lunches, I told Jackie that my time traveling dreams felt like commercials. "They end with a logo and a slogan."



“Can Google do that now? Can they post ads in people’s dreams?” she asked, not entirely facetiously.

Just then, a guy interrupted our conversation. “Excuse me, ladies,” he said. He wore a dark jacket over jeans and a black t-shirt. He was young, white, and his hair was dark and styled. I suspected massive amounts of hair jell.

“I’m Ted, and I’m new in town. I’m trying to drum up a little interest for my business. I have the Madison franchise for Time Travel Adventures. The first trip is half off!” he exclaimed. Looking directly at me, he asked, “how about it? Are you interested?”

“No thanks,” I said. I’d formed an instant dislike of the guy. He wasn’t wearing a mask! And nobody likes being pestered by sales clerks in stores. It was much worse out here in a park. How rude! Jackie and I had been having a *private* conversation.... “Hey, were you *eavesdropping* on us?” I was pissed.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry!” Ted said, backing up and waving his hands in front of him. “I just thought you might be interested.”

“No. Go away,” I said.

Jackie was gazing at Ted as he retreated. “Time Travel Adventures—isn’t that the company in your dream?” she asked.

“Yeah, right. No, that guy just overheard me telling you about my dream. There’s no such thing as a time travel franchise. He’s probably selling an Internet-phone-TV bundle.” I shook my head and said, “What an asshole.”



Ted took a seat on a bench close to ours Wednesday afternoon, while Jackie and I ate salads. He waved and smiled at Jackie, but didn’t try to approach us. I glared at him.

I hadn’t had any time-travel dreams the night before, so Jackie told me about a frustrating encounter she’d had that morning outside her home office with a UPS delivery guy. “He thought he could tell me—*me!*—that the Drake equation proves that alien flying saucers are visiting us all the time!” Jackie shook her head in weary disappointment. This wasn’t the first time people registered her pretty face and failed to notice her awesome brilliance.

“I don’t think the Drake equation proves that,” Jackie told the UPS guy. “But he shook his finger at me, and told me he would be glad to explain it to me. He called me ‘sweetie’! He said he just read an *article* about the Drake equation on *Real Facts*, so he knew all about it.”

“Yeah, I actually wrote that article,” Jackie told him. “I don’t think he believed me. Damn. I need a vacation,” she sighed.

Lunch over, we fitted our masks onto our faces and walked back toward our apartment building. But Jackie hesitated and looked over her shoulder. “I need some coffee if I am going to stay alert through the afternoon,” she said. I walked on without her.



Jackie failed to meet me on Thursday. She hadn’t called me to cancel but I figured that she probably got caught up in some sort of last-minute science emergency with her *Real Facts* colleagues. News about the vaccine booster had just broken; maybe she was following up on that. I began eating potato chips out of a bag and was about to open the novel I always carried with me (just in case), when I saw Ted talking with a middle-aged man on a nearby park bench. Ted was waving his arms excitedly at a Latinx businessman who wore a nice wool suit and colorful vest, and sat diagonally on the park bench, eagerly absorbing every word that Ted spewed. “Don’t let Ted take you in,” I whispered. Too late. The Latinx man accepted a piece of paper and pen from Ted. Balancing his brief case on his lap and using it as a desk, he signed the paper and handed it back to Ted. Then the two of them rose and walked off. I got up too, and followed them. One nice thing about being my own boss was that my schedule was pretty flexible. Maybe I would discover what Ted was selling. A block past my own apartment building the two men turned a corner and had disappeared by the time I turned the same corner. But a window across the street bore a familiar black and red logo and spiral clock image. No dream blurred the words on the sign this time. It read, “Time Travel Adventures.” I crossed the street. A smaller white-board sign over the door was scrawled with the words, “Closed. Back at 1PM.” The door was locked.

“It’s real?” I said. Could I be dreaming again?

The window was painted over completely below the logo art. I couldn’t see inside and there were no clues to indicate what sort of business it really was. Well, there were no deadlines waiting for me. I could afford to take a longer break than usual, so I walked around the corner again, and then down the alley behind the row of businesses. Time Travel Adventures had been the second storefront on the block and I easily found its back entrance. There was a small window set into the back door and if I climbed up onto the doorstep, I could see inside. This would be a good story to share with Jackie on Friday. I smiled in anticipation, expecting



to see rows of cell phones displayed on a counter with sale cards.

Instead, I saw office furniture and computers. I noticed a closed door on the other side of the room that must open into the front of the shop. One large computer monitor faced me and glowed in the dim room. The screen was divided vertically into two parts, each labeled with a name. I immediately recognized Jackie's face on the left side above her name. A man's face filled the right side of the screen above the words, "Henry Biddle." His face was badly pockmarked, his hair was long and greasy, and he wore a weird sort of lace bib. A green progress bar glowed at the bottom of the screen, very close to 100% complete.

I needed to find Jackie. I stepped back into the alley and called her cell; I left a message when she didn't answer. "Hi, it's Jeanne, your lunch buddy. Call me right away, OK?" I walked slowly back toward my apartment. That's when I heard Jackie's voice.

Jackie stood outside Time Travel Adventures' open door with Ted and the Latinx man, who was slowly backing away from Jackie and Ted.

"He paid no attention to Newton! None! He thought that *Isaac Newton* was boring! *ISAAC NEWTON!* Isaac Newton... who was inventing fucking *calculus* in the next room. All this guy cared about was getting laid! The stupid asshole didn't even know that he was plague positive. We were coughing up blood, for God's sake. Or maybe he was so dim he didn't notice that he was dying," she spat. It sounded like Jackie was just getting started on her tirade.

The Latinx man, alarmed, asked Ted, "you sent her into a plague?"

Ted tried to calm Jackie, "there were no guarantees..."

"...but a whole lot of implying, right? What a scam!"

Ted's mood turned glum. Maybe he knew Jackie wouldn't write

a favorable Yelp review. He had certainly lost a client. The Latinx man had fled.

"Henry wasn't happy with your time either," Ted sighed.

"What?" Jackie said, surprised at the conversation's turn.

"I suggest that you not eat out at any of the restaurants on King Street. Henry made scenes in all of them when they asked him to wear a mask. I think he felt it was somewhat unfair that he'd time traveled from one pandemic into another."

"You mean I paid you so that Henry could ruin my reputation?! Jackie glared at Ted, who found a rag in his pocket and wiped out the message, "Closed. Back at 1pm" from the whiteboard hanging on the door. And then he slunk inside the store.

As the door closed behind Ted, Jackie noticed me walking toward her. She smiled and said, "Will I have a story for *you* tomorrow!"

