



FR READERCON

34

**Cecilia Tan
P. Djèlí Clark
Charles R. Saunders**

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34

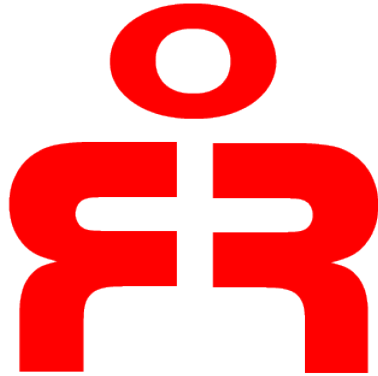
RR READERCON

34

**Cecilia Tan
P. Djèlí Clark
Charles R. Saunders**

July 17 - 20, 2025

Boston Marriott Burlington in Burlington, MA



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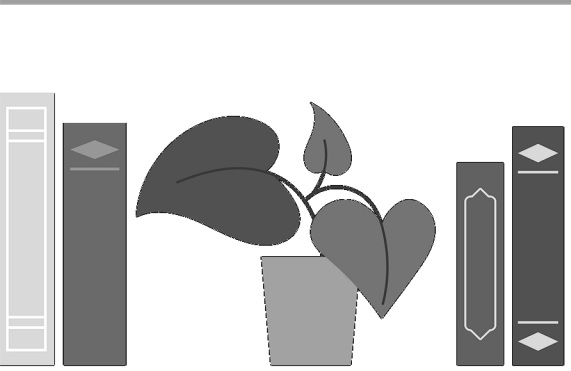
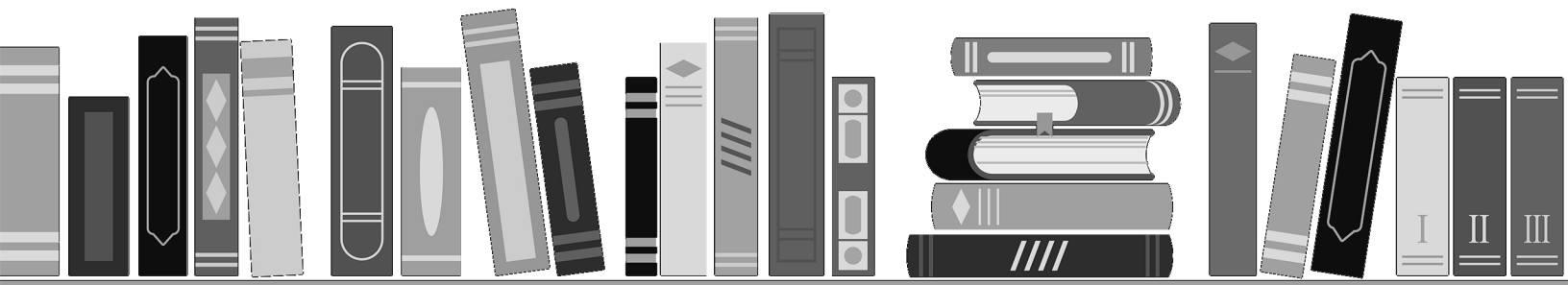
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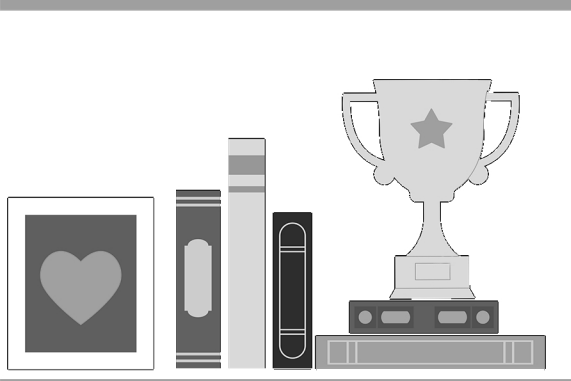
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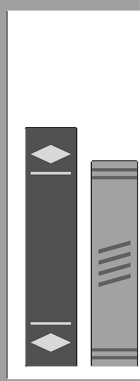


READERCON 35

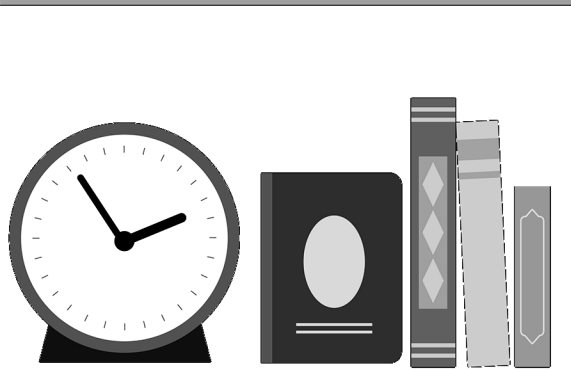
Conference on imaginative literature



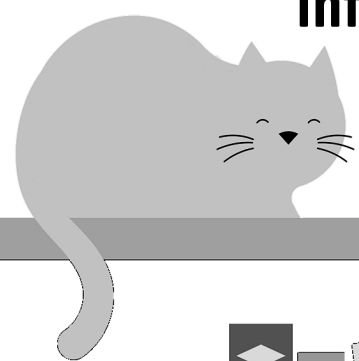
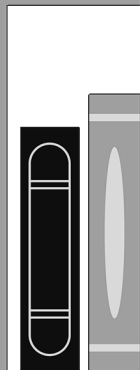
**Save the date:
July 9 - 12, 2026**



**Burlington Marriott,
Burlington, MA**



**info@readercon.org
readercon.org**



Message from the ConChair

Hello Readercon 34 attendees!

Welcome to Burlington for this year's celebration of speculative fiction through our multitrack conference of panels, talks, readings, an epic bookshop, and people who read, write, edit, and publish books focused on our favorite genre. We are excited to return to this location after a decade in Quincy.

A huge thank you to our Guests of Honor Cecilia Tan and P. Djèlí Clark for bringing their incredible vibrancy and perspectives to Readercon 34 programming.

Speaking of programming, we want to recognize and thank Program Chair Noah Beit-Aharon and the members of the Program Committee for all your work in bringing the Readercon 34 program to life.

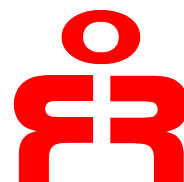
Over the last year, the Conference Committee has also spent months leading the process of improving, debugging, and preparing for this year's conference. Thank you Walt & Margo Williams (Bookshop), Lori Meltzer (Hospitality), B. Diane Martin (Hotel), Angela Rose (Logistics), Con vonHoffman (Publications), Merryl Gross (Registration), Dawn Jones-Low (Signage), Beth Kevles (Tech), and Opus (Volunteers), as well as Nightwing Whitehouse and Jan Dumas (Health & Safety).

On behalf of everyone named above, our biggest appreciation of all goes to our Readercon volunteering community at large. Whether contributing your time and skill over the last year or staffing this weekend, Readercon would not and could not take place without you. Thank you so very much.

We hope you enjoy Readercon 34 and would love to hear about your experience at conchair@readercon.org!

Rae Borman & Thom Jones-Low
Readercon 34 Conchairs

*See the Save the Date for Readercon 35 on the previous page.



Code of Conduct

Readercon's Safety Committee (safecom) and Conference Committee (concom) will annually review this Code of Conduct and amend it as needed. "We" and "Readercon" refer to the members of Readercon's committees and corporation.

Readercon's concom wants the conference to be safe and enjoyable for everyone. To this end, everyone with a Readercon membership is required to abide by this Code of Conduct while attending the conference, including while in any part of the hotel or virtual community spaces. In addition, all Readercon Board members, committee members, staff, and volunteers are required to abide by this Code of Conduct during Readercon meetings, on Readercon mailing lists and Readercon-branded social media accounts and forums, while conducting Readercon business (which includes all emails sent from readercon.org addresses), and while discussing Readercon-related matters with other Board members, committee members, staff, and volunteers.

While attending or volunteering for Readercon in any capacity, you agree to help create spaces that are and feel as safe as possible by respecting other people's physical health and physical, virtual, and social boundaries. This Code of Conduct will always be available for review at readercon.org/safety.

Vaccination & Masking Requirements

Everyone over the age of 2 years is expected to have completed a full primary vaccine series for COVID-19 **prior** to attending Readercon in person, however we will **not** be checking vaccine cards. Boosters are encouraged, not required.

While at the conference, attendees are expected to:

- Wear a N-95, KF-94, or surgical mask over your nose and mouth while at programming and hospitality spaces to protect our community. Masks of lesser quality will not be permitted (e.g., cloth masks). Anyone who neglects to wear their mask over their nose and mouth will be asked to "mask up" by volunteers. We have extra N-95 masks to distribute as needed, please ask the volunteers in the registration room if you need one.
- Remain masked while in conference areas, including the Bookshop.
- Panelists who wish to remove their mask while speaking during a particular panel or program must ask for consent from their fellow panelists prior to the start of the conference. If this conversation has not taken place, then all panelists are expected to stay masked for the entirety of the panel.
- Eat outdoors or in designated eating areas, where signs will indicate masks are

optional.

- Abide by Marriott hotel masking policies in all hotel areas outside of official Readercon programming spaces.

Attendees with medical exceptions to the masking requirements above must email a doctor's note to Safety Chair at safety@readercon.org prior to attending Readercon.

Physical Boundaries

Do not physically harm, threaten, or endanger other people.

Do not touch people or their personal effects — including clothing, assistive devices, bags, and service animals — without an express invitation. If you want to invite physical contact, do so verbally or with a friendly gesture, such as holding out a hand for a handshake.

When sharing space with other people, engage in active demonstrations of respect and empathy. For example:

- Leave other people a clear path to the exit.
- Moderate the volume of your voice and the expansiveness of your gestures.
- Maintain an appropriate physical distance.

Virtual Boundaries

Do not harm, threaten, or endanger other people through words or actions online.

Do not send direct messages or friend requests in social media without an express invitation. If you want to invite direct contact, do so explicitly.

Keep conversation about sexual topics in adults-only channels or in the discussion channels for relevant program items.

Keep images and videos in the channel designated for them.

When sharing a virtual space with other people, engage in active demonstrations of respect and empathy. For example:

- In fast-moving chats, make space for slower typists to chime in.
- When sharing a link, explain what it links to.
- Refrain from correcting other people's typos.
- If using an audio or audio-and-video channel, avoid interrupting or speaking over others.

Social Boundaries in Both Physical & Virtual Spaces

In all cases where someone has told you or demonstrated that they do not wish to interact with you, or if you believe someone has blocked or muted you in a Readercon virtual space, do not contact them in any fashion — including through an intermediary or another online platform — unless and until they approach you of their own initiative.

Readercon thrives on vigorous debate, but it is not acceptable to verbally attack people. Do not use slurs or make derogatory comments about a person, group, or category of people. This includes comments based on characteristics such as (but not limited to) actual or perceived race, national origin, sex, gender, sexual orientation, physical appearance, age, religion, ability, family or marital status, or socioeconomic class.

Do not post images, videos, or links that contain explicit violence, sexually explicit content, or attacks on a person, group, or category of people.

Do not make threatening or intimidating comments or otherwise create a hostile environment.

Do not make unsolicited sexual comments.

Do not share identifying information about someone who is pseudonymous in conference space.

Do not share another person's contact information, photo, location, or other personal information without their permission.

If you come to Readercon to do business, please do so in a respectful way. Do not ask an industry professional to read an unsolicited manuscript. If you're on a panel or presenting another program item, you may briefly promote your work at the beginning and end; otherwise, do not promote your business or product outside of space designated for that purpose (such as the Bookshop or a self-promotion channel).

Do not solicit donations or support for a cause outside of space designated for that purpose (such as a fan table channel or a bulletin board).

Recommendations of other people's work are welcome, but do not share links to pirated works or piracy sites.

When interacting with other people, engage in active demonstrations of respect and empathy. For example:

- If you don't have direct personal experience or knowledge of the topic under discussion, step back and listen to those who do.
- Be willing to learn new things and admit when you're wrong, including offering apologies.
- Moderate your consumption of alcohol and other intoxicants, and respect those who choose not to partake.

- Obtain ongoing consent for interactions. Pay attention to verbal and non-verbal clues that another person wishes to stop interacting with you; these clues can range from “Gosh, look at the time!” to the other person walking away from you or blocking you. If you’re not certain someone is enjoying your company, end the interaction yourself.

Accessibility

Respect people with disabilities. Make Readercon as accessible as possible. See our Accessibility Policy for more information.

In Summary

Just as you do not owe anyone your time, attention, or physical contact, no one owes you theirs. Interacting with people you don’t know well can be somewhat like first contact with an alien ambassador, so demonstrate peaceful intentions and do your best to be a credit to the human race.

Reporting a Problem

To reach Readercon’s Safety Team during the conference, day or night, use one of the following options:

- Call or text (617) 544-0966.
- Use the #safety channel in the year-round Readercon Discord server to ask for assistance. As the channel is publicly viewable, we encourage you not to provide any details there.
- Send an email to safety@readercon.org.
- Use option 2 and option 3 above to reach Readercon’s Safety Team at any time outside of the conference event.

If you’re making a report about an online interaction, please include screenshots if possible.

For more on how we handle reports, please see Readercon’s Safety Policy.

Readercon’s Safety Policy

Readercon’s Safety Committee (safecom) and Conference Committee (concom) will annually review the policy and amend it as needed. “We” and “Readercon” refer to the members of Readercon’s committees and corporation.

Readercon’s primary concern is the safety of our attendees, and we appreciate the assistance of all of our attendees in creating and sustaining a culture of safety at Readercon.

General Policies

- Cell phones must be set to silent or vibrate mode in programming areas.
- No smoking in programming areas or the Bookshop, by state law and hotel policy. Smoking is permitted on the hotel patio, but please do not smoke under awnings or overhangs.
- No eating or drinking in the Bookshop.
- No animals in conference areas with the exception of service animals.
- No weapons in conference areas.
- All individuals over the age of 15 need a membership to attend Readercon. Individuals between the age of 15 and 18 need a Teen membership
- All children under the age of 15 attend Readercon for free, but must stay in the company of their guardian(s) or other adults approved by their guardian(s) whenever in conference areas.
- Any disruptive or inappropriate behavior may lead to being asked to leave the conference.
- Readercon reserves the right to revoke membership at any time for any reason. No refunds will be given.
- Readercon reserves the right to refuse membership.

Policies for Addressing Reported Code of Conduct Violations

Each report will be handled in accordance with the policies and procedures effective at the time the report is received, taking into account the Readercon Code of Conduct that was in effect at the time the incident took place.

Who can report a problem?

Anyone who was directly affected by or witnessed a Code of Conduct violation during Readercon or while volunteering between events can file a report, and is encouraged to do so.

What sort of problem can I report?

You can report any behavior or pattern of behavior that violates our Code of Conduct. If you feel someone's behavior is dangerous or harmful to you or others, if someone's behavior makes you feel afraid or very uncomfortable, or if someone is actively making it difficult for you or others to enjoy or fully participate in the conference, we would like to know about it.

Who can I make a report about?

You can make a report about anyone whose behavior causes you concern. We will give all reports equal consideration. Our handling of reports will not be influenced by factors such as the social status or conference role of anyone involved in the situation.

When can I report a problem?

You can report a problem at any time; however, we request that reporting take place as soon as possible during or after an incident, especially if you believe that someone may be causing problems for multiple people at the conference. Reports will be taken seriously and handled appropriately regardless of when they are made.

How do I report a problem?

At the conference, approach any concom member (identified by a red badge ribbon) or speak with a staffer at the Info Desk or Consuite. You can also call (617) 544-0966 at any time during the conference, day or night, and your call will be taken by someone trained in handling reports of problematic behavior. The phone number is also printed on the back of your badge. After the conference, email safety@readercon.org.

What will happen if I make a report?

The following is a brief summary. See our Procedures for Addressing Reported Violations of the Code of Conduct for detailed information.

If you make a report at the conference, two responders will offer you the use of a designated quiet space, explain in detail what the possible outcomes are and what will be asked of you, listen to your report, and interview other people (witnesses and/or the person the report is about) as necessary. They will then bring all collected information to the Safety Chair(s), who will decide what immediate action needs to be taken, if any. After the conference, the report and any actions taken will be reviewed by a working group that will include the Safety Chair(s) as well as both responders. This working group will determine whether long-term action also needs to be taken. You will be informed of any action that Readercon takes in connection with your report.

If you make a report after the conference, the Safety Chair(s) will receive your report and assign two responders to you. The responders will explain in detail what the possible outcomes are and what will be asked of you, read your report, and interview other people (witnesses and/or the person the report is about) as necessary. They will then bring all collected information to the Safety Chair(s), who will convene a working group that will include both responders. This working group will determine what action needs to be taken, if any. You will be informed of any action that Readercon takes in connection with your report.

What will Readercon do in response to my report?

Readercon will always prioritize the safety of all our attendees over a single person's desire to attend or participate in Readercon. To this end, Readercon reserves the right to:

- request that someone who is causing problems change their behavior.
- revoke access to some or all conference spaces, without refund.
- revoke conference membership, without refund.
- involve hotel security.
- involve local law enforcement via hotel security.
- deny membership for a period of one or more years, or permanently.
- choose not to take action.
- make a public statement regarding actions that Readercon takes in response to a report.

If Readercon makes a public statement regarding actions taken in response to a report, the statement will safeguard confidentiality as much as possible. Readercon will inform all parties involved in the report about the statement, and will provide them with links to the statement on

the Readercon website and/or any relevant posts to social media.

If we believe someone needs to be immediately removed from the premises for the safety of our attendees, Readercon may enlist the assistance of hotel security and local law enforcement.

If we believe someone is in need of immediate medical attention, Readercon may call for an ambulance.

If a person under 18 makes or is the subject of a report, we will take any steps necessary to ensure the safety of that person and other attendees, but will not take other action until that person's parent or guardian (as listed on their Readercon membership materials) is present - unless the person under 18 is making a report against their parent or guardian, or their parent or guardian is alleged to have mistreated them, in which case we may notify the Massachusetts Department of Children & Families and/or call 911 and/or contact hotel security. While involvement in Readercon does not legally require anyone to report allegations of child abuse or harm, some Readercon staff and attendees are mandated reporters in their professional lives, including the chair of the safety committee for Readercon 33. We all take such allegations extremely seriously.

Readercon's representatives will follow this policy and our procedures with the safety of all the conference's attendees in mind, which may require us to take certain actions without the consent of the person making the report. We will do our very best to balance the needs of all involved parties and the needs of the conference when they conflict.

What won't happen if I make a report?

We will not reveal your identity or the substance of your report unless it is absolutely necessary to obtain information about the incident or take action related to the incident. See our procedures for a detailed explanation of our confidentiality policy.

We will not take any sort of retaliatory action against you for reporting or not reporting a problem.

We will not provide mediation or intermediary communication services.

While we will always err on the side of safety and treat all reports as true, we will not assume that a report being made automatically means that action needs to be taken.

We will not respond to general requests for a list of all parties whose memberships have been revoked or denied. However, if anyone inquires as to whether a particular person's membership has been revoked or denied, Readercon will provide that information. We will not keep any kind of list or database of such requests, or consider a membership status request tantamount to a report.

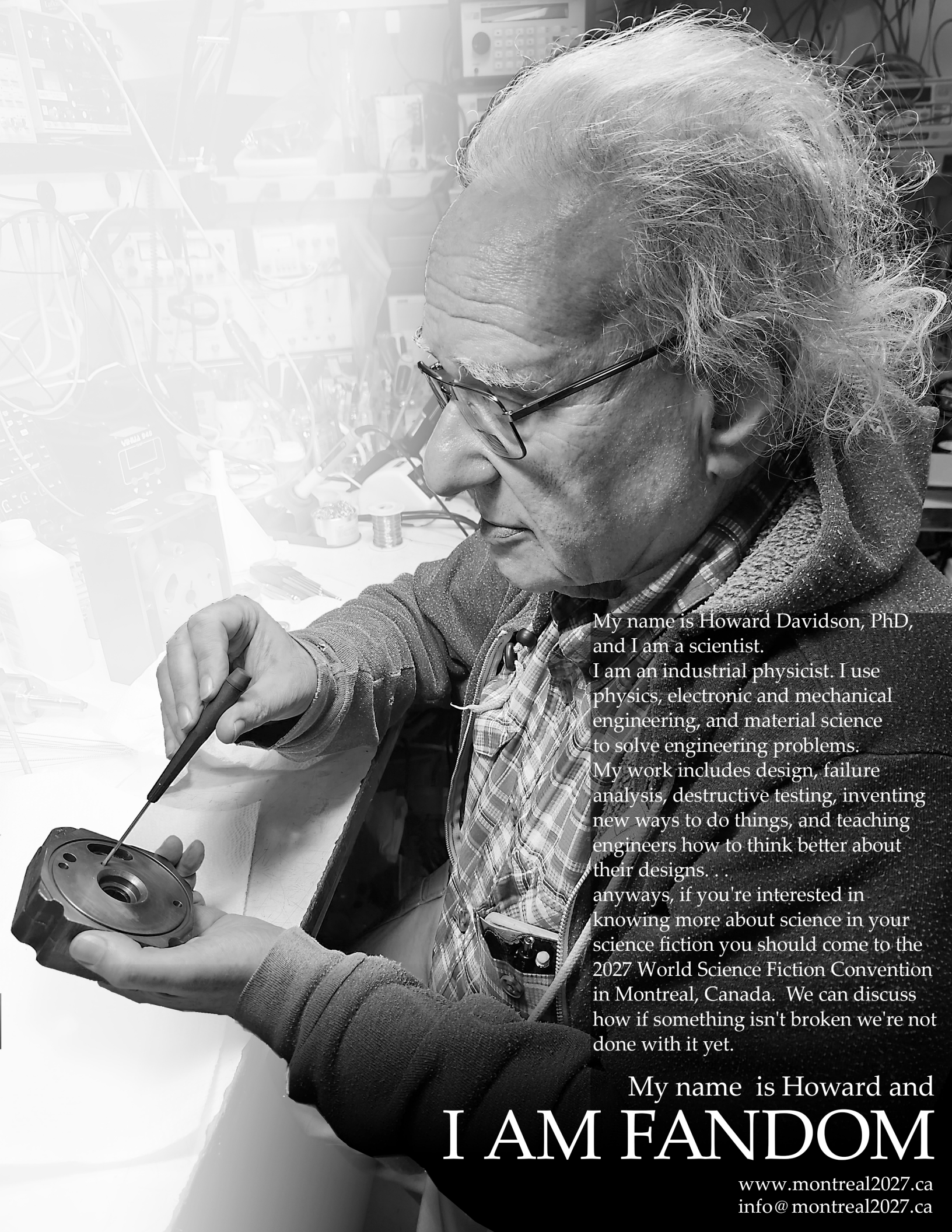
What will happen if someone says I caused a problem?

If someone tells us that you have violated the Code of Conduct, two conference representatives will ask to speak with you about it in a designated quiet space.

If you decline to be interviewed, we may ask you to leave the conference. If, after speaking with you, we believe that you have violated the Code of Conduct, we may ask you to change your behavior or leave the convention, or take other actions. We will not take action until we've spoken with you and anyone else involved and done our best to get a clear picture of what happened. See the document titled Readercon Procedures for Addressing Reported Violations of the Code of Conduct for detailed information.

If we believe that no violation occurred, you are welcome to go about the conference as usual. We will not attempt to mediate or carry messages between you and the person who made the report.

If someone deliberately makes a false report about you, we will take appropriate action in response.



My name is Howard Davidson, PhD, and I am a scientist.

I am an industrial physicist. I use physics, electronic and mechanical engineering, and material science to solve engineering problems.

My work includes design, failure analysis, destructive testing, inventing new ways to do things, and teaching engineers how to think better about their designs. . .

anyways, if you're interested in knowing more about science in your science fiction you should come to the 2027 World Science Fiction Convention in Montreal, Canada. We can discuss how if something isn't broken we're not done with it yet.

My name is Howard and
I AM FANDOM

www.montreal2027.ca
info@montreal2027.ca

Cecilia Tan Biography and Bibliography

Cecilia Tan is “simply one of the most important writers, editors, and innovators in contemporary American erotic literature,” for her pioneering the combination of erotica and science fiction, according to Susie Bright, and her works have racked up a number of awards. She founded Cirlet Press, publishers of erotic sf/fantasy, and is the author of many books, including the ground-breaking short story collections *Black Feathers* (HarperCollins) and *White Flames* (Running Press), and the Magic University series (Riverdale Avenue Books) and short stories in *Ms. Magazine*, *Asimov’s Science Fiction*, *Absolute Magnitude*, *Strange Horizons*.



Novels

Stand alone

The Velderet, Cirlet Press, 2001

Mind Games, Ravenous Romance, 2010

Watch Point, Riptide Publishing 2017

Spanish Nights, Cecilia Tan, 2016

Royal Treatment, Torquere Press, 2009; Cirlet Press, 2012

The Hot Streak, Ravenous Romance, 2009; Riverdale Avenue Books, 2014

Series

Daron’s Guitar Chronicles (Cecilia Tan Publishing).

Daron’s Guitar Chronicles, Volume One, 2010

Daron’s Guitar Chronicles, Volume Two, 2011

Daron’s Guitar Chronicles, Volume Three, 2011

Daron’s Guitar Chronicles, Volume Four, 2012

Daron’s Guitar Chronicles, Volume Five, 2013

Daron’s Guitar Chronicles, Volume Six, 2014

Daron’s Guitar Chronicles, Volume Seven, 2015

Daron’s Guitar Chronicles, Volume Eight, 2015

Daron’s Guitar Chronicles, Volume Nine, 2016

Daron’s Guitar Chronicles, Volume Ten, 2017

Daron’s Guitar Chronicles, Volume Eleven, 2025

Daron’s Guitar Chronicles, Volume Twelve, 2025

Daron’s Guitar Chronicles, Volume Thirteen, 2025

Magic University (Riverdale Avenue Books).

The Siren and the Sword, 2014
The Tower and the Tears, 2015
The Incubus and the Angel, 2015
The Poet and the Prophecy, 2015
Christmas Magic, (Novella), 2016

The Prince's Boy (Cirlet Press).

The Prince's Boy, 2011
The Prince's Boy, Volume 2, 2012

Secrets of a Rock Star (Hachette/Forever).

Taking the Lead, 2016
Wild Licks, 2016
Hard Rhythm, 2017

Struck by Lightning (Hachette/Forever).

Slow Surrender, 2013
Slow Seduction, 2014
Slow Satisfaction, 2014

Collections

Bent for Leather, Cecilia Tan, 2023
Edge Plays, Cirlet Press, 2008
Black Feathers: Erotic Dreams, Harper Perennial, 1998; Reissued by Cirlet Press, 2012
White Flames: Erotic Dreams, Running Press, 2008
Telepaths Don't Need Safewords and Other Stories from the Erotic Edge of SF/Fantasy,
Cirlet Press, 1992

Novellas

The Bonds of Love. Riverdale Avenue Books, 2019
The Blossoms of Summer: A Tale of the Forbidden Flowers, Cecilia Tan, 2024

Non-Fiction

The Negro Leagues are Major Leagues, Sean Forman co-editor, Baseball Reference, 2022
The Binge Watchers Guide to the Harry Potter Films, Binge Watcher's Guides, 2020
'75: The Red Sox Team That Saved Baseball, Bill Nowlin co-editor, Rounder Books, 2005
The 50 Greatest Red Sox Games, Bill Nowlin co-author, Rounder Books, 2005
The 50 Greatest Yankees Games, John Wiley & Sons, 2004
The Fenway Project, Bill Nowlin co-editor, Rounder Books, 2004

Anthologies: Editor and Co-Editor

Superlative Speculative Erotica, Bethany Zaiatz co-editor, Circllet Press, 2018
Spellbinding: Tales from the Magic University, Riverdale Avenue Books, 2015
Like a Mask Removed, Bethany Zaiatz co-editor, Circllet Press, 2015
The Circllet Treasury of Erotic Steampunk, J. Blackmore co-editor, Riverdale Avenue Books, 2014
Jingle Balls, Arabella Flynn co-editor, Circllet Press, 2013
Like Hearts Enchanted, Kathleen Tudor co-editor, Circllet Press, 2012
Like a Midsummer Night, Nikola Klaus co-editor, Circllet Press, 2012
Like a Breath of Flame, Cosmin Alexander co-editor, Circllet Press, 2012
Like a Coming Wave, Andrea Trask co-editor, Circllet Press, 2012
Fantastic Erotica, Bethany Zaiatz co-editor, Circllet Press, 2012
Like a Moonrise: Erotic Tales of Shapeshifters, Artemis Savory Co-editor, Circllet Press, 2011
Like Heaven and Hell, Tabitha Dulla co-editor, Circllet Press, 2011
Women on the Edge of Space, Danielle Bodnar co-editor, Circllet Press, 2011
Like an Iron Fist, Katherine Bergeron co-editor, Circllet Press, 2011
Best Erotic Fantasy & Science Fiction, Bethany Zaiatz co-editor, Circllet Press, 2010
Like an Iron Fist: Dystopian Erotica, Katherine Bergeron co-editor, Circllet Press, 2010
Like a Moonrise, Artemis Savory co-editor, Circllet Press, 2010
Like That Spark, Marcy Harris co-editor, Circllet Press, 2010
Only in the City, Nico Vreeland co-editor, Circllet Press, 2010
Like Butterflies in Iron, Lauren Senger co-editor, Circllet Press, 2010
Queerpunk, Kelly Kinkaid co-editor, Circllet Press, 2010
Bites of Passion, Ravenous Romance, 2009
Women of the Bite: Lesbian Vampire Erotica, Alyson, 2009
Like an Animal, Bethany Zaiatz co-editor, Circllet Press, 2009
Like Tooth and Claw, Joy Crelin co-editor, Circllet Press, 2009
Wired Hard 4, Lauren P. Burka co-editor, Circllet Press, 2009
Like a God's Kiss, Jennifer Levine co-editor, Circllet Press, 2009
Like a Sword, Gloria Y. co-editor, Circllet Press, 2009
Like a Queen, Rachel Kincaid co-editor, Circllet Press, 2009
Like Twin Stars, Kelly Clark co-editor, Circllet Press, 2009
Like a Thorn, Sarah Desautels co-editor, Circllet Press, 2009
Like a Prince, Rachel Kincaid co-editor, Circllet Press, 2009
Best Fantastic Erotica: Volume One, Circllet Press, 2007
Like a Myth, Cynthia James co-editor, Circllet Press, 2008
Like a Wisp of Steam, J. Blackmore co-editor, Circllet Press, 2008
Sex in the System: Stories of Erotic Futures, Technological Stimulation, and the Sensual Life of Machines, Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006
The MILF Anthology, Lori Perkins co-editor, Blue Moon Books, 2006
Cowboy Lover, Lori Perkins co-editor, Running Press, 2006
Blood Surrender, Blue Moon Books, 2005
Erotica Vampirica: Sensual Vampire Stories, Circllet Press, Reissued by Blue Moon Books, 2005
Erotic Fantastic, Circllet Press, 2003
Mind and Body, Circllet Press, 2002
Sextopia: Stories of Sex and Society, Circllet Press, 2001

Wired Hard 3: Even More Erotica for a Gay Universe, Circllet Press, 2001
SexCrime, Circllet Press, 2000
A Taste of Midnight: Sensual Vampire Stories, Circllet Press, Reissued by Blue Moon Books, 2006
Stars Inside Her: Lesbian Erotic Fantasy, Circllet Press, 1999
More Technosex: Erotica for the Cybage, Circllet Press, 1998
Fetish Fantastic: Erotica on the Edge, Circllet Press, 1997
Sexmagick 2: Men Conjuring Erotic Fantasy, Circllet Press, 1997
Cherished Blood: Sensual Vampire Stories, Circllet Press, 1997
Wired Hard II, Circllet Press, 1997
Genderflex: Sexy Stories on the Edge and In-Between, Circllet Press, 1996
The New Worlds of Women, Circllet Press, 1996
Erotica Vampirica: Sensual Vampire Stories, Circllet Press, 1996
Of Princes and Beauties: Adult Erotic Faerie Tales, Circllet Press, 1995
S/M Futures: Erotica on the Edge, Circllet Press, 1995
SM Visions: The Best of Circllet Press, Masquerade Books, 1995
Selling Venus, Circllet Press, 1995
S/M Pasts, Circllet Press, 1995
Blood Kiss: Vampire Erotica, Circllet Press, 1994
The Beast Within: Erotic Tales of Werewolves, Circllet Press, 1994
Technosex: Cyber Age Erotica, Circllet Press, 1994
Worlds of Women: Sapphic Science Fiction Erotica, Circllet Press, 1994
Wired Hard: Erotica for a Gay Universe, Circllet Press, 1994
Forged Bonds: Erotic Tales of High Fantasy, Circllet Press, 1993
SexMagick: Women Conjuring Erotic Fantasy, Circllet Press, 1993

Short fiction

“This Goodly Frame, the Earth” in *Worlds of Possibility*, August 2024
 “Just Killing Time,” in *Adventures in Bodily Autonomy*, edited by Raven Belasco, Aqueduct Press, October 2023
 “The Blossoms of Summer: A Tale of the Forbidden Flowers” in *Hot and Sticky, Passionate Ink*, 2023
 “Humble Pie,” *Best Lesbian Erotica of the Year, Vol. 7*, edited by Sinclair Sexsmith, Cleis Press, December 2022
 “Personalize Your Netherparts,” in *Bent for Leather*, April 2022
 “The Dark Room,” *Halloween Microfictions*, Circllet Press, October 2021
 “Sacred Heart” in *Unfettered Hexes: Queer Tales of Insatiable Darkness*, edited by dave ring, Neon Hemlock Press, 2021
 “Aura of the Phoenix” in *Schoolbooks & Sorcery*, Riverdale Avenue Books, 2021
 “Art in Oils” in *Flesh Fiction*, edited by Mara White and Suanne Laqueuer, 2021
 “Sacred Heart” in *Unfettered Hexes*, Neon Hemlock Press, 2021
 “All in a Rush” in *Erato, The New Smut Project*, edited by Alex Freeman, Guinevere Chase, and TC Mill, 2020
 “Brass Tacks” in *Release the Virgins*, edited by Michael A. Ventrella. Fantastic Books, 2019
 “The Beast” in *Women Who Love Monsters*, edited by Lori Perkins. Riverdale Avenue Books, 2018
 “A Flicker of Torchlight” in *Ultimate Wired Hard*, 2017

“Crowdthink Consensus Thresholds,” *CONGRESS Magazine*, edited by Molly Tanzer, August 2016
 “The Wanting” in *Dark Discoveries* magazine, 2015
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Sacred Heart by Cecilia Tan

“Sacred Heart” first appeared in 2021 in Unfettered Hexes: Queer Tales of Insatiable Darkness, edited by Dave Ring at Neon Hemlock Press. I had told him that I wrote my best work when editors nagged me for stories, so he nagged me, and one of my best stories ever came out.

So, after all that, you want me to mend your broken heart.

Sorry, can't help you. You think I can burn incense made from the ashes of love letters or some shit? I can't fix a broken heart. I can only fix your broken lust.

What, did you not realize it's broken, too? Well, they say recognizing the problem is the first step.

The real first step, though? Throw salt. It does little good to be bitter. You're the only one who'll taste it.

Every good chef knows to counteract bitterness not with sweet but with salt. How many rituals start with salt? All of them, tiger, all of them. The salt is to purify; they know that everywhere in the world, from the Gaelic hedgewitches to the Shinto priests.

So go on, let it fly. It makes a safe space. Be pure. Tell me, what'd your lover do that burned you to a crisp? Oh not all at once, of course, or you would've been out of there in a hot second. But you know what they say about the frog in the gradually heating water.... No, not *bubble, bubble, toil and trouble*, just what kind of witch do you think I am?

They say if the water comes to a boil gradually enough, the frog never jumps out of the pot. Don't blame yourself, tiger. You didn't know you were killing yourself.

The same is true of water turning to ice. If it happens bit by bit, you don't notice until it's too late. How long ago did the fire go out?

Oh, the relationship was toxic? Poison can get you the same way, seeping in gradually. Seeping right under your skin. Dampening your ardor.

You know what I have to do next? Suck out the poison. I can do that, you know. If you'll let me.

What, you think I'm just going to latch on like a lamprey? Your body isn't ready for that. You've been through too much. You've got your grip so hard on your lust you could crush it in your fists, like it's the hilt of a sword. Like you're going to do battle. Come here. Relax. I need to be soft to firm you up, to use the lightest of touches to make your flesh swell and rise. Bodies come in many shapes, but nearly all have a point right near the heart where if I put my mouth right there...

See? So firm now, small and hard as an acorn or a seed, ready to be planted, ready to be nurtured until it grows into something new and green. The roots reach lower, right down here, where everything's hot and tight now.

Suck out the poison. That's what I'll do. Good and wet, nourish the roots. Nature provides. I can suck softly or I can suck hard...or both, to draw it out.

I like drawing it out.

There it is. Let it flow.

What's that? You can't remember when the last time you felt free to just lie back and let

someone else do the work? Does it feel like work? Or does it feel like play?

I better play with you now, with my hands, my fingers. When was the last time you played with yourself? And I mean really *played*? I don't mean rubbing one out in the restroom during your 9-to-5 or a quick one in the shower before bed so you didn't have to have another fight with your lover about what you wanted and they didn't. When was the last time you let your fantasies wander? Touched not only your flesh but your mind, your dreams?

Who do you see walking into your vision while your ardor ramps up? Who do you want to see coming through that door? This is how conjuration works, tiger. It's my hand moving, but it's your rhythm. It's my voice, but it's your vision. We're getting to it now.

It must hurt; I can hear you whimpering. Maybe I better suck out a little more poison.

Much better. Nothing's wrong with your eyes. I see them shining. Now. Who do you see?

Not me, tiger. This isn't about me.

Oh, I see. I had it wrong, didn't I? It's not just who you want your *lover* to be that's hard to see. It's who you want *yourself* to be, isn't it? I'll let you in on one of the secrets of the universe: That's true of everybody, tiger. Okay, okay, maybe not for the people who don't question at all. But that's why they don't have the answers. They've never had to look for them. The conservatives, the conformists, they do as they're told.

We folk, though, we *question*. It's in our nature. It's hard for others to know you if you don't know yourself.

Others can't love you unless you love yourself. You know when you're your true self? Oh, we'll get there. Don't worry. We'll get there. Every ritual is a journey with a beginning, middle, and end.

Lust leads places. It starts by leading you to nibble on the back of your lover's neck, to lick the back of their knee. That leads to all kinds of things. That sounds like nonsense but it makes perfect sense if you've bent their leg like this.

That's the way, tiger.

Lust leads to rash decisions, sometimes. Sometimes that's how we land in hot water. But you can't just stop wanting. You'll never get anywhere that way. You just circle around and around and around.

Don't mind if I do.

I'm taking you all the way. Once the candles are lit, once the flames are a-flicker, once we start down that path together, we have to walk the whole circle. We have to go and come back to be whole. You're doing great, tiger.

Chanting's good. Chanting's fine. Right about now is when people start to call out to whatever gods they believe in. Repeating the names of the gods, whether chanted or sung, is one of the most ancient invocations.

I hear you calling out my name, in rhythm like a freight train. But I'm not a god. And I told you, I'm not here to fix your broken heart. Only you can do that.

That's lust talking, tiger. We'll see if you still feel that way after. I told you, this is about getting you where you're going. About you finding out who you are in the moment when all other thoughts stop, when the magic hits you. That's power, don't you feel how close you are to it? You thought folks were joking when they'd ask *did the earth move for you*? Shake, rattle, and roll, tiger, 'til you get there.

'Til you come.

Some come quiet, like a cloud crossing the moon, some come together, like waves meeting

and sending up spray. Some say they get lost in the moment, but what they've lost is their head, and this isn't about that. (Is it?) When you lose your mind, what do you keep?

When you come, it'll feel like your body supernovas into a billion tiny atoms, blasting through space, through every dimension. When you come, you go and go and go. You think your ex matters on a cosmic scale? You are bigger than galaxies, filling the infinite space between stars, before gravity begins to pull you back together, before you coalesce once again...

Right here with me, as you fit back into your skin. I love the taste of it, but you know it's just a shell, right? We are luminous. Our place in the universe isn't determined by the shape of that shell nor the depth of our pain. I see you looking out at me from behind dazed eyes. Who are you, tiger? Can you tell me?

It's not as important to tell me as to tell yourself. What are you feeling?

You're sure? I told you I—

You're sure. Well, maybe there's a reason I offered to help in the first place. You had to get there for yourself, though. Lead can't be made into gold, no matter what you've heard.

But I suppose I can admit it now. Lust *can* transmute to love. If you let it. If *I* let it. It can only happen in a space where I feel safe.

Yes, like this one.

That's magic, tiger. That's magic.

Pearl Diver

by Cecilia Tan

I wrote “Pearl Diver” in 1994 when a small press editor had contacted me saying they needed one more story to fill out an anthology, and in particular they were looking for something that centered female sexuality, included a non-Eurocentric perspective, and that used the moon as symbol. At first I thought, that’s ridiculous, I can’t come up with a.... oh, wait! Inspiration struck, I sat down and wrote this, and immediately felt it was one of my best stories. Amusingly, the small press then rejected the story as violating their guideline that stories had to have more than one character in them. But serendipity struck: a call for submissions came that very week for an anthology called On A Bed of Rice: Asian American Erotic Stories, edited by Geraldine Kudaka. Geraldine not only accepted the story immediately, her agent also turned around and sold it to Ms. Magazine. Yes, stalwart feminist magazine, Ms. And from there it was picked up for Best American Erotica 1996, edited by Susie Bright. That same literary agent then took me on as a client and sold my collection Black Feathers to HarperCollins. All because of a rejection.

I breathe. As I lie still in the bottom of the boat, the sea breathes with me, rising and falling. There is just enough room for me in my little wooden shell, the oars tucked against each side. Droplets of seawater glisten on my bare skin, and I watch my own chest as I breathe, touch my stomach with my hands. The time is coming, and I am almost ready. The moon is still climbing up the sky, and I wait for it to reach its peak. It must, because that is the way things are and have always been, the moon and the sun circling forever above without cease, just as the waves must rise and fall, and the rains to follow the dry time. Tonight is not just any moonrise, though, not just any night upon the water. Tonight is the night of the pearls.

I sit up in the boat and peer over the edge. The water is dark, but the sand and the stones are almost white. Below me the silvery flash of fish in the moonlight catches my eye--but I know it is just fish, not pearls. I will know the pearls when I see them. When the moon is at its height. I have been prepared for this moment since my breasts first began to swell; for years I have prepared my body for this, to be a pearl diver.

The elders in the village say the pearls fell down from the skies; some say they are stars out of the heavens, some say *we* came down from the heavens, that we came long ago from another place where we were not the only people, where there were people with pink skin and yellow hair, that we traveled on the water in boats like my little shell, and some say that when we die we will go back to that place and others say that when we are born that is where we come from, and in any case the only thing we do all agree on is that the pearls are magic and precious, and if there is a link to our ancestors, gods, or afterlife, it is through them.

I lie back down in the boat. The moon is taking its time. I let my feet hang over the edge on either side, warm water touching my toes as the shell rocks into a small swell. The night breeze rustles the dark cluster of hair between my legs and the lips sigh open. As they taught me, I lick my finger and let it rest there, rocking my hips as each wave passes, slow as a sleeper's breath. Just as

I had been taught, I gather the magic around me, and I can almost see myself beginning to glow as I resist the urge to press my finger harder and let the energy burst and dissipate. It surges through me as I go on touching what we call the *woman's pearl*, the nub of flesh now grown hard like the treasures I will be seeking.

My eyes have slipped closed but I must keep watching the moon. I open them to find it is almost above me, looking down on me like an eager lover, who will now finally be allowed into my virgin flesh. I slip over the side of the boat and into the warm embrace of the sea. Bubbles rise up and catch between my legs, and I want to keep my hand there, but I will need both of them to swim. I lower myself under the surface of the water and as sounds grow dim, my vision grows sharp. I am a pearl diver and I know how to see through the shadows and murk. But there is nothing to see, yet. I let go the boat and float face down on the surface, my legs hanging free below me and open. I tense the muscles inside me, and feel the energy shoot through me again. Soon those muscles will do what I have practiced so long to do. The elders chose me out of all the others to do this task. All the girls of my age had been taken aside and trained, the old women rubbing our women's pearls with oil until we learned to do it ourselves, reaching fingers inside of us, first one, then, two, then three, as they exercised us until we had the strength that was needed, and holding our breaths until sometimes it seemed we did not need to breathe at all...

And now I see why. The moon must be over my head as the shadows have all shrunk as small as they can be, and I see at first faint but then as bright as the night time stars, the pearls. Glowing from the bottom. They are invisible and dead as rocks at any other time, but now they glow. Maybe, I think to myself, they fell not from the stars but from the moon itself, and they glow only when the moon draws so near. I take the last breath that I will ever draw as a girl and with wide strokes I dive toward my womanhood.

The first pearl I find is small, no bigger than the end of my thumb, and I lift it from its bed of sand and turn it in my fingers to convince myself that what they told me is true, it is smoother than anything I have ever felt, much smoother than the wooden beads we used for practice. Curling myself into a ball with my head between my knees, I open myself with one hand and slide the pearl inside me, using my muscles to draw it as far up inside as it will go...

The shock of the first vision almost makes me lose my air, a tiny silver bubble rises toward the moon as I see in my mind's eye the moon, the stars, not spread out above me like a roof but hanging all around me like a school of fish in the water, and I know that I feel my place among them.

My legs together, I stroke with my arms to the next glowing spot, and lift out of the sand a pearl the size of my eye. It feels warm, warmer than the blood-warm sea water, and with one hand I slip it inside.

This time I am ready when the vision comes: I am moving through space like a swimmer, circling down toward a planet blue with oceans, and thinking *Home! Home!* and already I am spiraling toward the next pearl, this one bright as it protrudes above the sand, almost too large to fit in my closed hand. I press it against my opening, but it does not slide in like the others. I cannot breathe to help me relax, and I do not have time to waste with only one breath of air inside me. While I take the time to do this I float toward the surface and it will be more work to get back to the bottom. As my hands work at my opening, they brush my woman's pearl and I feel something inside me blossom open like a flower, and take the white orb in.

I am swimming, turning and tumbling, as the planet below revolves in its dance around the sun, the moon its partner swinging round, and all the close family of others moving stately through

the sky, and beyond, and beyond, and beyond... and a voice, not my own, in my head, saying 'the seeds of life, scattered.'

I realize my vision is getting darker and my air is almost done but I make for one more pearl nearby. This one I lift in two hands, it is the size of my fist. Some part of me thinks I cannot hope to take it in, but one hand is already rubbing hard at my own pearl while the other is pushing the huge thing against me. It goes partway in and then slips back out and if I could I would be gasping for breath but there is only water all around me as I thrash, I need this last pearl more than all the others, I am hungry for it, the energy and magic flowing in and out of it as I push my fingers inside myself, trying to open the way wide enough, and then it is going in, it moves in my hand into me bit by bit, up to its widest point, and then, as my other hand presses hard on my woman's pearl, I swallow it whole.

The universe breathes like giant wings beating, I see people infinitely small in a band across the face of the stars, I see white glowing star stuff spread like webs across the void, I see embryos bursting into life inside mothers' wombs, I see the *man's pearl* dripping from the tip of his finger, I see all of creation. I cry out as the magic bursts through me and my bubbles race out of me like a flight of startled birds. My hands are between my legs, one keeping the pearls in place and the other holding my own pearl which throbs and ebbs, and my head breaks the surface...

and I breathe. I lie on my back in the water with the moon shining upon my breasts and I cannot take my hands from between my legs as I burst the bubble again and again, fingers furiously working as the sensations wash over me, and under the moon's watchful eye I know I will return to the shore, bearing the wisdom of ages.

Personalize Your Netherparts

by Cecilia Tan

The story “Personalize Your Netherparts” (PYN) came about when I decided to put together a collection of short stories so I would have something new to sell when I went to give the keynote speech at International Ms. Leather aka IMsL. Ostensibly a “lesbian” event, “Imm-zull,” as it is known, is possibly the queerest, most joyfully genderbent convention of long standing (since 1986!). For those not familiar with the leather subculture, at the event’s heart is a sort of “beauty pageant” contest in which people compete for the title of International Ms. Leather, but the key is that there is no gender policing: anyone who would proudly wear the label “Ms.” can go for it.

I thought, here I am in my fifties, this decade I will finally get around to writing about my gender-identification bullshit. Then I compiled the collection to get it ready for IMsL, pulling together all the quote-unquote “lesbian” stories from all across my career, and when I had them all lined up I realized that every single one had a female-bodied protagonist who was grappling with her masculinity in some way. Some of them are butch, some are bigender, some are transmasculine, but I guess it proved that I have been mining this theme all along without realizing it. In my defense, I contain multitudes and my subconscious is always ambushing me. Getting surprised by things my subconscious has been withholding from my consciousness is a big part of my writing process. The process on this story was spurred by the Kickstarter I ran to raise the funds to self-publish the book. One of the stretch goals was “make ctan write a new story” and another was an online party for the backers. (We were still in semi-lockdown then.) At the party, we played various word games and the winner got the grand prize: give me from one to three words as a prompt for the story I’m going to write. As it happens, a Boston-area con-goer (hi, K!) won, and gave me this prompt: “easy alternate genitalia.” That sounded like an advertising slogan to me and... once I had that thought, the story basically wrote itself

There aren’t enough expletives in all the languages I know to express what I feel when I alight from the train at the Horizon Plaza station and catch sight of the ad for PYNTEch on the billboard that runs up the side of our building. The building is 14 stories high—172 feet—which means that the anatomically correct, 100% lifelike penis that the ad depicts is at least 171 feet long. It stares at me as if the slit at the top is actually a single eye on a monstrous alien worm. And then words appear along it, as if the erect flesh has been tattooed with taffeta-nano ink, the swirling blackwork calligraphy rainbowing as if an invisible hand is stroking upward.

I don’t even *have* a penis and I clench my thighs at the thought of getting tattooed there.

“ALL THIS CAN BE YOURS,” the lettering reads. Then a second line appears. “Easy Alternate Genitalia, *Now In Reach!*” The slogan is then occluded by a host of hands reaching for it, fingers just barely about to close around the turgid flesh... when the advertisement blinks out, leaving only the PYNTEch logo, spinning like a penny. I take off my googs and look with the naked eye, half-hoping the ad was only visible in AR, but I can still see the logo.

A tamer ad—for climate-resistant house paint—follows, thank goodness.

So much for Jarry’s promise that if we did any advertising, it would be “tasteful” and “not

push boundaries.” The ink is barely dry on the court case that established this loophole: while real nudity is still considered illegal to display in public, artistic facsimiles—including the very lifelike—are allowable.

And what we make at PYNtech are definitely facsimiles. Jarry will never understand that if the ruling is reversed it will likely be because of antics like his.

I’m seething, but marketing is his job, not mine, and we established long ago who holds the reins in which department. I enter the building through the lobby doors right around where a blobby bare ballsac had been minutes ago. I take the elevator up to my office on the lab level, which would be right below where the v-shaped crown peaked.

This, honestly, is not where I thought I’d end up when I started studying vat grown meat in college. In grad school I thought I was so lucky to land a spot in Dr. Kentaro Henry’s lab, where they perfected the technique of growing wagyu-style ribeye. (The legendary story of how a young Ken brought a barbecue grill to thesis defense is of course well known.) The idea was to grow edible meat cells in a lab in a manner that was efficient and environmentally friendly, but also created the texture and flavor that previously could only be created by an actual animal walking (or swimming) around.

I was the first one to introduce artificial nerve endings. It had started out purely as a way to try to get the muscle fibers to contract in a more energy-efficient way. I wasn’t the one who had dreamed of making sex toys out of it.

No, that had been Jarry. Which was not really a surprise when you consider that back then Jarry thought about sex as often as I thought about nucleotides.

Some things don’t change. As I exit the elevator and try to stride past the cubicles of his media team to get to my own office as quickly as possible, his arm appears around my waist and he sweeps me in a circle like a ballroom dancer. He has clearly been lying in wait for me. “Did you see it? You love it, don’t you.”

When he says the word “love” he growls like some kind of beast.

“No, J, I don’t love it,” I say, barely deterred by his choreography in my march toward the lab. Various underlings of his are staring, or pretending not to.

I’m about to launch into a diatribe about how, even if our corporate legal liability didn’t just skyrocket, there are a billion other reasons not to just force thousands of commuters a day to look at a giant dick on the side of our building, but as I glance back at him I see his effusive glee has deflated to a sullen, wounded look.

I settle for, “It was a bad idea and you know it.”

He sighs and turns in the direction of the elevator as I’m unlocking the entry to my lab. Then he spins back and says, in his most neutral voice, “You used to think it was a thing of beauty.”

I suddenly understand the wounded look. That wasn’t just any vat-grown phallus, was it? Only Jarry would think himself a genius for flashing his own genitalia at the whole city.

“I want it down before the first stockholder complains,” I say, in a sharp tone I haven’t used with him in years. “And if it’s too late for that already, then...” I’m at a loss for what to say. If this were one of the games we used to play, there would be some excruciating punishment awaiting him, something I would dole out bit by bit while ramping up my own pleasure. But this isn’t one of those games. I apply the best, worst threat I have in my arsenal. “...then I’ll issue a recall for your model and you’ll have to hand it over by the end of the day.”

I’ve never seen his jaw actually drop before. This isn’t one of his practiced, dramatic looks. He’s genuinely shocked. “You wouldn’t!”

“I would. I can, and I will. Take it down, Jarry, from everywhere.” The door beeps as it acknowledges my presence and slides open. “Or else.” I step in and the door slides shut, coming between us like a jealous mother-in-law.

On the laboratory side of the portal, puffs of air and disinfecting light greet me. At the end of the intake chamber I go into the locker room to change my clothes. It takes me about ten minutes to get suited up to enter the sterile area.

By the time I reach my desk, in an office overlooking the vat farm on floor 12, I can already see the alert light blinking in the upper right corner of my googs. Priority message. Aziz, my AI assistant, may not be as smart as a real human, but it knows when to flag an email from PYNTech’s biggest shareholder. The alert is amber, but I am seeing red. Sure enough, they are not happy, and neither am I.

Having made the threat, I have to make good on it. After forwarding the email to Jarry to deal with, I push a recall notice for his appliance—which, after all, technically belongs to PYNTech and not him—and then I send him a Backchannel™ message, as well: *I want it on my desk by lunchtime.*

His reply scrolls past my eyes: *Can’t it wait until morning?*

I shoot back, think-texting: *Why, hot date tonight?*

The lack of a snappy reply makes me think I’m right.

Sometimes I hate being right.

I spend the morning with a couple of our endocrinologists. They’re fairly giddy that they’re so close to being able to implement artificial insemination, they think we should start lining up real test subjects. Within six months, they say, they think they’ll have an implant for the PYN180 that will be deliver viable sperm into a natural womb. Viable artificial wombs are still a couple of years away. That’s the holy grail, as far as I’m concerned, because it would mean we could position ourselves as real viable family planning alternative and gain the ironclad ability to market to and through the health care industry, instead of what we are now, which is designer sex toys for the elite.

It galls me to no end that we can’t *already* market ourselves as life-affirming, gender-affirming care for trans, nonbinary, and genderfluid folks. Too many laws still on the books from the 2020s. But with the vat farms now at full capacity we’ve been able to drop the price to something reasonably affordable. Getting new genitals for your midlife crisis is now cheaper than a sportscar and certainly less passé.

I know the moment Jarry arrives. My assistants are convinced I’m psychic because my head always goes up like a meerkat’s right before the visitor alert chimes, but it’s actually that I can feel the slight change in air pressure in the lab whenever someone enters the intake chamber. And he’s the only person I’m expecting at midday.

I have my Aziztant direct him to my private lab, which is already prepped for an appliance removal.

Another Backchannel crawl stripes my vision: You’re really going to leave me defenseless?

I reply: *Defenseless? Are you going to a dick duel or something?*

Tiv, please. I know you’re angry. I know that’s why you’re doing this. Or you would’ve offered me a loaner.

I don’t reply. He’s right. I’m doing this to punish him.

When I enter the lab he’s sitting there on the procedure table completely nude, stroking himself shamelessly while he talks to his PYN like it’s a kitten and I’m a veterinarian.

He finally looks up to meet my gaze.

“If you really need a loaner,” I say, “Kal’s got a prototype of the dolphin we’ve been working on.”

Jarry’s eyes light up. “Are you serious?”

“It’s the female dolphin,” I clarify.

To my surprise, this dims his enthusiasm not at all. “Is it the spiral-shaped bottlenose one?”

“It is.” I cross my arms, looking him up and down. Twenty years ago we were just horny grad students with a dream. Ten years ago I had to hack our own building security system to black out this lab, just to make sure we weren’t unintentionally providing an in-house porn feed to employees.

I mean, it *was* research, technically.

But that was then. We stopped not long after that, around the time the *Forbes* profile came out, the one with the infamous quote that described me as married to my work and Jarry as just sleeping with it. That was right before the company went public and so did Jarry’s marriage to a supermodel whose name I can’t even remember. (The marriage was quite short-lived.) His hair is artificially blonder now—to hide the gray—but his cheeks are just as plump, his smirk just as insouciant.

He swallows, sobering a bit under my examination. “I know I went too far.”

I put my gloved hand on his shoulder and ease him back onto the biometric gelpad so I can glance at his vitals. “Do you?”

“If I didn’t, do you think I’d actually let you do this to me, Tivi?” He’s searching my face and I wonder what he’s looking for. “I’m sorry. I let my ego run away with me.”

“Yeah, and ‘Egomaniac tech CEO’ is so 2020s,” I say.

He smirks at my joke. “You always were the only one who could put me in my place.”

I open my mouth to jokingly ask if I should give him a spanking as well... but before the words can reach my mouth I realize *I’m not joking*. The surge of emotion that rushes up through me feels hot, but it’s not anger, not anymore. It makes my spine feel like steel and my face flushes. “You’ve proved you can’t be trusted with your toy so I’m taking it away,” I say. “And I think you deserve a spanking.”

His gasp and the thrill on his face make him look like he’s reached the peak of a rollercoaster that’s about to plummet. “Whatever you wish!”

It takes a mere gesture to get him to flip over and show me his ass. On his back is an extensive tattoo of a pair of angel wings. The ink looks black at first, but I know that wherever I touch it’ll sparkle with iridescence. He groans as his still-erect PYN presses into the gelpad under him and I rub my gloved hands in preparation.

The first smack on his bottom startles me with how loud it sounds in the sterile room. I try to match it exactly on the other buttock and he groans again, humping the table.

I cluck my tongue. “You’re enjoying this far too much. You’ll take the rest of the spanking after the removal.”

He whimpers, but he obediently turns back over.

When our products are installed, typically the recipient is given sedation similar to what one would have during a colonoscopy. It isn’t strictly necessary, but psychologically it seems to aid the adjustment for people who have never had alternate genitals before.

Jarry’s an old pro, though. We also usually advise a new recipient to allow at least six hours for the full graft to integrate neurally. For Jarry and me, though, it really only takes about thirty

minutes, sometimes less. We used to jokingly refer to it as the “refractory period.”

“I’m going to engage the restraints to keep you from wiggling around, since I’m not going to sedate you,” I say.

“Of course,” he says, voice high with apprehension. I surmise it’s been a while since Jarry’s been restrained.

The setup of the procedure table is all too convenient for this. Of course it is. We designed it that way. I’d forgotten that. I reposition him on his back, thighs and waist strapped down to keep his pelvis immobile, and then I run the cannula across his upper lip with the two small prongs in his nostrils.

He breathes deep and then whimpers as I flood his system with the neurochemical signal that tells the nanobots to disengage. Even without sedation, it should make him feel pretty spacey. He hums but falls silent as my hands search his skin. Not long after, I’m able to find the seam between the real Jarry and his “cosmetic appliance.” He whimpers a bit as I peel it free and plop it into the receptacle tray.

It’s been years since I’ve seen Jarry au naturel. He’s hairless and his enormously engorged clit peeks from between his smooth lips.

“How are you going to spank me if I’m strapped down like this?” he asks, pupils as big as fairy tale saucers.

I let out an evil laugh of surprise, because until he asked I hadn’t thought that far ahead. But now it’s obvious. “Give me your hands.”

I place his hands on his vulva, one on either side, pressing his lips together so that the ripened blackberry of his clit protrudes above his knuckles by a good half inch or so.

He trembles. “You wouldn’t.”

“I would.” I take up the ruler we use to measure specimens and anatomical positions. It’s a clear, rigid plastic with inch markings up one side and centimeters up the other. “I’m sure you’ve taken one of these across the knuckles before when you were naughty, hm?”

He swallows, and his answer comes out a whisper. “Yes, Tivi.”

I wonder if he remembers his safeword. Not that I think he’d use it. Not when he thinks he deserves this.

“Count,” I say, as I raise the ruler and bring it down with a loud smack.

He grits his teeth, jaw tight, processing the pain of the blow before gasping out, “One.”

I let the silence stretch as I savor the moment. It feels almost like the pain rippled through the air itself, caressing me like a luxurious breeze. Then I prompt him. “And?”

He grimaces as if to silently ask me if we *have* to do it this way. My silence and raised eyebrow insist that *yes, we do*. He sighs and adds, “May I have another?”

I nod and position the hand holding the ruler right beside where I want it to strike, pulling it back with my other hand, ready to let go at any moment. He cringes but can’t bring himself to look away, either.

The ruler snaps downward and leaves a stripe across his knuckles, but where he feels it most, I know, is right on that hypersensitive knob of erect flesh.

“Two,” he croaks out. “May I have another?”

Yes, you certainly may. I let him have it again, and again. I draw in a long, slow breath. It’s like each time I hit him there, I’m pressing a button wired right to my own pleasure centers. I know we shouldn’t go past ten, though, not unless I want to risk actually damaging him. Right?

When we get to ten, though, he just grits his teeth and says, “May I have another?”

“Do you feel you deserve another?” I ask. I can feel my own arousal all the way from the soles of my feet through my gut and right to the end of my hand. “Or have you learned your lesson?”

“I... I...” He seems to be struggling with words, or maybe with himself somehow. “I deserve whatever correction you deem necessary, Tivi. B-But.” He bites his lip, squeezing his eyes shut on... tears?

“Jarry.” I say his name to remind him to be present. To remind him of himself. And of me. “But-what?”

“I deserve to be punished. But would my tormentor please...” He turns his head away, as if embarrassed to look at me, as he answers. “Please use your own hand?”

I’m not entirely sure what’s going on in Jarry’s mind, but I agree. “Very well.” I brush a teardrop from his eyelashes with my thumb. “But it means starting over.”

He closes his eyes and whispers. “As you wish.”

So. That means ten more smacks, right on the pubis, catching his clit with the fat part of my palm on each one. I don’t tease him this time. I give him a few seconds between blows but otherwise I am relentless, each one harder than the previous, putting every ounce of my annoyance and frustration and exasperation into hitting him *right there*.

He’s weeping by the end, like maybe he knows this has not only cracked him open, it’s cracked me open, too. I see it clearly then. This was what he wanted all along. The dick billboard was all a gamble to try to get my attention. This kind of attention.

And part of me says I shouldn’t be giving him what he wants. That’s no way to teach him a lesson. So. If he’s going to have a shred of humility after all this, instead of just a smug surety that he can do it again, I know I have to make sure he’s come completely undone. The tears are a good start, but...

I change the flow of gas to prep him to accept the new appliance, the dolphin vagina. In his extremely aroused state the graft should take to him quickly. He moans as I secure his hands into restraints just because I can, and then I begin the fitting.

While it’s settling, I press my mouth to his, breathing in the sweet odor of the mixture. He gasps as I suck on his breath. Has he guessed why I want a hit of the neurogas?

Perhaps he has when I start stripping out of my scrubs. I haven’t been this aroused in years.

And I haven’t worn a PYN in years, either. My sexuality never was as tied to gender or genitalia as much as it was to dominance and submission, to sadism and masochism. But sometimes genitalia, whether real or applied, can play a part in that.

I take up Jarry’s dick and graft it onto myself. It feels pendulous, and only moreso as it fills, lengthens, thickens. I stroke it roughly with one hand and then rub it against the edge of the table, enjoying the pain in myself as much as his groans and his feeble attempts to tell me to *be careful with it*.

“You’d rather I rubbed it up and down right here, I suppose,” I say, as I find the area that is the dolphin clit and thrust hard against it. The sound he makes is nearly as high-pitched as a cetacean.

The dolphin vagina is twisty inside and lubricates itself well, and fucking it is possibly one of the most pleasurable sensations I’ve ever had. It feels like more than just the dick is receiving the sensation. It’s like all of me is being plunged into pleasure, and the harder I fuck, the better it feels.

Orgasm is inevitable but is not what will satisfy me.

Only Jarry’s utter capitulation, only the complete deflation of his ego through the humiliation of being fucked utterly senseless by his own cock, only the absolute loss of sense and perspective

that will come from begging me to abase him even more, to deny him orgasm until after I've come in every orifice of his available to me, both real and grafted, including down his throat and onto his face...

What, you think we'd design a cock that could only come once?

After all that, he's reduced to just blubbering the word "please" over and over with the occasional "I promise to be good" thrown in for variety. I ungraft the dolphin appliance and rub his own fingers up and down his bare clit until he's just shuddering uncontrollably. I keep frigging mercilessly until he's come so many times he can no longer move at all, unless you count his fluttering eyelids, and he barely has the energy to beg me to stop.

Then, and only then, am I satisfied.

Hours later, he sits up on the couch in my office, waking up to find I've restored the PYN180 to him and he surprises me again, this time by breaking down in tears for the second time that day.

I drape a blanket over his shoulders, my touch triggering the rainbow effect on the feathers of his tattoo. "I take it you just realized you're on your own to explain to all your afternoon appointments why you blew them off." I hand him a tissue to dab his eyes with. "Or are those tears of relief that now you can still go on that hot date you had planned for tonight?"

He just shakes his head, like he can't stop weeping. I feel a chill of fear that I've misread him and pushed him too far. "Jarry, you okay?"

He lets out a long breath and wipes his eyes. "What do you think? Would I have made a gimungous self-destructive bid for your attention if I was okay?"

My arm feels heavy where my hand rests on his shoulder. "I suppose not. But wasn't it you who said I didn't turn you on anymore?"

He looks up at me. "I may have been trying to protect myself from feeling rejected by you... by rejecting you first."

"That is the mindset that leads to gimungous self-destructive bids for attention instead of just, oh, *asking me*."

He rocks in place slightly, hugging himself. I can guess what he's thinking about. He's thinking about the whole married-to-my-work thing, and how I have maybe a tenth of the sex drive he has, and all the reasons we've been many kinds of partner, but never the romantically pair-bonded twosome kind. His voice is small. "Would you have said yes?"

"We'll never know because you didn't ask." I stand and then lean down to kiss him on the forehead and hand him a bottle of rehydrating solution. "I've got to get down to vat inspection."

He just nods and sucks greedily on the solution.

He won't see my Backchannel addition until he puts his googs on: *Next time, ask me first. And I don't mean about advertising.*

A Really Brief History of Circler Press by Cecilia Tan

I gave a talk at Emerson College recently (where I got my masters in writing) and it reminded me just how weird and wild the world of publishing is, and small press publishing especially. I started Circler while I was working my first desk job in the book business. Right out of college I got hired at Beacon Press, a super-liberal left wing publisher in Boston owned by the Unitarian Universalist Association. It had dawned on me as graduation approached that if I, a self-declared writer, was going to have a day job to support my writing habit, a job in book publishing was a great idea. Learn the biz, make contacts, etc. Meanwhile, I was doing what aspiring writers did back then, which was send Self-Addressed Stamped Envelopes to publishers all over, compiling their writers guidelines, and submitting short story manuscripts to the ones that were apropos. One day I sat down and wrote a story called “Telepaths Don’t Need Safewords.” When I thought of the title, it was like a bell rang in my head and kept on resonating as I wrote it. Despite my undergrad classes in writing, my early attempts at contributions to school literary magazines, et cetera, it was the first time I really felt a story “gel.” I knew I was onto something.

But when I went to my three-ring binder of writers guidelines, and when I went to research in books like *Writers Market* and *Novel & Short Story Writers Market*, what I found was that every place that would accept science fiction had a rule that said No Erotica. And every place that would take an erotic story had a rule that said No Science Fiction. I was astounded. Surely I could not be the only person in the world who wanted to put the chocolate and the peanut butter together...?

With nowhere else to publish it, in 1991, I ended up posting “Telepaths Don’t Need Safewords” to the Usenet newsgroup alt.sex.bondage. (For those who don’t know what Usenet was, it was kinda like Reddit.) I immediately received a flood of positive feedback from kinky folks all over the world telling me it was one of the best BDSM stories they had ever read. Apparently I was correct, the chocolate and the peanut butter DID go together. (Fun fact: at the time I wrote that story, I had not yet actually done BDSM in real life.)

I founded Circler Press to not only put “Telepaths” in print, but to create a place where other writers and readers who liked mixing erotica with science fiction/fantasy could find each other. Ultimately that is what a publisher does: transmit words from writer to reader, and transmit money back the other direction. It’s mind-boggling now to realize that, at the time, the term “paranormal romance” didn’t yet exist in the industry. Somehow, erotica and sf/f had grown as genres with a massive wall between them. I ended up quitting my job at Beacon to pursue grad school at Emerson, and instead of getting an MFA in writing as I originally intended, I instead wrote an MA thesis that included a historical overview of previous attempts to put the erotic and the fantastic together, and a five-year business plan for Circler. The historical predecessors for Circler were few. There were scattered anthologies like *Eros In Orbit: A collection of All New SF Stories About Sex* (New York: Trident Press, 1973) and *Sex In the 21st Century: A Collection of SF Erotica* (London: Granada Publishing, 1979), but no book publisher or imprint dedicated to the genre. One of the only attempts was by none other than Andrew J. Offutt, former president of SFWA and popular contributor to the *Thieves World* books, who—in addition to his original sf/f novels and his Conan the Barbarian tie-ins—authored over 400 pornographic novels under a host of pen names. (His son Chris eventually penned a memoir, 2017’s *My Father, The Pornographer*.) Many top writers

in sf/f in the 1970s made money writing porn, including Robert Silverberg, Frederik Pohl, and Cordwainer Smith, but they only rarely melded the genres. My surmise is that there was too much societal pressure to stay in the closet about the porn writing, and the publishers preferred to keep everything separate, as well.

I had no such qualms and no intention of being quiet, especially having just come out of college in the era of ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and Queer Nation. When I see a closet door, I kick it down. I decided to publish under my real name. I was a bisexuality activist and quickly found myself part of the groundswell of sex-positive feminist erotica publishing that was rising right as Circler was getting going. Small erotica publishers like Down There Press (the imprint of the Good Vibrations woman-owned sex toy store), queer imprints like Black Books, lesbian publishers like Cleis Press (which pivoted their focus from politics and poetry to a lot of smut), and many others were all part of sea change in the way erotica was curated, published, and consumed. We essentially created and grew a market for upscale erotica anthologies that were carried by all the major bookstores, eventually resulting a decade dominated by not only the *Best American Erotica* series (edited by Susie Bright for Simon & Schuster), but also endless other anthologies with “Best” in the title, including *Best Women’s Erotica* (Cleis), *Best Lesbian Erotica* (Cleis), *Best Erotic Fantasy & Science Fiction* (*cough* Circler), *Best Fantastic Erotica* (Circler, again), *Best New Paranormal Romance* (Juno), and even the parody-but-also-brilliant *The Best of the Best Meat Erotica* (Suspect Thoughts Press).

But Circler remained the only dedicated imprint for erotic science fiction and fantasy out there for over 20 years. We were also dedicated to a pansexual approach, often mixing straight and gay stories together, and gay and lesbian together, much to the consternation of the gay bookstores, who would often take me aside and try to explain that their store was like The Gap, with all the women’s books on one side of the store and all the men’s books on the other... and so where-*oh-where* were they going to shelve a book of erotica that had—*gasp*—both?? My usual answer was either: *well, buy twice as many and put it on both sides*, or, *how about just pile it up right by the cash register?* More often than not what ended up happening was they just put us in their science fiction section, which was usually NOT sex-segregated, thank goodness, but it meant they had to get over this persistent idea that sex and science fiction could not go together. Or they had to create an anthologies shelf, where all the erotica ended up, which was what happened in Waldenbooks and some mainstream bookstores where they didn’t LABEL a shelf “erotica,” but they certainly sold a ton of it.

The thing about the upscale erotica “boom” though, was that it came at the same time as the big bookstore chains, Barnes & Noble and Borders (or as I sometimes called them, Barnes Ignoble and Boredoms), were putting over 85% of the independent bookstores in the country out of business. We went from around 5,000 healthy independent bookstores in the US (and Canada) to around 500 in a span of ten years. Every time a bookstore closed or went bankrupt, they usually went under owing the publishers money. And the smaller the publisher, the less likely it was you got paid while they were struggling. And of course it was independent bookstores that supported small presses like Circler the most.

The result was not only bookstores going under, but wholesalers and distributors that served them. Twice Circler had major distributors go belly up and nearly put us out of business. The first time the distributor was a Hartford, Connecticut, concern called Inland Book Company. Inland handled repping many of the queer and underground publishers of the day, not only warehousing our books but actively soliciting pre-orders from stores for us. The only reason we got wind of

what was going on was because at various book conventions we had gone out partying with various employees of Inland, who were also radical book-loving people, and who wouldn't like to hang out with the science fiction pornographers? (C'mon, we were always the coolest.) Our drinking buddies who worked in the Inland warehouse essentially called up and tipped us off that everything was going to be seized, but if we could, oh, drive by on Tuesday at 3pm, they could conveniently have our books sitting on the loading dock. We were at Philcon at the time. We readily agreed to pass by there on our drive back to Boston. So, the morning after the SFWA annual Mill & Swill in NYC, corwin and I drove our Chevy Beretta hatchback (a hand-me-down from my parents) up to Hartford, and our friends loaded up every cubic inch of the interior with books. It was about \$10,000 worth of inventory. The undercarriage was literally scraping the road as we got on the highway, but we made it home unscathed by either automotive mishap or the bankruptcy.

Publishing anything to do with sexuality in a largely sex-negative society always meant we had an uphill battle, and that battle is still going on. Not only do erotic (and queer *non-erotic*) publishers face literal censorship, book bans, removal from libraries, etc. but there are the hidden costs, too. Like at one point another small publisher urged me to get a quote from their printer which had an amazing price and really increased their margins. I spoke to a rep on the phone at C&C Press, everything seemed fine, and I Fedexed off the files (this was before we did everything digitally) to them. The next day I got a message on my answering machine saying they were Fedexing it all back to me with a very, very apologetic tone: "I'm so sorry we can't print this for you, but what you don't know is that C&C Press is short for Christ and Country Press, and while I have no objection to your kind of material existing, I don't think the good Lord put me on earth to do that kind of work." They were so cheap because they were a Bible printer.

As should be obvious by now, I didn't do it alone. I don't know why fate put me in the position to be the one to declare that the chocolate and the peanut butter go together, but as soon as I did, just like in the old Reese's commercials, the ice was broken and everyone who loved the combination was freed. It meant I had the privilege of publishing well-known, well established writers like Jack Haldeman II, Catherine Asaro, and Francesca Lia Block, and I also got to be the first publisher (or a very early publisher) for many up and coming lovers of the combo, including Mary Anne Mohanraj, M. Christian, and Raven Kaldera. I also got to bring some of my favorite books that had gone out of print elsewhere back into print, including Delia Sherman's *Through a Brazen Mirror*, Nancy Kilpatrick's *Darker Passions* series, and Laura Antoniou's *Marketplace* books. Many folks who sold early work to Circler have gone on to be Hugo- and Nebula-award winners, some of whom I can't out their pen names, but some used their regular names or are publicly known, including N.K. Jemisin, Monique Poirier (aka Moniquill Blackgoose), and David D. Levine. Writing always exposes ones most vulnerable side, and erotic writing even moreso, and I am thankful for the trust writers gave to me and my staff, because without writers, there are no books. There is no "product." Publishers should always remember that, and it's an ethos I tried to pass on to my interns and staff editors, some of whom went on to edit sf/f publications like *Strange Horizons* (hi, Susan!) and *Betwixt* (hello, Joy!).

I couldn't have done it without the help and support of my longtime partner corwin (Reader, I married him), who ran accounts payable/receivable for the company until we sold it in 2020, the stockholders who bought in when we incorporated (the original form of crowdfunding!), many *many* people running conventions including Readercon, Arisia, Philcon, Lunacon, Boskone, and many Worldcons, for putting me (and Circler's writers and editors) on panels, letting us run smutty readings and throw parties, and the readers who have been showing up for us since 1992. I can't

thank you all enough.

I have lots and lots more stories of publishing adventures I can tell you, but I have a word limit, so you'll just have to ask me about them some time on the hotel patio or at a book party down the road.

Appreciations for Cecilia Tan

I've long had an intellectual crush on Cecilia Tan... well, if I'm honest, it's probably more than intellectual. I blame a wicked and skillful tongue. Seriously! My strongest memory of them was at a convention where they demonstrated tying a cherry stem with their tongue... and that, uh, has stuck with me for literal decades.

All that aside, Cecilia is one of those people who has always made fandom and pro-dom feel welcoming--particularly to those of us who are queer. I remember at a Chicago WorldCON feeling very much like a nobody because I'd just been on a boat full of authors far more famous than I was. Then, I walked into a party that Cecilia was hosting. Their smile and recognition made me feel like I'd found my people, that I was home, where I belonged and was valued. That kind of generous soul is rare and wonderful.

— Lyda Morehouse, award-winning author of the AngeLINK series. Lyda also writes paranormal romance as Tate Hallaway.

I first encountered Cecilia Tan's work when I was in college. I graduated from Smith College (Northampton, MA) in 1996. During my first semester, Northampton was featured in a news segment on *20/20* as "the lesbian capital of the world." *That* phone call with my mom was awkward; I was in the midst of the not-uncommon experience of figuring out some things about myself in my first semester away from home. Being queer was dangerous; not an aspect of my 1990s experience I wished to repeat.

In each dorm at Smith, first-years had sophomores formally designated as mentors, "Heads of New Students" (HONS). HONS helped us move in, find our classrooms, figure out how to join clubs, and adjust to college life. They volunteered to be the designated awkward question answerers for all manner of first-year existential crises. Which were plentiful.

Three a.m. confessions of newfound *queer feelings* happened to the one out lesbian HONS often enough that our dorm had also developed an informal tradition: The Porn Fairy. When one of those conversations happened, a day or two later, a stack of relevant literature from the local LGBTQ bookstore, both factual and fictional, including several flavors of erotica, would appear discreetly on the dorm room threshold of the student in question, so that they could read and explore at their own pace. Once they had done so, the stack would be placed back on the threshold, and the books would magically disappear until they were needed again by the next person. When it was my turn, the Porn Fairy delivered an anthology that featured an early short story of Cecilia's.

Let's just say it made *quite* an impression. I sought out more of her work through college, my first job, graduate school, and starting my career as a professional librarian. Because of the timing of her publication history and my life and career, who I am as a queer woman and professional librarian was literally shaped by Cecilia and the Circket Press. She unwittingly stepped into the role of my personal Porn Fairy. (I still have a copy of the first edition of *Black Feathers* that I keep meaning to have her sign, and never remember to bring with me when we're going to be in the

same place. Maybe next time.)

It takes courage to ask for what you really want. I'm an inveterate romance reader in addition to being a science fiction reader. When asked, I've been recommending Cecilia's work for decades, particularly after the *Fifty Shades of Grey* explosion. Cecilia makes consent sexy. She depicts singular moments of intimacy with elegance and verve. Whether the characters are princes in disguise, aliens from the Velderet, or rock stars from Earth, they are relatable and memorable. She makes vulnerability beautiful and powerful.

At a late 2000s WisCon, when I was working as a rare books librarian at Northern Illinois University, I met Cecilia in person for the first time. As the then-owner of the Circler Press, with over a decade of significant contributions to the queer community, she was working across two of my major collecting areas: science fiction and queer literature. The Porn Fairy was, once again, meeting me exactly where I was at.

There I found myself, visibly flustered and turning bright pink, as my brain struggled to not shut down while connecting the live person to the name that had featured prominently on my naughty shelves for over a decade. I awkwardly explained how much I enjoyed her work and how important I felt it was.

I was brave and asked for what I wanted: her archives.

Luckily for me, she was very gracious, and we began working together to bring her materials and those of Circler Press to NIU.

We have since become warm friends and colleagues. She has been incredibly supportive of *Uncanny Magazine*, including supporting multiple Kickstarters with rewards and helping us to find an affordable printer for the limited print run of *Disabled People Destroy Science Fiction*. In my current role in the Rare Book & Manuscript Library at the University of Illinois, I invited her to interview the legendary lesbian pulp writer Ann Bannon for one of our public programs. That conversation is still available on our YouTube channel, and I highly recommend taking the time to watch two legends of queer literature discuss their work.

The Porn Fairy is queer history.

Cecilia's impressive career as an author and publisher has been formally recognized by numerous organizations. She has won lifetime achievement awards from multiple organizations, including being inducted into the Saints & Sinners Literary Festival's Hall of Fame for GLBT writers, the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Leather Association, and the Romantic Times Career Achievement Award in Erotic Fiction and Pioneer Award for Genre Fiction (erotica). She has also won the Tweed Webb lifetime achievement award from the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR). (I mostly forgive her for being a Yankees fan as a lifetime Red Sox fan myself). And, of course, she's this year's GOH at ReaderCon.

Cecilia Tan's work across a storied career is expansive, inclusive, and hot as hell. We are unfortunately back in an era where any work depicting sexuality and/or queerness is now once again in the crosshairs for book bans and erasure across the nation. Reading her is once again an act of rebellion.

Thank you, Porn Fairy. It's been a pleasure.

— Lynne M. Thomas, *Uncanny Magazine*

Cecilia Tan as I Know Her:

It was one in the morning on the coldest night of the winter when I called. My husband had been in an accident, taken to the Beth Israel Hospital with part of his finger torn off. No, he didn't need me to pick him up, but I had to get his car from where he had left it. At one in the morning with a wind chill factor that brought the real feel somewhere around minus ten.

Cecilia Tan is the person I called. She came, immediately, without any question except "Is he okay?" and "Do we need to get him at the hospital?"

"No," I told her, "I just need to get the car."

She was at my house in ten minutes, her car nice and warm. She drove me to where he'd left his car earlier in the evening and then asked if I wanted her to come back home with me. Maybe make me some tea?

Because Cecilia always makes the best tea. I wasn't sure I could show her my paltry tea cabinet.

Okay, maybe I could have taken an Uber that night, but I was shocked and afraid and not thinking clearly. And I needed a friend.

Cecilia Tan is that kind of friend. That kind of person. When you need her she is there, not just with platitudes, but with knowledge followed by action. Probably followed by tea because tea is the WD-40 of life.

It would be easy to be jealous of Cecilia for her talent, her accolades, her many prizes and prestigious publications. Only how could anyone begrudge someone like her her well-earned success when she goes out of her way to constantly support and mentor others? When, if you need a place to shower when your bathroom floods, she tells you to come on over and hands you a towel. When you don't know what to do with a character or a scene she'll spend hours brainstorming where it could go and how you could put things together.

And when all else fails, she'll even do a Tarot reading for your protagonist, because no matter what you believe, it still might break the dam and give you a new perspective.

Then there's Cecilia Tan the baseball fan. The Yankees lover who has season tickets and drives down to New York for every game. But Cecilia is writer and editor enough that somehow she didn't just attend games, she became a baseball writer, first with her Yankees column, and now is the head of publications for SABR, the Society of Baseball Research, where she edits a scholarly journal of baseball research. Not only has she won awards for her fiction, but she has also won the USA Today Sports Weekly Award for her presentation, "The Women's Baseball Marathon" and was co-winner of the Tweed Webb Lifetime Achievement award for editing, "The Negro Leagues are Major Leagues."

Baseball is not the only subject where Cecilia has made serious scholarly contributions. She has also published papers on romance as literature, enough so that she has been offered a Ph.D. in the field should she publish just a few more.

Don't get the idea that Cecilia is all work and no play though. She's funny as all get out. I hope that you have the opportunity to hear her read her short story "Catwoman and Batgirl." You'll laugh so hard you'll gasp for air. Yes, it's the writing, but her rendition is hilarious. As are her jokes—especially once she's had a cocktail or two. But catch her quickly because she has that special gene where she metabolizes alcohol fast and doesn't even get a hangover.

The thing is, there isn't anything I can think of that Cecilia doesn't do ridiculously well. She plays classical guitar (and I'm still waiting for that book about Sor and Tarrega that you said

you were going to write!) and makes outrageously good dumplings. She took a napkin folding class on a cruise, so I have to ask her to do the napkins every year for the Christmas table. She studies Japanese, has traveled around the world, and has eaten at more Michelin starred restaurants than I can name. And she takes pictures of all the various dishes so you can see them on her Instagram. She says she hates salad and yet made the most delicious composed salad I've ever eaten.

Cecilia's fluent in Spanish and when she was in high school she was a superfan of the group Menudo—to the point that she got to travel with them to Puerto Rico to write about them. So she gained her expertise in the music industry and what it's like to be in a successful band to write her popular serial Daron's Guitar Chronicles.

Yeah, Cecilia's done all of this—and more. But the most remarkable thing is that I've never seen her be unkind to anyone. I've seen her stand up for people who are marginalized, but I have never seen her put anyone down. She is there for everyone she accepts into her world one hundred percent. Including driving out in minus ten weather at one in the morning, without a second thought.

Because while Cecilia Tan is through the roof talented and works harder than any three other people together, and has mastered at least four different professions, she is, above all, one of the most decent, best humans I know. That is the Cecilia Tan I know, and as you get to know her work over this convention, I hope that you get to know this woman as well.

— Shariann Lewitt, science fiction & fantasy author

Cecilia Tan has changed my life — and I am by no means alone.

Thirty years ago, I was barely at the start of figuring out my whole deal as a kinky queer person and as a writer. I didn't know where to start looking, and I was half convinced that nobody else had ever had any of the feelings that I was trying to make sense of. And then one day, I was in a record store but also sold zines and indie books, and I stumbled on a book by Cecilia named *Telepaths Don't Need Safewords*.

That book was a total revelation to me. Partly because I didn't know that you could write science fiction like that, and partly because I didn't know that you could even talk about BDSM and sexuality so openly and with so much tenderness and nuance. Since then I've become a massive admirer of Cecilia's writing — I don't know how many people I have urged to read her classic BDSM novel set on another planet, *The Velderet*.

And then I discovered Cecilia Tan, the publisher and editor. When I first realized that Cecilia ran a publishing company called Circler Press that put out tons of anthologies of science fiction and fantasy erotica with queer and kinky themes, it utterly blew my mind. I remember finding a bookstore with a shelf that included several Circler titles and just marveling at all of the stories and perspectives that were represented here. I now have a wholesale in my home containing various circler books and I'm still so grateful that these stories exist. When I started writing short fiction myself, Circler was one of the first places I sent a story to — and later, Circler put out two volumes of bisexual erotica and one volume of trans erotica, all three of which I was lucky enough to contribute to.

I haven't even mentioned the wicked spritely fanfiction that Cecilia writes and sometimes reads at cons, or the lovely parties that she throws, some of which are Harry Potter-themed. Or the

ways that she's helped so many people make sense of loving Harry Potter in spite of the author's unforgivable bigotry. Or her Magic University series, which is the story I always really wanted about magic schools and falling in love and discovering yourself.

I've known other people who've helped to create or elevate an entire subgenre the way Cecilia has. I've known plenty of other niche publishers and party organizers and genre innovators. I've seldom known any of them to be as kind and thoughtful as Cecilia. As generous, as mindful. She's one of the rare people who can create an entire scene around her and allow others to shine within it. She has used her formidable storytelling and organizing powers to lift countless other people up. She's a role model of how to be a queer nerd, and a decent human being.

I'm far from the only person whose life was changed by the writing, publishing, and presence of Cecilia Tan. If you haven't read her work or heard her read yet, then I envy you getting to discover her for the first time. You're in for a treat.

— Charlie Jane Anders, award-winning author and science fiction & fantasy book reviewer

Albacon 2025

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September 12-14, 2025
Marriott Courtyard, Clifton Park, NY

Remote Guest: **Laura Anne Gilman**, the author of more than 20 novels, including the Nebula award-nominated *The Vineart War* trilogy and the award-winning *Devil's West* series. Current projects include the *Huntsmen* books and a series of paranormal romance novellas focusing on non-traditional partners. She also writes mysteries as L.A. Kornetsky.

In Person Guest: **Joshua Palmatier** is the author of 3 series: the *Ley* trilogy, the *Wells* trilogy, and the *Throne of Amenkor* series, as well as numerous short stories. He founded the small press *Zombies Need Brains*, which specializes in Kickstarter-funded anthologies, and has an online magazine. Josh also creates as Benjamin Tate, and works as a math teacher.

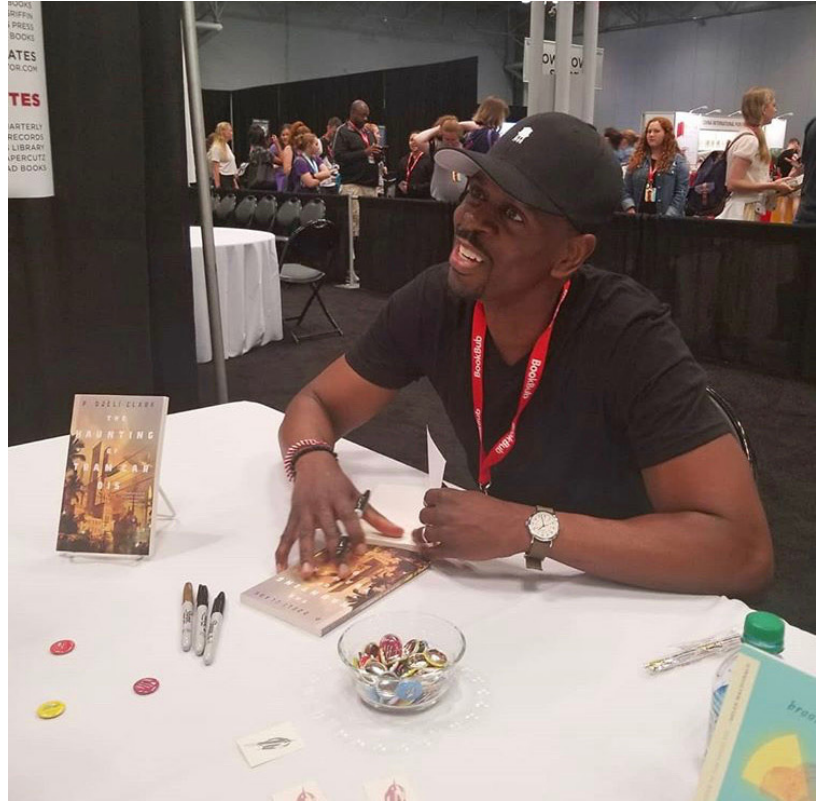
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Authors ✨ Costume Contest ✨ Panels
✨ Games ✨ Readings ✨ Signings ✨

Ice Cream Social

P. Djèlí Clark Biography and Bibliography

Phenderson Djèlí Clark is the award-winning and Hugo, Nebula, Sturgeon, and World Fantasy nominated author of the novels *Abeni's Song* and *A Master of Djinn*, and the novellas *The Dead Cat Tail Assassins*, *Ring Shout*, *The Black God's Drums* and *The Haunting of Tram Car 015*. His stories have appeared in online venues such as *Tor.com*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*, *Apex*, *Lightspeed*, *Fireside Fiction*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and in print anthologies including, *Griots*, *Hidden Youth* and *Clockwork Cairo*. He is a founding member of *FIYAH Literary Magazine* and an infrequent reviewer at *Strange Horizons*.



Born in New York and raised mostly in Houston, Texas, he spent the early formative years of his life in the homeland of his parents, Trinidad and Tobago. When not writing speculative fiction, P. Djèlí Clark works as an academic historian whose research spans comparative slavery and emancipation in the Atlantic World. He melds this interest in history and the social world with speculative fiction, and has written articles on issues ranging from racism and H.P. Lovecraft to critiques of George Schuyler's *Black Empire*, and has been a panelist and lecturer at conventions, workshops and other genre events.

At current time, he resides in a small Edwardian castle in New England with his wife, daughters, and pet dragon (who suspiciously resembles a Boston Terrier). When so inclined he rambles on issues of speculative fiction, politics, and diversity at his aptly named blog *The Disgruntled Haradrim*.

Novels

Abeni and the Kingdom of Gold (Abeni #2), Starscape, April 29, 2025 (forthcoming)

The Dead Cat Tail Assassins, Tor.com, May 21, 2024

Wins: Alex Award (2025)

Nominations: Locus Award for Best Fantasy Novel (2025)

Abeni's Song (Abeni #1), Starscape, October 24, 2023

Win: Ignyte Award for Best Middle Grade Novel (2024)

Nominations: Lodestar Award for Best Young Adult Book (2024)

A Master of Djinn (Dead Djinn Universe #1), Tor.com, May 11, 2021

Wins: Nebula Award for Best Novel (2022); Locus Award for Best First Novel (2022);

Compton Crook Award (2022); Ignyte Award for Best Adult Novel (2022); RUSA CODES Reading List (Fantasy) (2022)

Nominations: Hugo Award for Best Novel (2022); World Fantasy Award – Novel (2022); Mythopoeic Award (2022); Dragon Award for Alternate History Novel (2021)

Novellas & Novelettes

Ring Shout, Tor.com, October 13, 2020

Wins: Nebula Award for Best Novella (2021); Locus Award for Best Novella (2021);

British Fantasy Award for Best Novella (2021)

Nominations: Hugo, World Fantasy, Shirley Jackson, Ignyte Awards – Best Novella (2021)

The Haunting of Tram Car 015 (Dead Djinn Universe #0.3), Tor.com, February 19, 2019

Nominations: Hugo, Nebula, Mythopoeic, Ignyte, Locus Awards – Best Novella (2020)

The Black God's Drums, Tor.com, August 21, 2018

Wins: Alex Award (2019)

Nominations: Hugo, Nebula, World Fantasy, Locus Awards – Best Novella (2019); William L. Crawford – IAFA Fantasy Award (Shortlist) (2019)

“A Dead Djinn in Cairo,” Tor.com, May 18, 2016

Nominations: Nebula Award for Best Novelette (2016)

Short Stories

“Hide and Seek,” in *Out There Screaming: An Anthology of New Black Horror*, edited by Jordan Peele (2024)

“What I Remember of Oresha Moon Dragon Devshrata,” *The Book of Witches* (ed. Jonathan Strahan; Harper Voyager, 2023)

“How to Raise a Kraken in Your Bathtub,” *Uncanny Magazine*, January/February 2023

Wins: Locus Award for Best Short Story (2024); British Science Fiction Association Award for Short Fiction (2024)

Nominations: Hugo Award for Best Short Story (2024); World Fantasy Award for Short Fiction (2024)

“If the Martians Have Magic,” *Uncanny Magazine*, Issue #42, September/October 2021
 Win: Ignyte Award for Best Short Story (2022)
 Nominations: World Fantasy Award for Short Fiction (2022); Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award (2022); Locus Award for Best Short Story (2022)

“Percival and the Jab,” *Black Boy Joy* (2021)

“With a Golden Risha,” *Uncanny Magazine*, Issue #36, September/October 2020

“The Mouser of Peter the Great,” *Uncanny Magazine*, Issue #36, September/October 2020

“The Secret Lives of the Nine Negro Teeth of George Washington,” *Fireside Magazine*, February 2018
 Wins: Nebula Award for Best Short Story (2019); Locus Award for Best Short Story (2019)
 Nominations: Hugo Award for Best Short Story (2019); Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award (2019)

“Night Doctors,” *Nightmare Magazine* (2020); Originally published in *Eyedolon* (2018)

“Ghost Marriage,” in *Griots: Sisters of the Spear* (2013). Reprinted by *Apex Magazine*, Issue #105, February 2018

“The Paladin of Golota,” *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly* (2018)

“A Tale of Woe,” *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* (June 2018)

“The Angel of Khan el-Khalili,” in *Clockwork Cairo: Steampunk Tales of Egypt* (ed. Matthew Bright; Twopenny Books, 2017)

“The Things my Mother Left Me,” *Fantasy Magazine* Issue 60 Dec 2016, special edition: *People of Colo(u)r Destroy Fantasy*

“Redemption for Adanna,” in *Myriad Lands: Volume 2* (2016)

“Skin Magic,” in *Griot: A Sword and Sword Anthology* (2011)

“What the Sea Wants,” *Daily Science Fiction*, June 2012

“Wings for Icarus,” *Daily Science Fiction*, June 2011

“Shattering the Spear,” *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*, Issue 11, May 2011

“The Machine,” *Every Day Fiction*, December 30, 2010

The Mouser of Peter the Great

by P. Djèlí Clark

1704

Tsardom of Muscovy

Ibrahim watched as Tsar Pyotr of the Russians was seated into a wooden chair in front of a fireplace. It was made for a very big man, with a high back and curved arms carved like lions. And the Tsar was certainly big, taller than any of the other men in the room. Taller perhaps than any man Ibrahim had ever seen, and he wondered if these Russians were all ruled by giants.

The Tsar settled into a long red coat trimmed in gold, drawing it tighter as if seeking warmth. He leaned forward, inspecting the two boys that stood before him. His appearance—those black eyes, and even blacker hair, all on a face that could have been cut from stone—should have been terrifying. And it might have been, had the man also not looked so very tired.

At a nudge from Bilal, Ibrahim lifted his gaze to meet the Tsar. This Pytor of the Russians didn't sit in his great wooden chair so much as he sagged in it—as if doing all he could just to hold himself up. The whites of his eyes were tinged with red, and the skin around them swollen. His face looked drained, so that cheekbones showed just beneath the flesh. And he was so very pale.

Well, Ibrahim mused, that wasn't so uncommon here. Not like at the Sultan's palace, where there were pale people, sand- brown people, bronze people and every type of people you could imagine. Some had even been like him, with black skin and hair that curled and coiled. Here, everyone was pale, or red, like they'd been pinching each other's faces. But this Pytor of the Russians was even paler than that—pale as milk. When he spoke, the tiredness that showed on his body filled his voice.

Ibrahim listened, and understood nothing. He and Bilal had only just arrived in this Tsardom of Muscovy, this place with no sun and only clouds, where it rained cold white ashes that covered everything in ice. At the Sultan's court they had been instructed in Turkish, which he now knew well. This was definitely not Turkish.

"His Majesty is speaking to you," someone said.

Ibrahim turned to look upon a silver-haired man in a long green coat with bright yellow stripes, reminding him of a bird in the Sultan's palace that bore the same color of feathers. He and Bilal had met the odd man when they arrived. He told them to call him Spafarius. But they had already named him No-Nose—on account that he had no nose. There were just two holes where a nose should have been, and Ibrahim wondered if perhaps some people here didn't have noses. Or maybe in all that pinching of cheeks, it had been pinched off. The nose-less man did, however, speak Turkish.

"The Tsar asks if you know how old you are?" Spafarius No-Nose translated. He gave Ibrahim an expectant look, knuckling at long silver whiskers that drooped on his nose-less face. "Come on boy. Vasil'ev said you were the bright one."

Ibrahim blinked. He opened his mouth then stopped. How did you say numbers in this language? Deciding on another course, he held up one hand to show five fingers and a second to add three more.

The Tsar smiled, a slight spark touching his dreary face. He spoke again.

“Clever,” Spafarius No-Nose remarked. “His Majesty asks if you know your name?”

“Ibra—” Ibrahim began, then changed to, “Abram.” That was what they called him here. A *proper Christian name*, the man Vasil’ev had said, the one who brought he and Bilal to this place. To Ibrahim it didn’t matter much, because in truth neither of those were really his name.

“And were you and your brother treated well in your travels, Abram?” No-Nose translated once again.

Ibrahim looked to Bilal who just shrugged. Bilal seemed to shrug at everything these days, and Ibrahim thought perhaps his brother blamed him for having to leave the Sultan’s palace. Well it hadn’t been his fault. At least, he hadn’t meant for it to happen. He thought some more on the Tsar’s question. Treated well? They hadn’t been beaten on their long trip with Vasil’ev. They had been fed. And dressed in thick furs when it turned cold. But they were still slaves, as they had been before. Of that he was certain.

“Da,” he answered finally. Then gave a bow, like he’d seen some men here do, and added, “Tsar Pyotr.”

The Tsar’s eyes rounded at this and he laughed aloud, shrugging off some of his tiredness. Ibrahim met Bilal’s surprised look with a satisfied smile. He’d picked up a few things. The Tsar lifted a long finger to point at him and spoke.

“His Majesty is impressed,” Spafarius No-Nose winked. “He would have you in his personal service, Abram.”

Ibrahim bowed again. He’d become accustomed to the ways of powerful men at the Sultan’s palace, and knew this was not a request.

There were a few more questions and then an exchange of words between the Tsar and the other men in the room. After a while, some of them helped him to his feet. He grumbled but leaned his tall frame on them, letting the men guide him. It was as he turned to go, that Ibrahim first saw the eye.

It was an ugly eye. A big pale grey thing, with long fleshy roots that clutched to the Tsar like a weed. It sat there riding his back, twisting this way and that, glaring out upon the room. When it caught sight of Ibrahim it squinted thick eyelids on its stalk, looking him up and down.

Then it shrieked.

Ibrahim cupped hands to his ears, clenching his teeth at the sound. No one else did. No one even paid the ugly eye any attention. Not Bilal, not Spafarius No-Nose, or even the Tsar. Because he knew, none of them could see it or hear its angry screams. And that bad feeling that came from it didn’t prick their skin like needles and make them shiver either. He could see it, hear it, and feel it, because that was who he was—who he’d always been.

The shrieking didn’t stop until the Tsar was gone. And when Ibrahim took his hands from his ears he found Spafarius No-Nose eyeing him. There was a curious look on his face.

“Your brother will come with me,” the man declared. “You however, Abram, will stay here. The Tsar is not well. His sleep is troubled and he eats little. He is here secretly at the home of his friend, the Count, while the Count and his family are away. There are only a few servants in the house to care for him—and now, you. He needs your very special help I think.”

Ibrahim looked up at the man, trying not to stare at his no-nose. Bilal had said that was rude. “Me? What can I do?”

The man knelt, so that he was nose-less to nose with Ibrahim. His breath smelled of onions and things both sweet and bitter. “I want you to hunt mice, Abram. As you did for the Sultan. You know how to hunt mice, yes?”

Ibrahim thought of the eye, and knew right away that Spafarius No-Nose wasn't really talking about mice.

The next day Ibrahim found himself alone in the big house. Spafarius No-Nose had taken Bilal away and now there was no one to talk to. The servants bathed and dressed him. They gave him new clothes—a blue coat with tight sleeves, white puffy pants and brown house slippers. It was more clothes than he'd ever worn. But he was cold all the time here, and so he didn't complain.

He hadn't seen the Tsar all morning. He'd dreamt about that shrieking eye though. And that bad feeling still hovered in the air. Spafarius No-Nose wanted him to do something about it, like he'd done for the Sultan. But how was he supposed to do that?

The sharp sound of echoing laughter suddenly caught Ibrahim's attention. Curious, he followed it through several rooms of the big house. The tingling scent of unfamiliar spices and cooking meat told him he was in a kitchen. There, an old woman was trying to roll out a bit of dough. But each time she did so it folded back up, sticking together.

Ibrahim could see the problem. It was a little man, no taller than himself. He was covered in long black hair like a shaggy dog, with an even longer grey beard. He tugged at the dough between hairy fingers, pulling it and pushing it even as the old woman tried to smooth it out. Each time she grunted her frustration he giggled and did it again.

"Why are you doing that?" Ibrahim asked.

The old woman looked up over a bulbous nose then clucked her tongue, saying something he couldn't understand and waving him away. But he wasn't talking to her and the hairy little man answered.

"Because it's fun," he remarked.

"It's not very nice."

The little man seemed set to dismiss him then stopped, looking up with round shining eyes. "You can see me?"

Ibrahim nodded. In a blur the hairy little man was in front of him. He looked Ibrahim up and down. "But she can't see me, or hear me. How can you?"

"I just can," Ibrahim answered truthfully. He always could. The old woman looked to him again and frowned. Not that she understood spirit-talk, which he knew sounded like nonsense to everyone else. Still, he'd learned at the Sultan's palace that speaking to things others couldn't see frightened people. He didn't want that here.

"Let's go somewhere else," he suggested.

The little man nodded eagerly, trailing along behind. They found an empty room and the two sat down across from each other in big wooden chairs.

"Are you a witch?" he asked.

"No," Ibrahim answered. At least he didn't think so.

"Where do you come from?"

"Far away," he answered. "I wanted to ask—"

"Can everyone there see? Like you can see?"

Ibrahim shook his head. "No. Just me. Have you seen—?"

"And your skin," the little man cut in. "It's so...black!"

"It is. But do you—?"

"Does it come off? Your skin I mean?"

Ibrahim frowned. What a silly question. "Of course not. Does yours?"

The little man pursed his lips and thought hard. "I don't think so."

Ibrahim sighed. "I just want to know—"

"Your hair is so curly! May I touch it?"

"No!" Ibrahim snapped. "Touch your own hair!" He had hoped to ask the little man something about the eye, but this was becoming annoying.

"Does everyone have hair like you where you come from? And skin? How far away is it? Do you have a Tsar? Are you *sure* it doesn't come off...?"

Ibrahim sat listening to the endless questions, and grew increasingly frustrated. Mostly he was frustrated because the little man wouldn't stop talking. And because he was, after all, only eight, what he did next was entirely understandable.

Ibrahim reached into the air and pulled out a sword. It was a big sword, with a broad curving golden blade. One of the guards in the Sultan's palace had owned such a sword, and Ibrahim had wanted one like it. So he made one up, the way he was able to always make such things up. It was almost as tall as he was, and should have been much too heavy for a boy of eight. But as he was the one who conjured it, the sword weighed whatever he wanted it to weigh. He lifted the large blade above his head and glared at the talkative little man.

"Be quiet! Or I'll chop you up like a radish!"

The little man let out a single shriek and vanished in a puff of hair.

Ibrahim felt his temper die down and he put away his sword with a sigh. That had probably not been a good idea.

It took all morning to find the hairy little man again, hiding under a set of stairs. It took still another hour to coax him out. When it was all done the two sat by a window, looking out at the cold ash coming down from the grey sky. The hairy little man called it snow.

"I'm sorry I said I would chop you up," Ibrahim apologized. He really was sorry. "I'll answer your questions if you answer mine." He paused. "But you still can't touch my hair."

The little man blinked, as if he'd forgotten about that entirely. "I'm Domovoi," he said, "a house spirit."

"Domovoi," Ibrahim repeated. "Is that your name?"

The house spirit shrugged. "All Domovoi are named Domovoi. We help take care of homes."

Ibrahim raised an eyebrow. "You didn't look like you were helping this morning."

"Not my home," Domovoi explained. "My house was here long ago. I cared for an old man and woman. I would spin straw for them and mend broken things. Then someone sent them away. Or they died. I can't remember which. This bigger house is built where their house once was. And so I remain."

"My name's Ibrahim. That's the name the Sultan gave me. Now I'm Abram."

"What was your name before that?" Domovoi asked.

"I don't know," Ibrahim admitted. "I don't know my name."

"Where did you come from then? Before the Sultan?"

"I don't know that either."

Domovoi cocked a hairy head. "Don't you remember?"

Ibrahim shook his head. He didn't. Neither did Bilal. All the two of them remembered was that they came from somewhere else, where there was always sun, and people had faces like them. He told Domovoi as much.

"We were taken by men. It happened at night. I think they wanted me, for what I could do, what I could see. But I was with Bilal, so they took him too. Then they worked some kind of magic and made us forget."

“Where did they take you?” the little man asked.

“Far away from our home, to the Sultan’s court. That’s where we learned Turkish. Then one day the Sultan’s mother called for me. She told me I had to help the Sultan. There was a bad spirit in the palace she said. It haunted the Sultan in his dreams. She knew what I could do, and I was put in his room at night to find it.”

“Why was this bad spirit angry with her son?” Domovoi asked.

“The Sultan got his throne by taking it from another Sultan—his brother,” Ibrahim explained. “The spirit haunted the new Sultan for doing this bad thing.”

“Oh!” the little man exclaimed.

“One night I awoke to find the spirit there. It was a great big ogre with a fiery eye. It frightened the Sultan. He was so scared, he couldn’t even call for his guards.”

“What did you do?” Domovoi whispered, his bright eyes round as plates.

“I pulled my sword,” Ibrahim said. “And I fought the ogre.”

Domovoi inhaled. “You fought an ogre?”

Ibrahim nodded. “For a long time. We fought and fought, all around the room as the Sultan watched. And then I chopped off his head.” He made a cutting motion with his arm and Domovoi gasped. “The Sultan cried when it was over. He laid his head on my lap and just cried and cried. The next day, his mother sent Bilal and I away.”

“But why? You helped him. You chopped off the ogre’s head!”

“I think because I saw him cry. I don’t think Sultans are supposed to cry.”

Domovoi made a face. “That’s silly. Everyone cries.”

It was Ibrahim’s turn to shrug. He didn’t understand it either. “A man named Vasil’ev took us. We traveled on a river, then over land and then on a ship across a lot of water. Someone called it a sea. The man brought us here where Spafarius No-Nose took us to see the Tsar.”

“That is quite a story!”

Ibrahim supposed it was. “Are there others here?” he asked. “Like you?”

“I am the only Domovoi in this house,” the little man said proudly. “But yes—there are many others! A Kikimora lives in the kitchens behind the stove and steals food, but she’s stingy and won’t share any. There’s an absent-minded Lesovik nearby that likes to scare cattle. He tends to forget where he lives and spends a lot of time wandering about. There’s a Bagiennik or two sleeping under the ice in the lake. We don’t want to wake them up however—big eyes and teeth and very bad tempers. Almost as bad as those Rusalki nymphs...”

Ibrahim listened as Domovoi listed more spirits than he could possibly remember. The little man would probably go on forever if he didn’t jump in.

“What about the eye?” he asked. “You’ve seen it?”

Domovoi’s mouth clamped shut. He made a face and nodded. “I only saw it for the first time when he arrived.”

Ibrahim guessed he was the Tsar.

“It’s an omen,” Domovoi went on. “That’s what the others say—of something bad to come. That’s why so many of them are leaving...”

“Leaving?” Ibrahim asked sitting up. “You mean the spirits?”

Domovoi nodded. “There are barely any in the house any longer. When he arrived with that thing on his back—most of them left. Something’s coming, and no one wants to be here when it arrives.”

Ibrahim frowned, thinking of the bad feeling. It hadn’t gone away. If anything, it was

stronger now. “Why aren’t you leaving?” he asked.

Domovoi grinned, showing blocks of white teeth. “Because I like it here!” In a blur he was gone. From the distance came the sound of something crashing. Someone shouted and that familiar laugh echoed through the house.

Ibrahim let the mischievous spirit have his fun and sat back, thinking on what he’d learned. Only then did he notice the girl. She sat in a corner of the room, looking at him with watery blue eyes beneath long brown hair. He wondered how long she had been there? Had she seen him talking to Domovoi? Well no, he’d look like he was just talking to himself. That was hardly better.

As if waiting to be noticed, she got up and walked over to him, sitting nearby. She looked near his age, and was just as tall. When she smiled he smiled back, fumbling through his head for something to say. But nothing came to mind. So they just sat there, staring at each other until finally the girl giggled. He giggled too, uncertain what else to do, and soon the two were speaking the one language it seemed everyone understood.

Their laughter was interrupted when the old woman from the kitchens walked in. She looked flustered—Domovoi’s doing no doubt—but called the girl over, handing her a pastry. The two walked away and into another room leaving Ibrahim alone again. Disappointed, he settled back down and was surprised when the girl quickly reappeared. She ran up to him with her pastry, grinning as she broke it in half and gave him a piece.

“Vatrushka,” she said before leaving.

Ibrahim watched her go and wondered if that was her name or the pastry? He decided at the moment he didn’t much care which—only that maybe he’d made a friend. Two, if he counted Domovoi. Then he ate the pastry happily.

The next day Ibrahim woke up to find the bad feeling had gotten worse. It seemed outside the sky was filled with more clouds. Even the flames in the fireplace looked dim, as if struggling to stay alight. He was staring at them when Domovoi found him. The hairy little man sat down right in front of the fireplace, wriggling his long toes at the heat.

“You were talking to old Varvara’s granddaughter yesterday,” he remarked.

The girl, Ibrahim remembered. “We didn’t really speak.”

“She gave you a pastry,” Domovoi sulked. “She never gives me pastries.”

“She can’t see you Domovoi,” Ibrahim reminded.

The little man’s bright eyes flared. “Oh! That’s right!”

Ibrahim stifled a laugh. “What’s her name?”

“Eva,” Domovoi pronounced. “She and old Varvara belong to the house.”

Ibrahim frowned. Belonged? How could people belong to a thing?

“They’re slaves? Like me?”

Domovoi shook a hairy head. “Not like you. They belong to the house. You belong to the Tsar. A Tsar is more important than a house. So you must be more important. That’s good, yes?”

“I don’t want to belong to anyone,” Ibrahim replied.

Domovoi shrugged, as if there was nothing more to say. Then he blinked and sat up. “I almost forgot! I found someone you can talk to—about the omen!”

“Who? Someone..like you?”

Domovoi nodded. “He keeps to himself. The others don’t like him much. But he knows a lot of things. Or he thinks he does.”

“Take me to him,” Ibrahim begged. “Please!”

Domovoi jumped up and motioned for him to follow. They walked through halls and up

stairs, to another part of the house. A few times Ibrahim had to run to keep up, yelling at the hairy little man to slow his blurring pace. Fortunately this part of the house was empty so no one else could see him. They finally stopped at a set of doors and Ibrahim pushed them open.

It was another large room. There were books everywhere, some on shelves and more heaped in piles on the floor. Ibrahim followed the house spirit past what looked like small wooden ships, some of them half-built and on their sides. There were other things here that he couldn't name: round glasses filled with colorful liquids, contraptions of wood and metal that somehow fit together.

In the middle of it all was a small man—as tall as Domovoi, but not hairy at all. He wore a long blue coat with gold buttons and tight short pants that fell to the knees with white stockings. Stacks of books rose up around him like miniature hills, and he muttered beneath his breath as he read and scribbled on a piece of paper with a feather quill. He seemed to exclaim at every other word, wriggling his pointed pink ears through a curly white wig. Ibrahim walked up and introduced himself.

“And is that supposed to mean something to me?” the small man asked, never bothering to look up. He scratched at the end of a long nose, leaving a smudge of ink.

“I was looking for help,” Ibrahim said.

“Help?” The small man smacked his lips together, showing two large front teeth that jutted down like a rabbit's. “I have no time to help. Can't you see I'm busy?”

Ibrahim eyed the stack of books. “Doing what?”

The small man pulled a hand from his quill, which continued writing all the same. He looked up at Ibrahim with black eyes over wire-rimmed spectacles. “Doing what?” he repeated. “Why, plotting the future! The future is coming! We must plan for it! We are so behind! All of you are lucky I'm here!”

“And who are you?” Ibrahim asked.

The small man sputtered, looking offended. “Why, I am the spirit of progress, you silly boy! The spirit of invention and proper government! Do you know of the salons in Paris? The Royal Society of natural philosophers and experiments in London? Where's our Descartes? Who has written our Leviathan? How shall we compete? We must strive to move forward, boy! Always forward!”

Ibrahim watched as the excitable little man went back to his writing, muttering the whole time. He looked to Domovoi.

“I told you no one liked him,” the house spirit remarked.

Ibrahim could see why. “Where does he come from?”

“I came back with his Majesty's Grand Embassy,” the small man answered before Domovoi could speak, sparing the house spirit a glare. “His Majesty has placed his hopes in us. We work to make our land more modern, like those of the West!”

Domovoi laughed. “The Tsar cut off their beards!”

“What?” Ibrahim asked, now completely confused.

“His Majesty ordered that all men of the nobility shave their beards,” the haughty spirit proclaimed. “These are the ways of the men of the West that we must adapt.”

“He made them dress different too,” Domovoi added. “And if they wouldn't do as he said, they had to pay money. They didn't like that.”

“All part of the struggle to make a backwards people modern,” the other spirit huffed. “But some are stubborn. They don't want us to move forward. And now they hobble His Majesty with

their superstitions!”

Ibrahim perked up. “You mean the eye? You know about it?”

The spirit looked back up over his wire spectacles, grimacing. “A Likho,” he spat. “A curse.”

Ibrahim had heard of curses, in stories at the Sultan’s palace. You could put them on another person to do bad things. That’s what the eye was. The Tsar had been cursed!

“How do we make it go away?” Ibrahim asked.

The spirit shook his head. “The Likho is vile. Try to cut it away and it will make His Majesty cut off his own hand. Try to drown it and it will let His Majesty drown before floating away. It eats at his life and infects all about him with misfortune. But it is only a part of the curse. The Likho draws something else here. It calls it. Something more terrible.” The small man’s long ears fell and his eyes fixed on Ibrahim. “Can’t you feel it?”

The next day Ibrahim could feel it. And it seemed, so now could everyone in the house. The servants went about their tasks stooped and bent, barely even whispering. The Tsar wailed through the night in his dreams so that no one slept. A gloom settled over everything, as sure as the snow that covered outside in ice.

That day, Spafarius No-Nose arrived back at the house. He went up to see the Tsar and came down again looking tired. He sat in front of a fire and sipped from a cup, hugging himself as if he couldn’t get warm.

“Two bits of advice for you Abram,” he slurred. “One, never intrigue against a vengeful prince with a sharp knife.” His finger tapped the space where his nose should have been. “Second, never drink cheap bread wine made by peasants. It has the taste of feet.” He grimaced into his cup, but took another sip anyway. “Your brother has a gift with his voice. I am thinking he may do well in music, once we give him a proper Christian name. How goes your hunt for mice?”

“I haven’t caught any yet,” Ibrahim admitted.

Spafarius No-Nose sighed. “No? Well, I hope you do soon. His Majesty is so tired he cannot rise from bed. I do not know how much longer we can go on like this. We have kept the Count’s servants quiet of the Tsar’s presence. But now the girl is sick, and they will talk.”

“Who’s sick?” Ibrahim asked puzzled.

Spafarius No-Nose took another grimacing sip before answering. “The old cook’s granddaughter.”

Ibrahim inhaled. “Eva!”

Spafarius No-Nose raised an eyebrow. “You have met then. She has taken with a terrible fever. It burns her up, and nothing can be done for it. The servants fear it is something to do with His Majesty.” He shook his head. “No, they will not stay quiet long.”

Ibrahim excused himself and quickly left, going off in search of Domovoi. He found the little hairy man under his favorite stairs. He lay curled up into a furry ball, and his bright eyes were dim.

“Eva is sick!” Ibrahim told him.

Domovoi nodded, listless. “Everything is bad now.”

“It’s that Likho! We have to do something about it! Stop the other thing from coming!” Ibrahim didn’t know much about this Pyotr of the Russians. Maybe like the Sultan, the Tsar had done something bad to deserve this. But not Eva. Not the girl with watery blue eyes who had shared her pastry. She hadn’t hurt anyone.

Domovoi sighed. “Too late for that. It’s already here. Came in last night.”

Ibrahim glared at him. “What? Where?”

Domovoi’s eyes turned to the floor. “In the cellar.”

It took more coaxing, but Ibrahim managed to get the house spirit to lead him to the cellar. The closer they came to it, the worse the bad feelings got. When they reached a long set of stone stairs Domovoi stopped and whimpered. Taking the lead, Ibrahim walked down into the dark.

The cellar was huge, like the house had a great big belly beneath. It was filled with old things: iron suits of armor, paintings and even swords. They cluttered up the space; things from long ago hidden in dust, cobwebs and gloom. It was the perfect place for a monster to hide.

Ibrahim saw it almost immediately. A large shape sat in the dark of the cellar, sprawled out among the old things. Its bright green scales shimmered and its body heaved when it breathed. It was gigantic. Monstrous! He counted one, two, no, three heads! Each looked like a snake with horns and had sharp teeth that poked out from mouths on long snouts. Grey smoke seeped from their flaring nostrils as they slept, and a rumble like a snore rose from their throats. He had heard of things like this before, from the Sultan's storytellers. This was a dragon!

"It looks very scary!" Domovoi squeaked behind him.

It did, Ibrahim agreed. He'd never seen anything so big. When an eye on one of those giant heads opened, it was all he could do to not run. The eye swam about to regard him, narrowing to a red slit on a bright yellow sun. A deep growl from its throat quickly woke the other heads. The three opened their eyes then lifted sinuous scaly necks to stare down at him.

"What is this?" the middle head rasped. "Who wakes us?"

Ibrahim swallowed, searching for his voice.

"I do," he called up.

The head on the left snarled, its eyes narrowing. "And who are you?"

Ibrahim faltered. That simple question seemed suddenly very hard.

"I'm Ibrahim," he said at last. "I've come to tell you that you have to leave. You're scaring people here, making them sick. I think a curse brought you, but you shouldn't be here. Please go away now. Go somewhere else."

The dragon glared at him with six red-on-yellow eyes for a moment, then laughed. It came grating and barking out of three different throats to make one unpleasant sound.

"Go away?" the middle head rasped. "Why should we go away? Do you know who we are?"

"We are Zmey Gorynych, the great serpent!" the right head thundered. The dragon lifted itself up on two large back paws, and two smaller front ones—each with black talons that raked on stone. "Our wings bring darkness!" the left head snarled. The monster unfurled two wings like a bat that plunged the cellar into a deeper gloom. "And our breath is fire!" hissed the middle head, orange flames licking the inside of its mouth. "We have come for this Tsar!" the right head rumbled. "The betrayer! The one who would change our lands!"

Ibrahim wasn't certain what kept him standing. His heart pounded fast. All he wanted to do was run. Somewhere, he found the courage to speak.

"But you're hurting everyone. You're hurting Eva. And I won't let you!" He reached out, and drew his sword. The broad curving blade came at his summons, gleaming gold in the dark as he held it high above his head. He hoped to at least frighten the dragon. But the monster only laughed, wisps of smoke escaping its throats.

"*You* would harm *us*?" the middle head rasped. "*You* would stand against us?"

"You are not from these lands," the left head growled.

"Everyone can see you are different," the right thundered. "That you don't belong."

"Look at your skin," the left sneered, "black like soot."

"Your nose is flat, and your hair crisp and tight," the right added.

“You are nothing more than a slave,” the middle hissed.

“The Tsar’s pet,” the right mocked with rumbling laughter.

“The boy who does not even know his own name!” they bellowed as one.

Ibrahim felt himself falter again, and the too-big sword grew heavy in his hands.

“Yes,” the middle head rasped. “What is your name, boy? Where do you come from? Do you even know?”

“We know *our* name,” the left head declared. “Zmey Gorynych! How can you with no name harm us?”

Ibrahim felt his hand tremble with the sword as those words reached inside and pulled at him. Why was it getting so heavy? Before him the dragon seemed to grow even larger, until it was his whole world, and those yellow eyes with red slits looked big enough to fall into.

“Go away, little nameless boy, little slave,” the three heads boomed together. “You are nobody! You are no one! Run away now, before we open up our jaws and eat you up!”

Ibrahim felt his sword grow too heavy—and he dropped it. The golden blade vanished before it hit the floor and he stumbled back. Before him the dragon stalked forward, taunting and laughing. He heard its thoughts in his head, and took them as his own. *Slave. No One. Nameless.* How could he fight this monster if he didn’t even know his name?

“Bring back your sword!” someone pleaded.

Ibrahim looked to Domovoi. The house spirit cowered behind him but surprisingly hadn’t run away.

“I can’t,” he stammered. He had stopped moving, too frightened now to do anything but stand there, and wait for the dragon. “I don’t have a name. I’m just a slave. A boy who was stolen away. I don’t even know who I am.”

“But I know who you are!” Domovoi insisted. “You told me. You’re the boy who comes from a faraway place. You’re the boy who saved a sultan. You fought an ogre! You’re the boy who came here from all the way across a sea. You’re the boy sent to hunt mice for the Tsar. You’re the boy who talks to spirits and carries a great golden sword...!”

Ibrahim listened as the talkative spirit told his tale. Had all of that happened to him? Had he really done all those things? He listened, and the words began to drown out the taunting laughter. Soon they were on his tongue and coming from his own lips. He felt the fear that made him numb ease away. Doubt shriveled inside him as his courage returned, filling up the emptiness. And he pulled his sword.

The blade came at his call, settling into his hands and almost singing with anticipation. He stared up at the dragon that now hovered in front him, so big it seemed to take up the entire cellar. It still laughed and sent its taunts. But Ibrahim was no longer listening.

With a yell, he lifted his sword at the head closest to him and brought it down with all his strength upon those scales. The blade bit through spirit flesh and bone to come clean through the other side. The dragon’s neck wobbled momentarily where he had cut it and then the horned head slid away. It tumbled down, landing with a thunderous thud on the cellar floor. Those red-on-yellow eyes were turned up with a look of surprise and a long red tongue hanged from its open mouth. The remaining heads howled their pain, and Ibrahim smiled. Sword in hand, he stepped forward.

“I am the boy who was stolen!” he cried out, swinging again at a paw sent his way. It came off beneath his blade, talons and all tumbling into the darkness.

“I am the boy who chopped off the ogre’s head!” Another head roared at him with jaws

opened wide, showing a hundred teeth. Ibrahim jumped as it came, bringing his sword down to cut through its thick neck. The head fell away and the dragon retreated now, as if to run. But Ibrahim wasn't finished.

"I am the boy who saw the Sultan cry!" he shouted. The dragon's last head sucked in air and then spewed a blast of bright orange flame at him that lit up the dark. Ibrahim dodged beneath the fire, feeling its heat on his back as he raced to hack off another paw. The dragon lurched off balance, pitching forward. Ibrahim jumped aside as it came crashing down in a heavy mass of green scales and spirit flesh. He quickly moved back in, bracing a foot on the dragon's neck and lifting his giant blade up above the remaining head.

"I am the boy with the golden sword!" Ibrahim proclaimed, as the red slit in that yellow eye stared up at him—afraid. "Today, I will be the boy who cut all the heads off the great Zmey Gorynych!" And with a final swipe he sent his blade through that scaly neck, until it struck stone—severing the last head of the dragon. Its monstrous body shuddered with tremors, and its wings folded in to cover it like a shroud. With a loud whoosh, it vanished into a green mist that fast swirled away to nothingness.

Ibrahim looked down, breathing heavy from the battle. Where the dragon had been there was now a tiny pale worm—with three tiny heads. It let out a squeal and began inching away. He brought a heel down on it, mashing hard and squishing out colorful goo that smeared the ground like a rainbow.

"You killed the dragon!" Domovoi yipped, jumping up and down in delight.

Ibrahim smiled. So he had.

It was later in the day that Ibrahim sat in the kitchens eating a pastry prepared by Eva's grandmother. The old woman was happy her granddaughter's fever had unexpectedly broken. She couldn't know he had anything to do with it, but she was giving out pastries all the same. These had cheese and sweet fruit jam in the middle.

The Tsar felt better as well, and was now eating so much food the cooks were kept busy preparing one meal after another. The Likho was gone from his back. Ibrahim had seen it shuffling through the halls—now a small, scrawny old woman with bony limbs and one big eye. It had glared at him but he waved his sword and the thing shrieked, fleeing the house. The gloom in the place had lifted and Domovoi claimed the other spirits were already returning, all of them talking about the strange new boy with the big golden sword.

As he sat eating, Spafarius No-Nose appeared. The man approached and sat down. He looked somewhat pleased and his white whiskers twitched as he eyed Ibrahim.

"So...did you catch your mouse?" he asked.

Ibrahim shoved a pastry whole into his mouth before answering.

"A worm," he replied.

Appreciations for P. Djèlí Clark

Phenderson Djèlí Clark: Guardian of the Word

In previous eras, storytellers were a sacred class. The best of them possessed unmatched wit and generation-spanning memory and had mastered the art of using words to weave truth and legend. Guinean luminary Camara Laye named these legendary sculptors, scholars and authors “Guardians of the Word.” For him, the Djèlí’s benefit to society transcended artistry. The shape of their language carried the very spirit of his nation, region, and people. My own ancestors and metaphysical extended family share this deep cultural respect and genetic craving for stories, many of which we remain disconnected from. Writers—*people*—like me have always sought the Djèlí, seeking that conduit reconnecting us to our sacred histories and truths.

In my recollection, Drizzt Do’Urden’s astral panther companion Guenhwyvar introduced me to Phenderson Djèlí Clark in the days of the Black Science Fiction Society. There was a subforum there called The Forge, a critique space for members. Reading through the submissions, separating fledglings like me from the members who already had a grasp on the stuff of good stories, like Phenderson, was easy. As our respect for each other’s work grew, we became critique partners. An early draft of his story “With a Golden Risha,” a damn good adventure that interwove history and myth and magic, made understanding of a then-elusive element of story craft unfurl in my mind. Phenderson encouraged this fledgling writer to submit my stories to literary revolutionaries like Milton J. Davis and Charles R. Saunders, helping me understand my nature as a griot.

Alongside being memory, archive, or song, the Djèlí also represented cultural community and connection. These two things are, historically, of life-or-death importance to Black writers. I know no other author who lives into this lifesaving role with as much dedication to craft and community as Phenderson. He enlightens and sharpens us because, in the way of guardians of the word, he has tangled mightily with craft, language and meaning and also with the world outside of the gauzy dream of being a published author, bringing home that double-headed truth to us with frequent reminders of Industry Rule #4080.

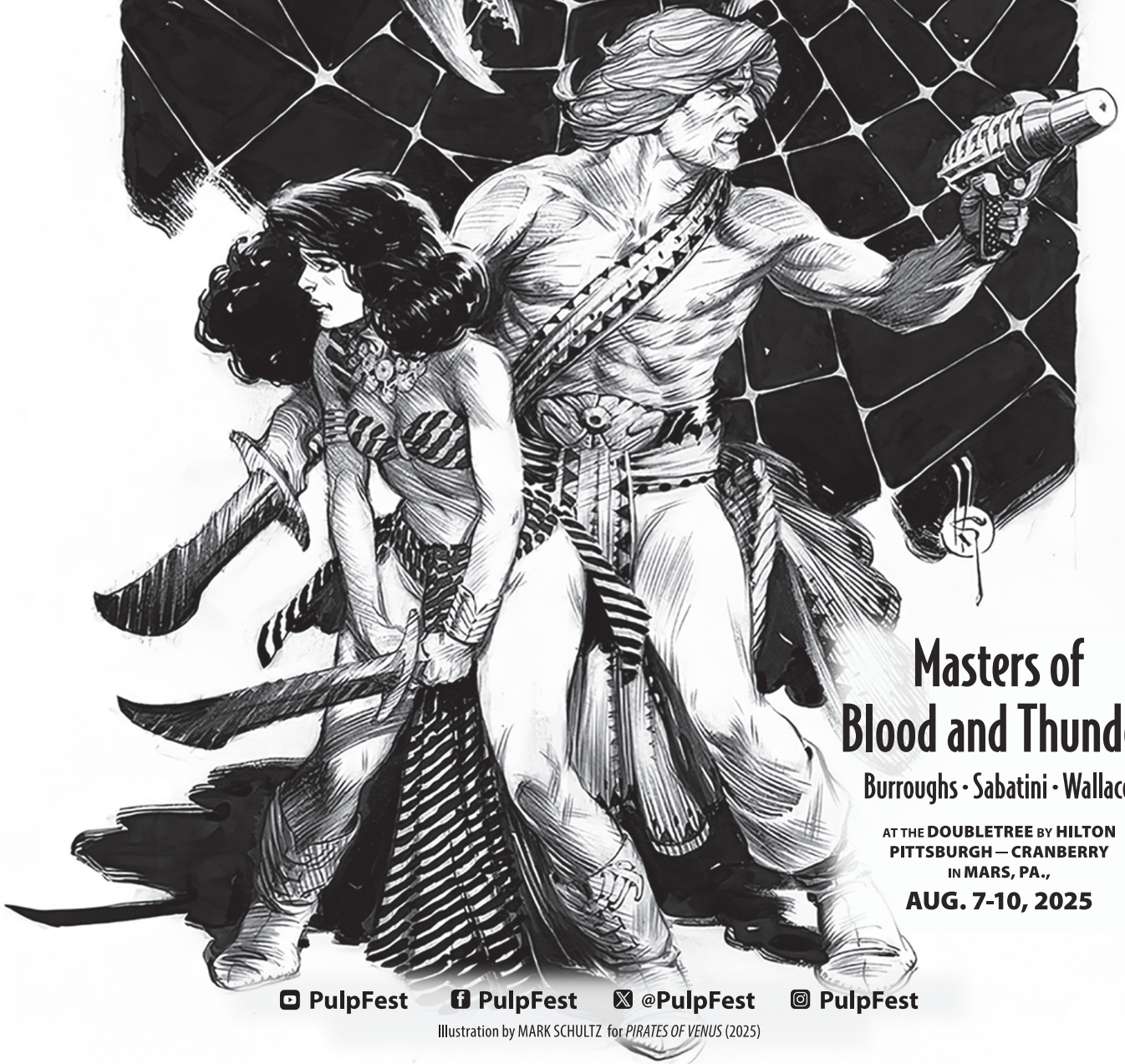
I’m grateful we’ve been able to dream and create alongside each other. I’m grateful you showed me how to draw wisdom from critique and transmute it into stronger art. I’m grateful for Fizzgig, the spark that started a *FIYAH*. I’m grateful for all our chats on craft, nerdiness, and the meaning and shape of Black speculative fiction. I’m grateful that you trusted me with your stories. I’m grateful that we’ve been able to see the dreams we’ve sowed for our work and the work of Black writers everywhere grow from dream into its own truth. I’m grateful to Readercon for honoring you. And I’m most grateful for you, the work you do, and the person you are: Djèlí! A guardian of the Black word and keeper of the tools that craft our most powerful legends.

— Troy L. Wiggins, award-winning writer and editor

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Illustration by MARK SCHULTZ for *PIRATES OF VENUS* (2025)

Appreciations Charles R. Saunders

In Memory of Charles R. Saunders

I was fortunate enough to have known Charles for 40 years. We first got in touch by mail in January 1980; we'd already become fans of each other's work in the fanzines, of course, the only practical venue for those of us getting started with fantasy and horror fiction in the 1970s. We quickly became a mutual appreciation society and, over the following decades, encouraged each other, commiserated about personal problems, and celebrated triumphs we'd achieved. We were of the same generation, having grown up in the turbulent 1960s—his experience as a young black man very different, however, from mine (a white kid in Ohio), although my sympathies were always with him. (I was raised right by good people.) We also shared that generation's interest in and fascination with the pulp fiction of the writers who'd come before us; it influenced us greatly, this grand American tradition of popular storytelling, and gave us purpose and direction. Charles's creation of Imaro and, by extension, a new genre, *Sword and Soul*, was inspired and absolutely right for the times (as was his introduction of Dossouye a bit later), although, as with any artist breaking new ground, it took many years for the rest of the world to catch up with him—and this in a genre (science fiction or science-fantasy) long regarded as forward thinking. But it was a different time. Charles always knew how good he was and trusted his instincts, although he was worn down for a time when the commercial publishing world continued to ignore or exclude him. He was thrilled, at the end of his life, when he was mentioned in *The New Yorker* and when it looked as though a movie might *finally* be made of Imaro. Certainly such attention was deserving.

I find it difficult in retrospect to picture him as the quiet old man regarded as such in his last years around his neighborhood in Dartmouth because he will always be for me—and for most of his fans, I hope—the young firebrand who gave us not only great fiction but also great journalism, tireless in his advocacy of the African-Canadian population of Nova Scotia. I still miss him deeply, the conversations we had by letter and, later, email. We never met in person, which—given our roots in continuing the achievements of the popular writers of fiction who preceded us, most of whom had relationships solely by correspondence—seems rather fitting. But at last Charles is getting the recognition he deserved all along, both as a trailblazer and as a damned good fiction writer and journalist.

– David C. Smith, fiction writer and medical editor

Charles R. Saunders showed readers that Africa, with its incredible variety of environments and vast array of cultures, could be the basis for a secondary world fantasy as rich as anything inspired by Europe. And with his signature character Imaro, Saunders gave the world a classic sword and sorcery wanderer, someone whose trials lead him out of the warrior culture that trained him but never accepted him, out into the great continent of Nyumbani in search of a

place to belong — or at least friends to wander beside. Meanwhile powerful forces see a destiny in him that they hope to crush.

Imaro's determination in surviving a childhood that should have nurtured him, but instead brutalized him, in my opinion gives him a unique appeal. Sword and sorcery has many great protagonists, and they can be sympathetic and exciting and even tragic. But they rarely feel like real underdogs. Imaro's road is a rough one, and at first his wits and strength are all he's got. But it's also a beautiful road, and the stories' immediacy makes every new land reached, every new friend made, feel as valuable as any jeweled treasure. Imaro's eyes thus become the ideal viewpoint from which to experience wide savannas and mighty forests, the wonder of seeing cities for the first time, the horrors of sorcery from a lost continent, and more.

It's been years since I last read Saunders, and writing this makes me want to return to Imaro's world — as well as to see the world of Saunders' heroine Dossouye for the first time. I see that Imaro is at the library in the next town over. I think I can make it back to Nyumbani tomorrow. I hope you'll join me.

— Chris Willrich, author of the “Gaunt and Bone” sword and sorcery series

Many years ago, Paula R. Stiles and me published a series of small press anthologies and a magazine. We had both read Saunders's Imaro and remembered it fondly. We nervously wondered if we might be able to contact him and tell him about our little magazine.

We asked friends of friends if they had his email. We eventually managed to get a hold of him and asked him for a story. This is before we had won a World Fantasy Award for our work as editors of an anthology (*She Walks in Shadows*), and long before I hit the bestseller list.

We were very much obscure editors and didn't know if we'd get a response. But Saunders was nice enough to return our email and sent us a story, “Jeroboam Henley's Debt,” which he'd originally published in 1982 and revised for the July 2010 issue of *Innsmouth Magazine*.

Innsmouth Magazine closed many years ago, but I never forgot how nice Charles was. He cheerfully talked about his career in the 1980s and his love of fantasy. He said he was very glad to be remembered and discussed how he was working on some new material. We never met in person but we exchanged several emails. He was a pleasure to chat with, even at a distance.

I've always said it's a pity that he wasn't better known, but for those who did know Saunders, he was an iconic trailblazer. I'm glad his work is getting attention once again.

— Silvia Moreno-Garcia, bestselling author of *Mexican Gothic* and *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau*

Charles R. Saunders wasn't as appreciated as he should have been in his lifetime, but his voice, passion, and creativity gave rise to authors that came after him who remain deeply influenced by his work. From the creation of Imaro and Dossouye to his later stories set in the fantastic quasi-African lands of Nyumbani, he not only serves as a whetstone for the new edge in Modern Sword & Sorcery, but he is also the primary wellspring for so many great authors and artists in the Sword & Soul genre today.

Saunders and his contributions cannot be overstated. He not only brought African varied cultures and mythologies to *Sword & Sorcery*, having been inspired by Robert E. Howard's Conan, but infused a depth of sincerity to his characters that was revelatory to the genre itself. His heroes were more than their swords and muscles, steel and sinew, but deeply-drawn characters seated elegantly and, more importantly, humanely within their diverse and wondrous settings. Saunders not only made us awe at the action, monsters, and magic he installed his tales with, but at a gravitas that made you believe these forces of nature were so close to us in our hearts and minds that they left indelible marks upon their readers afterward.

Many will speak to his mastery of the craft, having sharpened his prose in both journalism and radio, but what distinguished Saunders from others was the passion placed in his stories. If there was a word to describe his work, it is that—Passionate.

The passion is still there, waiting for readers to find it again, as are the wonderful adventures Charles R. Saunders left us. I hope those who read this end up embarking on those magnificent journeys.

—Jay Requard, author of *The Driver of Serpents and A Wave of Lions*

Charles Saunders was one of the kindest, most generous souls I've ever had the privilege to know. I remember many discussions about our shared love of boxing. He wasn't just a brilliant writer—he was a mentor, a trailblazer, and such a quiet pillar of strength for so many of us. His *Imaro* books didn't just entertain me—they cracked open a door I didn't know existed and invited me into a world where I finally saw myself in the stories I loved. I devoured every page, and I know I'm not alone in that.

Charles' contributions to the *Sword & Soul* genre weren't just important—they were foundational. He paved the way for so many of us, and the path he cleared is one we still walk today. I'm endlessly grateful for his words, his wisdom, and his warmth. His legacy lives on in every story we tell.

—Veronica G. Henry, author of *Bacchanal* and *The Scorched Earth Duology*

THE STARDUST GRIOT

Remembering Charles R. Saunders: Luminary, Friend, Pioneer

Charles R. Saunders, a luminary whose light continues to illuminate speculative fiction, left an indelible mark on my literary journey. His words, like stardust, ignited my imagination when I first encountered his groundbreaking fantasy stories from the 1970s and 80s. There, I met the formidable Dossouye, a warrior queen who defied expectations and blazed her own trail. Inspired by Dahomey's real-life female warriors, Dossouye was an unusually independent and strong Black woman, challenging stereotypes alongside the pioneering works of Octavia E. Butler, Samuel R. Delany, and Jewelle Gomez.

In 1998, believing this brilliant voice might have been lost, I reached out, eager to help reintroduce his powerful fiction. His return was met with enthusiasm, and it was my distinct honor when he contributed “Gimmile’s Songs” to *Dark Matter: A Century of Black Speculative Fiction*, marking a wonderful renewal of his career. He later graced *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones* with “Yahimba’s Choice.” Beyond stories, Charles offered vital essays like “Why Black People Should Read (and Write) Science Fiction,” challenging assumptions about Black readers’ interests with profound intellectual depth. During my research for *Dark Matter*, he supported my desire to include Du Bois in the volume, and he generously mailed a copy of the first story, a testament to his collaborative spirit.

Charles was simply a kind, erudite, and generous writer. It was a privilege to include his work in my first anthologies. He is rightly credited with creating the “sword and soul” subgenre, blending fantasy, adventure, and African myth. His iconic characters, Dossouye and Imaro, captivated me, and I admired his skill at crafting compelling action scenes. His influence extends far beyond his pages; he was a mentor to many, including my friend, author and publisher Milton Davis.

Charles R. Saunders was truly a pioneer, shaping the genre and paving the way for future generations. His enduring legacy continues to inspire me and countless others, as his “Stardust Griot” spirit shines on. *Ashé.*

–Sheree Renée Thomas, award-winning writer, poet & editor”

Charles Saunders: An Appreciation

I first discovered Charles Saunders and his wonderful character Imaro in an anthology from DAW books called *Heroic Fantasy* (1979). The story was “Death in Jukun.” This led me to the first novel about the character, just called *Imaro*, from DAW (1981) with a controversial, Tarzan-like cover by Ken Kelly. I was hooked on the writing but it took a while to find books #2 and #3. These were *The Quest for Cush* (1984) and *The Trail of Bohu* (1985), both with excellent and more appropriate-to-the-character covers by James Gurney. They make a nice, solid body of work. In 2009, Saunders self-published a fourth Imaro novel called *The Naama War*, which closes out the Imaro cycle. There’s also a short story collection called *Nyumbani Tales* set in Imaro’s world. Unfortunately, both the last two seem to be unavailable at present. I wish some small press would reprint them.

Saunders (1946 – 2020) was one of two men who established a sub-genre of Sword & Sorcery that has come to be called Sword & Soul. The other was Samuel Delany (1942 -). Saunders was born in the USA but moved to Canada as a conscientious objector after being drafted for Vietnam. He became a journalist and wrote a lot of nonfiction, much of it dealing with the lives of blacks in Canada. Around 1974, he created a fictionalized Africa called Nyumbani and began writing Sword & Sorcery stories set there about Imaro. These were published in a small magazine called *Dark Fantasy*, although the first one, “The City of Madness,” was professionally reprinted by Lin Carter in his 1975 Year’s Best Fantasy (#1). Another appeared in Carter’s Year’s Best Fantasy #3 (1977) and was entitled “The Pool of the Moon.” By 1981, some of these stories had been connected into novel form and were published as Imaro.

DAW didn’t know how to market a black Sword & Sorcery hero like Imaro and initially

the character was compared to Tarzan, probably because of the African connection. Imaro, however, is much more Conan than Tarzan, although he is a unique character and no “clonan.” DAW realized their error and made the better connection, quoting on the back of Imaro: “Imaro’s saga will be compared with that of Conan and other heroes of history and legend...” Imaro III: The Trail of Bohu has a cover quote: “Imaro follows in the footsteps of Conan.”

I remember hearing of Saunder’s death several months after it occurred and being shocked. He was relatively young at 74. His writing, fine as it was, had not brought him any comfortable financial situation. I never met him personally, and wish I had, but I did correspond some with him. I had no idea of his finances at the end, though. Saunders was a literary groundbreaker with great talent who certainly should have made more money from his writing while alive. Both he and his work deserve to be remembered.

—Charles Gramlich, author of science fiction, horror & fantasy

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In Memoriam

by William Sherman

Preface

Looking back over the last twenty-two years of my patronage of Readercon, both as a regular member, then a staff member, what stands out most are the people, especially writers, whom I have met, have conversed with, and have learnt about both their lives and their works. Especially poignant are the moments when I learn that some of them have passed on, leaving behind memories and their works for all time to read. Three such have I met, who stood out in my memory for a set of eclectic reasons: a written work, an attire, a conversation, a personality, or just some random incident that has stayed in my mind. Anyone may research them and their works on-line, but for this retrospective, I prefer personal memories. To wit....

Katherine MacLean

Ms. MacLean won Readercon's Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery Award for 2011. I remember during a meeting of a ConCom prior to that year's con when discussing the award, B. Diane Martin exclaimed, "Isn't it wonderful that we'll have a living winner of the award actually attend." Attend in Burlington, she did, and even at age 86, she would dazzle. Then living in Maine with her caregiver, she loved telling stories of her years writing, of meeting fellow authors-- like Fritz Leiber, and editors, like John W. Campbell-- in the GoH dinner, in panels, and while kibbitzing with the much younger attendees. During one panel, I remember she talked about being a female pulp writer in the 1950s, while using her own name—a rarity—since so many women wrote either under aliases or truncating their names with initials.

She related that one incident stood out: while working in Manhattan in the 1950s, after publication of her story, *Incommunicado*—recognized as a prelude to the personal computer boom to come—she worked late one night in her office building, when a man came into the building looking for a particular engineer. This man asked after the engineer. After pointing out his office, she described that the visitor asked her for her name. She said, "Katherine MacLean." The man replied, "*The* Katherine MacLean who wrote *Incommunicado*?" She replied in the affirmative, after which the man practically kidnapped her, taking her to a meeting of SF aficionados. This man introduced her as the author of *Incommunicado*, one of the group's favorite SF short stories. They fawned on her all night, as engineers are wont to do in the presence of a favored writer. Naturally, the man who had removed her from her workplace returned her there, then excused himself after explaining himself. She ended her story by stating that that night, possibly, was the most gratifying night of her life as an author.

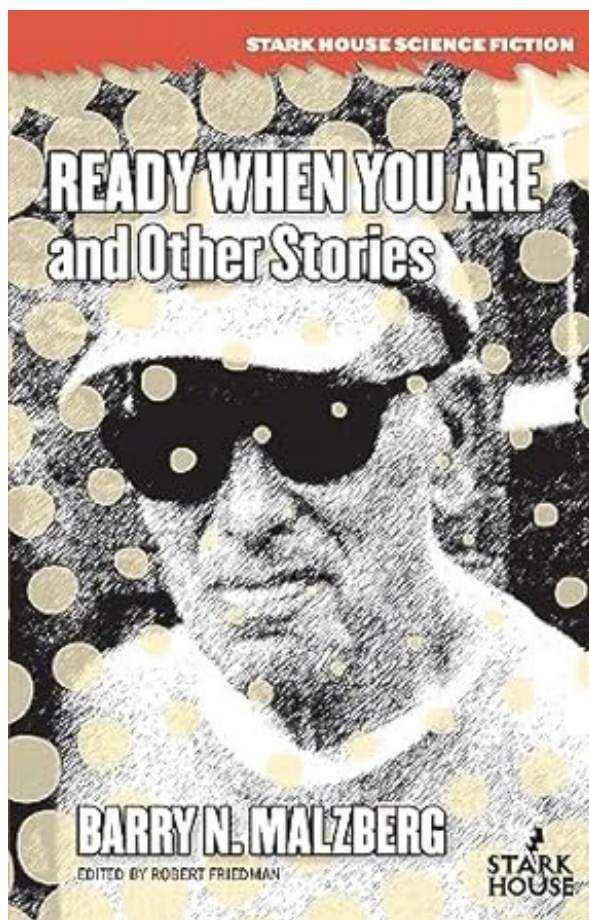
During the final years of her life, before passing in 2019, she became a fixture in her Maine town, sketching the faces of tourists for a few dollars. In fact, during one panel in Salon G at the Burlington Marriot that I attended, she sat down three seats from me in the rear row of the salon. After asking me if she could sketch my profile in colored pencil, I agreed. I confess to its being a very good likeness. I offered to pay her a small honorarium; she declined, stating that she was happy simply to be attending Readercon. I still have that portrait, in my bedroom, fourteen years later, as another wonderful Readercon memory.

Barry Malzberg

Passing only last year, 2024, after a panoply of illnesses that forced him to cease attending Readercon, “Barry”—yes, he had attained first-name-only status with us—had been so constant a fixture at Readercon since its inception that one might surmise that his very presence had given us part of our character. An editor, an author of both short stories, essays, and novels, his professional achievements speak for themselves.

What stood out for me was the man, himself. Inevitably wearing a t-shirt, black socks, and what looked like slippers, he resembled a grandfather out for a day trip in Florida. I watched him, year after year, announcing the winner of the next year’s Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery Award right before the “Meet the Pros” event at con. His participation in panels also drew me into his knowledge of the SF & F publishing field. I sat in on a panel he solely led, discussing that year’s Cordwainer winner, author Marc Clifton. Held concomitantly during the runup to that year’s Kirk Poland Memorial Bad Prose Competition—named for a character in his own novel, *Herovit’s World*—he clearly was irascible in having his panel scheduled so. To wit, he gave a fifteen-minute lecture on Marc Clifton, the man, and his works, to about four of us in the room, encouraging us to seek out his, Clifton’s, works and not to be too depressed by them. He then ended the panel, allowing all of us to attend Kirk Poland.

Nevertheless, I, during that same con, did squire him in an elevator interview about a few of his works that I had read: *Beyond Apollo*, *Herovit’s World*, and my favorite SF anthology, which Ed Ferman and he edited—*Arena: Sports SF* (1976). In *Arena*, particularly, I thanked him for both his short story, “Closed Sicilian (1973),” about SF’s most famous Fool’s Mate, and the ending essay, “Afterword: On the Non-transcendence of Sport.” Suddenly, the irascible man brightened up and talked at length about all four works just mentioned, especially “Closed Sicilian.” A chess enthusiast, Barry explained at length all that went into that story, the ending essay, and how he interfaced with the other contributors to that anthology, most of whom were not athletic, but, of one sport or another, fans. We parted and would never see each other again. Such is the nature of conventions, between writers and fans.



Picture courtesy of Daniel Dern.

Peter Straub

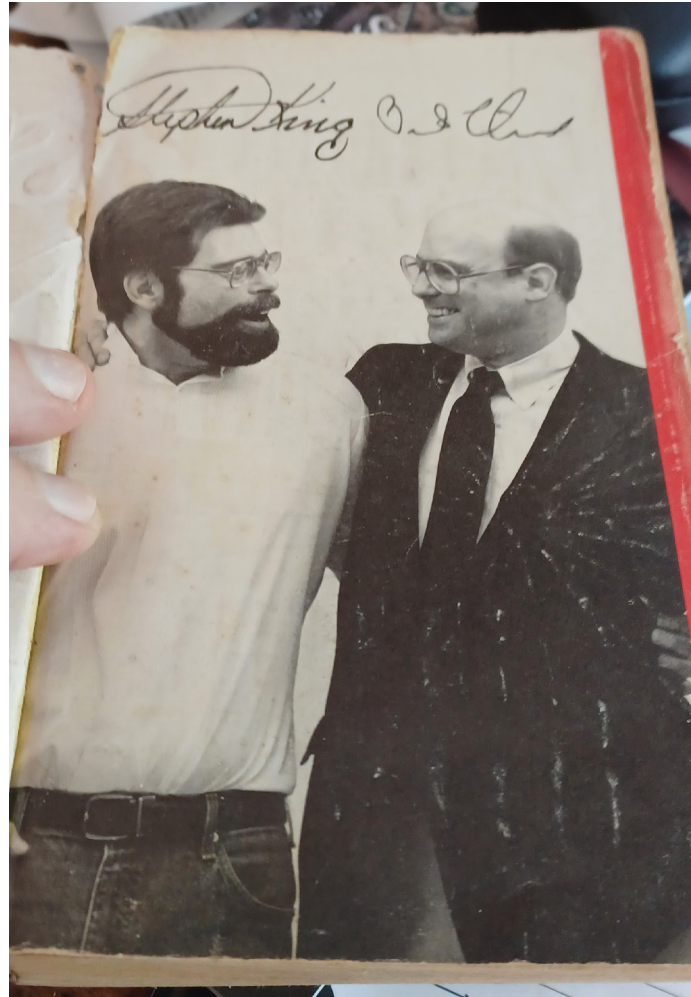
Ah, Peter Straub. A Guest of Honor in 2012, I remember him for the panels on which he sat, his stories about collaborating with Stephen King—my earlier entry drug into Straub’s own works—his writing in New York, while King wrote in Maine, and the writing process in general. During a panel in Salon G during 2013, Peter was making a point about something regarding fax machines and how during the writing of *The Talisman* (1984), King and he were supposed to have a 50/50 writing collaboration. As Straub relates, according to his editor, for every one or two pages of text that Straub would fax, King would send almost a hundred pages—such was King’s proficiency. This struck Straub with awe. As track manager sitting in on that very panel, I watched Straub struggle with remembering the exact year when he had been our GoH. I interjected, “Last year,” to much laughter, even a good-natured chuckle from Peter himself.

I also had the chance to meet him during an elevator ride in 2013. By then, Straub walked with the aid of a cane. I kidded him that I had disseminated a joke, based upon the riddle of the Sphinx, about his needing a cane, among my fellow staff members: “What walks during Readercon on four legs in the morning, two legs at noontime, and three legs in the evening? Answer: Peter Straub.” He laughed very loudly as we ascended towards our floors. In fact, I still have my copy of *The Talisman*, which he kindly autographed after the laughter abated. I admit that meeting with him up close, despite what I would read of his own, singly-written works later, I found his personality at odds with what I had expected from a writer in the horror genre. A very nice man, and a loss to literature.

Exordium

During an interview with Bill Moyers for Moyers’s 1988 PBS series, *A World of Ideas*, Moyers asked Isaac Asimov a question: “Do you fear death?” Asimov replied, “No, I do not, because all my ideas and thoughts are in print, on the shelves of libraries and bookstores. Sure, my flesh will die, but my stories and the rest shall live on.” One could say the same for the above-mentioned, and all, writers, in fact. Great art always outlives the artist. R.I.P.

Insert photo of Peter Straub with Stephen King from THE TOMMYKNOCKERS, c. 1983.



Our Staff

Gloria Lucia Albasi likes kaffeeklatsches, proofreading, art, film, writing, travel, and hanging out with fen.

Julia Austein visual artist and art teacher; loves stories and exploring narrative through her artwork. Is a perpetually overbooked human but loves to help out and is excited to be contributing to Readercon this year with designing signage and the souvenir book cover!

Tierney Bailey is a Libra, a loudmouth, and a dice-collecting gremlin. Currently, Tierney divides her time as Associate Poetry Editor with Sundress Publications, copy editor at Strange Horizons, and publishing assistant with Escape Artists Foundation. She has earned a BA from the University of Indianapolis and a Masters Degree in Writing, Literature, and Publishing from Emerson College. Tierney is most easily found screaming into the void as @ergotierney.

Noah Beit-Aharon is a writer, singer, dancer, homemaker and stay-at-home dad. In his writing life and elsewhere on the program he goes by N.S. Dolkart, author of the Godserfs trilogy. His other accomplishments include performing as Darth Vader in an opera, teaching Israeli folk dance, and conducting trainings in dementia care—but not all at once.

Rae Borman is a lover of things wordy and full of fantastical story. Rae still finds it hard to believe she is 15 years into volunteering with Readercon.

Ellen Brody believes that five of the most important things in the world are reading, writing, friendship, coffee, and dark chocolate.

Merryl Gross is in charge of Registration and foolishly agreed to be President of Readercon, Inc. this year. When not worrying about databases and committees, she scoffs at badly designed user interfaces and types at strangers on the Internet. Let her know if you have any ideas of how she should spend her retirement!

Beth Kevles lives with four cats who have taught her all the herding skills she needs to keep the tech team organized. While she has been the tech director of the New England Folk Festival since 2019, she only discovered Readercon last year! Beth enjoys working with volunteers from novice to expert, making sure the tech runs so well that nobody really notices its presence ... and she does this without being a tech wizard herself! Once the Con is over, she enjoys returning to the company of her cats (and her several human housemates), who all appreciate the quiet reading time that follows her home.

Lisa Opus Goldstein (not the author) has many years of experience in operations administration and accounting for nonprofits in real life. She is not very funny and helps run local science fiction conventions in her spare time.

John Hodges is running our 13th Readercon Blood Drive. Massachusetts General Hospital is so appreciative that our community chooses to give at this time of year, annually a time of increased patient need and reduced donor availability. It is his pleasure to serve the conference as Blood Drive coordinator, as he does for other local fandom conventions as a Heinlein Society volunteer. John has been in this role for 20 years. As of the end of April 2023, he made 589 donations himself, whole blood and platelet apheresis, for a total of 1,372 units. John started donating and volunteering in high school in 1976, started coordinating blood drives at MIT in the late 70s, and now, in retirement, has an encore career with the American Red Cross. 1976 was the same year Robert Heinlein first brought a blood drive to a fandom convention.

Dawn & Thom Jones-Low: Dawn arrived at Readercon 1 just in time to respond to a plea for help from one of the founding committee members. Helping at Readercon was so rewarding that she brought another helper, Thom, to Readercon 2. They've both been trying to be useful to Readercon ever since and finally joined the concom in 1999. Thom is currently serving as co-ConChair and managing a variety of technical tasks while Dawn is overseeing the Signage department. They live in Vermont on their horse farm with twenty horses, two dogs, two cats, an elderly pet mouse, countless Legos, and thousands of books.

Lori Meltzer has worked on SFCons since 1978 in many capacities, and at Readercon has settled on Hospitality. Lori wants to be sure everyone eats and drinks, so please go to the Consuite, Green Room, or Kaffeeklatsches for social places to recoup your energy!

William A. Sherman III attended Readercon 11, his first, in 2001, as a Saturday-only visitor. Love at first sight ensued. Since, he has become an annual, full-weekend attendee and frequent volunteer. So much the volunteer, in fact, that ConCom elected him to join in January 2010. An attendee of both M.I.T. and Salem State University, he has attained two B.S.'s in Mathematics and Business Administration—Accounting; also, two B.A.'s in both English and Spanish, and minors in Economics and Marketing. Coming to ConCom from concomitant careers in long-term health care management and real estate management, he truly prepared for ConCom beginning in 1976, after reading Jack Williamson's *Trapped in Space*, and continuing from 1983 to 1987, when he joined MITSFS for life. Currently, he resides in Boxford, MA, with his parents, two cuddly dachshunds, and about two thousand SF books and pulps.

Constantine von Hoffman, R34 publications chair, is a veteran journalist who has worked at CBSNews.com, NPR, and the Boston Herald. A former stand-up comedian, Con is author of the magical realist novel *JOHN HENRY THE REVELATOR* and a graduate of the Viable Paradise writers' workshop. He lives in Boston with his wife, Jennifer, and either too many or too few dogs. His website is cvonhoffman.com.

Nightwing Whitehead spent her early years playing with books and fabric. She discovered that it was more fun to read the books and create with the fabric. After more than a decade talking to room-sized computers, Nightwing was sent for retraining, and has ever since been reclothing the world. When not busy helping run Readercon, she can be found controlling fabric or howling at the moon, sometimes both at the same time. She is also working on making wearable versions (wearable by the author that is) of as many SF/F covers as possible, reading them all first to make sure she gets it right.

Margo Williams is a retired museum professional with curatorial and registrarial experience. In Sharon, MA she has served as Hospitality Chair of the PTO board and as Secretary of the nonprofit FAME board. She is a member of the Archives Committee, the Display Committee and has just joined the Board of the Sharon Historical Society. Margo is the Assistant Clerk of Readercon. She helps the Readercon Publications team and is part of the Bookshop staff.

Walt Williams is an Information Security executive by day and author by night. His publishing credits include: THE GARDEN AT THE ROOF OF THE WORLD (2013) currently being shopped for a TV/film deal, THE REALITY, MYTHOLOGY, AND FANTASIES OF UNICORNS (2021) with Dragonwell Publishing and JOHNNY TALON AND THE GODDESS OF LOVE AND WAR with The Wild Rose Press (2024). He is a frequent panelist at ReaderCon, Arisia, Boskone, and served as a panelist at the 80th World Science Fiction Convention (Chicon 8) in 2022.

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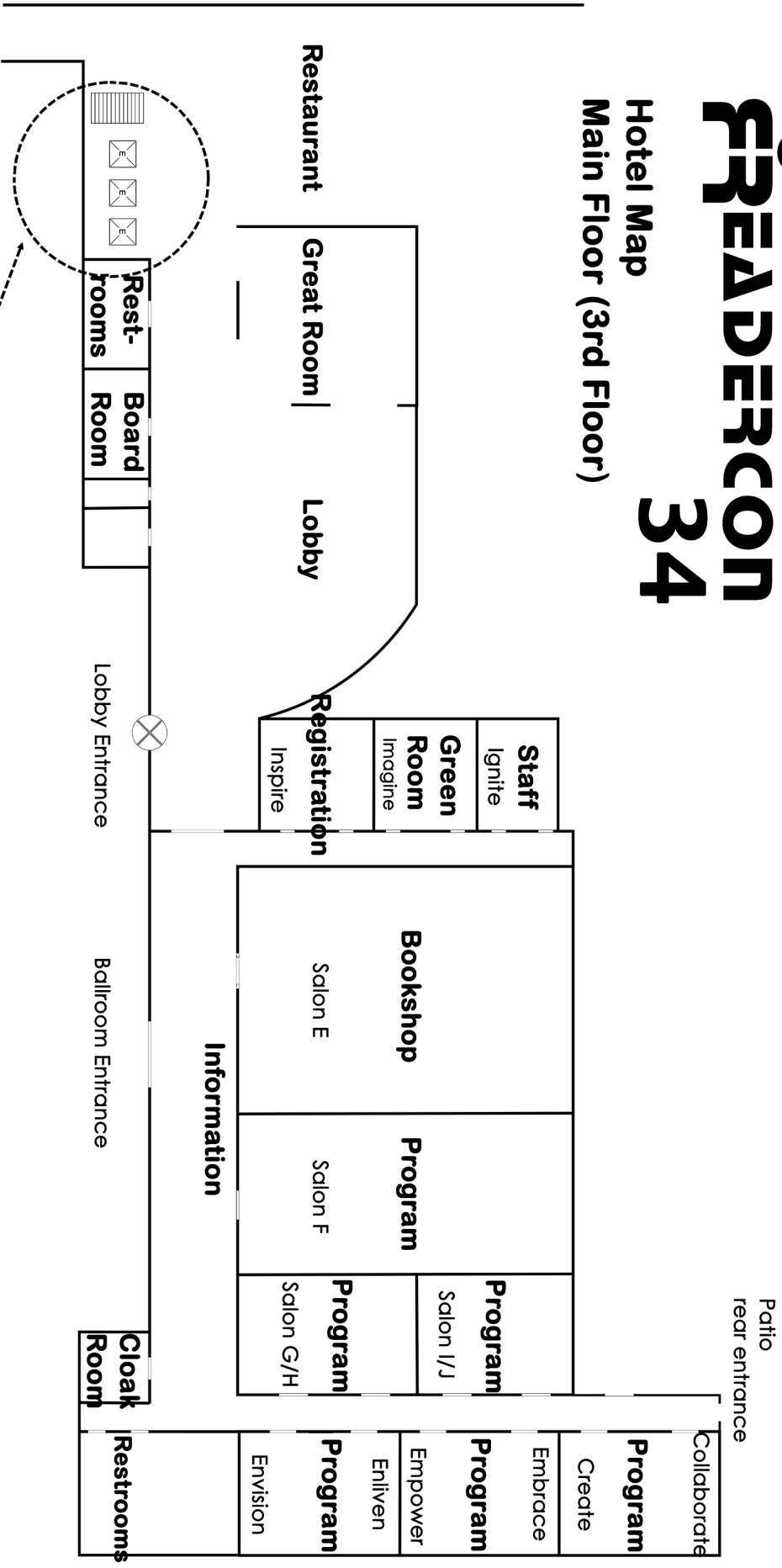
Author's Alley

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Hotel Map

Main Floor (3rd Floor)

34

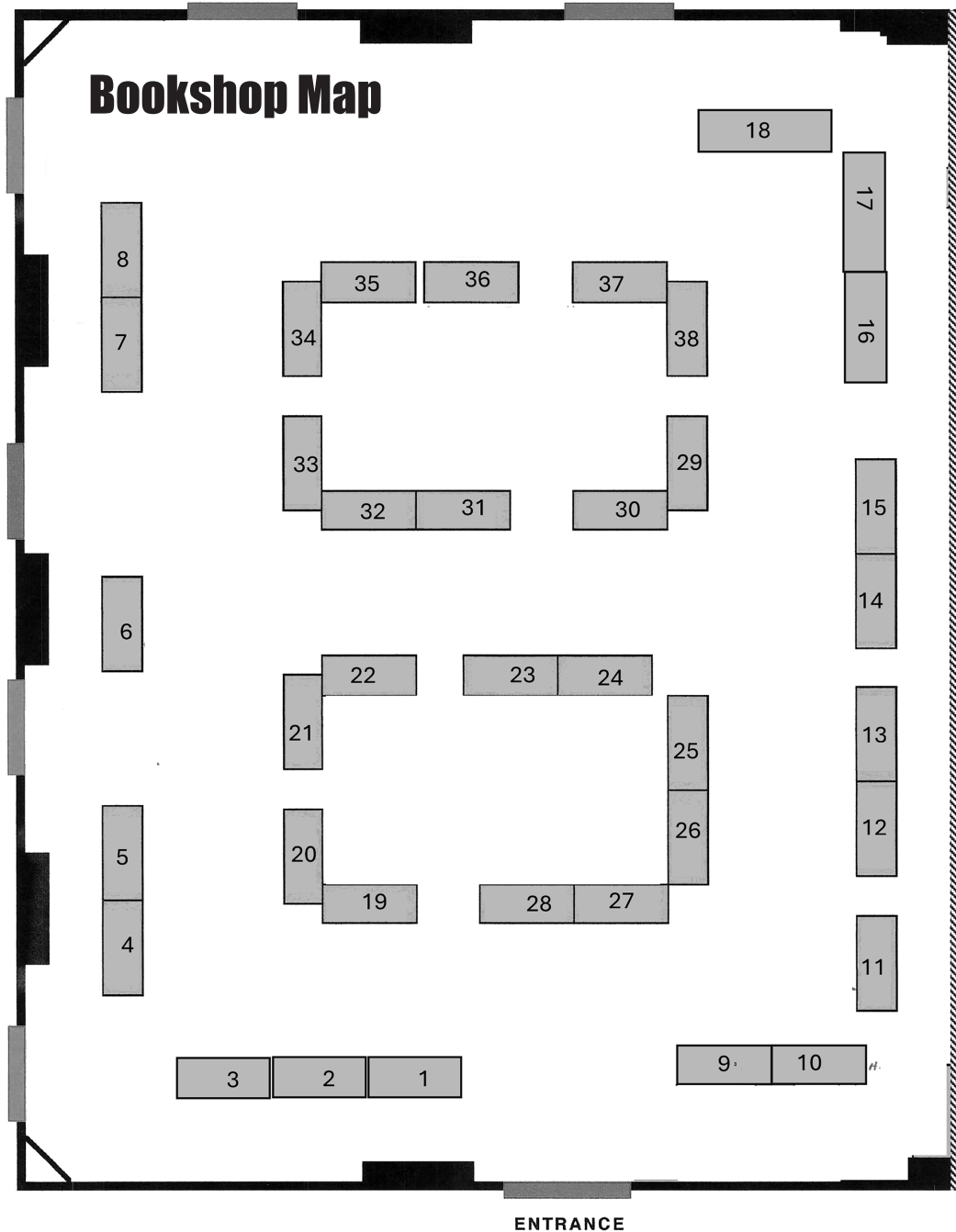


Autographs & Blood Drive in same area as Information

8th Floor

Kaffeeklatsches -- Room 830

**Con Suite -- Concierge Lounge
(directly across from elevators)**



Dealer	Table(s)	Dealer	Table(s)
Alton Kremer	24	Minds Eye	16,17,18
BerHal Books	14,15	NESFA Press	7,8
Book Moon	26,27	Nash & Arti Connection	34
Broad Universe	12,22	Old Earth Books	31,32
Clarkesworld	29,30	PM Press	4,5
David Clarke Productions	9,10	Reckoning Press	28
David Gerrold Media	6	Tigereyes Press	12,13
Dragonwell Publishing	11	Water Dragon Publishing	24
Duck Prints Press LLC	33	Small Publishing in a Big Universe	25
Eric Hook, Author	38	Author's Alley	35
Fantastic Books	19,20	Author's Alley	36

