

# Sigma May 2021 Issue 422







## Σ Squib

### — The Reason For Sigma Squibs Throughout Thus Issue

Patti Burns, an otherwise fine Pittsburgh media journalist, once stated when asked why the news reported was always so negative, I paraphrase, 'What am I supposed to do report 'dog didn't bite man.' I am reminded of the Monty Python piece about the Adventures of Ralph Melish, where our hero goes out in the morning and to the sound of dramatic swelling music and the portentous sound of a Tele news announcer and, 'absolutely nothing happens.'

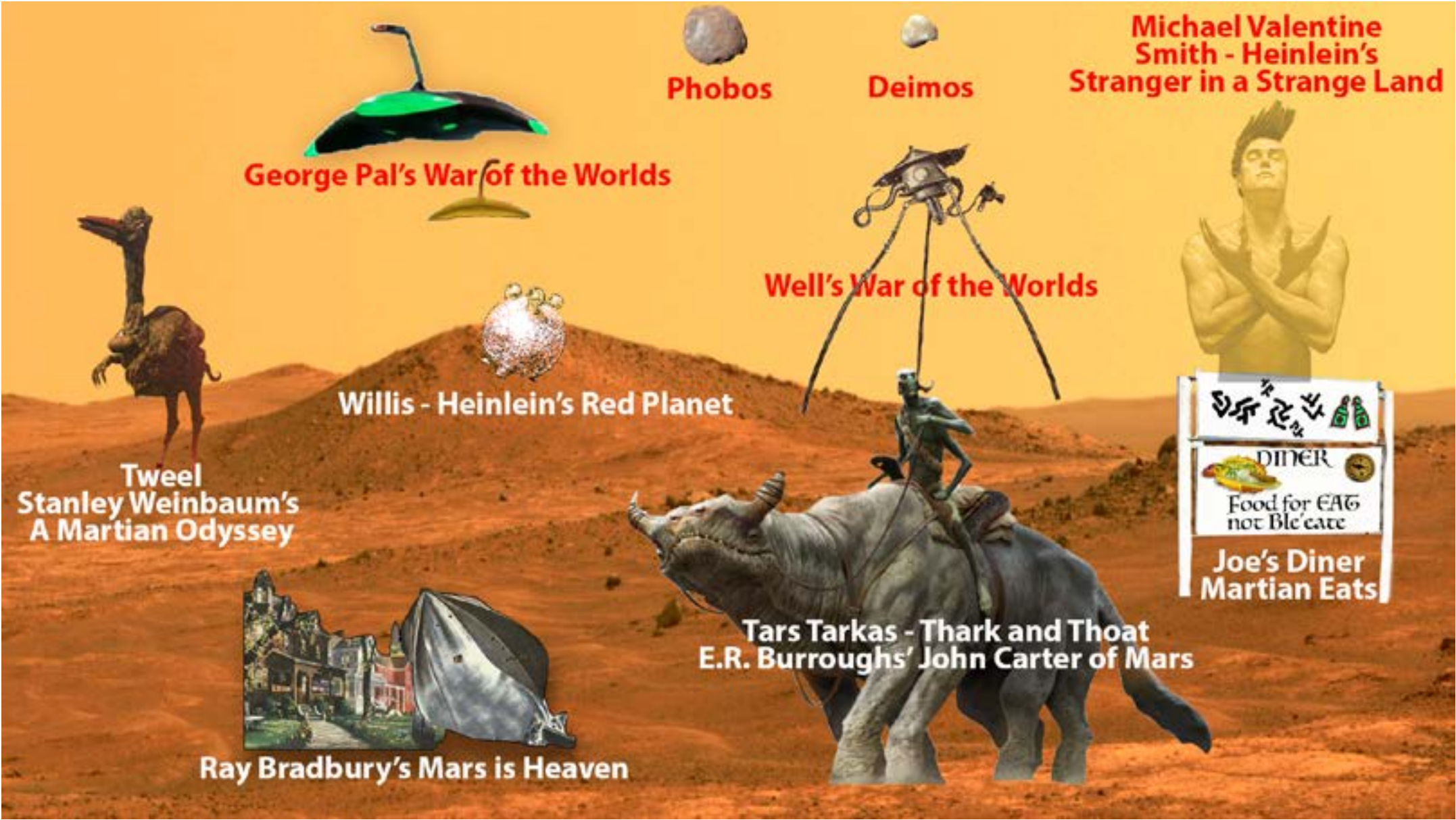
Patti Burns was replying as a news reporter who faced TV popularity ratings and an editor with a deadline each day. Ralph Melish is the life for the rest of us. My gripe is there is so much newsworthy never reported. A glance at the cable news channels, all of them, demonstrates they are ever sensitive to our horrified reaction to the best gloom they can generate. Whether it has any merit.

If you manage to look further down in some of the more obscure regions of the New York Times, or Washington Post, or other national papers of note, you sometimes find positive news that brings light to the world. Further, if you haunt sites on the internet like Science News, or The Literary Hub, or The History Reader, and so many others, you are likely to find intellectual articles arranged to challenge your thinking.

There are also the gems I find in the backwater or on some invisible island for Sigma Squibs. Genuinely odd, often endearing, stories that will bring an instant of joy to you, and a wise-cracking comment from me. Just to clarify, I consider the wisecrack my homage to the hard work that goes unremarked in the rest of the news. To me, these are the most important ideas I encounter throughout the day. They are, at once, the meal and the spice. In spirit, I offer them to you in the pages of Sigma.

### — Key for Last Month's Cover

There is some evidence Willis is one of the elders who raised Micahel Valentine Smth. Mars is either martial or mellow. Take your pic.





## — Galactic Hellcats by Marie Vibbert – A Review By Kevin M. Hayes

I know I'm taking a risk writing a review about a book by someone I know, but if I didn't like it and find value in the work, I probably wouldn't be writing anything. For those who don't know, Marie Vibbert is a writer living in Cleveland Ohio; she has been a guest at Confluence and did a presentation for one of our Parsec meetings about how not to sell a novel (to a publisher). This is the novel she talked about trying not to sell.

I could talk about Marie easily for a good part of this piece since she is at least as interesting as any of the characters in her book. But let's talk about her book: Galactic Hellcats.

According to Ms. Vibbert, she wrote parts of the original manuscript when she was a teenager and revisited it in later years. I think the youthful ideas and inspiration coupled with seasoning of maturity (really?!), other writerly advice, and training really shows.

In a nutshell, three wildly different women all obtain solo-flyers--a sort of single person (some can carry two, but they should be good friends and not mind being cramped) spaceship. They're fast, maneuverable, flashy and, because of the tech in this universe, they can make faster-than-light jumps, just like the big ships. Think space-going motorcycles with atmospheric capabilities. The women don't know each other but find themselves thrown together by circumstance and intent.

Because of the unsettled and unsettling political situation on a fantastically mineral-rich planet(mineral, as in jewels), the women find safety in an alliance. Together, they determine the only way any of them will escape the overly zealous fascistic police looking for them, is to kidnap a beautiful and helpless crown prince. And by "kidnap" I mean "help him to escape his controlling matriarchal family." Ultimately the trio aren't sure if they're liberating the prince or kidnapping him with the hopes of receiving a staggeringly large ransom.

And that only takes the reader about half-way into the book. Escape from the bad guys, rescue by good guys who may not be as good as you would hope. What follows in the form of narrow escapes and breathlessly close calls is self-realization, learning to trust each other and an almost Swiftian look at culture after culture in this delightfully well-drawn funiverse.

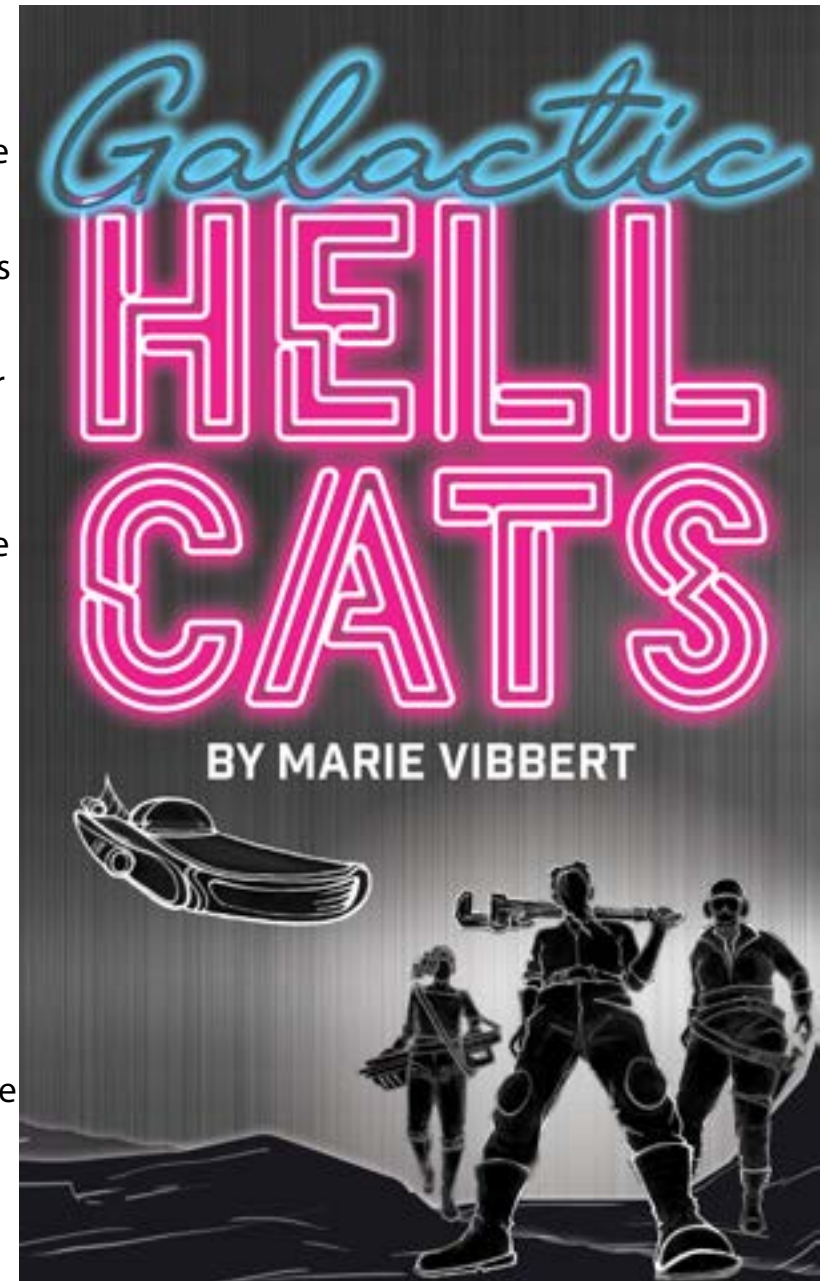
That said, some of the things I really liked about the novel: I really enjoyed the fact that each of the three, and ultimately four major characters obtain their solo-flyers in different ways. Ki, an accomplished thief and the first character introduced, is willed hers by a best friend's dying wish. Margaret is a military veteran who lives with her enabling parents, makes an exorbitant purchase as an attempt to change her life and fortune. Zuleikah is a bored little rich girl who receives hers as a bribe from clueless parents, thinking they will be instilling in her a sense of obligation. It is important to see how each of these characters gets and holds on to their individual solo-flyers--especially since the flyers are the symbol for the independence and freedom so eagerly sought by each woman.

Each is distinct and different from the others. All have their own motivations and thoughts about their situation, and all have their own assets and skills they bring to the table.

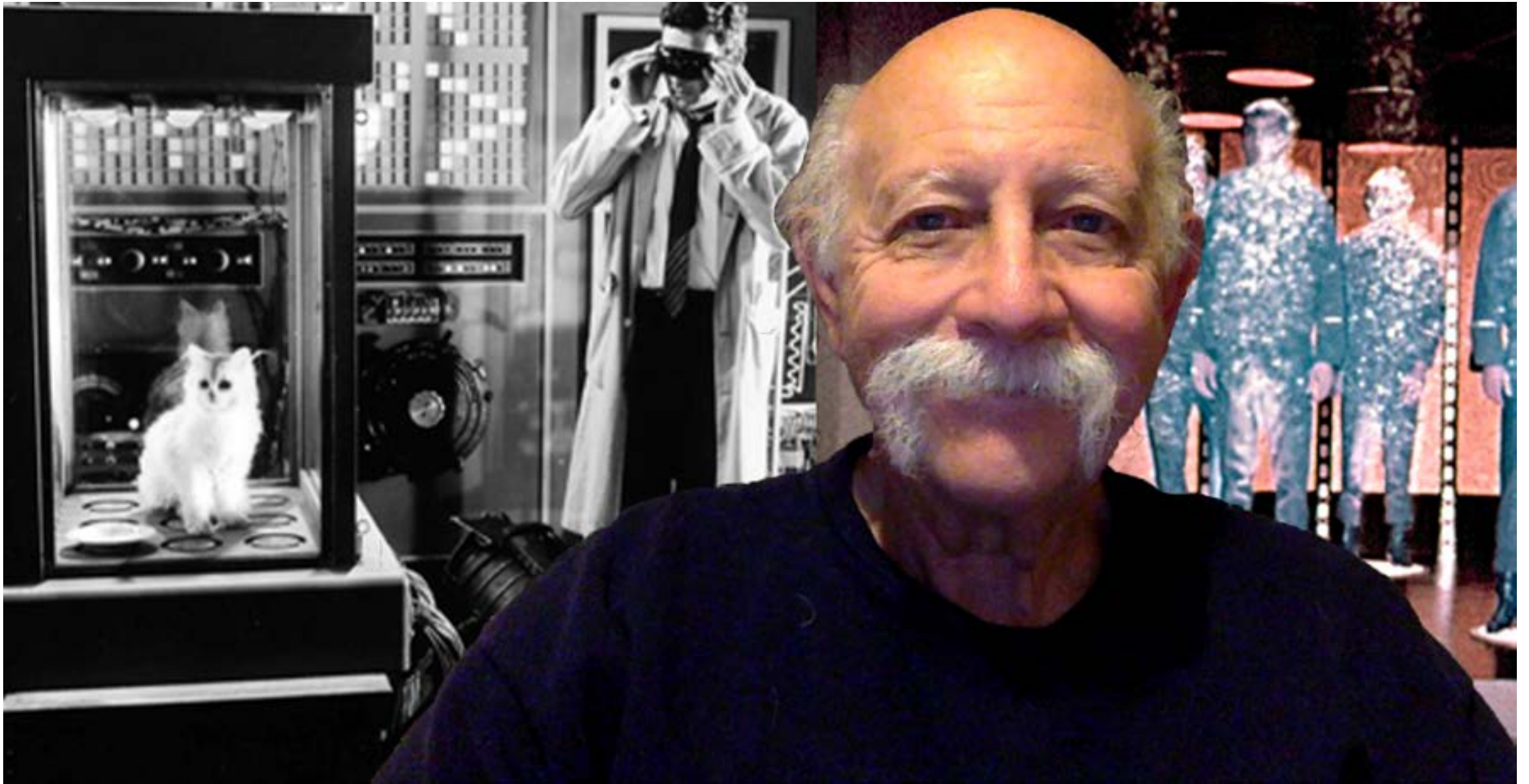
The women are shown as strong and independent people who still have their faults and foibles. They think for themselves and make their own choices. And when a man is thrown into the mix, they have to come to his rescue--on more than one occasion. In a delightful bit of turnabout, Prince Thane, is the shallow self-absorbed beauty used to being taken care of and having people pander to him. Like the others in the story, he has his own darkness and internal struggles and he finds strength in the support of three women the likes of whom he has never known.

The story is wonderful in its demonstration of strength balanced by insecurities of each of the characters and that is part of what makes this such a fun read. While the opening of the novel--the part that introduces the characters--is a little slow at times, once they all get together, you'd better hold onto your proverbial hats, because you are in for chase scenes, hairsbreadth escapes, unsuspected allies and ultimately, a group of friends who have gone through too much not to trust each other when there is no one else on their side.

I have to say, Galactic Hellcats is exciting, entertaining and a heck of a roller-coaster ride of galactic proportions. Recommended.







— **President’s Column The Fiction in Science Fiction**

There is a flibbertigibbet of information in books, articles, web snatches, YouTube blips, and newspaper features about the science in science fiction. Flibbertigibbet is a word I have appropriated for any designation of groups about SF. Much as there is a coloratura of opera singers, okay, I made that up, it’s really a clash of opera singers.

I have found very little about the “fiction” in science fiction. Of course, there are a dozen or so, (an egg-carton) of books with the title that somehow implies you will learn the secrets of, ‘How to Write Science Fiction.’ They have chapters on world-building, character development, plot thickening, mise en scène, and the “science” in science fiction

Gene Roddenberry famously created the transporter, not because it was a neat science-fiction device, but because he required a quick entry into story. Landing a craft in each episode would take up valuable story time and become deadly boring over a season of similar if not the same visuals. Make a little bubbly sound, generate an initial sparkle of a crew member, and ply a negative sparkle at the destination. Now that, my friends and fiends, is a perfect example of the fiction in science fiction. And for a kick in the pants once in a while, you can disassemble some poor schnook and then refuse or be unable to reassemble our red-shirt from the cold wild of outer space. I am reminded of another famous transporter film, “The Fly.” David Hedison in describing his process of transporting an object, in this case, a cat, from one booth to the other across the laboratory talks about “cat atoms” traveling through the air. (Here is the line from the script: “Well, where’s she(the cat) gone?” “Into space. A stream of cat atoms.”) That takes the “fiction” and the “science” of science fiction to a whole new level. Was it a mixture of fly and human molecules that ultimately causes Hedison’s transformation, madness, and demise?

What about hyperdrive, wormhole, deep sleep, teleportation?

“Gully Foyle is my name,

And Terra is my nation.

Deep space is my dwelling place,

The stars my destination.”

A story without those notions and their synonyms would be a long boring slog across the universe. I guess, since it is fiction, you could just elide to another scene in another place very in the future, indicate the passing of a “stumble” of generations. Let the reader figure out what the hell is going on through an explanation of such bulk it would, of necessity be scads longer than the tale you began before giving in and creating another word for hyperdrive. Wag.

It is illusion and a kind of magic, that you are using science as a basis in a science fiction story. Real science is exciting and can take a lifetime of learning to appreciate. Real science is a textbook. Exciting to those who are acquiring that lifetime of knowledge and gobbledygook to those who are not devoted

I give to you, in some relief, those I call “shadow genre” people. Willy Ley, Lisa Randall, Jana Levin, Isaac Asimov, Neil de Grasse Tyson, Natalie Angier, Carl Sagan, Mary Roach, Einstein himself in “The Evolution of Physics,” Sabine Hossenfelder, George Gamow...please feel free to name your favorite. These

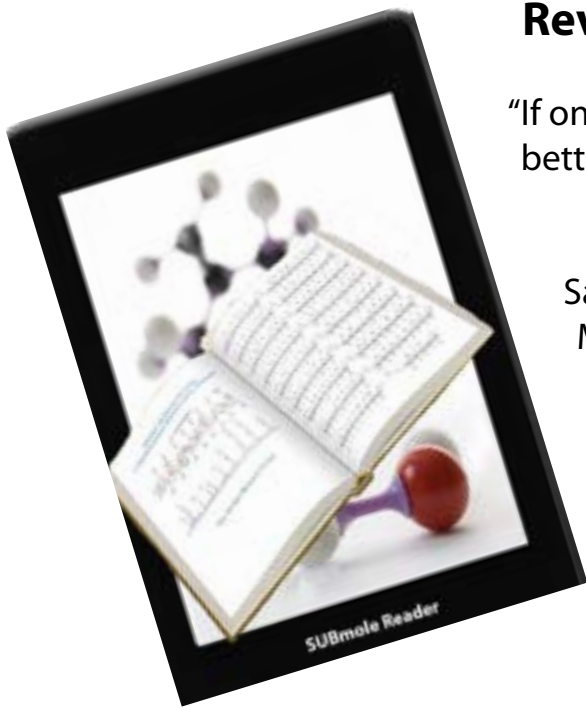
are the folks who dare to write a book of “popular” science. Einstein’s dictum applies here, “If you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.” Their works often tread into the SF genre and are inspiration for both the “fiction” and the “science” in science fiction.

I feel completely at home in the pages of the books written by these and others too numerous to mention. In so many ways I enjoy and am as stimulated by “popular” science discussions as I am pondering the heavens on a star-filled night. Enraptured In the frisson often captured in works of science fiction. The classics are the classics for a reason.

So is it fiction “first” and “science” second? Or is the vice versa? The only true answer, may be as paradoxical as time travel conundrums and the infamous double-slit experiment committed at the dawn of quantum mechanics, both science and fiction are first and second no matter the amount of saturation or even the non-existence of the other. Round we come agin to Hugo Gernsback’s pre-1930 prophetic and appropriate sticky appellation - scientifiction.

Put that in your “this is not a pipe” and smoke it.

ΣSquib



Revenge of the musty book shelf. Kindle lovers beware, there is a new sheriff in town

“If one scheme of happiness fails, human nature turns to another; if the first calculation is wrong, we make a second better: we find comfort somewhere.

–Jane Austin, Mansfield Park

Samuel Dahlhauser, a researcher at the University of Texas encoded a selected passage from Jane Austne’s Mansfield Park on plastic molecules. The goal of the study to check the viability of plastics as a data storing technique. The study was a success. Jane Austen was sequenced and decoded on an archive that neither fades nor decays. To Saint Thomas Aquinas this would be less of a surprise than a bunch of angels sitting around on a pin head. I wonder how I’m going to hold my new molecule reader.

source: lithub.com & sciencedaily.com

DreamForge Anvil, SF & Fantasy Stories and How to Write Them. An online magazine of speculative fiction that is positive and hopeful, while also helping new writers learn their craft.

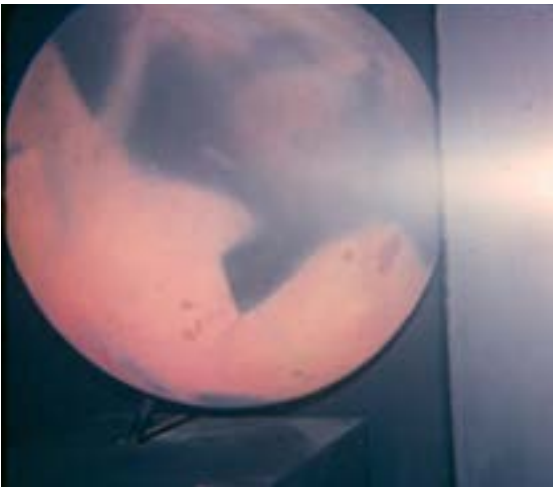
First Free Issue at: <https://bit.ly/DF-Anvil-1>





— 1956 Francis G. Graham

In September 1956 the planet Mars was in opposition, and closest to the Earth, at 35, 160,000 miles. The canals of Lowell and Schiaparelli were fairly doubted already by then, but the planet was a great mystery. What is more, there was something in the popular air of America at that time that made facts about the Red Planet news. Outer Space was still a great new adventure to come, and people were swept up in it in post-war America. Vaucouleurs’ scientific book The Planet Mars, prepped us, Hubertus Strunghold’s book The Green and Red Planet -- gave a good case for lichens growing on Mars--and Roy Gallant’s young adolescents’ Exploring Mars gave the most beautiful Mars map that decade could produce. There were hints in the IR spectrum that the lichens were real. The big W-shaped cloud on Mars. What was that? ( Perhaps just a big W-shaped cloud).



Not everyone was swept up in it. Segregation, chain gangs and lynchings still happened in the South, so much that some postcards were actually made of the lynchings. There were the stirrings of a civil rights movement from such oppression. And Indigenous Americans didn’t have a great time either as their culture and languages were threatened.

But still, there was this feeling-- in spite of the advent of the H-bomb--that things might just work out OK, that the Korean Armistice divided the world like the Pope divided it in the Middle Ages between rivals Spain and Portugal. Maybe WWII was not so inevitable. Ike was pretty level-headed, after all.

There were the beginnings of Space travel. As Mars approached its closest in decades, Iven Kincheloe flew the rocket airplane X-2 to an unheard of altitude of 24 miles. “Almost outer space!” we thought. It was the era of the space opera, the silver spaceships as drive-in fodder. This, George Pal assured us, is how it would be, straight from the pages of Collier’s, in just ten years. But it was a stag venture. Women then could be nurses, teachers, maids, secretaries and some could be doctors, but certainly not Space Station Commanders. Pitt’s 6 floor engineering school had one female rest room, but men’s’rooms on every floor.

Television was starting wide. Many people got their first TV then, and bought aluminum - packaged pop-in-the-oven TV dinners. It was black and white broadcast TV and always needed adjustment. The porcupine-looking roof antenna was a risky venture to adjust way up there. “The rolled vertical and horizontal sometimes during the climax of “One Step Beyond”. No videotape, to be archived shows were actually filmed from the TV screen. People took courses with the old DeVry and the Cleveland Institute of Electronics. They sent you a kit every month.



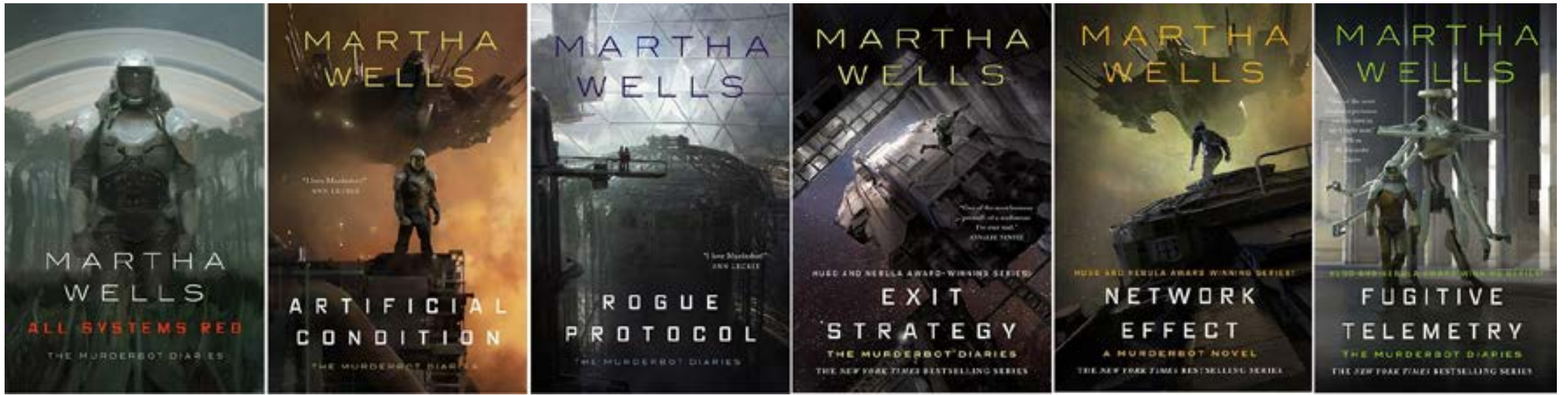
Major communication was done through magazines. Periodicals. Every city had a daily paper, it was for a city sine qua non. In 1956, Pittsburgh had three: the Press, Post-Gazette and Sun-Telegraph. In Braddock, we had the Comet News to buy magazines. Yes, betting happened in the back. But in the front, magazine after magazine on everything. Popular Science told us of wonders to come, of a rebirth of airships. Mechanix Illustrated and Popular Mechanics gave us a million do-it-yourself projects and ways to make money such as with miniature donut machines. Men’s magazines offered news of heroic rescues of Korean slave girls or torture by the Nazis of beautiful women, who looked like the model Alice Denham, coincidentally. Or lurid crime tales such as “The Man Eaters of Georgetown.” This D.C. suburb has had a wide variety of bizarre things I knew of later in life, but I never thought it had cannibals. I wish I had kept that article.

And there was the UFO craze at a fever pitch. Were they real?!? This was before the legend of Roswell gelled. Maybe we might not believe Adamski, but surely Gray Barker and Donald Keyhoe would not lie. For sixty cents, Gabriel Green would tell us to Face the Facts About Flying Saucers. And then, he ran for President. I’m not kidding.

Radio played a big part, especially in the rural sections of the country where television had not ventured. Both banks and radio stations were rigidly regulated by the Federal Government to assure they were locally owned and operated. Each radio station had a variety of programs; there was no “format” So here is very tall Long John Nebel telling us about UFOs from Venus as if he were an ambassador from the planet. His co-host, and later wife, equally tall model Candy Jones, told us about government medical and psychological experiments that she personally endured. And you know, so bizarre were events in her life, she just might have been a victim of mkUltra. But there was also a new sound on radio. A sound that most Bible Belt preachers dismissed as Satanic. But what they really meant is that its origins were non-Anglo.

The past of 1956 was like a foreign country, if not itself an alien world.

## — Fugitive Telemetry by Martha Wells and Murderbot in General Review by Larry Ivkovich



The 6th book in the Murderbot Diaries series by Martha Wells is here (just released in ebook format last week)! It follows the previous books All Systems Red, Artificial Condition, Rogue Protocol and Exit Strategy. It's a prequel to the fifth book Network Effect.

In case you're not familiar with the series (where have you been?), here's a little review:

Introduced in the 2017 Hugo and Nebula Award-winning novella, All Systems Red, Murderbot is a cyborg security unit or SecUnit in the future and distant universe of the Corporation Rim. Here, huge galactic corporations rule and are not shy about resorting to mass murder to obtain their goals. Cyborgs and robots are commonplace in this universe, SecUnits being rented out by their parent company to various offworld mining operations, research missions, scientific expeditions, etc., as security consultants/guards. Or as Murderbot basically says, "To protect stupid humans from doing stupid things."

The human brain parts of all cyborgs (including Pleasure Units and Combat Bots) are controlled by a "governor module" to prevent the units from "going rogue," that is disobeying orders, running off, or killing anyone. But in All Systems Red, we find out pretty quickly Murderbot has hacked its governor module and is now an autonomous individual.

However, Murderbot doesn't know what to do with this newfound freedom so, (if the nameless parent company found out, it would wipe Murderbot's memory, at the least) it pretends its governor module is still operational and continues to perform its security functions until it figures out what it wants to do.

In a nice twist, Wells flips the old trope of a robot or android wanting to be human or have emotions. Murderbot wants no part of that. It just wants to do its job, be by itself during its downtime, avoid humans at all costs if not part of its job, and access thousands of hours of adventure serials for entertainment (skipping past the sex scenes which gross it out).

However, the group of humans Murderbot works for, starting in All Systems Red, doesn't treat Murderbot like a piece of equipment or some expendable machine. They treat it like a person, one of their team, especially their leader Dr. Mensah. This both confuses and angers Murderbot, especially when it realizes it's starting to care.

As a result--If anyone or anything messes with "my humans," there will be Hell to pay.

All the books are told from Murderbot's point-of-view in the first person. Wells has given Murderbot's voice and personality equal parts anxiety, snark, paranoia, determination, courage, a bunch of "I don't care," and humor. Lots and lots of humor.

Murderbot is a great character.

By the way, Murderbot is the name this particular SecUnit has given itself for various reasons. Those reasons end up driving the action of the first four books in the series (all novellas) in a story arc which is wrapped up in the fourth book, Exit Strategy. The fifth book, and only novel in the series, Network Effect, is a standalone book (though it helps to have read the previous books) and presents Murderbot with a possible new direction in its life. It also brings back a character from the second book, Artificial Condition, that sets up the story and delivers a lot of really funny interaction between this character and Murderbot.

Did I mention there's a lot of humor in these books?

Fugitive Telemetry, though the sixth book in the series (another novella) actually takes place before the events of Network Effect and is also standalone. Unlike the other books, Fugitive Telemetry is less an action-packed, tension-filled, slam-bang adventure than a whodunit.

Murderbot plays detective in this one, helping the human security agents of Preservation Station (the station orbiting the planet Preservation, home to Dr. Mensah and her colleagues) investigate a murder. The game's afoot as Murderbot, despite the distrust and fear station security hold toward it, rapidly convinces them to listen to and trust it. Or else.

As you might guess, the murder investigation leads to a much more wide-ranging and sinister plot than a simple killing.

Though slower-moving than the other books, Fugitive Telemetry is still enormously entertaining and all Hell does break loose near the end.

Hey, it is Murderbot after all.



## You Must Remember This, A Font is Still A Font

even if it helps you to remember

### Sans Forgetica

Or so researchers in Australia say

The principal behind the font is called desirable difficulty.

Designed to be a challenge when you read so you will become more involved, and presumably force you to read more slowly and thoughtfully.

The idea is when you are more engaged in reading better memory retention will occur.

There will be a test, if I remember to create it.

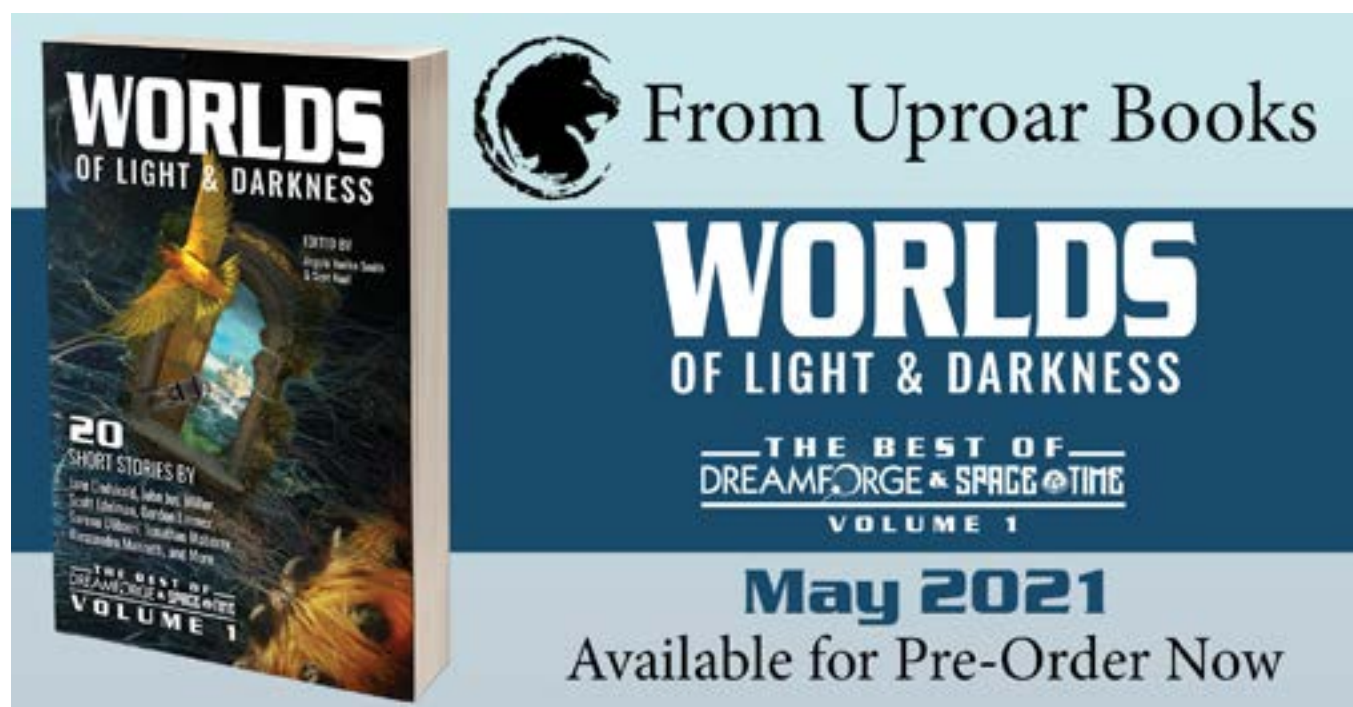
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From Uproar Books: The Worlds of Light and Darkness is a collection of the best speculative fiction from the pages of DreamForge and Space & Time magazines, including short stories by Scott Edelman, Jane Lindskold, John Jos. Smith, Austin Gragg, and more.

Stories include WSFA Small Press Award Nominee Weight of Mountains, and six stories that made the Tangent Online Recommended Reading lists in 2019 or 2020.\*

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—Brief Bios  
Eric Leif Davin



Garen Drussai (Mrs. Kirk Drussai), (? -?)

Her science fiction stories appeared in the mid-Fifties, but she also wrote short mystery fiction, such as “Why Don’t You Answer, Theodore?” (*Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine*, May, 1970).



Theodora (McCormick) Du Bois (1890-1986)

Du Bois was an American novelist, primarily of detective and children’s literature. She published 30 mystery novels between 1930-66. Some of these, such as *The Emerald Crown* (1955), appeared under the name of Theodora McCormick. She was important to the mystery field for pioneering the medical murder mystery. Her series characters, Dr. Jeffrey McNeill and his wife, appeared in a number of novels, most notably *Death Dines Out* (1939). From 1932-66 she also published ten novels for juveniles.

In her fantasy novel, *The Devil’s Spoon* (1930), a young devil takes possession of a man’s body to stop the Satan from dominating the world. In one of her mysteries, *Murder Strikes an Atomic Unit* (1946), she combined the murder and SF genres. Her 1951 SF novel, *Solution T-25*, portrayed a nuclear attack on America, followed by Soviet conquest. An American underground resistance eventually overthrows the Communist domination.

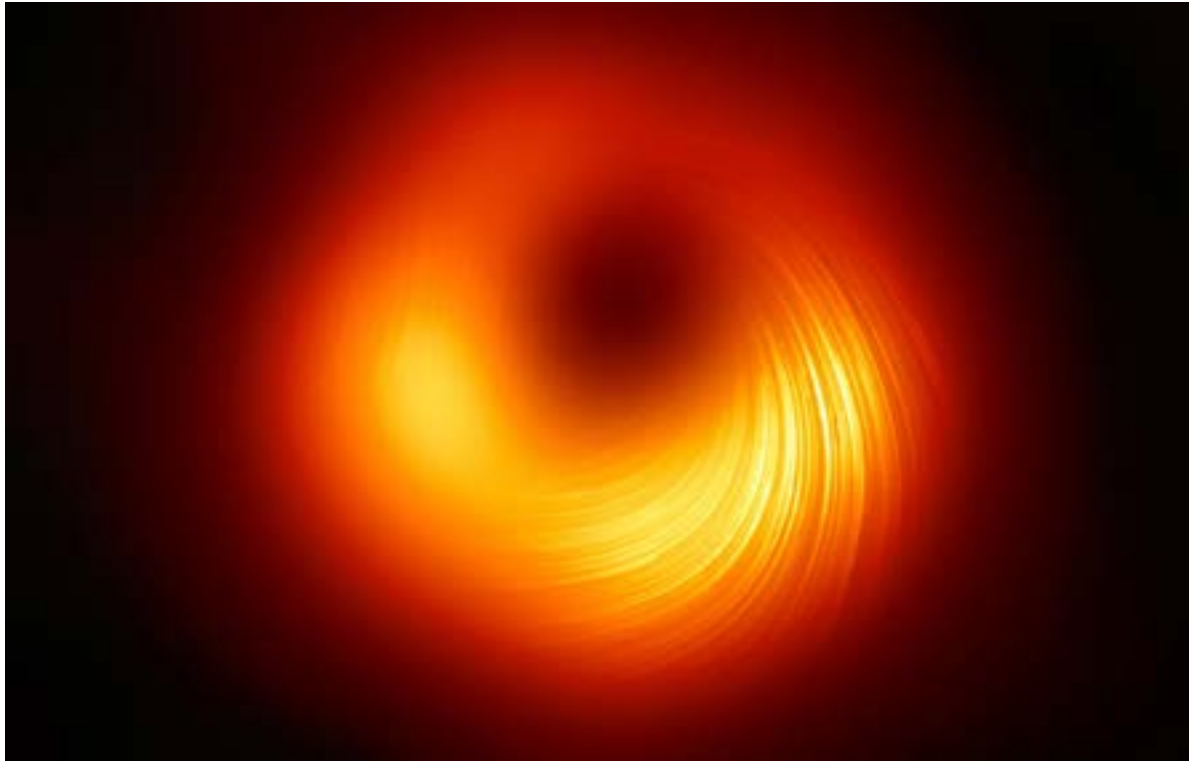
Merab Eberle (? -1959):

Eberle attended Oxford College, in Oxford, Ohio, and served as art editor of the *Dayton (Ohio) Journal Herald*. She was associated with the Red Cross during World War I. She authored many children’s plays, including *The Spirit of Democracy* (1917), *Bobby in Belgium* (1918), and *Anne of the Red Cross* (1918). A collection of her poetry, *Many Doors*, was published posthumously in 1961. It is unclear if she was married to Joseph Eberle, a cover artist for science fiction magazines in the 1950s, such as Lester del Rey’s *Rocket Stories* and Ray Palmer’s *Universe*.





In keeping with this Month's Theme in Sigma  
What do you call a collection of black holes?



Astonomers are crowd sourcing for names.

The candidates so far: A crush, A mosh pit, A silence, A speckle, A hive, An enigma.

For fans of John and Paul and George and Ringo, and Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds, I read the news today so now I know how many black holes it takes to fill an "Albert Hall of Black Holes."

*source - New York Times*

DreamForge Anvil, SF & Fantasy Stories and How to Write Them.  
An online magazine of speculative fiction that is positive and hopeful, while also helping new writers learn their craft.  
First Free Issue at: <https://bit.ly/DF-Anvil-1>





— “May You Live in Interesting Times” Eric Leif Davin [ericdavin@hotmail.com](mailto:ericdavin@hotmail.com)

Supposedly, the above is an ancient Chinese curse. Seems it’s a modern Brit invention, instead.

I was perusing The Quote Verifier: Who Said What, Where, and When,” by Ralph Keyes, St. Martin Griffin, 2006. According to the entry on this quote, Robert F. Kennedy “put this mini-curse in modern play” when he used it in a 1966 speech in South Africa. Journalists, especially Bennett Cerf, hopped onto it and spread it all over.

However, say the Quote Sleuths in this book, “nobody has ever been able to confirm its Chinese roots.” Nobody has ever found a Chinese source for it, nor are Chinese natives familiar with it. The first time they heard of it was when they came to America, and they then heard it in English as attributed to ancient China.

“Dr. Torrey Whitman,” the entry continues, “president of New York’s China Institute and a specialist in Chinese proverbs, has concluded that ‘May you live in interesting times’ did not originate in China. Whitman thinks the saying was created by a Westerner, probably an American, who called the saying ‘Chinese’ to enhance its mystique.”

Then the entry tells the reader that, “Professor Stephen DeLong of the State University of New York has doggedly explored this saying’s provenance. The earliest use DeLong has discovered is a 1950 story in Astounding Science Fiction that included this line: ‘For centuries the Chinese used an ancient curse: “May you live in interesting times.”’”

And that’s it, no author, title, or even month of issue follows. A bit of shoddy scholarship, that.

So, I did the work that Ralph Keyes should have done. He could have simply asked Dr. DeLong for more particulars. I turned to Pulp Meister Arthur Lortie, of Taunton, Mass. Arthur told me the story in question was “U-Turn,” by Duncan H. Munro, in the April, 1950 Astounding. “Duncan H.Munro,” in turn, was a pseudonym for Eric Frank Russell, a British writer. Professor DeLong probably wouldn’t have known that.

So there you have it. Unless further research by the Quote Sleuths can turn up an earlier citation, it seems we have Brit Eric Frank Russell, mid-20th century, to thank for this “ancient Chinese curse”, which has so proliferated in the English language. [Read the Story “U-Turn” here](#) (Note Page Marked as Astounding Science Fiction Magazine 137, First Paragraph

Σ Squib

Good Vibrations



“Here Come the Mummies , a funk band out of Nashville Tennessee may have a new authentic member soon . Researcher’s at London’s Royal Holloway College have created the voice of a 3,000 year old mummy by recreating its vocal tract using mdeical scanner and 3D printers.

The researchers worked with the body of the Egyptian priest Nesyamun. David M. Howard co-author of an article in the jurnal Scienc-tific Reports states, “We have made a faithful sound for his tract in its current position, but we would not expect an exact speech match given his tongue state,”

An elecronic larynx was used to make the single sound which was somewher beweeen the vowels in “bed” and “bad.”

Sounds Bbbbaaad to the bbbbone to me.  
source - [www.royalholloway.ac.uk](http://www.royalholloway.ac.uk)

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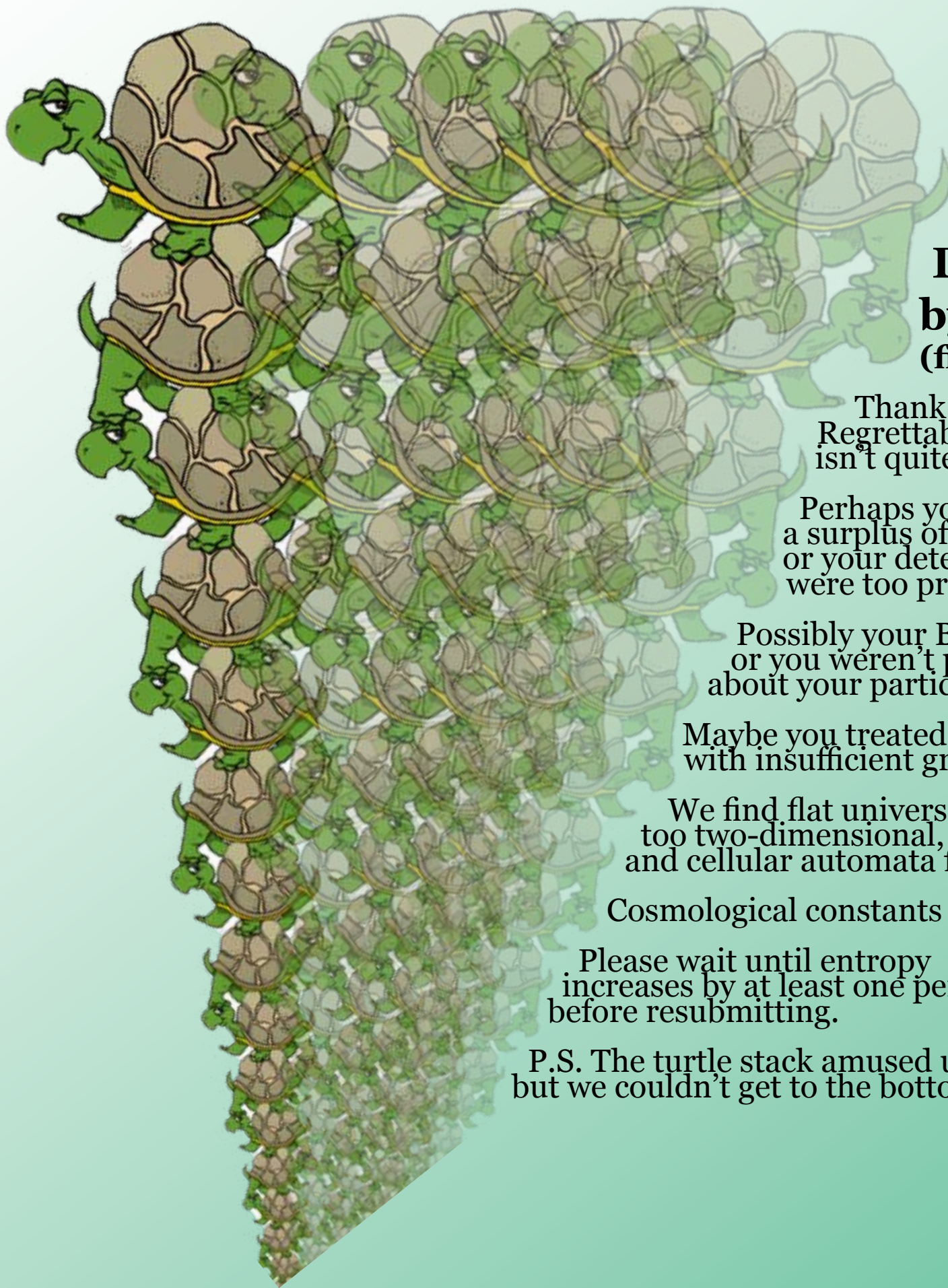
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**Dear Creator**  
**by Mary Soon Lee**  
(first published in F&SF)

Thank you for your submission.  
Regrettably, your draft universe  
isn't quite right for us.

Perhaps you proposed  
a surplus of elements,  
or your deterministic rules  
were too predictable.

Possibly your Big Bang wasn't,  
or you weren't particular  
about your particles.

Maybe you treated your material  
with insufficient gravity.

We find flat universes  
too two-dimensional,  
and cellular automata formulaic.

Cosmological constants should be.

Please wait until entropy  
increases by at least one percent  
before resubmitting.

P.S. The turtle stack amused us,  
but we couldn't get to the bottom of it.



# Parsec Meeting Saturday, May 15, 2021, 1:00PM



## Science Fiction and Comics A Multimedia Presentation by Joe Coluccio

Science Fiction and Science Fiction Comics share the same heritage, strolled the same paths.

From Buck Rogers to Fiction House, Amazing Stories to Mysteries in Space, Weird Tales to Weird Science, Mad Magazine to Dangerous Visions and Beyond.



# U-TURN

BY DUNCAN H. MUNRO

*There are lots of reasons for deciding on suicide. None of them are exactly sane. Except this one, which isn't really!*

Illustrated by Orban

He came slow-footed off the rocket ramp with one thought recurrent in his mind, *We are scientific and completely civilized—therefore I am going to die.*

Nearby officials gave him no more than the usual cursory glances as he wandered across the landing area toward the exit gates. Outside, he stood on the rim of the city street, surveyed it with eyes half-blinded by thought.

*We are scientific and completely civilized—therefore I am going to die.* His teeth chewed around lightly with the tip of his tongue. *It will be easy. They will make it easy for me. Afterward, I shall neither know nor care. I have been nonexistent before—I was dead before I was born.*

His gaze shifted to the overcast sky, the dull gray Earth-sky so different from that of Mars. Rain was dropping in a steady torrent, but

none touched him, not a drop. The great plastic roof caught it and bore it all away. The street remained warm, dry, dustless, dirtless, germless. A street of the sanitary age, a street designed for cleanliness, comfort and total independence of the elements.

An electro-taxi hummed smoothly along the road, the silver balls of its antenna spinning almost to invisibility as they sucked at power sources broadcast from faraway. He signaled it, his hand moving as though stubborn determination had overcome its own inherent unwillingness. The cab sighed as it stopped. Its driver regarded him impassively.

"Where to, mister?"

Climbing in, he said: "Life Terminal Building."

Lips parted in readiness to repeat the instructions, the cabbie changed

his mind, firmed his mouth, said nothing. Switching power, he started off, covering ground at little better than a crawl while he brooded over the wheel. His passenger endured the snail's pace without reproof and exhibited the fatalistic patience of one whose mind is made up and has never been known to unmake it. Several sleek electro-sporters flashed past at speed that made air blasts rock the creeping vehicle but failed to shake the driver from his mood.

Reaching the great marble entrance of Life Terminal, the passenger watched his machine depart at swifter pace. He had another look at the sky, the street, the even, architectural line of high roofs between the two. Then he mounted the forty steps leading toward the crystal doors, starting off with a reluctant right foot, followed by a reluctant left, gradually overcoming the pedal inertia and increasing his speed until he arrived at the top practically at a run.

Behind the crystal lay a circular floor flowered in mosaics from the center of which arose a gigantic hand of sparkling granite, five or six times the height of a man, with one mighty finger raised in warning. Imprisoned within the hand was a vibratory command which came to his aural-esp like an urgent cry.

"Stop! Think! What have you left unfinished?"

He walked steadily around the hand toward the far counter, his rubberoid feet-pads moving silently.

Behind the counter a sweet-faced girl in white uniform came erect as he neared. Her full lips parted.

"Can I help you, sir?"

He gave her a wry smile. "I am afraid you can."

"Oh." Her blue eyes registered sudden understanding. "You are not here to make inquiry? You wish to . . . to—"

"Yes," he said. It echoed hollowly around the hall, made a solemn sound in the overhead cupola. "Yes."

The granite hand vibrated. "Stop! Think! What have you left unfinished?"

"Third door on the right," she whispered.

"Thank you."

She watched him all the way to the door, watched him as he shoved it open and passed through. Even after he had gone she continued to survey the door as if she wanted no part of it whatsoever.

The man occupying the room behind the third door bore no resemblance to an executioner. He was plump, jovial, quick to rise at his visitor's entrance, swift to shake his hand and give him a seat. Resuming his own chair, he slid a bunch of forms into convenient position on his desk, held his pen poised in readiness, eyed the other inquiringly.

"Your name?"

"Douglas Mason."

He wrote it down, said: "Age?"

"Two hundred eighty-seven."





"Ah, then you have had a third rejuvenation?"

"Yes." Mason fidgeted. "Do we have to fill up forms even for this?"

"Not at all." The official studied him carefully, found him tall, slender, gray-suited, tired-eyed. "A civilized state makes no claim upon the life of any individual citizen. Anyone has the unalienable right to end his life, for any reason he considers adequate or for no reason at all, even at the merest whim, provided that the method of accomplishing the said ending does not cause discomfort or distress to fellow citizens."

"I know my rights," assured Mason.

"Therefore," the official went on, as if reciting an oft-repeated rite,

"we must recognize your choice regardless of whether or not you see fit to co-operate in this matter of form-filling. If you do not care to answer our questions it will make not the slightest difference—but the data we need is very useful and we would greatly appreciate your help."

"Help?" repeated Mason, rubbing his chin. He gave the same wry smile he had bestowed upon the girl outside. "I was under the impression that I could no longer be of help to anybody."

"Many have that idea. Usually they're wrong. In fact," continued the plump man, waxing still more jovial, "I have officiated here for twenty years and have yet to meet the individual who is completely useless."

Mason said: "I suspect you of wanting to talk me out of this." He leaned forward, his tone hard. "My mind is made up!"

"Would you care to tell me on what ground?"

"There is no reason why I should. If a person decides to die he has reasons which seem good and sufficient to himself." Mason thought a moment, added, "I have several reasons, and the best of them is that I do not fear death."

"Nor life?" put in the official. His fat face suddenly seemed not so fat. It had taken on a sudden shrewdness.

"Nor life," confirmed Mason without hesitation. He carried on, "When all one's purposes have been achieved, all one's ambitions realized, all one's friends long departed, and one has to retire for sheer lack of anything further to do, life ceases to be life. It becomes mere existence, a waiting-time. I can stand only so much of that."

The official shrugged resigned shoulders. "It is not for me to argue your motives much as I would like to." He indicated the forms. "May I fill these up, or do you refuse to oblige?"

"Oh, go ahead," said Mason.

The other prepared his pen. "Married?"

"Never had the time."

"Really?" He put it down with a faint touch of incredulity. "No children then?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You have never functioned as a donor?"

Mason snapped: "I disapprove of such practices even if they are embodied in our civilization."

"They are necessary because they are helpful to someone," the other retorted. "The driving force behind our present-day science is the need to help people. Would you rather have it as it was in barbaric ages when science was misapplied?"

"I'm not so sure I wouldn't. Things were messier but a darned sight livelier."

"You prefer them lively?"

"At this stage, yes!" Mason continued in the manner of one pondering aloud rather than talking. "I have an alabaster villa with a forty-acre cactus garden on Mars. It represents the *ne plus ultra* of something or other. In many ways it is also a mausoleum. Within it I can suffer the nagging pain of acute boredom in total comfort. What little work has still to be done is reserved for the young ones, the first and second rejuvenations. Earth is civilized. Venus is civilized. So is Mars. So is the Moon underneath its few scattered domes. Everywhere is civilized, orderly, regulated, under control."

"Everywhere?" echoed the official, raising his eyebrows.

"Even the jungles are artificial ones designed for the edification of the curious and the coddled," Mason went on, a hint of contempt in his tones. "Full of cultivated plants and cunningly doctored animals. The



lion at last lies down with the lamb. Pah!" He eyed the other. "For centuries the Chinese used an ancient curse: 'May you live in interesting times!' It isn't a curse any more. It's a blessing. We're scientific and civilized. We've got so many rights and liberties and freedoms that one can yearn for chains for the sheer pleasure of busting them and shaking them off. Reckon life would be more livable if there were any chains left to bust."

"I doubt that," asserted the official. "People are very happy until eventually the frustration of idleness overcomes them. It's a long, long time before that occurs." He pointed his pen. "On your own showing it has taken most of three centuries for you to reach this stage."

"Yes," admitted Mason, "because I had a good spell of plenty to do. Now, I've got nothing. Fairly soon I'll be due for a fourth rejuvenation. What's the use of it? A man can hang around too long." He leaned forward, hands on knees, face taut. "Know what I think? I think science has overdone it."

"Not necessarily."

"It has," Mason insisted. "I'm telling you that science has us all trapped between its accomplishments and failures. It has got us to Venus and Mars. It can get us no farther. The outer planets are completely beyond reach of any human being in any human-built spaceship. No rocket-fuel concoctable can do it. That's been admitted time and time

again. Science has taken us right up to the last frontier—and I've got a press-button, fully automatic alabaster villa right on it! Science can go no farther—so it has turned inward and civilized what it's got. Result is we're pinched in, confined in absolute freedom, and made so all-fired happy that we could burst into tears."

The official pulled a face expressive of unvoiced but polite disagreement, remarked pointedly, "Isn't it somewhat incongruous that one so condemnatory of science should seek its aid in escaping it?"

"I conform to the conventions in finding my way out," retorted Mason. "Besides, I readily admit that science has its uses—only I think it has gone too far."

"You may have something there," said the other, enigmatically. "I often wonder where it will stop."

"It has stopped to all intents and purposes. Anything which turns inward, upon itself, has stopped."

"That is an opinion to which you, as a citizen, are fully entitled." The official's manner made his own opinion clear. Shuffling his forms, he selected one. "However, since you have made the finality of your decision most obvious, I have no choice but to sign your warrant."

"Ye gods, so I must have a warrant!" Mason bent forward, took it after it had been signed, waved it around like a white flag. "What do I do with this?"

Nodding toward another door, the official said: "Take it through there

and give it to the attendant arranger. He will consult you about the manner of your passing."

"You put it so prettily," commented Mason. He waved the flag again. "Well, thanks for everything. See you in the next world."

"The meeting will take place only when my constitution can stand no further rejuvenations," promised the other.

The arranger proved to be tall, thin, bald and taciturn. He took the warrant, scanned it carefully.

"Do you prefer it swiftly or slowly?"

"What a question. Who on earth wants to die slowly?"

In funereal tones, the arranger said: "I am not talking about the act of dying, but the condition of death. Do you prefer it soon or after a certain interval?"

"Better make it soon." Mason paused, then added with grim humor, "Otherwise I might weaken and change my mind."

"That has happened."

"So?"

"Often," confirmed the arranger.

"It's a new one on me," Mason confessed. "I've never heard of anyone getting this far and living to tell the tale."

"Nobody tells the tale. Secrecy is the price of freedom."

"In that case I can change my mind at any time up to the final moment and walk straight out providing I swear to say nothing?"

"Yes." The other looked him

over. "But somehow I don't think you will. Unless you do your thinking fast you'll be one of the many who have put off mind-changing until it is too late."

"I get you," said Mason. "But I've already weakened six times in the past two years. I don't soften a seventh." He examined the room. Except for a desk and a calendar, it was bare. "Mind telling me how it will hit me?"

"Unawares."

"I know that much, but how?"

The arranger said: "The method is adapted to the individual case."

"I'm only curious."

"You won't be—afterward," promised the other. He went on, "The procedure is that you go through that door, take the automatic elevator up to the Life Terminal hotel and select any room you please. They are all most comfortable and—"

"Take the elevator to *where*?" said Mason loudly.

"The hotel," repeated the arranger imperturbably. "You will reside there, comfortable, entertained, happy in the company of others, until the culmination which will occur only when you are thoroughly at ease and completely off guard. That may mean hours, days or weeks before the end, according to the psychology of the subject, but as a method it is merciful."

"So I just sit around and wait for it?"

"There are adequate diversions. Nobody broods. Indeed, there is no

cause to brood, since a subject either weakens and goes or stubbornly sees it through."

"You can tell me no more than that?"

"At this stage," said the arranger pointedly, "I cannot imagine you caring very much."

"Which I don't," assured Mason. "Not a hoot. Do I get on with the job or are there further indispensable bureaucratic preliminaries?"

The other winced. "There are two forms I should fill. If you're in such a hurry I'll let them go blank." He pointed to the nearer of two doors. "You can take your choice. That is the way out." He indicated the other one. "That also is the way out."

Mason went boldly to the first, opened it, looked through. Beyond lay the mosaic hall with its granite hand.

"Stop! Think! What have you left unfinished?"

He tried the other door. Behind stood the elevator, bare, metal-lined, with a red stud in one wall.

Stepping inside, he peered out, said with a touch of ghastliness, "Going up?" Then he closed the door, jammed his thumb on the red stud and instantly realized that this was it!

The stud sank under his thumb while he watched it fascinatedly and lacked the power to release his pressure. It appeared to go down with an awful slowness born of a time-sense distorted by peril. The approach to death is difficult; the con-

tact tremendously breath-taking. His pores were wide open, his body tense, his mind whirling when the stud closed a circuit and the mock-elevator performed its designed function.

There was only a pale-blue luminescence in the air and a split second of immense agony during which his body seemed to be torn into a million pieces and further dispersed to its last molecule.

Voices murmured deep in a colorless haze, slow-mouthing voices that advanced upon him, then receded, then came back. They sounded close to his ears, and whispered away through illimitable distances and again returned. There was a peculiar rhythm to this vocal coming and going like the steady swing of a wave through positive and negative amplitudes enormously stretched in time. It was quite a while before he could distinguish words.

"Three in succession. That plays hob with the odds."

"Dunno so much. The odds take account of inevitable runs. You're taking too short a view."

"Or maybe they're getting better?"

"I'd like to think so, but I just can't see it."

Mason sat up, held his head. The voices ran away, ran back. "Give him a shot . . . yep, just there." Someone stuck a pin in him. He opened his eyes, snapped at a gray-bearded man, "Go easy, will you? I've got a fat nut."

"You're lucky," remarked a sec-

ond, heavily built man standing close by his side. "Some have only half a nut, others none at all."

"And some never use more than half anyway," said Mason. He ceased nursing his head, put his hands on the floor and helped himself upright. The room whirled momentarily, then steadied.

The graybeard eyed him speculatively, hitched a blue, long-snouted gun more comfortably over one hip, went behind a desk. Sitting down, he pawed a printed form into position, licked the end of a primitive pencil, looked at Mason again.

"Name?"

Mason teetered, felt the bulky man's hand steadying him, protested hoarsely, "Holy smoke, do we have to go through all that again?"

"What I want," informed the graybeard, "are three things: your name, your remaining rejuvenation-run and your qualifications."

"Douglas Mason, twenty-four, suicide," he gave succinctly.

The bulky man chipped in with, "Hah-hah!" When Mason turned to look at him, he added, "You've been foxed."

"Shut up, Corlett." The graybeard registered mild annoyance. "I've told you repeatedly that arrivals must be cushioned against mental shock." He showed white teeth, and his beard waggled as he concluded, "You're no cushion."

"And I'm no hothouse flower," said Mason. "Neither of you need be afraid of me wilting."

Corlett said: "Hah!" again and

added, "Listen to that, Dexter. He doesn't want any cushions."

The graybeard named Dexter leaned over his desk, spoke sharply to Mason.

"Just what do you mean?"

"It's like this," explained Mason. "I'd got nothing left to do but sit around and think. For a while I thought of all sorts of things, most of them futile, all innocuous. I was a useless cog in a big machine. I was waiting to be discarded."

"I know," assured Dexter. "I'm no babe myself."

"Then one day a lecturer on the video set me off on a new tack. He'd been praising our civilization, its scientific exactitude, its perfection. It worked so wonderfully, he said, because every man had his place and every place its man. All the cogs interlocked, the big and the small, mutually necessary. It was a morale-lifter, the old it-all-depends-on-you technique."

"Well?" prompted Dexter.

"Then he blundered. He opined that our inability to reach the outer planets was really a blessing, in disguise. Our setup was so complicated and highly organized that a sudden rush of cogs elsewhere would make it fall apart. There would be chaos. The machine of super-civilization couldn't run if losing its parts faster than they could be replaced."

"That makes sense," contributed Corlett. "But what of it?"

Mason said: "I stewed it over in my alabaster villa on Mars." He

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turned his head, looked at Corlett. "Do you know that there is no alabaster on Mars?"

"No."

"Well, there isn't. It set me back a million credits to drag the lot from Earth more than a century ago. It was shot across space by vibro-transference in loads of two thousand pounds which, at that time, represented the limit per boost over that distance. They had to send four times as much as was needed because three-quarters of it reintegrated wrongly at the focal point and ceased to be alabaster. That's the trouble with vibro-transference. As a process it's ultra-swift but darned temperamental."

"Go on," urged Dexter, watching him.

"Humans make the Earth-Mars runs by rocket. It's slow but certain. They get across alive, in one piece, and still in human shape." He paused, rubbed his head which still contained a faint and peculiar fizzing. "Just for the ducks of it I spent four years working out the odds on a human being getting himself dumped alive and kicking on an outer planet, by vibro-transference. I made the load limit per boost something over two hundred pounds."

"Two eighty-four," corrected Dexter.

"And I made the odds appallingly low. No more than three chances in a thousand."

"Seven," said Dexter.

"As good as that? They must have improved."

"They have. There is always improvement."

"Anyway," Mason went on, "the odds against stood so murderously high that obviously it was a job to be reserved exclusively for lunatics or would-be suicides. In other words, *for the few cogs who become superfluous on their own showing.*"

"Of which you were one?" queried Dexter. He stroked his beard, cast a thoughtful look at Corlett, returned his gaze to Mason.

Mason nodded agreement. "You'd get a scramble for new frontiers—if everyone knew they were available, within reach. There is no similar enthusiasm for the death house. The self-confessed superfluous can be handled where the downright adventurous cannot; their numbers are less and they don't matter much."

"So you put two and two together?"

"And made it four. I thought of the basic rights of individuals craftily established by law, of occasional puffs of publicity for Life Terminal's facilities, and of the fact that as far as further rocket efforts are concerned the experts don't seem to be really trying—yet scientists are notorious fidgets even in their sleep. Why shouldn't they keep trying? Answer: because they've got there!"

Dexter emitted a brief chuckle, said: "There's one flaw in your complaint about scientific secrecy. If you can think this out all on your own, why shouldn't a million

others do likewise—and start the dreaded rush?"

"Because the conclusion remains a suspicion until one can get proof." Mason's expression became slightly lugubrious. "There's where the powers-that-be do have me foxed. I put over my best act from the moment I stepped on Earth, I bet on those seven chances in a thousand and I got through pure, white and uncontaminated. I was born lucky. I got the evidence."

"And now you're stuck with it," Corlett interjected again. "There are eight hundred of us here. At the rate the newcomers reintegrate recognizably, it will be a long, long time before we're eighty thousand, much less eight million. So we haven't got much: no airplanes, no rockets, no video, no rejuvenation plant, no dream-gardens, no alabaster villas, no vibro-boosters. You can't go back. You can't return from the dead waving your evidence triumphantly."

"I know it." Mason pursed his lips good-humoredly, let his eyes linger on the blue sheen of Dexter's gun. "The big-brains have made a tricky setup, a very neat play. This is life after death—and nobody can return to say that it isn't. The play

can't be broken until we've grown big enough and powerful enough to build a civilization of our own."

"You said it!" agreed Corlett emphatically.

"But it worries me none," Mason went on. "I wanted proof for my own satisfaction alone. I've turned right around and gone back to where I started—at the bottom, with a spade in my hands."

"You'll need more than that," promised Dexter. He patted the weapon at which Mason was still looking. "This place isn't so amiable as it might be."

"So much the better. Chains were made to be busted. There will be no more rejuvenations, and I haven't got long. Give me a gun and a spade and let me get started."

They found both for him, took him outside. He leaned on the spade, smelled the heavy air, looked at the small group of crude stone houses standing nearby. His gaze swung from there, studied the great red spot on the monstrous thing poised brilliantly overhead. His feet shuffled around in queer purple grass.

He said: "As one Callistrian to a couple of others, that's a mighty fine sight!"

THE END

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