

Volume 2

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sonder

everyone has a story

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front cover: The Library,
computer-generated art
by Midjourney

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Publisher
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Editor in Chief
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back cover: Bright Eagle
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My Old Friend, You've Changed

Libraries.

Was there ever a more magical place to those of us who love books? Certainly not for me; I grew up dirt-poor and way out in the country, so the highlights of my month were the two days my grandparents went to town to shop. Invariably, my grandfather would want to sit out in the courtyard square to talk to his old friends - he was nicknamed Windy for a reason - and I walked across the quiet street to the library, a one-room affair with maybe ten freestanding shelves and walls lined with books. I did not go so that peculiarly dressed men could sashay around and entertain me. I did not go so that librarians could read me supposedly banned books. I went because I could never find enough to read.

Our libraries have forgotten their magic - their incredible ability to open the doors to other worlds for lonely, poor, and forgotten children, to help adults continue learning for their entire lives, and to bring communities together with a shared love of stories. For some reason, they have ceased being an educational resource for communities and turned to politics, promoting an odd version of the First Amendment that would appall our Founding Fathers. (What would Thomas Jefferson think about Drag Queen Story Hour, I wonder?) Worse, librarians have forgotten their jobs as curators of American culture. The best books of the past are tossed aside, replaced by the lightest ephemera - just so it's politically correct. Shelves are removed to make room for computer kiosks. And librarian book recommendations, once stellar guides to the best books for patrons, have turned to the progressive and the woke.



Libraries should be relatively quiet, passive places of peace and reflection, almost monastic. They have become places of strife and, in the worst cases, of outright chaos and battle. I love libraries, but I confess to being trepidatious about going, or letting my kids roam the children's stacks unchaperoned.

The cover image pays homage to that element of libraries that is most magical, the books that seem to open the door to other worlds. Without my libraries, my childhood would have been pretty miserable. With them, I knew there was a future for me brighter and more hopeful than I could possibly imagine. Isn't that what they should be?

Jamie K. Wilson
Publisher

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n. the realization that every person on the planet pursues a life as vivid and complex as our own. They each have their own, personal hopes and dreams, virtues and vices, moments of sanity and craziness interwoven in an epic story perpetually playing out around us like Shakespeare in the park, or the café, or the bowling alley, or in church. We may appear only once, as an extra sipping beer in the background, or as a blur of traffic passing on the highway. Or we may command the stage as a tragic hero, or a complex villain, or even as comic relief. Each of these stories are uniquely ours, uniquely human, and they deserve to be told.



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Editor's Note

by Jamie K. Wilson, Today's Guest Editor

Our most exciting offering this time, I think, is the outstanding interview Tom did with the brilliant Tom Monteleone. Mr. Monteleone has a career that extends back to the early 1970s; he's published over a hundred short stories and dozens of novels, as well as editing anthologies including the acclaimed *Borderlands* series. In spite of this stellar career, Mr. Monteleone was canceled earlier this year by the Horror Writers Association because he did something he's done his entire life: bluntly told the truth as he saw it.

We also have several short stories, some critical essays, a poem, and computer-generated artwork - though I'd rather publish original art from right-leaning artists! In fact, If you're reading this, we would love to have your submissions. We take all cultural artifacts - scripts, flash fiction, sketches, whatever. Just please, no politics; there are plenty of outlets for that. Submit to sonder@conservatarianpress.com with the subject line Submission. Other guidelines are on the last page of this magazine or on our website.



Enjoy our offerings here! May they inspire you, motivate you, and most of all give you hope.

Roy M. Griffis | Fiction

Roy decided he wanted to be a writer at ten, and hasn't looked back since. His most recent novels include the Cthulhu, Amalgamated series, which is "equal parts Terry Pratchett and Mel Brooks," according to [Upstream Reviews](#).

Shadows

It is the third day. Today, I am assigned to the western, or forward, anti-aircraft battery. Hans has the eastern gun. Almost every third day the British have sent a reconnaissance plane toward us: our lives have become patterned around that fact. But we look ready each day.

At least, we are told it is a recon plane. Before he died, Herr Deitrich told us, "If it is a recon plane, we must do our best to shoot it down. The element of danger and our appearance of bloodthirsty determination to knock them out of the skies will help the Britisher's report of us." So we wait.

The land here is mostly flat, unlike the steep hills and valleys of home, and it is also dead, unlike home when I was last there. I do not like to think of the green and slate colors all black, burnt and scarred by the Allied bombs. When the sun rises here, it sends the light running ahead of it, like pouring golden water on a dark table top. The nights are cold, the sunrise cool, and the largest part of the day is hot.

I wear an old Messerschmitt leather jacket, gloves on my hands as I sit at the controls. The jacket has ragged holes down one side. Within hours of the sun's

rise, I'll be stripped to my undershirt. Stretching night, stiffened limbs, I catch my leg against the metal frame. It is only a glancing blow, but the pain flies up through me like the red streaks radiating from my wound. "Scheisse!" I mutter.

Gingerly, I move my leg aside. The seat of the gun is rough, better used on a farm tractor than for a weapon; even so, to recline invites sleep. Instead, I look back over my shoulder at the camp.

The 10 or more cooking fires are lit, and Johann's most important duty for the day has been performed. Prometheus. I call Johann "Prometheus" for the fire he brings to the British now huddles inside what would be the cook's tent. He is wearing his cook's uniform, easily seen from the air. He waits, as we all do, for the sound of the aeroplane. The serving tables are set; the containers half full of something like food. The wind shifts the smaller pots a bit. The occasional tinny clank carries across the empty field between us.



The massed trucks, the personnel carriers. All of this is for them alone. The tents, the fires, even the camouflage thrown over our weapon emplacements. It is for them.

I can hear it. Almost all of the noise from the engine, I was told, so little from the propeller. Sound travels almost as quickly as dawn sunlight in the desert, but deceives about the direction.

There it is...too distant to make out the details, but even were I to see them, I would not be able to correctly identify the craft. I should, but the type has ceased to be important. Only the circle within a circle of the British emblem interests me. It is a good target on which to aim.

High and fast it comes, staying hidden in the sky filling explosion of the morning sun. The flight goes as others before it; we fire, the plane circles, we fire again, the sentries on the ground move about, and the English fly away with their photographs.

Within the consuming, jolting reports of the weapon I control, I wonder about them. About those men who fly over us. Do they see through this? Do they see through us?

Surely they've not pierced the veil of deception we've thrown around our camp, as surely as the camouflage is wrapped about the guns. For if they had, they'd not return again and again with cameras.

I've never been in an aeroplane. I was shipped to Afrika in the stinking hold of a coal steamer. I wish I were not hurling steel at them. I wish I could be in the cool heights with them, flying faster than the swiftest bird can fly. But I'd not be looking down. I'd be looking ahead, to see where the sky and the land touch.

When the Englishmen do look down, do they see us as men, or as small running figures? Perhaps the

pilots do not even observe us...as I understand it, there are automatic cameras in the nose of some craft. But if he can see us, this British pilot, does he think of us as deadly implacable enemies, or mere grains upon the grains of his film? I would rather be seen as his foe than not seen at all.



After the plane flees back across the desert, all stretch and warm themselves in the same sun we'll be cursing in short hours.

Hans has made our breakfast. It is mostly tasteless, but filling stuff. Hans prefers to have the breakfast duty after he has been at the guns. We are unable to hear for some time after, the reports deafen us so. Thus, when the rote complaints come, Hans merely smiles and turns away.

Rudolpho waves his good arm in front of my bowl to capture my attention. "Ja?" I say, my voice loud inside my head.

His lips move, but I do not need my ears to know what he says. He is reminding me that the trucks must be moved.

"Johann?" I call. He comes to me without question. We are the least halt of our company. We finish our meal and leave the cook's tent.

"Fortunate," I hear Johann say faintly. He points. "...grade..."

"Ja." It will be easier to roll them down to a more level area, even though the rubber of the tires is flaking and flat.

With much pushing and cursing, we change the position of the trucks, using only our backs and what strength God has left us. It conserves the small quantity of diesel fuel remaining.

We are spent by mid-morning. The camp has changed in small ways. The

trucks have been moved, one or two tents have shifted their location, and a new machine gun nest appears to have been placed.

Cooled, and at the same time plagued by our drying sweat, Johann and I return to our tent. Rudolpho and the others are tramping wearily about the camp: from tent to tent, around the perimeter, across the small field. They leave long footprints in the dusty earth. I wave them off as I see them. Gratefully, they break off and sit in the slight shade of the empty officer's hut. Their breathing is harsh. It whistles out of parched mouths like the wind between old trees.



I am the surgeon by default. My skills are more that of a medieval barber.

The men come to me slowly, quietly. It is a kindness for them to do that. I can sit in my camp chair and wait for them to make their painful way to my tent. Most can not walk as easily as I. Perhaps it is more pride than kindness that drives them. Or fear.

"We will change the dressing now, Johann." I no longer ask when it is a matter of their healing.

He stiffens. He lost an eye and part of a hand when his cannon blew apart beneath him during engagements with the Americans. He does not like for anyone to see the moist socket, the puckered flesh about his face. The bandage is an evil yellow color, soaked with the weeping of his burnt flesh, and crusted with desert sand.

He asks, "Is there any news from the front?"

They will all ask it, in their fashion. I peel the stiff bandage from his face carefully. "There is no news from any front. You would

have seen it coming...probably on a motorcycle dispatch."

"Have they forsaken us?" he asks quietly.

It is my own fear given voice. "No," I assure him as I gently wipe his wounded face.



"Without news, how do we know?"

I wrap his face. "It is a measure of our success that the British continue to come." I tap his shoulder. "Now, go. Try not to move about when the winds blow."

"When do they not?" he replies.

Many remain wounded; moving to me as best they can. Others are healed, however imperfectly and incompletely.

As I wait for the next man, my hands droop between my bent knees. What would be complete success, I ask myself, not for the first time. As before, the answer is: To have them attack us with all their might. One hundred and twenty-five kilometers is not far, by aeroplane. If a large-scale bombing raid were staged, we could perhaps shoot down one or two of their craft. Their supply needs are much the same as ours, so, too, the difficulty. Any

effort they expend against us weakens their position by that much. It will aid Germany's defense. It might kill us, though.

But they have not attacked.
Perhaps we look as unimportant as we are.



Rudolpho tells me that some scavenging animal has uncovered the grave of Herr Deitrich. I choose to siphon a bit of diesel fuel and burn the body. I would sooner use the fuel than assign to my weakened men the grisly task of gathering his remains together and burying them under rock fragments. It would be an unsettling reminder to all, for Herr Deitrich died of his infected wounds, but unsanitary, as well.



They came two days early. And not in the morning.

The camp was ready for them, the camp exists to be ready for them, but we were not.

Lying under canvas awnings, seeking some relief from the sun and the heat, we heard the plane. For the time of a heartbeat, we were motionless, heads lifted in alarm. I have seen deer do that when surprised a forest. They stand poised for flight until an invisible signal is given, and they leap away.

I cried, "To your posts of the morning!" We scattered stupidly like crippled hares. I limped for the nearest cannon. The plane was over us just as I reached it. Behind me, I saw men leaning on one another, hobbling about as they strove to give some appearance of function and order.

The aeroplane came in low, so low we might have fired on the pilot with pistols, had we any. For one moment, I could see the man inside. He was looking about the camp as he

flew. In a smear of silver and green he passed over me and out of the camp. I fought the urge to send a futile shot after him, and painfully walked back to the center of the camp where I found that several of the men had opened their wounds during our hasty assembly.

The English know, I think to myself as I watch my men gather slowly. In my heart, I am fearful of the return of the British. I keep the weapons manned while I tend to the open and bleeding flesh.

Rudolpho, my senior in years but not in military duty, gives me a reassuring clasp. "They caught us once, and you don't want them to catch us again."

I smile and nod without replying.

As evening fell, a wind began to blow, and I took the stronger men with me to restake the tents.

The wind grew in force, and it required every man to tie down the tanks. Had we not, they would have been scattered across the desert in canvas and plywood scraps.

It was hoped our camp would intrigue the Englishmen for a week or two. The magician's magic. We are the misdirection to catch their eye and divert their attention from other areas. We have been performing for them for two months. Perhaps they tire of their entertainment.

Herr Deitrich must return - no, he is dead. Someone must come soon. The infection in my leg is spreading. Hans will assist me when I lance the wound, but we cannot play at war for any long time.

The sand piles against the sides of the empty tents, the heat dries and splinters the wooden barrels of what should look like assault tanks from the air. Almost daily the thin sides of the mock buildings are stove in by the scouring wind. Our food, our water, they diminish.

Deitrich must return soon. He must relieve us from this charade. Is a slow death for the Reich more glorious than a swift, bloody one? I think not.



It is the next day. The third day. Dawn. Although it is cold this morning, I sweat as I huddle inside my robbed of the grave leather jacket. The infection has me fevered. Soon, too soon, I'll be lying on a litter with those others too ill to move. Tossing and writhing in fever dreams, until I'm too weak to do even that. And then, I'll die.

I hear him coming for a long time. The sound pushes through the sweat beading on my ears into my head. For so long I hear the sound without knowing it as anything more than the noise of the sickness rushing through my mind.

After a time, I lift my head to a breeze. I see the aeroplane.

It is moving slowly, or is it my seeing of it that is slow? It is not flying, it is crawling across the sky like an insect on blue glass.

The desert poisons in my blood are causing me to see it. I lean forward and rest my head against the cool abraded metal of the gun mount. I close my eyes.

The noise, the rushing, is louder now, so loud as to hurt my ears. Panting, I open my eyes. I'm suddenly thirsty. If I walk very carefully, I tell myself, I will be able to reach Prometheus. He will take the fire away from me. Johann will give me water.

For a moment, I see the aeroplane directly overhead. It fills my vision, appears almost as the angel must have to the shepherds on the hill. So close, so slow I can see the streaks of oil along the

fuselage, the pocks and dents on its undercarriage.

It flies past me and something drops from beneath the plane. Tumbling over and over in a flat arc, its oblong shape is one I've seen before.

The bomb lands squarely among the plywood tanks with a crashing sound. Inertia spins the bomb through three or four of the tanks, and they fold in on themselves as it does.

The thought comes to me. No explosion. It must be a malfunction.

It comes to me. Bomb! I raise my arms to the controls. My hands react as if they were on another body, another land.

The plane circles the camp slowly and the next bomb lands among the armored vehicles. It strikes the rusted hood of a truck, and flipping off it like a hooked fish, crashes against the side of the next derelict.

Another bad bomb. I look across the camp. Most of the men are hiding, lying behind what cover the land will afford. Hans is at the other cannon emplacement. Doesn't the Britisher know we have these guns? Or does he think them artifice like the rest of the camp?

He is circling slowly, as if in a market, seeking the choicest fruit. He selects the mess tent. The missile crashes through it and skids across the sand to within a few meters of the terrified Johann.

A new sound takes my attention from the damage to the camp. Hans has begun firing at the attacker. He is firing too quickly, the recoil of one shot ruining the aim of the next. I would call to him to conserve his shells, for we have so few, but it would be as futile as screaming into the teeth of a storm.

Johann crawls carefully toward the inert bomb. He looks at its

nose, and then touches it, an act that in my fever I can not understand.

He is saying something, Johann is. He has wrenched something from the side of the bomb and is waving it, but I can not hear him over Hans' firing.

The pilot seems to disregard Hans. He detaches another bomb, and our painfully maintained officer's quarters crumple like silk in a flame.

Suddenly it seems Hans' best is almost good enough. I see the entire plane shudder sideways in the air. Shocked by his fortuitous shot, Hans ceases to fire.

In the silence that follows, there are three sounds I can faintly hear: The roaring in my ears, the shrill whine of the aeroplane engine, and Johann's shouts, nearly choked by laughter.

"Holz!" he is crying. "Holz!"

The craft jettisons the rest of its load. The bombs spill out onto the dusty ground and I reflexively cower behind the gun.

I'm hearing more laughter. Others have taken up Johann's cry. "Holz! Gott un Himmel, Holz!"

The plane is flying toward me. It resembles a living thing to me...I've seen ducks shot out of the sky. They would tumble and fall, stunned. If not too terribly wounded, they would painfully spread their wings and try to glide to safety. The experienced hunter would continue to sight a falling bird, rifle ready to fire again if the prey recovered.

He's not out of my range. Flying slow at the first, he is now barely aloft.

Wood.

Johann says wood.

The bombs did not explode because they were wood.

The mock bombs lie strewn about the camp as if left by a careless child. They are toys, like the rifles of boys at play.

It's too fast. He is going to pass right over me; he begins to come directly within my sights, within my range.

I claw myself out of the gunseat and fall heavily to the sand. The webs of sweat about my face become cold and dry in the breeze.

He has destroyed our masque of a



camp with his simulacra of destruction. His bullets will shred my body to rags.

I am framed inside his gunsights.

I can feel the weight of the barrel as it aligns with me.

He will fire his wing guns.

He will not.

Kneeling, one of my hands ascends shakily as the plane drifts a stone's throw overhead, spilling fluid and smoke from its wounds.

For just the barest moment, I can see the sun wrinkled face of the British pilot, and he mine.

No more lies. No more shadow of threat, no need to act at living when we are slowly dying. He gave us lie for lie. He gives me now life for life.

The plane is beyond me. One wing laboriously dips toward the earth and slowly rises level again.

And then he is gone.

Jamie K. Wilson | Fiction

In Jerusalem

It was late fall, and for this place it was the end of the world. Rockets fell daily, bombings happened hourly, and it was only a matter of time before a new pillar of fire and smoke was raised over the land. Military transports patrolled the ancient narrow streets, helping people leave and protecting the homes of those who were gone. It didn't really matter; the bombs rendered both looted and intact homes into rubble. Still, it was a matter of duty for the soldiers and of civic order for their commanders.

I had not yet left. The skeleton staff of the U.S embassy would remain until the last minute. There was little to do. American citizens were long gone, files and papers had been shipped, and my inbox was empty save for occasional emergency orders. Each midday I wandered the streets of the city. I had grown to love it, walking the cobbled streets in the old quarters and lamenting their emptiness. I bore witness as, one by one, the cafes and food stands disappeared, their owners and employees fled to more peaceful lands.

Only a month ago, these streets had been a tangle of sensations. Conversation and music, laughter, conflicting odors of shawarma and baking boureka, tangy cracked olives, fragrant halva so bold you could taste it, bright-colored head coverings and the blackbird garments of Orthodox Jews. They were gone now. An air raid siren echoed in the empty street, piercingly loud. I ignored it as I drifted through remembered ghosts.

And then I smelled it - figs and almonds and pastry, blending with bright spices. It was an ancient fragrance, a lively thread drawn from the fabric of a culture that had somehow survived every indignity and abuse visited upon it. I followed the seductive trail to a metal door, left ajar, deeply set in a millennias-old archway. The door was painted blue and marked with traces of rust, but decorated with sharp impressions that had been crafted by a master: a large Star of David, a bird with a long and ornate tail, a stylized comet, a Sumerian lion glancing over its shoulder. A business sign was screwed into the wall nearby, but I could not read the Hebrew script. I pushed the door open gently. Moist air rushed out, flooding me with the aromas of bread and spice and yeast.

"Hello?" I called into the dark interior.

A voice answered from another room. "Shalom, my friend! Please, come inside."

I shook the dust and heat of the city from my shoes. Inside it was blessedly cooler and dark. Behind aged glass displays, baked goods were arranged in neat rows. Through the open door on the other side, I could see the baker. She glanced up and smiled at me, then continued working a white dough. I smiled back.

The bakery was homey in an exotic way. Its floor was a mosaic of stone tiles that looked as if they'd been scavenged from other houses, different sizes and shapes and colors and styles in a crazy-quilt design - beautiful in its own way. The furnishings were also a mosaic, a red vinyl booth and four mismatched tables paired with

chairs made varyingly of wood and wrought iron and plastics, all worn and comfortable looking. On the walls were family pictures, some from well before the Holocaust, others quite recent. In one, a strikingly pretty young woman in an Israeli army uniform stood, her rifle slung to one side as she smiled brilliantly at the camera.

"My daughter. She is stationed near the West Bank, but she comes home every night for dinner."

"She's very pretty."

The baker smiled, her flour-coated hands giving one last firm crimp to the pastry beneath them. "There are many pretty girls in my family. I was one, once."

I glanced up, for the first time really seeing her face. The right side was pristine, showing only slightly the marks of age. The other side, however, was a mass of corded scarring, the eye and ear and part of the hair gone forever. I looked away from her ruined face, feeling somehow shamed. "What are you making?"

"This is rugelach. I make the best in the city."

"It smells the way I imagine manna does."

She laughed, a slightly harsh, creaky sound. It was clear that whatever had left her face scarred had damaged her voice. I could not, however, feel sorry for her. Her laugh was still pure and joyful, a song to God. "It is a dense pastry, my rugelach, rich and filled with cream and nuts, not like manna at all. For that, you must have my cheese bourekas, light and flaky."

"I think I'd rather have the rugelach."

She brought the rolled dough to a counter near the display case. She spread a layer of creamy

cheese, then raisins and cinnamon and some things I didn't recognize - orange zest, perhaps? - were sprinkled on too fast to follow. Her skillful plump hands whipped around and dexterously rolled the whole thing into a tight and perfect tube, crimping the ends.

I was so absorbed in watching her that at first I did not see nor hear the movement in a cage behind her. Suddenly a peck! and the rugelach roll was on the floor, gouged and injured, and the head had withdrawn in satisfaction.

"Feyvel! Bad bird." The bird gulped down his spoils in clear satisfaction and contempt for the baker, then pushed a door open and fluttered out.

"He's loose!"

She sighed, picking up the pastry and tossing it into the trash. "He can come out whenever he likes. The cage is only to keep him from doing what he just did. Usually it's enough to keep him out of the food, but he will help himself when he can." She looked mournfully into the trash. "I did not latch the door properly this time. It was my fault."

The bird strutted around the counter toward me, then fluttered to the back of the booth. He peered at me with one eye while using one claw to clean bits of crumb away from his beak. His shimmering tail was about half the length of a peacock's tail, and his body was covered with burnished dull red feathers over charcoal-gray down. "What is he? I've never seen anything quite like him before."

She shrugged, then turned to put the now-incomplete tray of rugelach into the wall oven behind her. "I do not know. My daughter brought him back from Gaza. He took a liking to her and would not

go away. When he found me, he became attached." She tilted her head to look at me with her good eye. "He is not usually friendly, but he seems to like you well enough."

She was right. The bird - Feyvel - suddenly launched. Like wind rushing through trees, he landed lightly on the chair next to me, then reached out and gingerly nipped at my hand.

"Ouch!" I said, though it was more surprising than painful.

The baker laughed. "He has a mind of his own. Feyvel, behave or no more pastries." The bird glanced at her and pulled away. "I have a fresh batch of rugelach here. How many would you like?"

After some halfhearted haggling, I exchanged a handful of shekels for a fragrant paper bag. Feyvel tilted his head to eye it. "Are you leaving soon?" I asked the baker.

She shook her head. "To go where? My extended family died in the Shoah, in Auschwitz. I was the only child of my mother, and my parents both died in the Six Days War. I have no one but my daughter and no place but Israel."

"Surely you're not staying."

She shrugged. "This is home. This is everything, my land." She stroked the scars on her blind side. "I have bled and burned for my home. My husband died in the bombing that left me this, and I lost our son to another attack. If I leave now, all those things that were suffered are for nothing."

I shook my head. "If you die, it will be for nothing."

"There are things worth dying for. You are American. Surely you understand that."

I nodded, then reached into my pocket and handed her a card. "If you change your mind, call me.

Even at the last minute, I can help."

She took it, but smiled and shook her head. "My daughter is part of the final voluntary force. She will not leave, and neither will I. *SheElohim yevarach otha*, friend."

I wanted to say more, but how can you respond to that? Besides, it was time to return to the office. I opened the door, and the baker stopped me. "One moment, American."

I stopped. She was looking affectionately at the bird.

"Feyvel should not stay. My daughter saved him from a burning crater. He is a survivor. If you would take him with you..." She looked both sad and hopeful. I couldn't say no.

While an office is not a good place for a bird, the daily bombings had created a more casual attitude, and we had only a skeleton staff left. There was much admiration for my new partner. We managed. Feyvel and I went back to the bakery daily for fresh pastry, as he refused regular birdseed in favor of fresh, steaming bread. Over the next few weeks, he and I grew close, and he became a virtual mascot for the embassy.

In full sunlight, he was a stunningly beautiful bird, dressed in shades of deep reds to purples. His tail was a fiery maroon color shading into his body feathers, which were a gorgeous blood-dark red. An Israeli cultural attaché, a talented artist who was in transit to the United States, described the color as Tyrian purple. "The Phoenicians based much of their trade around that dye. It is a stain that never fades, but only grows brighter as

time goes on." He smiled. "My people sometimes refer to it as *tekhelet*."

Feyvel was a polite bird as well, provided one was not holding pastry. Unlike most birds, he reserved his bodily functions for the out-of-doors, and he was civilized enough to put himself to bed each night.

Feyvel was our sunlight during those dark days. The Middle East finally fell apart. Nuclear weapons moved into the Levant in easy range of Jerusalem, and the saber-rattling grew louder each week. There were still Israelis and even American Israelis still in the country, but we processed only a handful of departure cases every week. Most of those still in Israel had no plans to leave. As in Germany and Poland in the 1930s, thousands of anxious parents had sent their children out of the country to join relatives and friends in other lands. The parents themselves would stay and fight, or die.

And then the day came when the danger was too great. We were evacuated. A C-130 picked up the remaining staff members along with a number of others who had stayed until the last minute. We bid tearful farewells to our Israeli contractors and liaisons.

They were staying with their country, their homeland, even though the end would be bitter.

In the plane, Feyvel was not pleased to be locked in his cage, but I kept him close to me and after the sharp incline of takeoff he settled down. We had barely entered Cyprian airspace when the word was passed back from the cabin.

It had happened. All of Israel had become a pillar of fire.

It was gone.

My Annapolis home seemed empty and dark in the days after. While a cleaning service had kept it fresh, coming in every other week to maintain things, the air inside was dead and hopeless, strange to me after the dust-filled heat of the Levant. I did have a perfect place for Feyvel, however, near my fireplace on the broad hearth. I lit a fire every morning and kept it going every day, even leaving the dense red coals alone at night so the area would remain warm.

Feyvel appreciated his nest near the fire, but he drooped and sickened. His feathers grew dull as did his eyes, and after a few days he picked listlessly at even the best pastries I could find from nearby delis. I ordered rugelach online, and finally even made my own in hopes that the fresh, hot baked goods would tempt him. He appreciated it, I could tell, but nothing helped.

The veterinarian was stumped. She had never seen a bird like Feyvel. "His temperature is very high, even for a bird, but I don't think that's the problem. It seems to be normal for him. He's not eating, but he doesn't have any parasites. You're certain he can't be returned to his normal habitat?"

"He came with me from Israel."

She paused, looking at me with sympathy. "Did you lose people there?"

I shrugged. "I was with the State Department."

She tested a few other things, coming up empty. "I'm sorry. There doesn't appear to be anything wrong with him, poor fellow. Maybe he's homesick. Just keep him warm and see if it passes."

I gave her permission to pass information about Feyvel on to an avian specialist, but I knew it would make no difference. What ailed my bird was not a physical illness.

One night, I woke to all my fire alarms going off. The air was filled with a peculiar odor, acrid and unpleasant. Throwing on my robe, I ran downstairs.

Flames were blazing from my fireplace. I cursed myself for leaving the coals - what was I thinking? - and snatched my fire extinguisher from the wall. But it didn't matter. Even as I watched, the flames died down, seemingly



drawn into a pile of pale sand that glistened on the raised hearth.

Feyvel was gone. Smart bird, I thought. You took off when the fire blazed up.

The sand was strange, grayish, filled with small pale

fragments and ash. Gingerly, I poked it. It was cool to the touch, shifting easily, and in the center was something rounded and golden-red.

"That's an egg," I breathed to myself.

I touched it, and jerked my hand back. While the sand was cool, the egg was blazingly hot, and now I could see the shimmering waves of heat warping the air around it. As I watched, the egg wobbled and cracked. Sand shifted and slid down away from it, and it wobbled again.

A hole appeared. A tiny golden beak thrust through that opening. Slowly, a larger crack split the side of the egg, and finally a head thrust aside a piece of egg. It was fiery, bright-eyed and glowing. I realized that the little bird was covered with flaming feathers. I backed away.

Slowly, the shell fell away from the newborn. I scarcely dared to breathe. The bird stood there, shivering. Its feathers spread, developing and shimmering and glowing against the dark ash in the fireplace. And then it launched itself, flying around the room.

Somehow, I knew what to do. I ran to the side door and opened it wide. As the bird passed me, I felt a blast of heat from the trailing flames. And he was gone.

I knew Feyvel was gone as well. He was the heap of sandy ash in my fireplace.

And yet.

I stepped outside and looked up, to the east. As the bright spark disappeared into the night sky, I murmured to myself, "Next year, in Jerusalem."

Steve is an artist and writer in Virginia, where he lives with his patient wife in the world's smallest 5-bedroom house. He is the founder and director of Assignment Ready Training, a program that uses art projects to teach workplace skills to people with learning disabilities.

Crossroads

Editor's note: This is an excerpt from the opening chapter of Steve's thought-provoking new thriller, FLIP, now available on [Amazon](#) or wherever finer books are sold.

I knew if I worked on the painting much longer, I would ruin it, so I kept at it.

It was August 1964 in a large old house in a small Nebraska town. It was what people call the middle of the night. The upstairs rooms were empty, except for the dust. Downstairs was furnished, more or less. There was a couch, but you wouldn't know it for the junk. It was an art studio, in its way. I also lived there, if you want to call it that.

Nothing was where it should be, or maybe everything wasn't supposed to be there. The floor was a swarming accident, a landscape of forsaken tokens, remnants of occasions and schemes. Possessions mingled with rubbish, or maybe they were the same. Road signs were nailed to the floor. They covered the holes. Clothing and books and ashtrays - none empty - and beer cans - none full - and car parts and tools and magazines and advertising



signs and crumbs from needless feedings.

It wasn't personal. There was a church bulletin. I didn't go to church. There was a shoe. I didn't have its mate. There was a horseshoe. I didn't have a horse. Scrabble pieces and playing cards and Monopoly money scattered like confetti over the pile. I didn't play any of those games. There were puzzle pieces. I hate puzzles. There was a broken watch. I didn't wear jewelry. There was a padlock. I owned nothing of value. There were cigarette packages. Lots of them.

Smoking, I did.

There was a court summons. There were traffic tickets, lots of them. There were half-done, all-done, and maybe-done sketches and drawings and canvasses. The name "Matthew Andrews" was stamped on the summons and the tickets and signed on a few of the canvasses.

That's me.

An easel, hot lit by a swing arm lamp, spiked up from a clearing in the waste. There, I bent toward an oversized portrait of a young woman. It was a lovely, intuitive portrait that was also modernist. The style and handling were mature. The colors were like four-part harmony. It was bigger than it needed to be. The thing breathed confidence. I was eighteen years old.



Waist up, I had that studied, faux Elvis look, including the greased-up Chicago Boxcar hairstyle beloved by Fifties-era low-beam hoodlums. You had to work on that hair. You had to want it. Push it high on both sides and then pull it forward and down at the forehead. If it weren't for the strands that dangled in front - just so - you'd think it was made of asphalt. Waist down, I looked like a working cowboy, which I wasn't.

I was nose-in with my work. Truly. I should have stopped an hour before. My eyes were tired and my neck hurt and my arm ached and my fingers were stiff. I knew I was done because I had just nicked a little pile of paint off the canvas with a pocket knife. When you get

careless about the load on your brush, it's time to put the brush down.

The last thing this painting needed was one more thing. My brush - I prefer the short flat rounded ones - and my turp-slick fingers were poised to add it.

My door slammed open. Abby scrambled in and sent the floorscape airborne. For a moment, I heard the music I always heard when she entered a room. She was slim and small and dark. She had aquiline features that danced between handsome and pretty. She was smart and quick and she was always straight with you, which was good because she did most of the thinking for us. She was the only person on earth who could stand me.

I looked into her eyes, and the music stopped. I saw white-hot fear. And then she saw the portrait, and the fear melted away. She stopped dead in front of it. It was her. Well, it was of her.

"You're doing Modigliani," she said. There was that pitch-perfect ding of delight in her voice. It was just what I wanted. She didn't have that F-sharp upper-Midwest-almost-Canada sound. She had a touch of Texas in her voice. Like sunflowers.

"You noticed," I said.

And like that, her fear returned. You could almost hear her pulse. She started corralling clothes and possessions from the floor. Flinging this. Gripping that. Riddling the forlorn scraps of my life.

"You've got to go. Get away. Now. This minute."

No pitch-perfect ding this time. It was followed by overwrought muttering, something like, "God, you're a mess."

I stepped away from the easel and watched as she dug paper bags from the clutter and stuffed them

with clothes. Manic. She found a canvas bag. I could feel the crazy.

"What are you doing? What are you talking about?"

She didn't slow down. She moved to the clearing and hustled art supplies into the canvas bag.

"They know, and they're on the way. Here. Now."

Quick brain reconnoiter. I had not done anything wrong for which I had not already been caught. At least not lately. I stopped her and spun her around before the easel and held her by the shoulders, which was difficult. I still had a palette in one hand and a brush in the other.

"Who are they? What do they know? Why are they coming?"

"The baby. They know about the baby. Dad and both my brothers."

You know, you can only pretend a true thing isn't true - especially if you can't see it or touch it - until that true thing gets very true. I let her go. I just stood there. She opened another bag. Manic again. Is it possible to feel fear and resolve and delusion at the same time? Yes.

"We'll get married."

I meant it, which surprised us both.

"Oh, for God's sake, Matt."

"I'll be nineteen next year. You'll be twenty-two."

She gave me her stop-the-madness look.

"Dad has a shotgun. It's not for a wedding."

Eye contact. She wasn't kidding. She'd been quick. I didn't own much worth keeping, and she'd rounded it up. She shoved the last bag at me. I held it with my elbows, my brush and palette askew.

My final dab of paint ended up on my cheek. Red. It smeared. She tried to push me away from the easel. It was the first time her touch repelled me. Ever.

I dropped the bag. "I'm not going anywhere. Nobody's gonna push me around."

"Oh, for God's sake, Matt."

Fear, resolve, and delusion again.

"I'll take 'em. All of 'em."

This wasn't altogether bluster. I could manage her two brothers. They would be itching for a fight. One was a lunatic. A little justifiable homicide was just what he'd want. I might even enjoy taking him out. The other would quit when the lunatic was finished. Her father, though, he was different. Even I knew he was right and I was wrong. That means something in a fight.

And then there was the shotgun.

She stopped and turned and gave me that look, the one that says too much about me. I really didn't like it when she acted like my mother, which, unfortunately, she was often required to do.

"Alone? And then what? Who's gonna take your side? You've pissed off everybody in this town except me."

This was true.

She hesitated in front of the portrait. She took it in and she softened and she gave me that other look. The one I liked.

"You captured me," she said. "Again."

I didn't miss the double entendre. And like that, and for the first time, I began to grasp how hard this was on her.

"You know," she said. "Sometimes I don't see how it's possible that you..."

Her arm swept the crime scene of my room. "...and you..."

She stopped at the portrait.

"...are the same person."

And her trance passed. "Go."



Thomas J. Weiss | Essay

I Want to Watch Something Nice

This is a refrain often heard in my house, mostly in the evenings, after dinner, as we scroll through hundreds if not thousands of shitty, on-demand movies and series. In 2023, seemingly every character is angry or narcissistic or nasty or horny or just plain unlikeable, and the writing rarely makes them interesting or watchable.

So, it was with more than a little trepidation that I clicked on yet another reality show, this one starring James Marsden, called *Jury Duty*. What I found was unexpected and sweet and heartwarming and... Nice.

If you've seen the cult classic *Windy City Heat*, you'll recognize the premise. The trial is fake. So is the case. And the Judge. And the lawyers, witnesses, bailiffs, and every single juror save for one: Juror #6, a solar contractor fittingly named Ronald Gladden. He's the only person not in on the gag, and encounters situations that are increasingly insane.

Marsden - the only actor playing himself - tells Ronald an embarrassing secret early on that Ronald keeps to himself even when he could have blabbed to curry favor with the rest of the group. Almost against his will he's forced into acting as jury foreman, where he has to keep an elderly juror

awake while mediating some rather bizarre personal behavior from another.

All the while, an absurd civil trial - that Ronald believes to be real - plays out in front of him. The defendant's attorney isn't prepared for the trial, and the testimony sounds devastating for his case, but breadcrumbs are left throughout suggesting his innocence.

How will Ronald react to all of this? Will he remain civil? Will he fight for what he believes to be the truth of the case? And, finally, *for the love of God*, will he just go off on someone like I would have two days in?

The answer is no, he won't. Because Ronald Gladden is a *good guy*, even when that means taking credit for James Marsden blowing his bathroom up. He genuinely likes - maybe even loves - the people he's sequestered with for two weeks. He acts like a leader and genuinely tries to make everyone else's life a little bit easier.

The final episode pulls back the curtain and shows Ronald the truth. He tours the control room and chats with the rest of the cast and if this sounds boring, trust me when I tell you it's not. As much as Ronald is in awe of their acting and improv prowess - almost none of the dialogue was scripted - *they* are in awe of *him*.

The judge, shortly after this big reveal, tells Ronald he will be receiving \$100,000 as a result of his performance. This is the first time money is ever mentioned on the show, and I'd like to think the producers threw it in at the last



minute because they felt bad for every scenario, obstacle, and test they shoved in is lap. I don't think they could wrap their heads around the idea that there were any good, decent people in the world capable of navigating the labyrinth of dysfunction they had planned. And even if they could've conceived of such a person, I doubt they

would have been convinced it would make for compelling content.

But it does.

Ronald Gladden is the nicest man on television, and your eyeballs will be glued to the screen, watching his every move.

Do yourself a favor and watch something nice tonight.

Tom Monteleone: How Do You Cancel a Legend?

Editor's Note: My introduction to the horror genre, as a 16-year-old, was the novel *IT*. Believe it or not, its length was one of the things that attracted me to it. At well over a thousand pages, I thought I looked *impressive* carrying the paperback through my high school hallways. I read it all - twice, at least - and marveled at the sheer volume of *f@#cked-up sh!t* pouring out of King's pen. And, as puberty coursed through my veins like toxoplasmas through a mouse, I didn't bat an eyelash at the underage orgy described in great detail in the final act. To say King couldn't write that scene today is to say almost everything about the current state of traditional publishing.

Horror writers used to be edgy. They used to have a point of view. They used to live on the border of this world and the upside-down, breathlessly explaining one to the other.

In 2023, not so much.

Now, the people who control the publishing industry want authors to share a common, *progressive* point of view, and anyone who dissents from it - as legendary horror writer Tom Monteleone did earlier this year - has to go.

It began with a Facebook post, which Tom deleted, that garnered hundreds of comments. In the post, Tom writes, "despite the last few LAA years looking very much like an obvious DEI project, I am compelled to nominate a star, old white guy: Stu Schiff."

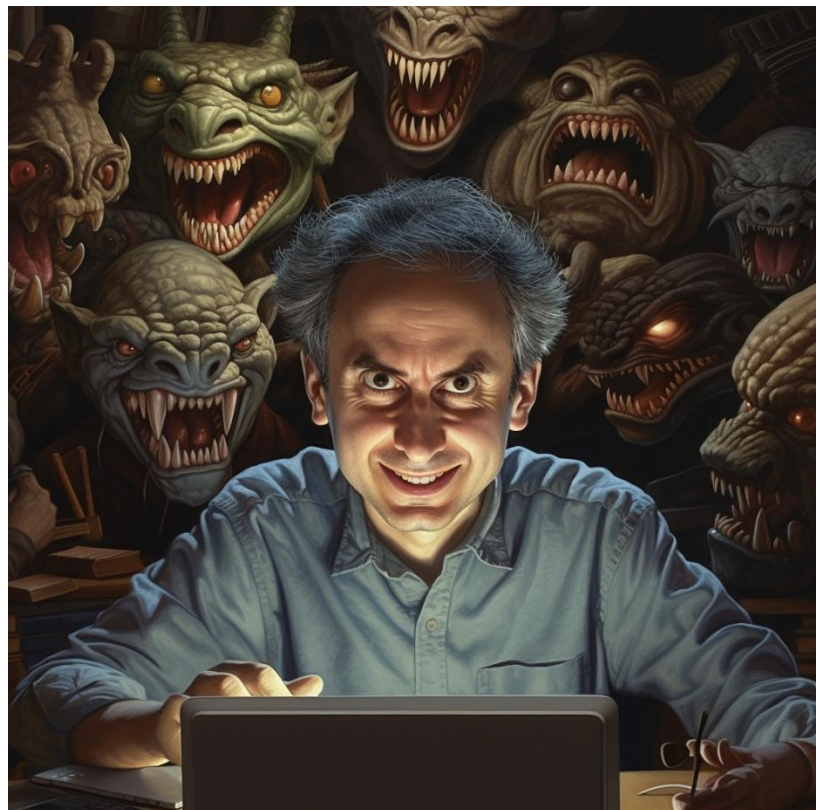
Edgy: check.

Point of view: check.

Offends the people in power: check, check, check.

The drama surrounding this post came to a head on a live podcast about a week later, one that attracted, at its height, *six* viewers (thousands viewed it after the fact). We go into what happened next in great detail in the lightly-edited interview below, but the result was astounding. The Horror Writers Association, despite having active members ***who have called for violence against their political enemies***, expelled Monteleone from its membership and stripped him of all his awards, including his 2016 Lifetime Achievement Award.

David Wilson, Tom's longtime friend and publisher at Crossroad Press, cancelled Tom's publishing contract without speaking to him first. When asked whether he read the offending Facebook post or listened to the podcast, Wilson said, "Of course I read the posts. Of course I listened to the podcast...I've known Tom a very long



time. What he wrote and said was well beyond the line where I would sever relations with anyone."

Another publisher - Cemetery Dance - dropped Tom's award-winning M.A.F.I.A. column, but took a distinctly different tone, as Tom explains in detail during the interview.

What does all of this mean? You can, apparently, write about children having an orgy or being murdered in the most brutal ways imaginable, but you won't get cancelled as long as hold the right political opinions...or shut up about the controversial ones you do hold.

But if you want to be the same honest, edgy person that's made you successful for the past fifty years - watch out!



Tom Monteleone: It's unbelievable what these motherfuckers did. What shocked me most was the absolute glee that some people had in, you know, trying to damage me. It was really amazing when you think about it.

Thomas Weiss: So I got in contact with David Wilson, who was your publisher at Crossroads. He talked to me for a little bit, until he realized who I was.

Tom Monteleone: (Laughing) Yeah.

Thomas Weiss: What he said was, look, I've known Tom for a very long time, and what he wrote and said is beyond the line where I would separate relations with anyone. He said I have a diverse group of friends and authors, and it sounds like to me - I mean I don't know David, I'm just reading between the lines - it sounds like he was at least a little bit conflicted by the whole thing.

Tom Monteleone: He probably was, because I've known him a long time. I remember many years ago he had a terrible house fire. He lost pretty much everything, so I sent him a whole raft of titles from Borderlands Press, you know, to just restart his library. And he was like blown away by it. And I said, just don't tell anybody. Nobody needs to know. I did this for you. That was early on, and he was trying to run a little magazine called The Tomb, and you know, he was a struggling, small press guy. But yeah, a lot of these people, I have a feeling that they weren't as upset as they were threatened by bully culture. If you don't go along with this we're coming after you. Which is, you know, the way it works. So I have a feeling that some of that was going on. But you know what, at this point I don't give a shit. I know who I am. I know what I've done. They can't take away my accomplishments. They can try to destroy me, but I don't think they're going to.

Thomas Weiss: In one interview a week or so after the whole crisis, you were quoted as saying that you reached out to the people you talked about on the podcast to apologize. How did that go?

Tom Monteleone: There was only one person that required me saying anything. We were at what I call now the Stoker Convention and it was really getting out there. I mean half the panels were all this identity and bullshit, and it wasn't fun. They took all the fun out of it. It was really sad. And we gave this award for Volunteer of the Year. They call this person up. I'd never heard of her. Her name was Sumiko Saulson. She's one of these people that when you talk to her, she doesn't look you in the eye. She's looking off somewhere else, which is an indication of some unstable things there. But she got

up, and instead of saying, "Hey, thanks for the award, HWA. Really great," she referenced some blog she does called Stoker So White. And I'm sitting there thinking, you gotta be fucking kidding me. We're trying to, you know, give you an accolade and a bullshit volunteer award, and you gotta check race into it? Yeah, I found it very offensive. I'm sick of this shit. I'm sick of being made to feel like there's something wrong with being a smart white guy. I'm really tired of it. So, when I was on the podcast that I didn't know anything about I had already gotten, you know, a little toasted on bourbon, and I offended this Sumiko character, who wants to be called 'they,' right? Well, you know what? I'll call you anything you want as long as it's singular. I'm not calling anybody 'they.' It just goes against, you know, common sense, grammar, everything. It's just some idiot construct that I refuse to participate in. And then I called her a fat black chick, because I was drunk. But it wasn't hate speech. She is overweight. She is black. And she is female. It wasn't like I was going after her other than using vernacular terms to describe her.

Thomas Weiss: Philosophically, is there any difference between that and calling you an old white guy?

Tom Monteleone: There's no difference at all. Now what I said online was they got pissed off at me because I questioned their DEI [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion] project. The people they've been giving the Lifetime Achievement Award to lately have been clear and obvious, you know, playing to the leftist equity regime. They gave it to this one woman, do you know Carol Clover? Do you know that story? She got the Lifetime Achievement Award for writing one feminist academic study of slasher films. And she

supposedly coined the term 'the last girl,' which I had never heard of. I never followed the thing closely enough to get into the philosophical and feminist meanings or attributions of being a final girl. I didn't give a shit. I never paid that much attention to it. Never liked slasher films, anyway, so who gives a shit? That's how I feel. But anyway, I said to compare what this woman has done with the career of Stuart Schiff is a fucking joke. It's laughable. It is absolutely laughable, and anybody that can defend it, you know, I think you're a jerk. Sorry. Free speech. I used to be entitled to my opinion, but I'm not anymore. But you know what? Fuck them. They can't stop me.

Thomas Weiss: When HWA stripped you of your awards, or when your publishers dropped you, were you contacted directly? Did you get any phone calls?

Tom Monteleone: Nobody would call me. Nobody would talk to me. They all hid behind their keyboards and texts, which is, you know, I'm not surprised. The one who really surprised me the most was Richard Chizmar. He says, "Well, I'm not gonna let you be in Cemetery Dance. We're going to cancel your column." And I said, "Okay, that's fine. You know, I've only been writing it for 40 some years, but that's fine. I'll find someplace else to publish it." And then he said, "I don't think we're gonna carry Borderlands Press anymore." And I said, "Richard, are you serious?" I said, "Do you really think I'm some hateful transphobic monster that needs to have my business destroyed?" And he says, "Oh, no, no, no. You and I are fine." This is what he says to me. "We're fine. It's just that, you know. I don't want to lose customers because we're dealing with you." That's what he said.

Thomas Weiss: He's virtue signaling. Caving to the mob.

Tom Monteleone: Yeah, he caved. But you know, this is when you find out, when you're on the ramparts of the Alamo, and you find out who's up there with you. This is when you find that out, and I was shocked. I mean I had close to 5,000 friends on Facebook, and 300 people unfriended me, right? But over the next 2 months, like 200 other people friended me. What does that mean? I'm not a big Facebook guy. I'm not on that often. But I did get a lot of messages from people that said, "Listen, you know, I'm with you, but I can't say anything." And I would tell people keep your mouth shut. You know there's no percentage in you going to bat for me. I don't need you going to bat for me. I know who I am. You know this transphobic stuff is bullshit. I don't care what you want to do. Just don't force me to buy into your bullshit. That's all. Do whatever you want. You want to call yourself a kitchen table. That's fine. You want to be a non-binary rabbit? Whatever you want to be is fine with me. Just don't involve me in it. Don't force me to share your delusion, because that's just not right.

Thomas Weiss: You've 'outed' yourself in other interviews as a libertarian, and this is what I have the most trouble understanding --

Tom Monteleone: I am. Basically I'm a libertarian. Politically, the libertarians are just never going anywhere. So I'm kind of a conservative because it's the lesser of 2 evils.

Thomas Weiss: I did Zach's podcast the week after you, and I essentially said the same thing. But it seems like, from my perspective, libertarians are not the people they have to worry about, because whatever views we hold, whether anybody finds them regressive or

hateful or what have you, we're not looking to impose those views on anyone else.

Tom Monteleone: We never have, but they have. There is a very dangerous anti-free speech vibe going through the culture right now, and it's very frightening, because you're not allowed to have a contrary opinion. You can see it by the way, you know they went after me. I mean, and this is the thing that gets me. Paul Wilson was telling me this, he said. "Jesus Christ, where have they been? They've been reading your Mafia column for 40 fucking years. They know who you are. You're very outspoken. You never hide anything. You hang it right out there. So, all of a sudden you're shot?" They know I think transgenderism is goofy. It's fucking goofy. I'm sorry. And then, why is it just so culturally infectious? I mean, you're talking about such a tiny percent of the population. And it is absolutely injected into everything. How did this happen?

Thomas Weiss: I was gonna ask you the same thing. You've been writing for 50 years. You're not a blank book. Why is this becoming an issue now?

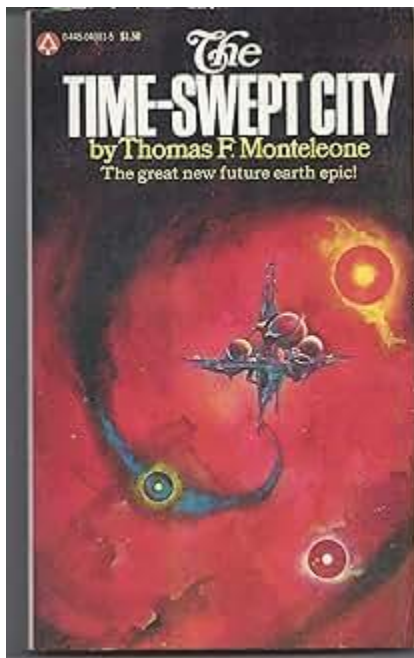
Tom Monteleone: It's control. They call themselves progressives, but they're Marxist. The control they have over education and academia and media entertainment, I mean, it's a fucking miracle that conservatives exist at all. They had several generations of kids that are coming out of grade schools, high schools and colleges that are totally, you know, they've been totally indoctrinated. It's really scary. We might not be able to come back from this.

Thomas Weiss: This is as good of a place as any to transition to your fiction. You know how there are some authors that you read when

you're a kid, and then you do other things, and you wake up thirty years later having forgotten you've read them. I had that experience with *The Time-Swept City*.

Tom Monteleone: Oh, my God! Yeah.

Thomas Weiss: I didn't connect you with that book until I started preparing for this interview, but it made a huge impression on me. You kind of nailed AI 50 years ago.



Tom Monteleone: I really did. I really was prescient with that. As a matter of fact, I've had it optioned twice in the last 10 years. The first group was...they wanted to do it as a standalone film, which I thought was not a good idea, but I took their money. The second group was from the Sci-Fi Channel, and they wanted to do it as a mini-series, which I thought would have been great. It structures out as a mini-series, because each story is kind of independent. I was in my Bradbury phase back then, and I wanted to do my own version of the Martian chronicles, and I use the whole AI thing as my matrix that I

laid everything on. Yeah, I still get tons of good feedback on that book.

Thomas Weiss: I also remember feeling very that it was kind of, maybe not a depressing take on humanity, but a pessimistic view of what our species has in front of us. This rise in Marxism, cancellation, etc., coming on the heels of what is arguably the greatest advancement in technology in human history, the Internet, followed by social media companies and that sort of thing. It's not exactly as you described in the book, but I think we're seeing some pretty depressive effects of technology, at least in the last 10 years.

Tom Monteleone: Yeah, I mean, who could have been prescient enough to see the deleterious effects of all this social media. I mean it's like holy shit. I'm shocked at how it's infected the culture so deeply. I get so sick of walking around whenever I'm out, and everybody's faces in their stupid phone. In a way it's a...you know, if somebody had written it in a Science Fiction novel, nobody would have believed it. It's like the Marching Morons. You know that's a classic piece of writing. And that's where we're at. We're living in the era of Marching Morons.

Thomas Weiss: You're still pessimistic.

Tom Monteleone: Yeah, more because of the cultural Marxism going hand in hand with technology we don't really understand. These people are assholes. They really are. They can't leave anything alone. They really don't like traditional American culture. They want to do anything they can to not just denigrate it, they want to destroy it. It's fucking creepy. Oh, there's an interesting sideline about the Marching Morons short

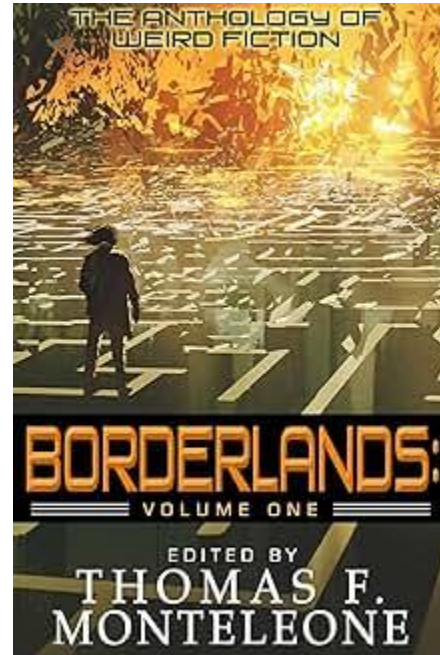
story. Do you know it was written by Cyril Kornbluth, who was a raging Socialist? And that story is anything but raging Socialism. It's the Ayn Randian individual, you know, overcoming.

Thomas Weiss: I've heard you mention her before, Ayn Rand. How big of an influence was she?

Tom Monteleone: Big. Huge. When I was in college, I was pretty much apolitical. Majoring in English and minoring in Budweiser, you know. I wasn't thinking about this stuff. But there was this one guy, his name was Barney Lee, and his parents had come from Communist China when he was about 10. And now we're all in college, and he was a fervent conservative, obviously, you know, coming from that shithole. He gave me this book to read, called The Fountainhead, and he says, "You gotta read this." And I said, "Boss, big book." He said, "That's okay, I got a bigger one for you when you finish this." And I read it, and it just transformed me. I said, "Yeah, I can dig this." So, this is my guy. I totally am in sync with him. And there was one line in that book that always stuck with me, and it kind of applies to the whole transphobic, you know, hate speech thing. At one point Peter Keating says, "Just tell me, Howard, what do you think of me?" And Roark looks at him and says, "Peter, I don't think of you." That's just fucking brilliant. That line just sang to me. It jumped off the page. And this is how I basically feel about the whole transgender movement. I don't fucking think of you idiots, you know, unless you unless you stick it up in my face. Otherwise I have no interest in thinking about, you know, Dylan Mulvaney prancing around in a Nike bra. It's like theater. It's like theater is the absurd.

Thomas Weiss: Every time I see Dylan doing anything, it's like he

is playing a caricature of a woman. It's like something a seventies feminist would have abhorred, but now it's stunning and brave and progressive.



Tom Monteleone: This is another, you know, cultural absurdity. My daughter went to a Catholic girls school, and she played a couple different varsity sports. She's a little kid, I mean. She was a little woman. She wasn't a, you know, big boned woman. She was only like 5'1", but very well coordinated. Like really good. She played varsity sports for 4 years, but the idea that that some guy could come in and be in the same locker room with her. That's just not happening. I just don't want to put up with it. How can these parents send their kids to public schools and think this is okay? Or sit on their hands, you know, and not say anything? I've often said that if I was king, I would ban all school buses. not just because I hate following them when I got to be somewhere. But because they have enabled parents to disengage themselves from their kids' education. I have always sent my

kids to private schools because I hate the whole idea of public education. And I got up in the fucking morning, and I drove them there, and when they were done I what I picked them up, and I was very involved in every aspect of their day and their education and everything. And I think school buses stop you from doing that. And you know I've talked to parents about it, and they say, "Well, I've got to go to work." Yeah, I had to go to work, too. Okay? And I still drove my kids to school every fucking day. I mean it's like, just don't get me started.

Thomas Weiss: I never rode a bus because my mother taught at my school. I hated it as a kid, but now that I'm older, I understand how good I had it.

Tom Monteleone: Oh, my God! I was taught by nuns. I was cleaning up a bunch of stuff from my mother's place and I found this picture of my second-grade class. The teacher's name was Sister Mary Peters and she taught 52 kids in this little classroom. Fifty-two in our grade school class, second grade, and that nun had us under control. Like, we were all wired up, and still no discipline problems. No nothing. And we learned. Then, I went to a Jesuit high school and, man, four years of Latin and two years of French or German, Greek, all the sciences, it was tough. We started out with 310 freshmen, and we graduated 207. They washed out a lot of people. Hey, 4 years of Latin, come on. I don't know how I did it. I still don't know. We read Cicero's Orations, Ovid's Metamorphoses, and the Aeneid. I mean come on. Nobody does that anymore.

Thomas Weiss: Changing gears for a second. You mentioned *The Time-Swept City* had been optioned, and in my research I found one other

short story that was made into a TV episode, but I don't see anything else from you that made it to the screen. How come?

Tom Monteleone: *The Blood of the Lamb* was optioned, and they kept renewing the option for 12 years. So, I made good money on that. It was 450K to buy it, and every 18 months they kept renewing it for 45 grand, and they did that for 12 years. I paid a lot of bills with just that one. You know, I've been very lucky that I've had lots of my stuff optioned but never made. I did have a couple things on TV that I told them to take my name off of once I saw what they'd done with them. There was a show called *Night Visions*, and they bought a couple of my stories, and they butchered the first one so badly, I said, man, I don't think I want my name on this thing, so they used the title of the story they optioned from me on their own story that they had written in house. They credited me with the based-on story. It was called *Hate Puppet*. And then there was a series called *Masters of Horror*. You know that one? Did you ever see that on Showtime?

Thomas Weiss: Was that Mick Garris?

Tom Monteleone: Yeah. And I thought it was half good. You know, come for the horror, stay for the titties. The idea was that he would buy stories from real horror writers, and then they would be directed by real directors like John Carpenter. They bought the rights to a short story I did, and it was scheduled for season three. But then the show was cancelled. There was never a season three. So, yeah, while my luck at TV and film getting to the screen hasn't been great, I've made good money.

Thomas Weiss: Would you prefer that your stuff got made and you maybe make a little bit less money?

Tom Monteleone: Yeah, I absolutely would, because I really think that validates you because, you know, they, there's a lot more people that watch movies than read books. It's a validation process, I think, which never hurts. I mean if you sell the rights to something outright, or they eventually pick up the option. and they can cast Daffy Duck in your lead role if they want, they can do whatever they want with it, right? You gotta be okay with that. If it's a squawking bird of a film, you know, you gotta live with it as yours, even though you know it's not yours, because they fucked it up. I don't know if you remember Charlie Grant. He and I were buddies in the 80s and 90s, and we came up with a show. We actually sold it, too. It was a weekly series, but back before cable, when there was just three networks, and it was called *Ravens Crossing*. It was the name of a little town in New England that was populated by these three powerful families. One guy was president of the small college in town. another guy was a big lawyer, and the last guy was financier or something, I forget. These three families ran the town, and the schtick was that the heads of these three families were Druid sorcerers, and they were like 3,000 years old, and they had come to the United States back in the 1800s, and settled in this little town because it was...the whole earth is covered with these like crust lines. You ever heard of the ley line thing? There was one in this little play place in New England called Greatness Crossing, and they gave these sorcerers their power. Once they leave that little area of concentration, they're just mortal. So they've got to stay in these

areas where the ley lines cross, and they have achieved immortality because they know how to occupy the body of one of their children. It was pretty complicated, crazy, and pretty original. Columbia TriStar picked it up. And we got good setup money. They hooked us up with CBS, back when they were doing movies of the week. And yeah, we got big time involved in it. Originally, my agent had negotiated that Charlie and I would write the pilot. As a matter of fact, we actually wrote like a half hour sample script just when we were pitching this thing. CBS said no, we have these two guys that that write a lot of our movies of the week, and we want them to do it. Well, these guys had no hard background in dark fantasy, or you know anything. The first draft of the pilot was almost unrecognizable. They changed so much shit. They were gonna improve it, you know, gonna make it better. And they really missed the whole concept badly. Anyway, they bring the finished script to TriStar, who said, "God, this is terrible." The producer calls my agent, and he says the script is really not what we're looking for and they dropped the project. Charlie and I ended up with like a hundred and forty grand for this. We did fine. But if they had done it as a series, I mean, even back then we would've made twenty or thirty grand an episode. It was big time money in the 90s. And the coda to the story is the following year CBS had a show on called *Wolf Lake*, about these three powerful families in this town in the Northwest, up in little town in in Washington State. But they weren't sorcerers, they were werewolves.

Thomas Weiss: Right.

Tom Monteleone: They took our premise and switched it around. It was awful. It only lasted one season. It totally shit the bed. But

yeah, that's the way TV is. I mean, they stole it. They just stole it from us.

Thomas Weiss: You've had a very long and successful career, I mean, aside from the cancelling we talked about early on. Has horror changed as a genre since you started? Is it better now? Is it worse? Was it more raw back in the seventies when you started?

Tom Monteleone: I sold my first story in '72 to a science fiction magazine, and then the horror market was basically non-existent. There was very, very little going on. Every once in a while you'd find an anthology with some old stuff in it. *Zachary's Midnight Snacks* had some stories from the 30s and 40s, and you know, every once in a while there was an anthology, but there wasn't much. Plus, I discovered some of the Ballantine collections of early Lovecraft stuff which really freaked me out. I mean this stuff was so bizarre and so different.

Thomas Weiss: Was Steven King really responsible, or was it Stu Schiff?

Tom Monteleone: Stu kept it on life support until King hit the scene, and then it became a big genre unto itself. And you know, a lot of people that had been writing Science Fiction, but really had their heart in horror or dark fantasy, kind of switched over. I know I did. I mean my first agent was Kirby McCauley, who was King's agent as well. He had an interesting stable of writers besides King. He had Dennis Etchison, Ramsey Campbell, Ted Klein, Carl Wagner. Charlie, of course. It's a whole bunch of us, you know. We all ended up doing well, nothing like King, but we all ended up, you know, having to leave Kirby, because Kirby was so involved in King's stuff that anything he would do for us was

like, you know, getting him dinner at the Four Seasons. That was pretty much all we were good for. So he was selling King's stuff for big money, and he didn't have time to market our short stories, or even our novels. And back then, in the eighties, paperback novels were super-hot. If you couldn't sell 50,000 copies of your paperback horror novel, you were a schmo. You weren't worth the pulp paper they were using. Now, writers would kill for 50,000 copies of anything. Then there were only three networks. There weren't a whole lot of publishing companies. Obviously, you know, self-publishing hadn't been invented yet. And the only problem we discovered, because we were all cranking out paperback novels, was that they didn't get reviewed because they weren't in hard cover. You weren't getting much permanence, because there were other books coming out the following month that we're going to take your place on the shelves. It's a reckless, weird way to live in the publishing world. That's when I decided to start doing hard covers which you know, I was able to do. Yeah, I've had an interesting career. I have to say it's been fun.

Thomas Weiss: Is the genre played out a bit, do you think?

Tom Monteleone: Yeah, I do. I do. I mean King is still really big, and he has an audience. Dean Koontz has a hardcore readership. Nothing like he used to be, but people stuck with him. There's been a big emphasis in the last 10 years to, you know, publish women horror writers, and that's really taken over the Science Fiction field. I don't know if you follow much of that, I don't, but I have friends that do. In the last six or seven years, it seems like men have suddenly lost the ability to write

science fiction. I mean, if you look on the awards ballots every year, it's 85% women. Which is fine, I guess. I haven't read it so I can't really pass judgment on it, but it's a weird cultural shift. But horror in general is getting stale. It's why when I do the *Borderlands* anthologies, I always say we don't want any regular tropes or standard horror icons. I don't want ghosts or zombies or vampires. I don't want any that shit. If you can't be original, I can't publish it. Show me something I've never seen before. That's the only way I would want to stay in the genre. I don't want to read the 83rd iteration of a zombie novel, or a vampire novel, and definitely not some, you know, clanking ghost story.

Thomas Weiss: It's all a bit cyclical as well, isn't it?

Tom Monteleone: Vampires were real big for a while. Remember Anne Rice? But most of the standard horror conventions. They don't interest me. I read a lot of that stuff when I was a kid, and when I read it all for the first time, it was great. When I read it for the second time, still pretty good. When I read it for the thirtieth time, it's like, I've already done this. That's why the *Borderlands* anthologies take a long time. Sometimes they're four or five years in between, because I can't find stuff I like. I'm not under any gun to do it. It's a kind of a labor of love. But I think I've left my mark in that area as well. You know. Not a lot of people were doing what I was doing.

Thomas Weiss: Where do you see your post cancellation career going? Obviously you're not done. I don't want to call you old, but you're older than I am and I call myself old.

Tom Monteleone: [Laughing] I just had a birthday, man. I just

turned seventy-fucking-seven. I'm definitely an older guy.

Thomas Weiss: You don't sound like an older guy. You sound like you have the voice and the energy of a young man. It seems like you have a lot of left in the tank.

Tom Monteleone: Yeah, I absolutely feel like it. I mean up until we just lost our lab, I used to walk him two miles every day. I play golf. I've been playing racquetball. I hurt my knee, so I don't play much anymore. You watch your weight. You don't turn yourself into an ambulatory bag of suet like some people do. You try to take care of yourself, and always have something to do. I mean, I've had friends that had regular grown-up people's jobs that were in my age group, and they retired and they didn't know what to do with themselves. And you know, two years later they're dead. I have more shit to do every day than I can get done. But no, is my career over? I already have a new publisher for my ebooks, and they're putting them together. I have a good relationship with a guy that recently started an audio book company. He's doing well. And you know I need a magazine where I can take my mafia column. I'd be happy to give it to you for free. I just want to publish it. So I got tons of stuff. There's no doubt about that.

Thomas Weiss: Do you have a lot of ideas?

Tom Monteleone: Yeah, I actually do. The ideas are still flowing at 77. They come, no problem. The problem is that writing never got any easier.

Thomas Weiss: I saw you said that in another interview, and that just fascinated and depressed me.

Tom Monteleone: It's just never gotten easier. I mean, if you don't have the discipline to do three pages a day, it's just not going to happen. I used to get up at like 6,

6:30 every day and write until like 9 or 10, and then my wife would always have other stuff for me to do. But then, you know, I'm running out of that that kind of primal juice. I still write. Mostly just nonfiction now, and I edit the anthology series. But you know this novel I've been working on for the last 3 years. It's just slow as shit. And I used to be able to write a novel in six months. Can't do it anymore. And not because I don't have plenty of ideas. I got tons of ideas that I'll never get to. So just the physical process of gets harder. Plus, the world is full of distractions, way more than it used to have. I remember for a while

there, when I would write on my first early laptops, I'd make sure I didn't have the Internet on it because otherwise I'd dick around for an hour, or answer email for an hour. I wrote my first eight books on a typewriter, there was no such thing as the email right? So yeah, it's easy to do research on the most obscure subject that you can think of. But then that that blows two hours, and you haven't written.

Thomas Weiss: Thank you so much for your time, and we hope to hear much more from you in the near future.

Tom Monteleone: Anytime. It's been a pleasure.

Why the Surprise?

I am watching the news coming out of Israel, listening to the expressions of shock, horror, and surprise at the brutal murder and kidnapping of women, children, the elderly, and handicapped by Hamas gunmen who infiltrated into Israel a few days ago.

I shake my head with my own surprise. Why is anyone surprised at their brutality? It is nothing new. The only difference now is the scale.

Go back 100 years, to the 1920's, when there were Arab riots attacking and killing Jews in what was then Palestine. In the 1970's a secular Palestinian faction attacked an elementary school in Maalot, in northern Israel. In 2001 Hamas bombed a pizza parlor. I could fill this column with such incidents. (I myself narrowly missed the bombing of a market.)

The difference? Hamas was able to make a major incursion despite Israel's defenses, something they were never able to do until a few days ago. Otherwise, the scenes we are seeing now would have occurred long ago.

It is gratifying to see the support Israel is receiving. It is appreciated. But the support seems to come when Jews are getting killed. When they take steps to prevent getting slaughtered, that's when the criticism starts. And it will, when Israel does take steps to prevent what just happened from happening again. To be honest, I'd rather they be silent with their sympathy if it means they will be silent with their criticism. And that criticism will surely come as Israel takes the needed steps to eliminate Hamas.

There are those who say the problem cannot be solved militarily. They say negotiations and agreements are the only way out of the conflict between Israel and Hamas, the rulers of Gaza.

Really? On September 13, 1993, Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin shook hands on the White House lawn. That gesture ushered in what was called the Oslo peace process, after the Norwegian capital where its groundwork had been laid.

On September 24, 1993, just 11 days later, Yigal Vaknin, a 22-year-old Israeli blacksmith, was stabbed to death by a Hamas terror squad.

Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005. Today I heard an interview with Likud member Danny Danon on the BBC. He said that Ariel Sharon, Israel's leader, hoped that by withdrawing from Gaza the area would develop and become like Singapore. Instead, Hamas, the rulers of Gaza, have used the funds they have received, from a variety of sources, to build a military infrastructure, instead of building schools, hospitals, and roads.

Hamas has no interest in making peace with Israel. The destruction of Israel is in their charter. This is more important than the well-being of the people of Gaza. And do you know one of the things Hamas has in their favor as they pursue this goal?

Ismail Haniya, a Hamas leader, was quoted in The Washington Post as saying that Jews "love life more than any other people, and they prefer not to die." In contrast, suicide terrorists are often said to have gone to their deaths smiling. An Israeli policeman reported, "A suicide bomber goes on a bus and finds himself face-to-face with victims and he smiles and he activates the bomb—but we learned that only by asking people afterwards who survived."

(<https://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP1187.html>; *The Logic of Suicide Terrorism* by Bruce Hoffman)

How do you make peace with people like that? After 9-11, did we negotiate with Al Qaeda or the Taliban?

And why should we be surprised by Hamas' behavior? The founder of their religion had at least 600 men of the Jewish tribe Banu Qurayza beheaded. No Jesus he, no Lamb of God.

It may be possible for national groups in conflict to find a way to compromise. But a religious fanatic has no need to compromise; he is guaranteed eventual victory because God is on his side.

I have to say this, though. If we can ignore the absolute sadism of what they did—there are enough videos they made and broadcast of their brutality against civilians to say it was sadism—if we can somehow ignore that, it was a brilliant move on their part. Not just the planning and execution, but the strategic aftereffects. Yes, the Gazans are

going to suffer terribly, but Hamas and its Iranian backers truly don't care about that.

The Hamas attack, and the Israeli response, has for now scuttled the warming relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. That is a strategic win for Iran. And, in all honesty, it has put the issue of the Palestinians on the front pages again, when it seemed that the issue was headed for obscurity.

The attack had another effect. Israeli society was riven by the issue of judicial reform. (To understand the potency of the issue in American terms, think of abortion.) The antagonism between the sides of the judicial reform issue was verging on hatred, something not seen between Jews in the Land of Israel for 2,000 years. (It is one of the themes of my historical novel, *The Sikarikin*, soon to be published by [Conservatarian Press](#).)

Now, in the face of a brutal, murderous external enemy, the people of Israel are united.

I AM A CHURCH...

I am a church, more than mere wood
assembled.

I see, hear and smell - even at
distance,

And now I will speak.

-Let those who have ears hear.

In the dull gray mist of dawn on an
April morning,

I bore witness to the alpha of "His
terrible swift sword."

-A crude hut of rough-hewn logs was
I,

My name meant place of peace,

Cruel irony, for carnage would soon
surround me.

They are not ready - boys in blue
with pitched tents all around.

They laugh, argue and breakfast
sizzles over myriad campfires.

They have sent no cavalry, prepared
no defensive works.

They ignore muskets firing in the
distance.

30,000 Confederate troops I see
deploying mere yards beyond the
trees,

This morning they know not.... They
are not ready.

Those troops too, are not ready -
they carry outdated flintlocks.

The long march has worn them down.

Scant pork and corn that is their
portion cannot match the Yankees'
wheat and beef.

Their terrifying Rebel yell will
carry them far, but it will not
be far enough,

Not today, and not in the years to
come.... They are not ready.

They are not ready - the mothers,
fathers, wives, sweethearts and
children back home. Not ready
for the blood, for the long lists
of names in the papers,

Not ready for Mr. Brady's and Mr.
Gardner's photographs,

Not ready for the hundreds of
thousands never coming home.

Not ready for a leg, an arm, or
other parts missing,

Victim to the terrible Minie Ball
and new rifled artillery,

Weapons reaching distances never
imagined in the tactics of old...
They are not ready.

He is not ready - The General who
commands the division around me.

He reconnoiters his lines.

The aide riding beside him is shot
out of the saddle.

A Rebel bullet grazes his hand.

Back to camp he rides,

Yelling for buglers to sound
assembly.

He wakes up to what confronts him -
On this day and hereafter.

By nightfall forever changed he will
be.

Most reviled in the South to this
day,

Soon to be the father of total war,
but this morning... He is not
ready.

Onward they come, the grey tide
 inexorable,
 Sweeping all before them, until they
 surround me.
 But what's this? They stop... Has
 their courage faltered?
 No, they are hungry.
 The bountiful breakfast abandoned
 around me tempts them,
 And there are other treasures
 besides...
 Up rides the pride of the South -
 General Albert Sidney Johnston,



From out in front he leads, as is
 his custom.
 He picks up a battered cup.
 "Let this be my share of the spoils
 today!" says he.
 His men understand..
 The plunder is left; the fight
 resumed.
 Yet too far out in front he is.
 A bullet clips the flesh behind his
 right knee.

It touches no bone, so onward he
 rides;
 Full of adrenalin; driving scattered
 units onward.
 Blood flows undetected down his leg
 - through his boot - out a hole.
 Johnston bleeds to death slowly,
 His beloved Confederacy suffering
 the same fate,
 He will not live to see.
 They shroud his body to hide his
 death from his men.
 P.G.T. Beauregard takes command, but
 too far behind the front is he.
 In the chaos of contact adjustments
 are not made,
 In this wooded, brushy, wet, gully-
 ridden terrain.
 For I am a poor church - in rough
 country indeed.

Backward slowly go the lines of blue
 through the day,
 Beyond me, eastward toward the
 Tennessee River.
 Holdout survivors in the center
 surrender,
 That they lasted till dusk is a
 wonder.
 Guns brought up to blast that road
 through the woods,
 Shake my timbers and crack mortar
 with each terrible volley.
 Light fades; the roar of the cannons
 and the rattle of musketry die
 down.
 Exhausted, both sides collapse upon
 the ground they hold.
 Clouds gather, approaching thunder
 is heard.
 Rain comes, making life miserable,

Among the groans and screams of the
wounded and dying.
It washes away at least some of the
blood,
Spilled in quantities ne'er before
seen on an American field.
Rain damps down fires lit by the
casual sparks of war,
Burning helpless wounded men alive
where they lay.

I am made a hospital - my floors
sanded,
So the surgeons do not slip in
grisly gore from their work.
Just beyond my door is a forlorn
pile of limbs.
Against one of my walls outside, the
dead await their shallow hole.
On the opposite side lie those in
pain and mortal terror,
Awaiting the surgeons, with those
who have passed through their
ordeal.
So deathly important just a few
hours ago,
A uniform's color matters not a whit
here.

The surgeons take them in order,
Gauging how bad the wound, and
chances to save.

Sounds like thunder shake the ground
upon which men try to rest.
Union gunboats skip shells off the
sloped muddy banks,
As a boy might skip stones across a
pond.
Their fuses burst over the heads of
the Rebels around me.
Shrapnel hits my roof, my door, and
my walls.

Men around me hear not what I hear;
know not what I know...
There are more than mere gunboats
afloat in that river.
There are ferries, and all night
they bring fresh Union troops.
Panicked soldiers who are fleeing
the horrors of the day,
Try boarding the ferries, but are
held back by bayonets.
Fresh men continue to land - 40,000
Yankees by dawn,
Facing less than 28,000 battle-weary
Confederates.

I hear a conversation in the
distance,
The men in grey around me do not
hear.
Two Union generals meet under a tree
in the rain;
One is the man who was shot in the
hand.
A lit cigar protected by the brim of
a hat brought low,
Protrudes from the face of the
other.
A friendship and trust, is forging
this night.
Before two years pass one will let
slip the leash of the other,
To tear through the South like a
Bull Mastiff on the rampage.
"Well Grant, we've had the devil's
own day, haven't we?"
"Yes... Lick 'em tomorrow, though."
the cigar itself seems to reply.

These two men begin to see what it
will take,

They've seen what's gone on all
around me.

No gallant charge will carry the day
and the cause.

No single battle will decide this.

It will go on and on, and on -

Until the iron will of one side bows
before the iron will of the
other.

Interstitial: Shiloh, a Requiem |
Herman Melville

I am a church...

My name is SHILOH.

Skimming lightly, wheeling still,
The swallows fly low
Over the field in clouded days,
The forest-field of Shiloh -
Over the field where April rain
Solaced the parched ones stretched
in pain
Through the pause of night
That followed the Sunday fight
Around the church of Shiloh -
The church so lone, the log-built
one,
That echoed to many a parting groan
And natural prayer
Of dying foemen mingled there -
Foemen at morn, but friends at eve -
Fame or country least their care:
(What like a bullet can undeceive!)
But now they lie low,
While over them the swallows skim,
And all is hushed at Shiloh.

I am a church... I am elegant and
stately;

Like many of my parishioners over
the years.

I am fortunate.

There was a time when the city
around me lay mostly in
smoldering ruins.

I was unscathed.

I bore witness to the omega of "His
terrible swift sword."

He is in Pew 63 - his usual - it is
communion Sunday, April 2nd.

A sexton walks down the aisle and
hands him a note.

He opens it, reads it and turns
deathly pale.

He rises, easing himself into the
aisle, and slowly walks out the
door.

He is noticed.

At first one, then by twos and
threes,

Men surmise what the note given to
Jefferson Davis contains.

They too slip out.

At Petersburg Lee can no longer
hold.

To save what is left of his Army of
Northern Virginia he will have to
pull out. Richmond - once proud
capitol - must be evacuated.

By the time services end, half the
congregation remains.

They are mostly women and children.

Their husbands and fathers have gone
to seek safety for their sake.

Night falls - fires break out.

The ordered destruction of war
materiel gets out of hand.

The arsenal explodes...

My walls shake - my stained glass
rattles.

The next day Union troops enter the
city.

Communion Sunday two months later,
June 4th....

The guns have all gone silent, but
the scars remain.

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Charles F.E.
Minnigerode consecrates the
bread,

In that slight German accent,
lending authority over the years:

"On the night he was handed over to
suffering and death,

Our Lord Jesus Christ took bread;
And when he had given thanks to you,
he broke it,

And gave it to his disciples, and
said,

"Take. Eat: This is my Body..."

Movement in the back of the church
catches his eye.

A stranger stands there.

He is tall, and well-dressed.

His head is held high, his
shoulders are back....

"Alleluia! Christ our Passover is
sacrificed for us;

Therefore let us keep the feast..."

The man makes his way down my
center aisle.

Gasps follow behind him like a wave.

"Gifts of God for the people of... of...
God."

The good Reverend stutters.

The man kneels at my rail with
upturned palms;

One upon the other,

Ready to receive the body of Christ.

But he is not of this body,

Not of that portion on the main
floor.

The folks who look like him in the
western gallery are contained.

They must wait for the ones below to
finish.

He is black.

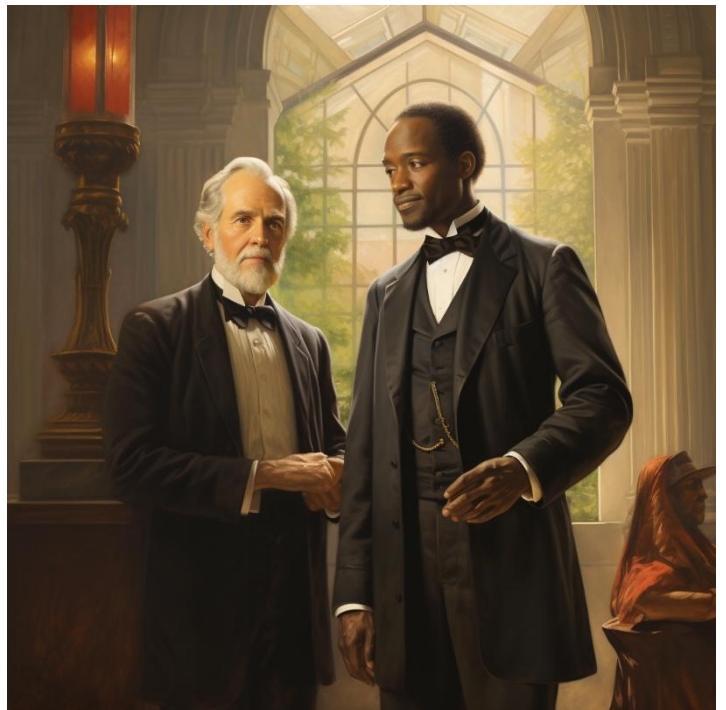
He is alone at the rail.

Who is he?

Did he come down unnoticed from the
gallery?

Did he slip in from outside?

What does he mean by this brazen
behavior?



The minister, the flock, the man at
the rail; all seem frozen.
The clock in the antechamber ticks....

From a prominent pew another man
arises.

His hair and beard are silver.

He wears a threadbare grey uniform
with no insignia.

He has lost everything.

Around his home at Arlington a
national cemetery now lies.

Transcendent dignity is all he has
left,

This he shares with the black man
already at the rail.

He approaches - kneels next to him.

He too places his hands in
supplication.

The parishioners come back to life.

They follow him in good order.

Men in my pews would follow him into
Hell;

They have done it these past few
years.

Many had died for him.

Many more men here would have,

But he put a stop to it.

Their deaths would be for naught.

If Lee can do this -

Take communion beside a black man -

So can they.

I am a church....

I am St. Paul's of Richmond.

Down through the generations I
whisper to my flock:

Be grateful.... Be ever grateful....

The house was not "divided against
itself,"

And still stands....

The "city upon a hill" shines yet -

Still the "last best hope of earth."

Jamie Wilson | Essay

Jamie is our executive editor at Conservatarian Press. She became an activist when she realized how much the publishing industry censors conservative thought, speech, and culture.

Censorship In America

Censorship is nothing new in America - or rather, the ever-shifting frontier between censorship and appropriateness. Our Pilgrim fathers certainly were careful about the reading materials that were openly available (Jeremiad screeds like "A Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God", yes; pamphlets compiling folk remedies, questionable; anything Catholic or Quaker, NOOO!) and of course there were the infamous Boston blue laws (Banned in Boston was a common advertising slogan for edgy plays and books.)

A bookstore or publisher or librarian who truly adhered to the idea that censorship is universally bad, however, would find themselves in a conundrum: which books do I sell, publish, or curate in my collection? Perhaps in the 1700s, it was conceivable for a library to hold all or nearly all the books in print; today, even with ebook technology, there's simply no way to keep up with everything written.

For this reason, those who hold or create collections of books must be choosy. Bookstores gravitate to selling the books that are most popular, that clear space on the shelves for new product fastest. Publishers focus on a genre or genres, or a certain style, or the books that most captivate the editors (and the marketers and financiers who often are the real decision-makers); if they fail to predict what the public wants, they

lose money and people lose jobs - or entire publishing companies fail. Librarians - well, they CURATE COLLECTIONS. This is a little bit different, as there's often no real repercussion when they do a poor job of serving their patrons.



Libraries are generally collections of books gathered together for a specific research or educational purpose. Legal libraries, medical libraries, libraries for particular university focuses like engineering or business or science - these are closely curated collections. Public libraries curate books that their patrons want to read (at least, if they want to be well-trafficked) and school libraries curate books that are appropriate for children. NO library tries to hold everything on its shelves. For one thing, it would be prohibitively expensive; for another, there's no reason to. Patrons generally gravitate to a relatively small subset of books they want or need to read.

For this reason, librarians should be sensitive to what their patrons want. This has become a problem in public and school

libraries; the American Library Association (ALA) is telling librarians that they should NOT listen to what patrons want because, they allege, **those patrons are generally complaining out of political ideology or sheer bigotry.**

Far from battling censorship, this attitude promotes censorship in the most insidious of ways: it creates a little government gatekeeper for every public or publicly funded library. Every public librarian is paid by the government, not an institute. In general, that means their jobs are safe unless cut for budgetary reasons. They are answerable to politicians, not the public they are supposed to serve. When it's a school librarian, he or she is answerable to principals, superintendents, and Boards of Education. For the most part, these entities remain hands-off; who wants to read all those books? And how harmful can children's books be anyway?

This brings up Lester Asheim's foundational essay on library practice, [Not Censorship but Selection](#), published in 1953 - the same year the ALA published their [Freedom to Read Statement](#). Both these essays were published in response to a time of great pressure on libraries to actively censor items relating to communism. Asheim's paper argued that there was a difference between censorship and selection - censorship being the banning (negative) of a book because of some (often small) part of content or even because the author has certain political beliefs, and selection being the choosing (positive) of a book because of its merits.

Sounds noble, no? But the truth is, librarians can't read everything they choose, even when it's a large

team of librarians in a big-city library system. Instead, they generally purchase collections of books from book vendors and subscription agents. Collections are often excellent asset additions, as with government maps or electronic journals - but in the case of more general library content, one must ask who is choosing books for the collection. There's an entire supply chain out there, from writers to publishers to wholesalers to retailers, who are complicit in marketing books for children. (And it's a big market. Just ask school publisher/distributor Scholastic, which banks about \$2 billion a year, largely with licensed reprints.)

Nevertheless, when you're talking about a large public library's general collection, that's okay. We are all adults, and while some books and media are disturbing, we can usually handle it. While I would prefer curation expand its choices to include more politically independent, right-wing, conservative, and libertarian books, I accept that this fault may simply be due to the difficulty in identifying the best books in those categories and that over time the right will eventually make headway.

It's a different story when it's the children's section of the library, or when it's a school library. Some things are too violent for elementary and even middle school children. Their developing brains are not ready for that, or for sexual content. **Even UNICEF agrees: "Exposure to pornography at a young age may lead to poor mental health, sexism and objectification, sexual violence, and other negative outcomes."** Children who have been exposed to pornography have significant changes in critical neural pathways. Because it's a super-normal stimulus, it can be

addictive; children may literally not be able to stop watching (or reading). And in the worst situations, it can cause children to harm other children by acting out the things they have seen or read. We also know today that the adolescent part of human brain development can last until age 25.

NONE of this has anything to do with LGBTQ+. Nothing. Yet every time I see an argument against a parent wanting these books removed, it's

books on the shelves that are likely to be inappropriate for at least some and possibly most of the children they serve? My suspicion is that it's largely about the upstream supply chain. Controversy sells. Banned books sell well due to notoriety. Ironically, our very protests as parents may well be feeding the drive for children's libraries to carry these books. Because protests drive sales up, publishers and distributors push



those books, putting them on "must buy" lists, and selling them to even more libraries.

The solution? To keep protesting, reject the label of bigotry, and continue pointing out that these people, entrusted with our children's safety and well-being, are giving them poison. To keep pointing out that we are concerned

because the parent is allegedly bigoted, in some way, against LGBTQ+ - because so many of these books feature characters with those orientations.

Even the ALA recognizes the necessity for children's librarians to curate collections with consideration for a child's developmental needs. Why, then, are so many librarians fighting to keep

parents and community members, not bigots. To demand that librarians curate their books with a mind to children's overall best interests, and to change minds one at a time if necessary.

In essence, we must be the cultural warriors we often claim to be. Our children's minds are at stake.

John McNichol | Fiction

John McNichol was born in Toronto, Canada at the dawn of the swinging 70s...which likely explains why he is such a fan of the Big 80s. He lived the first eighteen years of his life in Toronto, leaving to attend college at Franciscan University in Ohio. He now lives in the Dallas/ Fort Worth area with his wife and children where he teaches high school English and writes.

John loves loaded pizzas, meaty lasagnas and playing old Atari 2600 games. He hates broccoli. Hates it. Still.

A Most Unpleasant Day

Gorbag leaned back and polished his glasses, careful not to let his right tusk poke at the lenses. That done, he pretended to listen to the colleague who'd been blathering about Gorbag's academic standards without visibly blinking or even pausing for breath.

He folded his green-tinted hands and sat looking at the two colleagues opposite him. Jack's office was cramped enough with only two people in it; with three it seemed like a silly party game from his college days.

"Are you finished?" Gorbag said when the tirade was finally over. Unfortunately the younger colleague had only been drawing breath, and began another tirade before Gorbag finished the word 'finished.'

Five more minutes passed.

"Now are you finished?" he asked.

"For now," said the younger, breathing heavily.

"Good," Gorbag said, nodding and turning away from the upstart



idiot to focus on his department head. "Jack, you said to come by your office this afternoon for a chat. What in Moria's kitchen do you mean by ambushing me with this little scolding?"

"Gorbag, we just wanted to let you know about some concerns..."

"Concerns? Junior here just tried to tear me a new armpit, and with all the decorum of an Uruk-hai with a migraine. Meanwhile you sit there and twiddle your thumbs. What's the real reason for this shindig?"

"Gorbag, your last paper was...it gave us much to think about, true. But..."

"Oh, cut the cram, Jack. I expected blowback from some of the idiots running the show over at U.G., but from you? And did you notice junior here didn't criticise my research methods at all? He's only mad because my conclusions don't match the ethos of his petty little..."

"Your regressive attitude won't be tolerated in the world that's coming, Doctor Gorbag!" said the

younger one, his own smaller tusks glinting in the light.

Gorbag paused. He hadn't been in a fistfight since his sophomore year of high school, now over thirty years past. But now the memory of quick, unfair violence jumped back sudden and fresh.

"Are you...Jack, you're the department head! Are you going to sit there and let some adjunct threaten me, a tenure?"

Jack looked first at Gorbag, then at the younger academic with the slightest bit of fear and bewilderment in his eyes.

"I'm not threatening you, old one," said the younger...what was his name again? Gorbag couldn't recall. "I'm putting you on notice. You may be fine with the races of Men and Elves and Dwarves slaughtering our ancestors, but I'm not!"

"First, that happened a long, long time ago. Second, your latest piece, Junior, denied the battle at Helm's Deep ever happened, and claimed Gandalf was just a quaint myth that had its root in some stone age vegetation myths."

"So?"

"So? I've seen better research from undergrads! That some clown like you ever got a Master's degree is an insult to real academics everywhere! You deny a thoroughly documented, major historical event happened, but then turn around and claim it did happen when you want to use it to vilify me or my work!"

"Gorbag..." Jack said, sounding weary.

"Don't take that patronizing tone with me, Jack. I'll put up with a lot, but not with this. This little idiot may have you intimidated, but I'll retire to a cabin in the fens before I let some racca who doesn't know the difference between a half-orc and an

uruk-hai intimidate me into silence."

Jack sighed again, staring into the corner. "Look, Gorbag, you've got a sterling record as a researcher and a lecturer. However, modern sensibilities being what they are, you're going to have to make adjustments to what you say and write from now on."

"You're censoring me, Jack?"

The younger academic [Lug, Jack remembered, that was his name] leaned forward, his voice raising as his green-fingernail pointed at the ground for emphasis. "You will stop denying that our people were oppressed by the races of Men, Elves and Dwarves! You will stop spreading the bigoted lies that we ate man-flesh! And you will stop being a race-traitor by saying we came from Elves! Our culture has..."

"Before the age of Men, Lug, our 'culture' consisted of murder, assault and destruction. It's what we were bred for! It's only because we have Man and Elven blood in us now that we reason at all! And as to why we have it in the first place..."

"I won't be taunted by your accusations on our people!"

"Then leave! I won't shed a tear, let me assure you! Besides, it's not an accusation! Thousands of years of evidence! Moreover..."

"You're a race traitor!"

"I'm done here," Gorbag said, standing. "I won't be abused by this...person. I'm seeing trakko like this more and more, and I see people like you, Jack, doing less and less to combat it. Mark my words: if this trend continues, you'll see genuine research dumped if it doesn't meet a political litmus test. And it's twits like this that'll be setting that test."

"Count on that, traitor," said Lug, his smaller fangs gleaming

yellow as he smiled in the light of the cheap ceiling lamp.



Gorbag hiked across the campus, trying to calm his desire to run, scream, punch trees and kick badly dressed undergrads.

He sighed. When he'd started as a young professor the campus had been serene; one felt learned just by walking among the ivy covered buildings. Then, students walked about in jackets, ties and knee length skirts. Now, trash and makeshift

protest banners abounded, and the students dressed in...well, multi-colored rags was the first phrase that came to Gorbag's mind. Multi-colored rags and spiteful, spoiled attitudes.

It hadn't been easy being the first [and currently only] Half-Orc on the faculty. Back then, hard, smart work with a polish had earned first grudging respect and then outright admiration from his peers.

Now he was again isolated, not because of his race, but because of his views on his race.

"Traitor!"

The word sounded from a clutch of students behind him. He slowed his pace just a hair for one step,

but then kept walking with an even faster pace, trying hard to ignore all the chanted slogans he heard from pockets of students around the campus.

Anger frothed forth in small groups, with outraged slogans denouncing the 'Massacre of the Uruk-Hai' at Helm's Deep, or the 'Orc-Slaughter' at Minas Tirith. A booth set up near the cafeteria decried the inhumanity of men in ages past to endangered species, calling for the re-casting of Bard's Day as "A time of regret, when men

had heartlessly slain and celebrated the death of the last of the proud and noble beasts, the last Dragon, Smaug."

Gorbag shook his head at that one. What happened? It seemed he'd woken up one September morning and everyone had either joined a group hallucination or become



fearful of confronting it.

He stopped. A clutch of a dozen students surrounded something in a ring, partially blocking his path to the faculty cafeteria.

Normally, Gorbag did his best to weave his way around something like this. But in the center stood a slender elven woman. She'd arrived on campus as a freshman in a long white dress and flaxen blond hair,

and instantly become the demi-goddess crush of every healthy young man and elven male on the campus.

That had been a year and a half ago. Over time she'd donned first a headband, then a sleeveless white dress. A month more and then she wore a brown dress with a hem short enough to see her feet, then her knees, and finally her calves.

Today, she wore boy's shorts made of denim, and had shaved off her hair. Her tinted glasses couldn't hide the tears streaming down her face as she read line after line of poetry scribbled on a single sheet of lined looseleaf paper held in a now grubby hand:

*Uruk-hai, forced to fight
brought into a world you did
not make
by a white wizard
brought from elves
killed by elves
killed by men
men on horses
wizards on horses
elves with bows
defending yourselves against
aggression of men, and
elves, and wizards,
slaughtered, bloodied, like
cattle in the field!*

*Can you forgive us for our
crimes?
Can you forgive us for what
we've done?
Forgive, forgive! The crime of
creation, the crime of
destruction!*

Her voice, choking back even more tears, ended with screams of rage and sadness.

The students in the ring took up the call, screaming in a unified roar of high and low discordant notes.

Gorbag carefully slid around the edge of the group, thankful that

they were too self-absorbed to notice him.



Eating alone, he munched slowly on his sandwich, debating whether or not to eat his salad. Other faculty members had come in and sat with one another, while carefully avoiding looking at either Gorbag or the empty chairs at his own table.

"May I join you?"

The voice was firm, more than a little blustery, and was more a declaration than a request.

Gorbag looked up. Dis was already seating herself. The only female Dwarf he'd ever spoken to, much less worked with, Dis was an adjunct in the History department.

"Only if you don't care about going to any faculty parties for the next few months," he replied. "It seems I'm somewhat of a persona non grata, even by Orc standards."

"Try being a Dwarven woman out here. Sometimes I really think they hired me to seem enlightened," she continued, biting into a piece of dark bread, "and then decided to drop me down a hole and forget about me. Which suits me just fine, by the way. You gonna eat that?"

"Yes."

"Then you better get started, or I just might have to snatch it from you. What're you teaching this afternoon?"

"Sim One."

"Prehistory Lit? That's fun. You've got the Gondor kid in your class?"

Gorbag nodded silently, closing his eyes in exaggerated pain, though inside he felt unexpectedly happy. He'd been fighting so many battles lately, he'd forgotten what a simple pleasure it was to share a complaint about a troublesome student.

"The boy transferred here from UG," he said in a tired voice, "and

he's been whipping up everyone, trying to convince them that we're a bunch of retrogrades because we still use grades and papers to evaluate student learning." He shoveled in a mouthful of food for emphasis.

"Does he work?" she asked.

"For me? (swallow food) No. And the 'F' I gave him last semester didn't seem to phase him. His Daddy owns something like half of the White City, and the new wing Daddy put in Gamgee dorm last winter made him feel bulletproof as an Oathbreaker."

"Sounds familiar," she said, munching on her sandwich, talking with her mouth half full. "When I told him he was facing an 'F' in my class, he just laughed at me and called me repressive and backwards-thinking, an elitist tool of the fascist military-industrial-magikist complex."

"Don't we wish," Gorbag said, "I could use the money!"

They laughed, but then were quiet.

"What in Moria's going on, Dis?" Gorbag said. "It seems that this past year, everything's come unstuck."

"I dunno, Gorb. I've seen fads come and go, and I hope this'll pass. The other faculty don't disagree with you so much as they don't want some student protest outside their doors. And that could happen if they're suspected of consorting with a 'race traitor'." She swallowed another bite after making air-quotes with her fingers. "Plus, as a Half-Orc, the kids can't see why you aren't sufficiently outraged about, well, everything."

"And where do they get off, saying how I should feel about anything?"

"I didn't say it made sense, Gorbo. I said how it is. And you're

not the only one. Apparently I'm expected to hate every living-or-dead male of my species because of how Dwarf women were treated by their men."

"Wot?" said Gorbag. "There's no records of domestic violence of any sort among Dwarves."

Dis leaned in. "That shows," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper, "just how clever the Dwarven patriarchy is at covering its tracks." She leaned back again, chuckling. "Seriously, Gorbag? If we really were to..."

The glass wall over on the side of the cafeteria suddenly whomp!ed as a large plastic bag hit it.

"What the—" Gorbag said, "What are they doing?"

Another mob of students had formed up outside, cheering, screaming, cussing and chanting slogans in loud, garbled voices.

"Fecal bags," Dis said, wiping her mouth without any visible concern. "They've started their march to the North campus."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure. I just heard a bunch of them talking about it after I gave my lecture about the breaching of the wall at Helm's Deep. Who knows why they—"

She stopped, her eyes suddenly widening with understanding as she turned to look at Gorbag. "They wouldn't. Would they?"

Gorbag was already running towards the public courtesy phone, grabbing the receiver and dialing zero with a finger encumbered by a green fingernail that wouldn't stop growing no matter how much he trimmed it.

"Operator, get me the police. Yes, this is an emergency!" he turned to look out the window-wall again. "We have a student riot at the North campus, and we think they're going to...Hello? Hello?"

He stopped as the click sounded in his ear.

He turned. It was Jack. His pink index finger was on the button in the cradle.

"Jack what're you doing? Do you realize what's happening?"

"Gorbag, your position is tenuous as it is. Don't make it worse."

"Worse? Worse? Those privileged little miscreants are going to the library now. Remember what they did to the History building last week?"

"Jack, they have a right to assemble under the First..."

"Don't tell me about rights! The manuscripts there are precious, Jack! They destroyed books last week, and in the name of justice! And you keep us from calling the police time and again!"

"Do you want an incident here? Like at U of Gondor?"

"That was a pack of lies and you know it! That kid who got shot was part of a brick-throwing mob! He wasn't even a student! But now everyone's so afraid of the press that they either wring their hands or sit on them when students destroy priceless buildings, manuscripts, artifacts... Jack, Sauron himself couldn't do as much damage as these evil little buggers are doing!"

"You really don't understand, do you?" Jack said, his voice quiet and fearful, his eyes sad.

"Jack, let me on this phone! If you won't let me call, then do your job!"

"I am, Gorbag," Jack said, looking out at the mob through the glass wall.

Gorbag turned and looked at the mob of students. Most were children of Men, about a quarter were Elves. There was a smattering of Half-Orcs, but Gorbag couldn't see a single Dwarf, nor any Halflings.

They'd formed a ring around a central group of students. Gorbag

had seen this several times in the past few months. If the pattern held, a few students looking to be leaders would each in turn ascend a makeshift, rickety pulpit and scream an improvised, nigh incoherent speech for a few minutes and then give way to the next speaker. The crowd would cheer all of them, following each speech with chanted slogans that every person in the mob seemed to know the words, rhythm and cadence to.

"Gorbag, follow me," Jack said suddenly, letting go of the phone and beckoning.

"I have a class to teach in ten minutes."

"No one will be there with this going on. Now, Gorbag. This'll only take a minute, and then I'll call the police."

Gorbag paused, then shrugged and followed. How could things get worse? Jack found a door in a hallway in the cafeteria, one that Gorbag had walked past perhaps thousands of times but never bothered to investigate over the two decades he'd been teaching at UMT. The door surprised him by opening at Jack's touch to an ascending stairway.

Jack led Gorbag without a sound. After three floors, Jack opened another door, and they were on the roof.

Jack went to the lip of the roof and looked over at the mob from above. "Now, look. Really look at them. Do you see?"

Gorbag adjusted his glasses. The students stood on the small, grassy field in the quad. The speakers were largely finished, and the mob had proceeded to set fire to a stack of books they'd seized from the Library.

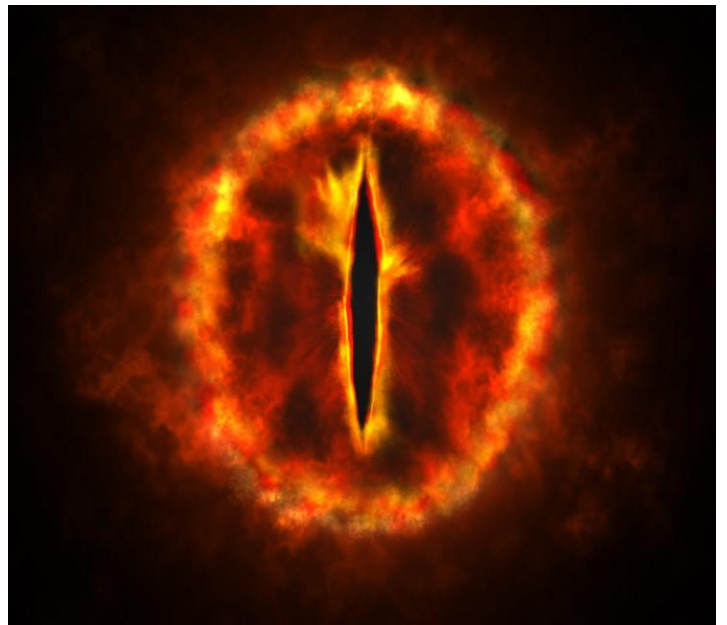
"The filthy little brutes," Gorbag whispered, horror in his voice. "Those are the ancient

commentaries on the Silmarillion! Or maybe from the histories on Aragorn. Why so much hate, Jack? Why are they trying to erase our history, our culture? Men died by the thousands defending it!"

"Look harder, Gorbag."

Gorbag blinked, then blinked again. Up close, the students' fashion choices had consisted of multicolored, disjointed color schemes, often the more bizarre the better. At this distance, he saw the predominant visible color was actually red. Other colors winked in and out, but the students overall looked like a flowing mass of crimson hues.

Moreover, what had seemed at first a disorganized mob looked quite different from the roof. Though bedraggled in appearance, they had nonetheless formed a perfect ring. The speakers had formed a line down the middle of the ring that bulged in the center. The effect made the protesters look like a big, red...



"Grey Gandalf's fireworks," mumbled Gorbag, adjusting his glasses again and again, suddenly wishing he could unsee what he'd seen. "Do you see?"

"Yes, old friend. A long time ago," Jack said as he pushed Gorbag off the edge.

David Churchill Barrow has written historical articles and short stories for Liberty Island, the Tampa Tribune (now the Tampa Bay Times), the Marine Corps Gazette and the Marine Corps Times. He and his wife MaryLu, who he met in high school, write novels and novellas together in their home just outside Tampa, Florida, which they share with the most beautiful dog this editor has ever seen, and some cats.

The Greatest Conservative Films: Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World

WHY IT IS A CONSERVATIVE FILM:

Because HMS Surprise reeks of Sir Edmund Burke's cologne from her stem to her stern.

It's a duel of ships, wits and nautical skills between Captain "Lucky Jack" Aubrey and the mysterious commander of the French heavy frigate Acheron during the height of the Napoleonic Wars. (Interesting historical tidbit: There was a heavy frigate with a unique innovative hull that gave the Royal Navy fits at this time that was the inspiration for the Acheron, but it wasn't French... She still exists as the oldest commissioned ship in the world. She's the USS Constitution (Old Ironsides) and you can visit her in Charlestown Harbor just north of Boston to this day.) Lucky Jack "improvises, adapts and overcomes," in part by learning a trick from an insect specimen collected by his best friend, the naturalist and ship's surgeon, Stephen Maturin.



DIALOGUE:

Making sport of his naturalist friend, Lucky Jack asks him to choose between two vermin wriggling out of the bread on the officers' mess table:



Steven: "I would choose the right hand weevil; it has significant advantage in both length and breadth."

Jack: "There, I have you! You're completely dished! Do you not know the in the service one must always choose the lesser of two weevils?" (Laughter all about).

(Conservatives see the world as it is, and realize they must make a clear-eyed selection of "the lesser of two weevils" on a daily basis.)

In the privacy of the captain's quarters the two friends later argue over Jack's order to have a sailor flogged. The doctor pleads the sailor's case by noting he was drunk at the time of the infraction:

Jack: "What would you have me do, Stephen?"

Stephen: "Tip the ship's grog over the side."

Jack: "Stop thirty years of privilege and tradition? I'd rather have them three sheets to the wind

than face a mutiny."

(Ah, TRADITION... What did Burke and the other patron saints of conservatism teach us - That tradition should not be altered for light and transient reasons, or else unintended consequences will likely result.)

Jack: "Men must be governed! Often not wisely, but governed nonetheless."

Stephen: "That's the excuse of every tyrant in history, from Nero to Bonaparte. I, for one, am opposed to authority. It is an egg of misery and oppression."

Jack: "You've come to the wrong shop for anarchy, brother."

(Do I need to spell out what is Burkean in that exchange? I think not...)

As they prepare for engagement, Lucky Jack is disappointed in the speed of his gunners:

"Lads, that's not good enough. Remember, we need to fire two broadsides to her one. Do you want to see a guillotine in Piccadilly?!"

"NO!!!"

"Do you want to call that raggedy-arse Napoleon your king?!"

"NO!!!"

"You want your children to sing 'La Marseillaise?!"

"NO!!!"

"Mr. Mowett! Mr. Pullings! Starboard battery!"

(What's the polar opposite of Burkean principle, and the fount of all the evil "isms" of the 20th century? The French Revolution, of course, which Burke detested.

That is what Lucky Jack and his crew is fighting against, but what are they fighting for?

Just before HMS Surprise springs its "surprise" on the Acheron, Jack reminds them:

"England is under threat of invasion, and though we be on the far side of the world, this ship is our home. This ship, is England..."

(So what is the difference between this and the "blood and soil" patriotism that anyone else in Europe might express? Because it is England... Burke said that the Americans and the English are "not only devoted to liberty, but to liberty according to English ideas and on English principles," and a nation like England "is a choice... It is an idea of continuity, which extends in time as well as in numbers and in space. And this is a choice not only of one day, or one set of people, not a tumultuary and giddy choice; it is a deliberate election of ages and of generations..." The crew may not be able to articulate it well as Jack or Edmund Burke might, but they know they have inherent and ancient

rights because they were born Englishmen.)

WHY IT'S A GREAT FILM:

Let's start with ten Oscar nominations, including best picture, and the award of two - best cinematography and best sound editing. When watching it, it's almost as if you can feel the rain stinging your face during the storm scenes and smell the acrid gunpowder and blood during the battle scenes. Russell Crowe is at his finest as "Lucky Jack" Aubrey, and there's not a subpar performance by anyone in the cast, even bit players. It's historically accurate in every detail; down to the sand thrown on the main and gunnery decks so the men do not slip in their own blood and gore during the battle about to commence.



Watching it, you'd be proud to serve under Captain "Lucky Jack" Aubrey.

Sequel, please...

Thomas J. Weiss | Review

Star Trek IV: The Worst Star Trek Movie Ever Made

McCOY: "My God, Jim, where are we?"

KIRK: "Out of control and blind as a bat."

Fans of the fourth installment of the Star Trek movie franchise may recognize this dialogue above the movie's climactic minutes. The situation is desperate. The crew has lost control of their captured Klingon Bird of Prey, which is barreling at impossible speed toward the Golden Gate Bridge and certain death. If the Captain and his intrepid crew don't do something, all is lost.

How does James T. Kirk manage to miss the bridge, land - safe and easy - in San Francisco Bay, save the ship, his crew, and indeed, the lives of everyone on Earth? What Herculean feat must he perform to save the day?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. It just happens.

The internet - as we know it - didn't exist when this movie opened in late 1986, and critics like Christian Toto or The Critical Drinker weren't around to tell us how second-rate it is, so we went to see it. En masse. In a year featuring genuine cinema classics that still hold up like *Top Gun*, *Platoon*, and *Aliens* - among others - the 5th highest-grossing movie was *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*.

Whenever someone makes the point that dreadful, woke filmmaking is a 21st century phenomenon, I show them this dumpster fire. The writing, acting, and special effects



are all horrible. And the plot - oh my God, the plot! - is nothing more than a progressive fairy tale.

It was woke before woke was a thing.

The antagonist of this movie is a probe which might as well have 'Deus ex Machina' inked on the side of its cigar-shaped body. Appearing from nowhere with the mysterious ability to permanently disable anything and everything in its path, Starfleet has no defense and quickly runs out of options.

As this threat barrels toward earth, Kirk and company are on Vulcan waiting for Spock to make a full recovery after returning from the dead. The resurrection plot-line - Spock died in the far superior *Wrath of Khan* - is silly, but makes far more sense than anything else

that happens in this movie. Once Spock is ready, the crew begins the journey back to Starfleet, but they receive a distress call en route warning them not to approach Earth as the probe is about to destroy all



life on the planet.

After analyzing the sounds emanating from the probe, Kirk and Spock determine they are targeted at a species of life that - in the universe of the movie - went extinct early in the 21st century: humpback whales. They bat around some ideas for how to answer the probe when this gem of a conversation happens:

McCOY: You are proposing to head backwards in time, find humpback whales, then bring them forward in time, drop them off, and hope to hell they tell this Probe what to do with itself!

KIRK: That's the general idea.

McCOY: That's crazy!

KIRK: You have a better idea, now's the time.

I like to think this was an actual conversation the writers - Gene Roddenberry, Leonard Nimoy, and Harve Bennett - had amongst themselves.

"This is stupid. Are we really making this the plot of the movie?"

"That's the idea."

"It's absolutely crazy!"

"Sure, but...you got a better idea?"

The only point to this decision - and the reason I have a positive teenage memory of this movie - is to plop Kirk and company in 1986 San Francisco where hilarity will (hopefully) ensue. And while there is a mildly entertaining recurring gag about the crew's attempts to swear, everything else falls flat.

Consider the stakes: the fate of Starfleet and every living soul on earth hangs in the balance. Finding a humpback whale is the only way to stop the probe. And what timeframe does an ever-logical Vulcan choose?

The rock-bottom worst time to look for humpback whales in the 7.5 million year history of the species. Spock could have picked a year at random and given his crew a much better chance of finding a pair of whales to bring back with them.

In real life, humpbacks were at their lowest numbers in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. By 1986, they'd already begun a comeback due to a moratorium on all whale hunting that was passed in 1982. Scientists believe this ban played a huge role in the robust recovery of many whale species - so much so that only four out of 14 whale populations are still protected today.

They were lucky, however, to have arrived in 1986, because the crew needs two other things only an advanced society can provide: a tank to hold the whales for the trip forward in time, and something to recharge the sub-standard Klingon dilithium crystals. This gives



everyone on the crew something to do on Earth of the past, however foolish it might be.

And there is plenty of foolishness to go around.

Take the whale tank. Scotty and McCoy travel to a plexiglass factory and talk their way inside to have a look. There, they have this conversation with the factory manager:

SCOTTY: How thick would a piece of your plexiglass need to be, at sixty feet by ten feet to withstand the pressure of eighteen thousand cubic feet of water?

NICHOLS: That's easy, six inches. We carry stuff that big in stock.

SCOTTY: Aye, I've noticed.

Bingo! They've found what they need. Now, their only task should be finding a way to get this plexiglass from the warehouse to the ship. Right?

Wrong.

Scotty and McCoy - for no reason whatsoever - decide to give this man the formula for 'transparent aluminum', a

revolutionary product that will reduce the necessary thickness of the plexiglass from six inches to one. As they're about to do this, McCoy's conscience eats at him and he pulls Scotty aside for this conversation:

McCOY: Do you realize of course, if we give him the formula, we're altering the future.

SCOTTY: Why? How do we know he didn't invent the thing!

McCOY: Yeah!

Ignorance, in this case, is time-travel bliss.

Instead of using the six-inch plexiglass they could have beamed out of the warehouse, they give a complete unknown a radical new formula that will take years "just to figure out the dynamics of this matrix," and the very next day they take delivery of the resultant product, then use a helicopter to deliver it to their still-cloaked ship sitting in the middle of Golden Gate Park.

While this is happening, Chekov and Ohura beam aboard a "nuclear

wessel" - it's a joke, see, because Chekov can't pronounce the letter V - to gather the photons necessary to re-energize the dilithium crystal. Once they've finished, Ohura beams out, but leaves Chekov behind where he is captured by security guards.

Kirk has already ordered his crew to remove their rank insignia, so you might assume Chekov would have a story - any story - at the ready in case something like this happened.

Nope.

He gives his real name and rank, says he is part of the United Federation of Planets - something no one in 1986 has ever heard of - then acts surprised and confused when the FBI agent doesn't just let him go. This is played for laughs, and might have gotten a few if the situation made any sense. The writers probably wanted this to be a commentary on US/Russian relations (the Cold War was still going strong in the mid-80s) but we're left shaking our heads.

As this interrogation proceeds, Chekov sees an opportunity to flee, and takes it. He doesn't get very far, however, and falls from one deck to another, hitting his head, hard. The military transports him to a nearby hospital, and when Kirk and McCoy find out, they race to save him.

Which leads to another pseudo-comedic sequence, overacted to perfection by DeForrest Kelley. The idea is to show how 'backward' medical practices are in 1986 compared to their 23rd century counterparts, and at a superficial level, it makes sense. One hundred and fifty years ago, doctors treated their patients much differently than we do today. The difference is we don't look back on 19th century doctors with even a fraction of the contempt McCoy displayed while searching for Chekov.

Actually, that's not true. McCoy doesn't search for his longtime friend and colleague after being told he's somewhere in the hospital in critical condition. Instead, he decides to chat with an old lady on a stretcher in the hallway, and they have the following conversation:

WOMAN PATIENT: Doctor.

McCoy: What's the matter with you?

WOMAN PATIENT: Kidney ...dialysis.

McCoy: Dialysis? My god, what is this, the Dark Ages? Here, you swallow that. If you have a problem, just call me.

Shortly after this, Kirk finds where they're keeping Chekov, and they race to save him. After talking their way into his operating room, we hear the following conversation:

DOCTOR #1: What the hell is that? What are you doing?

McCoy: Tearing of the middle meningeal artery.

DOCTOR #1: What's your degree in, dentistry?

McCoy: How do you explain slowing pulse, low respiratory rate and coma?

DOCTOR: Fundoscopic examination...

McCoy: Fundoscopic examination is unrevealing in these cases!

DOCTOR #1: A simple evacuation of the expanding epidural hematoma will relieve the pressure.

McCoy: My God, man, drilling holes in his head's not the answer. The

artery must be repaired. Now put away your butcher knives and let me save this patient before it's too late!

Both of these cases are meant to show how backwards medicine is in the 20th century compared to what it will be in the 23rd, but this is really an early example of a plague that dominates our national conversation today: presentism, or judging the past using present-day sensibilities. Dialysis, in 1986, was a state-of-the-art treatment kidney failure (and is still in use today!), but McCoy treats the idea with contempt because...doctors are somehow supposed to have 23rd century technology in 1986? They're magically supposed to know how to repair an artery with the weird beeping device McCoy puts on Chekov's forehead?

After rescuing Chekov, finding the whales in the open sea (which they could have done at literally any point in the movie), and beaming them aboard, the crew travels forward in time to the instant they left the 23rd century. Kirk releases the whales into the ocean and Deus Ex - the probe - 'chats' with them for about thirty seconds and...leaves. No explanation. No reason. No backstory. Nothing. There's a celebration. Kirk gets demoted to Captain - which is all he ever wanted in the first place - and the probe is never spoken of again.

Is no one curious to know where the probe came from? Or if it will come back? How will they repopulate a species with just two whales? What happens if another probe comes looking for woolly mammoths? Does someone have to go back in time again to bring two of them back?

Of course, to ask these questions is to miss the point of Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home, which is - humans are bad, and stupid, and horrible for the planet. Global warming didn't exist in 1986 (which wasn't long after Global Cooling was a thing) so they chose whales to illustrate the point.

I don't begrudge any happy childhood memories of this movie - completely turn your brain off and this could be a fun distraction - but it should go down as the absolute worst movie in a Star Trek franchise filled with marginal or downright bad offerings.



Steve Stinson | Feature

Thomas Hart Benton: The Truth

"The tumultuous forces of America, its manifold dissonances and its social anarchy, are perfectly expressed in the restless counterplay of his forms. The common criticism that his work is without poise or serenity is an unwitting affirmation of its truth."

Critic Thomas Craven on Benton, 1934

Summer, 1936. Jefferson City, Missouri. Nobody has ever heard the words "air conditioning." It's hot. Really hot.

You're a fly on the wall of a large room on the third story of the Missouri Capital building. Grand, tall windows overlook fountains and manicured grounds that fall away to the Missouri River. The legislature isn't in session, the streets and grounds are empty.

If there were a breeze, it might blow away some of the sulfuric pong of aging eggs.

The entire room is laced with light gray sketch lines from the chair rail to the ceiling. A small artist labors on scaffolding. He works methodically in the classic manner - left to right, top to bottom - coloring in the sketches

with egg tempera mixed at a nearby table.

He climbs down now and then and squints into a ten-foot long 3-D model that replicates the sketches. Then it's back to the scaffolds.

People, government employees mostly, wander in, linger and leave. He may or may not speak. If it's a nice-looking woman, he always speaks. If they touch the model or his equipment, he swears at them.

At five o'clock he closes up shop and leaves for "Children's Hour." He returns a few hours later, drunk. He screws himself back into a form of sobriety, starts mixing paint and the egg pong returns.

He continues working methodically for hours. The colors are brilliant.

You stay there all summer. When the scaffolding comes down, the show begins. The shouting starts. It's a mural by Thomas Hart Benton - "The Social History of Missouri." We're lucky it wasn't covered with housepaint.



Riots, slave trading, war, lynchings, whiskied Indians, train robberies, pollution, tarring and feathering, girly shows, slaughterhouses, dispossessed people, a baby's bare behind, and mules, mules, mules, all displayed in his signature style - restless, intermingled, sinewy forms of intense colors.

When the mural was unveiled, the reaction was familiar, at least to Benton. Like all his work, it managed to create an odd political union - both the liberal and conservative intelligentsia despised it. The common citizenry of Missouri admired it and trooped to see it.

There are very few first rank artists with a style so singular that very few second rank artists attempt to imitate it. Benton was one of those artists.

Critics, then and today, describe Benton's work as neither beautiful nor refined. Benton's answer was always the same: "It's the truth."



Elites despised him. The feeling was mutual. When his heroic nude "Persephone" was hounded by critics in 1939, Benton had it hung in a New York nightclub, The Diamond Horseshoe.



Benton, 1889-1975, a Missouri native, was a national celebrity in the Thirties. When Time Magazine published its first color cover in 1934, they put Benton there.

A banty rooster of a man, he was contentious and brilliant and



prolific. Loved and loathed over a 70-year career, he managed an artist's trifecta. He was relentlessly honest and brutally perceptive, yet he never lost his affection for the people he painted, or they for him.


It seems as though every fifty years or so, a Missourian comes along and holds up a mirror to America. In the 1800s it was Mark Twain. In the last half of the 1900s, it was Rush Limbaugh. In between was Thomas Hart Benton, painter, muralist, writer, musician, and son of a famed Senator of the same name.

In 1937, "An Artist in America," a provocative autobiography that traced remarkable walking excursions in Appalachia, the Midwest and the Southwest, where Benton's flair with a word, plus his gifts with a sketchbook and a harmonica opened doors wherever he traveled. The book should be required reading for anyone who claims to understand the American people.

By then, Benton had moved away from an early interest in Marxism, leaving behind the leading intellectuals and radicals of the day who once counted him a friend. He was a target of the Left for the next forty years and appears to have relished every minute of it.

He had also left New York for Kansas City, there to establish a regionalist art movement unsullied by annoying East Coast affectations.

Until World War II, Benton made more headlines than money. After the war, it was the other way around. The capital of the art world moved from Paris to New York and the headlines belonged to Benton's student, Jackson Pollock.



With a few exceptions, Benton was ignored by the national press while he worked steadily and made a nice living. Unlike images from his contemporaries Edward Hopper (Nighthawks at the Diner) and Grant Wood (American Gothic) a Benton painting never re-emerged as a pop culture icon.

After WWII, abstraction established prominence in elite art circles. You might call it the beginning of the "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like" Natural, realistic, narrative paintings were to be ridiculed, and Benton put forward the most howling example of that style on the national scene.

Pollock, Benton's most famous student, certainly understood turmoil on canvas. Because the two painters ended up on the opposite sides of the artistic fence, so to speak, their true relationship is often overlooked. Art snobs hate that it happened at all.

As near as I can tell, the relationship was one of affection. Pollock stayed with the Bentons on long vacations at Martha's Vineyard. He babysat the children. It was said that Benton was the only person for whom Pollock would remain sober.

Benton called the turmoil in his paintings "rhythmic sequences." There are no accidents in a Benton composition. The formula is exceptional.

A Benton mural was planned at several levels. Along with the usual sketches and studies, Benton laid out frameworks for controlling space. Then he made a clay model of the mural, arranged it, studied the lighting and removed the accidents of nature.

As a student, Pollock took a shot at the Regionalist style, with

mixed results, but I think "rhythmic sequences" soaked in. Juxtapose a Benton diagram for controlling horizontal space with Pollock's "Summertime" and you might see what I mean.

Years after Pollock's death in an auto accident, Pollock's brother opened a suitcase to find a collection of abstract paintings.

What later became known as the "Suitcase Bentons" was the result of a summer of painting at Martha's Vineyard, in which Benton and Pollock explored abstract painting.

Benton had either forgotten them or just failed to mention them to the "phonys, panty waists and sissies" in the art critic world. I don't know why. He knew the critics would despise and belittle the Suitcase Bentons. And they did, but even a child can see he used abstract forms to organize his murals all along.

I believe it's time for renewed interest in Benton's work, but that's just me. I was looking at a Benton when I decided to become an artist. I was eight years old.

Unfortunately, there is renewed interest of a wrong kind. Benton's truth is now a target of cancel culture. His depiction of Klansmen in a 1933 mural, "The Social History of Indiana," at the University of Indiana, has become a popgun target of snowflakes, who of course, have no clue that the depiction honors a 1928 Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper expose that broke the KKK's political influence in the state.

And, of course, the University of Indiana caved. The lecture hall where the mural resides has been repurposed.

Then again, artistic integrity wins over time. Ten years after Benton's death, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City paid

\$2.5 million for Persephone. That's a long way from a saloon.

The Continuing Saga of the War Against the Robots

If this essay's title brings to mind thoughts of the "Terminator" movies and Sky Net, it's deliberate. I confess to being fond of the Terminator films and the novels written by people like S.M. Stirling based on the movies. We are not there, yet, in technology, but I hope those who develop software will take precautions to prevent it.

Instead, this column is about the more prosaic, and sometimes silly side of artificial intelligence and chat bots. I realize I've already mentioned chat bots in two other columns, but this one is not going to be repetitive, at least not much. I promise. The world of chat bots keeps cranking out new developments that I want to share with you, not only for your amusement but so you will be forewarned and be wary in your use of one.

To refresh your recollections, a chat bot is a form of software that uses artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms to create prose. You can use a chat bot to write a school report or term paper, an essay, a story, a contract, and so on. You type in a detailed description of what you want it to write for you and sit while it creates the document. The most popular chat bot is ChatGPT, which offers both a "free" version and a subscription account, but there are others. We can expect their



creators to keep refining their products.

I use a free ChatGPT account, so anything I say about my personal experience applies to that program; I don't know anything about the competitors. I've also compared notes with friends who have shown me examples of what they tried to produce with ChatGPT, and some of my conclusions are based on their experiences, too, as well as published reports. So here is the good, the bad, and the ugly.

The good is that a chat bot can be a pretty good writing tool. The AI can, with a general description of what you want, turn out a decent template for a document such as a contract. That can save some time, but you are not going to be able to use what the bot gives you "as is." Likewise, in my fiction writing, I sometimes ask ChatGPT to create a description of a character or setting. But I've never got back anything I can use unaltered.

The bad is that there are already programs designed to scan documents to determine whether a document was written by a human or

a chat bot. The primary customers for these programs are - you guessed it - schools, colleges, and universities. The very bad is that these "detective" programs have, per reports, a great many bugs themselves. They let bot-written papers pass, and claim documents written by people were written by robots. Until they get better, they will create about as many problems as they solve.

The ugly comes in two observations about ChatGPT. The first is that it's biased. If asked to create an argument that Donald Trump was a better president than Joe Biden, it will tell you that its programming will not permit it to say anything political. But ask it to create a document proclaiming Biden is superior to Trump, and the AI will claim it's not being political, and then give the user what he wants. Who knows what other biases are "baked in?" (I'm told that Grammarly, another program I use, has the same defect. But I haven't noticed it.)

The second ugly feature of ChatGPT is that it is dishonest. It lies. Recently, lawyers in New

York City asked ChatGPT to create a legal brief to file in federal court. The AI spit out a lovely document complete with citations to published precedents from other courts. The primary lawyer filed the brief as it was without checking the citations. The judge, however, checked. Several of the citations were fictitious; the cases didn't exist. Needless to say, the judge was not amused. But when the lawyers who were in trouble brought the phony cases to the chatbot's attention, it insisted the cases were real and the citations genuine.

We can figure that both the chat bots themselves and the programs designed to detect their use will get better. In the meantime, users should be warned not to rely on them too much. Sky Net, they are not. But they still can be dangerous.

(Editor's note: the irony that most of our artistic images for this issue were AI-generated is not lost on us.)

Conservative-Friendly SF & F Conventions

One of the more unpleasant things that have been happening recently is the un-inviting of guests and the barring of certain people from science fiction conventions. This is deeply upsetting to those of us who have gone to conventions since childhood; these places were always a collection of, as Sarah Hoyt terms them, Odds - people who didn't quite fit into the regular world for whatever reason: social awkwardness, neurodiversity, or just plain strangeness. What DID bind everyone together was a love of speculative fiction: the idea that this world might not be the only world, the exploration of fantastic worlds of magic and scientific wonders, the sheer power of the human imagination. When we went to a convention, we knew that everyone there loved the same books, that we were part of a near-secret underworld that was somehow brighter and better than the ordinary world we left behind.

Today this wonderful welcoming world is all but gone. Political correctness overtook it

some ten years ago, first coming for Elizabeth Moon - a card-carrying liberal if there ever was one - and later expanding to eject or reject conservatives and others who disagreed with the liberal agenda in any way. Disagreement, you see, is violence, and violence against peaceful con-goers cannot be tolerated.

Well, conservatives have never been the sort to let that go. We are fortunate that a number of our friends and colleagues have started up their own conventions - and that several of the old standard conventions have stood fast against the liberal swarm, refusing to bow to political correctness, instead adhering to the old bonds of imagination, tolerance, and kindness that helped shape so many of us. Here is a starter list for cons you can go to and feel not just comfortable, but welcomed. Not all of these conventions are specifically conservative - but they do welcome everyone and are open to different ideas. We will update this with each issue.

Marscon.net

January 12-14, 2024 - Holiday Inn Virginia Beach in Norfolk, Virginia - If you want to start 2024 with some [Larry Correia](#) goodness, this is the place; he's their Guest of Honor, and they fought off an onslaught of PC screeching to keep him. (Trust me - I live in Va Beach and heard the whole thing!) This mid-size con is guaranteed to have a strong writers' track, as it's co-run by a large writer's co-op here in town. (And I'll be there too, with Clark - JKW).

[FenCon](#)

February 23-25, 2024 - Doubletree by Hilton Hotel Dallas Near the Galleria, Dallas, Texas. This relatively relaxed event is a traditional literary SF&F convention with a short story contest and a writers'

workshop, and it's projected (by me: jkp) to continue tilting further right. Politics? Larry Correia was the Guest of Honor in 2022, and that stuck despite heavy leftist pressure. You tell me. <http://fencon.org>

ConFinement

March 1-3, 2024 - Lebanon, Tennessee. Featuring [Sarah Hoyt](#) as the guest of honor, this convention was started by [Michael Williamson](#) during the Covid scare basically so he'd have a convention to attend. It's growing fast, and about as family-friendly and nonwoke as it's possible to be. The atmosphere is very relaxed, but you can get some serious networking done there, and the programming is surprisingly robust. Highly recommended. <https://www.confinementcon.org>

Fantasci.rocks

April 19-21, 2024 - Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina - a convention designed especially for young writers to learn from seasoned writers. You can expect to see Chris Kennedy and David Weber there most years.

NTRPGcon (NTRPGcon.com)

June 6-9, 2024, or the first Thursday in June. Westin DFW Airport Hotel, Irving, Texas. If you're just in it to play the games, this is the con for you. All old-school tabletop gaming with a focus on D&D and pre-2000 games, there's just no room for politics when you're immersed in the storytelling.

Libertycon

June 21-24, 2024 - Chattanooga, Tennessee. Known for its iconic convention book covers themed after the Statue of Liberty, this famously sold-out con is worth the trip. Hundreds of con-goers are also published authors or recognized artists, while dozens more visit from the nearby Oak Ridge facility - you'll brush arms with real nuclear physicists and rocket scientists who are SF geeks just like you. And the politics - let's just say you will feel welcome. <https://www.libertycon.org>

Imaginarium Convention

July 19-21, 2024 - Holiday Inn Louisville East, Louisville, Kentucky. Anyone can have fun at this young convention, but it's designed especially for writers and artists - lots of workshops, networking, and heavy attendance of professionals. Best of all, the focus is on art and entertainment, not bean-counting or politics. entertheimaginarium.com

Dragoncon

August 29-September 2, 2024 - Atlanta, Georgia. There's no point to telling you which hotel to choose - Dragoncon's 50,000+ attendees basically take over the heart of Atlanta every year (they peaked at 85K just before Covid and are still rebuilding.) You can find anything you're interested in at this five-day con, including lots of celebrities and

cosplay and a dealer's "room" that spreads through multiple stories of a nearby office building. Their fan-voted Dragon Awards have featured a number of right-leaning artist over the years, and when staff have been approached to "cancel" attendees or guests, they just blow it off. <https://www.dragoncon.org>

[P-Con.us](#)

September 15-17, 2023 - A North Texas convention near the Dallas/Fort Worth airport, this convention is so nonwoke that [LawDog](#) was a special guest in 2023.

[Basedcon](#)

September 2024 - Grand Rapids, Michigan. This relatively new convention is the brainchild of award-winning author [Robert Kroese](#), and was first imagined as a networking event for authors; when non-authors asked to attend, Kroese expanded it into a full-fledged convention, and it's growing fast. Politics? It's in the name - "based" as in "in touch with reality". If you're a SFF fan and you think men can't be women, socialism fails, and truth is the only way forward, you will feel at home here. This year it's sold out, but you can check their website for next year's event. <https://www.basedcon.com>

[Son of Silvercon](#)

October 2024 - Las Vegas, Nevada. Organized by [Wombat-Socho](#), this brand-new convention aims to give folks in the western part of the US a home similar to Libertycon. There's a lot of energy at work here, so let's hope it does well. <https://fission-chan.org/son-of-silvercon/>



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