

The Strange and Terrible Worlds of Edgar Harris

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"SFWA Changes Entry Criteria for Membership"

Chesterton, Maryland - The Science Fiction Writers of America, the long-running organization for professional science fiction and fantasy writers, announced today that it was making drastic changes to how it accepted new members, not to mention how it kept older members within the fold.

"The basic requirements for SFWA membership previously required that a writer have three short stories or one full-length fiction book or a dramatic script appear through professional paying markets," said Caroline Crawford, SFWA spokeswoman. "However, over the late Eighties and early Nineties, we found the organization flooded with members who received their accreditation through sales to the Writers of the Future or *Pulphouse* magazine, and although they never managed to get published again, they had lifetime membership so long as they paid their membership dues. Since we find ourselves flooded with members who do nothing more than put 'Member, SFWA' on their letterhead and throw tantrums if they don't get guest badges at local conventions, besides voting in SFWA elections against any provisions to remove members unpublished in a decade or more, we had to go to further extremes to enliven the organization and clear out the dead wood." Those "further extremes" consist of talent competitions completely unrelated to writing.

"Simply put," said Ms. Crawford, "any current or incipient member of SFWA must be able to impersonate a cartoon character to the satisfaction of an independently selected jury. No exceptions."

According to the new bylaws of SFWA, each member must be able to impersonate the voice of a particular character in an animated TV show or film, and each character belongs to that author until the author dies or is beaten in impersonation combat. "Effectively, each fiction writer qualifies for one impersonation. Nonfiction writers get two, and any professional editor gets one to add to his or her total," said Crawford. "This means that James Arce-Stevens gets one character, while Mike Resnick, being a fiction writer and a pro editor, gets two." Initially, the characters selected would be done on

a first-come, first-served basis, but two writers selecting the same character may compete in an arena for that impersonation: the winner remains with SFWA, while the loser has to leave the SF genre entirely unless they have an alternative. "Nonfiction writers get two solely because we can use as many as we can get."

Many extant and former SFWA members jumped on the new rules, with varying results. Harlan Ellison, due to his singular origins [see "Harlan Ellison: The Ultimate Literary Warrior Robot"], promptly claimed three characters: The Iron Giant, GIR from the Nickelodeon series *Invader ZIM*, and Bender from *Futurama*. Said Crawford, "Everybody knows that Harlan goes running around his house on Friday nights impersonating GIR anyway, so this wasn't too much of a stretch." Others had more of an effort. "[SFWA President] Norman Spinrad and James P. Hogan had a hard time of it, seeing as how they both do an exemplary Olive Oyl, and we needed judges after about three hours. They just wouldn't break character. Jim finally managed to win, but Mr. Spinrad managed to get back into the game with a Boomhauer impersonation that left us with tears in our eyes. It was just beautiful. It was almost as stunning as Pat Cadigan's Snow White or Emily Deventport's Stimpny."

Some new and established writers, unfortunately, found themselves out of SFWA. Kristine Kathryn Rusch, unaware that silent cartoon characters were ineligible for consideration, was quoted as saying "Wait, wait...okay, I'm Odie on *Garfield*. ...No? Okay, how about Maggie Simpson? Um. How about Claude Cat? Uh, okay, how about Taarna in *Heavy Metal*? No? Oh, poop." Other authors were a bit unclear on the concept but managed to pull through: Darrell Schweitzer at first spoke out at science fiction conventions about the new rules, but his impassioned and ceaseless cries of "Timmy!" were enough to pass muster with the judges. Other characters were retired without consideration due to the authors' reputation. "Fritz Leiber used to do an impeccable Fleischer-era Superman, and ever since he died, everyone else left it alone out of respect for him and his work," said Crawford. Other characters were left alone due to the nasty reputation of the author. "Even though he has no interest in joining

SFWA, and we wouldn't take him if he asked, Paul T. Riddell is known for his Beavis, Zorak [from *Space Ghost: Coast To Coast*], and Mr. Hanky the Christmas Poo. And they're right up his alley, so he can have them."

Likewise, some non-American members of SFWA are understandably aggrieved that some of their cultural icons may be appropriated by Americans, and others feel that the battle for impersonations should cross international barriers. On the Usenet newsgroup rec.arts.sf.written, one angry commentator wrote "I don't have any problems with Brian Aldiss getting Dangermouse, but why does Robert Sawyer get both Terrence *and* Phillip? What if I can do a better Phillip?" The particulars on the competition, and whether impersonations worked alone or in conjunction with automatic weapons, was not available at press time.

Whatever happens, most members of SFWA agree that it's high time for the membership rules change. One SFWA member who wished to remain unnamed said "The way things were going, just about anyone who wrote for a *Buffy* fanzine could get in, and some people were talking about a cull. You know, Thunderdome. This is better, though, because everyone knows I do a better Daffy Duck than anyone else alive. And since H.P. Lovecraft isn't here any more to challenge me, that means I'm set."

"Harlan Ellison: The Ultimate Literary Robot Warrior"

Washington, DC - Popular attitudes in the science fiction field hold that if celebrated author Harlan Ellison didn't exist, then it would be necessary to make him. Recently declassified documents held by the State Department since 1940 show that the latter part of that truism is literally true.

"Simply put, Harlan Ellison is the most sophisticated machine of mass destruction on the planet," said State Department advisor Dr. Lise Ward, an authority on technology and technological trends in the wake of World War II. "He was part of a top-secret program by the country of Freedonia to build the ultimate cultural warrior. When people talk about how Ellison can kill at fifty paces with a sharp twist of the tongue, they have no idea of how true this is. They should be thankful they don't know about the particle-beam weapons, rubidium lasers, and other armaments built into his body, because if someone irritates him enough to use them, we're all in trouble."

Freedonia's project was the brainchild of its dictator-for-life, the tyrannical autarch Rufus T. Firefly. In an attempt to rebuild Freedonia's crushed economy, Firefly declared war on its neighboring country Sylvania, but had more on his mind than mere military might. "Sylvania was known for its writers and artists, and Freedonia's most popular recreation at the time was recently imported to the US as the board game *Don't Whiz On The Electric Fence*," said Dr. Ward. "The idea was that if Freedonia couldn't import artists, then it could make them. World War II set in before any other prototypes could be made, and several Freedonian scientists managed to smuggle Ellison out of Europe and to the US before anyone realized the potential." After the war, Firefly (reportedly in the throes of addiction to prescription stool softeners) forgot all about the Ellison project and concentrated his country's resources on more vulgar and therefore profitable venues, such as animatronic television newscasters. Today, two-thirds of Freedonia's gross national product comes from the construction and maintenance of such television personalities as Sam Donaldson, Diane Sawyer, and Robin Leach.

According to the declassified State Department documents, Ellison is an absolute marvel. "Lots of conspiracy fanatics like to argue that most of our modern technological developments were 'borrowed' from extra-terrestrial sources, but in Harlan's case, it's probably true, because we can't find any other explanation for the sophistication," said Dr. Ward. Overlaying a skeleton composed of a titanium alloy that self-heals when exposed to heat are input, output, and defense systems well in advance of anything available elsewhere during the 1930s, and many are well in advance of today's comparable systems. Overseeing everything is a true AI processor capable of astounding leaps of deduction, thus explaining Ellison's ability to create fascinating characters and situations in such high-stress conditions as on radio programs and in bookstore windows. "It's no surprise that Ellison does all of his work with a manual typewriter instead of a computer, because trapping himself by using a computer would be like strapping yourself to a sparrow and expecting to fly to Australia," said Ward. Powering everything is the secret to how Ellison manages his grueling schedule of writing and lecturing: an incredible waste-free nuclear battery that promises to revolutionize industry if it could be copied. "People ask if he ever runs out of power after one of his 8-hour lectures, and the answer is 'No'. Oh, he might, but only if he keeps going for a while. Like 40,000 years without a potty break."

The explanation for Ellison's creation, as well as the

defense and offense capability (most of which are still classified by the UN) makes sense in the context of Freedomian history. “Firefly wanted true cultural warriors, who could present a thesis and defend it to the death if necessary,” said Ward. “Many of Harlan’s weapons were intended for use against enemies of Freedomia: radio commentators, film critics, know-nothing science fiction fans. Apparently a glitch in his cerebral matrix prevents him from accessing his full mission, but he obviously knows some of his reason for being. His fascination with artificial life forms, as evidenced in his *Outer Limits* screenplay *Demon With A Glass Hand*, is part of it, as is his ability to verbally filet any critic of his work who hasn’t done his homework. If he does access his core memories, then his powers will be virtually unlimited, and could be set off without warning. The trick, of course, is not to set them off. Treat him with the respect accorded to any replicant with the ability to wipe out all life in our solar system with a random sneeze, and we’ll all be fine.”

After Firefly’s death in 1977 and the subsequent collapse of Freedomia’s economy, some of the technology used to create Ellison was smuggled out of Europe by varying governments. “Canada did the most testing of the original Ellison technology,” said Dr. Ward, “with generally disappointing results. The government was trying to jump-start its own literary warrior program in the Sixties, and finally gave up when its best efforts flopped. When people refer to Paul T. Riddell as a third-rate Harlan Ellison clone, it’s closer to reality than you know.” Britain scaled its program back severely and sold most of the tech to private industry, with the greatest success to date being in pop music. Dr. Ward related “That’s why the Spice Girls disappeared right after their movie came out. Those girls were quite literally too ‘high maintenance’.”

The response to the announcement ranged throughout the spectrum. Ellison’s wife Susan responded “Suddenly it explains everything, especially why he speaks machine code in his sleep.” Longtime friend Neil Gaiman announced “Well, it’s about time that someone acknowledged Ellison’s abilities. I spent years trying to write as much as Harlan has, and the only way I can keep up that kind of schedule is by putting powered light sockets in various orifices and flailing away until the neighbors complain about the stench of burnt flesh.” Finally, director James Cameron, who locked horns with Ellison in 1984 over plagiarism of Ellison’s works in *The Terminator*, fled the country and is currently hiding out in an undisclosed location after receiving word of Ellison’s advanced weaponry and tactical software. Before leaving, Cameron was heard to say “I

could have ripped off Larry Niven or William Gibson, or someone else who couldn’t blast me from orbit, but no, I had to be *clever*..”

“Literary SF Publishers Announce ‘International Slushpile Bonfire Day’”

New York - One of the most onerous tasks in the magazine and book trade is the sifting of the slush pile. Slush piles, the collection of unsolicited and unagented manuscripts sent to publishers by beginning or would-be authors, are sometimes the source of future literary successes, but more often than not are the source of headaches and indigestion. Many editors privately complain and scream about the uselessness of slush piles, but fearing a backlash from beginning writers who already assume conspiracies keep their work from being printed, very few speak out about the quality and quantity of the material received.

With this in mind, the international literary community announced a special amnesty day for those long-suffering editors forced to sift through manuscripts where everything but the name of the author was misspelled on the title page. April 31 marks International Slushpile Bonfire Day, where editors and publishers are encouraged to collect all of the unreadable or unusable manuscripts that have built up in their offices, in some cases since 1968, and burn them while drinking wine and singing songs. Since one of the worst offenders is the science fiction/fantasy/horror triumvirate, SF, fantasy, and horror editors are allowed to place the first documents and light the pile when complete.

“We’re burning everything,” said Pablo Redondo, the organizer of the event and the only editor willing to appear on television. “All of the manuscripts with no merit other than the tag ‘Member, SFWA’” on the cover page. The manuscripts where the author didn’t bother to read the submission guidelines and dumped off the copy to a magazine that doesn’t buy that sort of fiction, or doesn’t buy fiction at all. The manuscripts where the author already registered the story for a copyright ‘to keep editors from stealing their work’. The Wesley/Worf slash fanfiction sent in ‘just in case we had an interest.’ The manuscripts sent in on toilet paper or on *Hello Kitty* note paper, and the manuscripts sent with death threats against any editor who plans to reject it, and the 3000-page ‘sequels’ to popular books written because the author didn’t like how the original ended. We’re making a big pile in the middle of Times Square, and every editor with a slush pile is invited to pitch in. Big magazines, small book lines, Webzines, rantzines, and weekly newspapers: every editor in the world is wel-

come to start the healing here.”

In return, the rest of the publishing community will protect the identity of the participants in the bonfire and blame the disappearance of the manuscripts on the Postal Service. “After all, they were all contaminated with...um...anthrax!” said Redondo. That’s right: anthrax and Dutch Elm Blight! Maybe a bit of tobacco mosaic and some cane toad venom, but anthrax was definitely involved somewhere. Of course, considering the number of manuscripts we’ve received with any number of bodily fluids all over the envelope, nobody will be surprised in the slightest.”

If this seems a bit extreme, the words of an editor who wished to remain nameless explained the situation. “We’re constantly reading in *Locus* or *Speculations* about the bad editors who take more than a week to accept or reject a story or novel, but these people don’t know what it’s like. An intern who takes eight weeks to reject a story is most likely needing that eight weeks to recover from jamming a set of ten Lee Press-on Nails in her eyes. By the time she’s able to see again, that same author may have sent another eight to ten stories to the slush pile, and the cycle begins again. Even at our best, we can only afford to publish three short stories and a novella a month, which means we publish a grand total of 36 short stories a year, and we get eight to ten THOUSAND manuscripts a month. This is the only way we can keep up with the overload without going insane and shooting at school buses once we got off work.

“Let’s put it another way,” the editor continued. “I hear from one writer who suggests that because of the delay in response to his submissions, we call out HASMAT teams to pluck his envelopes out of the incoming mail and decontaminate them before opening them. I can’t bring myself to tell him that we can’t afford a HASMAT team, and each and every one of his stories makes me scrub my arms with carbolic acid whenever I open it. Each one of his stories literally takes away my will to live, and I shudder every time I see his return address on an envelope. And he’s one of hundreds out there, maybe thousands. I have to buy elbow-length rubber gloves on credit just to keep up.”

Electronic manuscripts are no exception. “Since the advent of the Web, we’ve been receiving material from people who apparently learned to type by throwing their cats at the keyboard, and some of it is so horrible that we don’t let it dare escape,” said Redondo. “Some of it is so foul that we’ve decided to include hard drives in the bonfire, because any hard drive or mail server

that contained that story is obviously too contaminated for future use. The New York Fire Department had problems with this at first due to environmental issues, but when we explained the evil that would be removed from the universe by its extirpation, they understood.”

Surprisingly, no news of this action appeared in any of the journals dedicated to collecting existing and new writing markets, such as *Writer’s Digest*, *The Writer*, *The Gila Queen’s Guide To Markets*, and the innumerable Web sites cataloguing every market that pays in money, credit, advertising space, or raw meat still on the bone. Redondo said that this was deliberate. “The only publication that contained details was the American Editor’s Association newsletter *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash*, and anyone who leaked the details to the general public was to be appointed the person in charge of dealing with the repercussions. I myself am going into hiding in New Zealand after this, and I’m not returning to work until after I’ve had extensive cosmetic surgery.”

The response from the beginning writer community was, as expected, swift and terrible. A representative of the Eltingville (New Jersey) Science Fiction Writer’s Circle and Costuming Guild released a statement that read, in part, “We decry any efforts to rid the world of our works, and the ESFWC&CG will start up a GeoCities site to hold all of these orphaned stories until the New York Literary Establishment comes to its senses and buys them back for their full value.” When the representative was contacted and asked whether starting up a magazine or book line might be of more value than lambasting the existing editors, the response was “Of course not. They’re supposed to pay us for our work; we’re not supposed to pay to get it published. It’s not our fault that everyone submits stories but nobody pays to read the stories submitted, and we’ll all go to SFWA to complain if the magazines go under. Now go away: I have an *Absolutely Fabulous/Farscape* crossover novel that I have to get off to St. Martin’s this evening.”

Although the editors and publishers in other countries were sympathetic to the idea, it is currently unknown whether or not they will participate. At least one Australian editor expressed support for the bonfire, saying “Australia has only six million people, and between the four science fiction magazines in the country, we’ve received submissions from at least four million. Either we have a lot of razorback hunters and crocodile skinners with plenty of free time in the evening who will suddenly buy subscriptions so they can see their stories in print, or we’re going to have a bonfire of our own in our future.”

“Tina Brown to Take Over Editorship of *Asimov’s*”

New York - When one mentions magazine editors, the name of Tina Brown appears time and time again as one of the most recognizable. After her stints as editor of *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker* in the early Nineties, Brown moved to her own publication, *Talk*, and beat all estimates of the magazine’s success and lifespan. Widely criticized for her attitude and her extravagant spending habits, Brown still became one of the most popular editors in the last half-century.

For the last few years, though, Brown had expressed the urge to carve new frontiers in publishing. This helped explain the announcement this week that Brown was replacing current editor Gardner Dozois as editor of *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*.

“The catchline we’re looking for is ‘sexy,’” said Anne Uhmelmehe, spokesperson for Dell, the owners of *Asimov’s* and its sister publication *Analog*. “Gardner Dozois may be a lot of things, but ‘sexy’ isn’t a word you use around him unless you’re aroused by yeti. We figure that by getting Tina, we’ll get a lot of readers who just love that sultry British accent of hers. Besides, it’s not like Gardner’s being left in the cold. He’ll probably be able to get an editing job at *Mimosa* or *Star Wars Insider* or something.”

Dell’s immediate plan is to convert *Asimov’s* into a twenty-first century magazine, complete with standard magazine format, glossy pages, and advertising by Saks 5th Avenue and Nordstrom’s. However, the editor’s job is to determine the ongoing course and feel of a magazine, and Tina had very definite plans for this transition.

“First things first, we’re going to work on makeovers on our writers,” Brown said. “Science fiction writers are usually such oiks, so we’re looking for glamorous people in the field. Snappy dressers and the like. We can’t do anything about the readers just yet, but they’re next.

“The next plan is to bring on guest editors who aren’t generally associated with science fiction but like reading it in secret, so we can draw in new readers. Our first guest editor will be Roseanne, and then we’re going to bring in Christian Slater and David Arquette. They’ll do a little editorial or two about how much they like the job, and then we’ll publish the stories received in a given month that they like the most.”

Brown also expressed interest in bringing new artists in to paint or draw covers for *Asimov’s*. “Charles Addams is a perfect fit for the new *Asimov’s*, but someone told me he was dead, so we’re looking at a nice cross-section of experimental political cartoonists and expressionist painters. Everyone except that Tom Tomorrow; he’s just dreadful.”

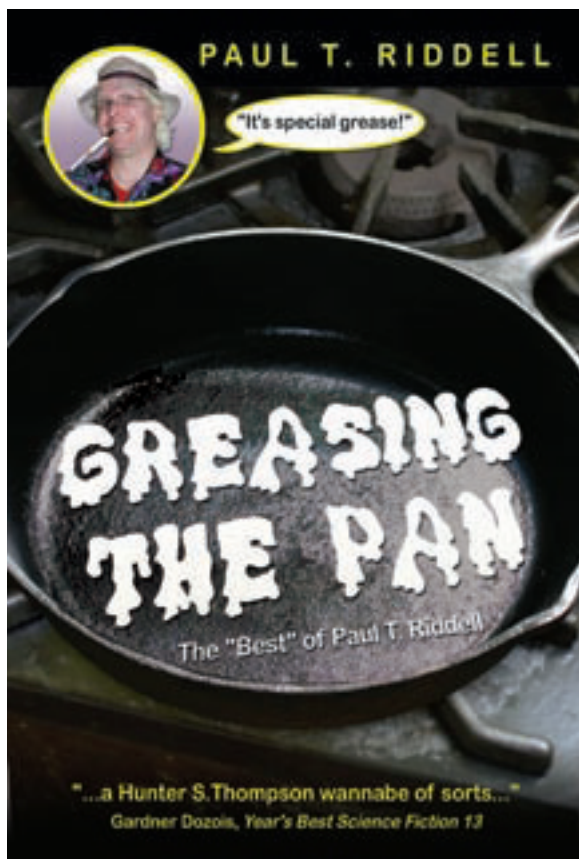
Another aspect with the change lay with promotion: already, bulk mail subscription cards have the “Edited by Gardner Dozois!” note covered over with a sticker reading “Now Edited by Tina Brown!”, but Brown has further plans. As of April, *Asimov’s* will become the first science fiction magazine since *OMNI* to run television advertising during prime time, and Brown and Dell will sponsor a premiere party simulcast on the E! and SCI FI cable channels. Brown has already answered critics’ concerns about the excessive costs of this promotion by saying “When you’re as fabulous as I am, you don’t need to worry about profits. That’s what I taught them at *Vanity Fair*.”

When asked about possible reader backlash, Brown was nonplussed. “When I edited *The New Yorker*, we took all sorts of harassment from those trolls at *Spy* magazine, and I crushed them like bugs. I dare *Locus* or *Science Fiction Chronicle* to say anything about this, because I’ll make them disappear. I guarantee it.”

News of the editorial transition caused immediate changes at most of the main magazines in the science fiction industry. Gordon Van Gelder, editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, hired famed screenwriter Joe Esterhaz (*Showgirls*, *Perfect*) to replace current film critic Kathy Maio for an undisclosed but rumored seven-figure fee, and *Analog* editor Stanley Schmidt commissioned a new convention report column by *Lake Wobegon* author Garrison Keillor. Other editors were more proactive: calls to confirm rumors that Scott Edelman, editor of the late *Science Fiction Age* and current editor of *Science Fiction Weekly*, and Ellen Datlow, fiction editor for *OMNI* and current editor of *SCIFiction*, had challenged Brown to a Bowie knife duel in the Avenue of the Americas plaza were not returned at press time.

- Edgar Z. Harris is best known as the former Sports Editor at *Science Fiction Age*, but his work has appeared in such diverse publications as *Fat City News* and *Revolution Science Fiction*. He can be reached occasionally at the Esoteric Science Resource Center, <http://www.sclerotic-rings.livejournal.com>.

And for more Edgar Harris, feel free to pick up...



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