



OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #8

**Stories by Sara Genge
Brian Dolton**

Poetry by Timalyne Frazier

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September

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Marge Simon's Cover Art: *GI*

Marge Ballif Simon free lances as a writer-poet-illustrator for genre and mainstream publications such as *From the Asylum*, *Chizine The Pedestal Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *Flashquake*, *Aeon*, and more. She has three collections coming out in 2007: "Vectors: A Week in the Death of a Planet" with Charlee Jacob, *Regions Press*, and self illustrated "Like Birds in the Rain," *Sam's Dot Publications* and "Night Smoke," (also self-illustrated) with Bruce Boston, *Kept Queen Publications*. Her self illustrated poetry collection, "Artist of Antitheses," was nominated for a *Bram Stoker* award in 2004. Marge is also the editor of *Star*Line*.

This is the second time we have featured her artwork on our cover.

Publisher, Seth Crossman

Editor, Seth Crossman

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Editor's Letter

Memory is a tricky thing.

I recently received a poetry submission that used fog as a metaphor for memory. I thought it was a fitting image that seems more fitting every day that I struggle to remember the things in my past, and fail to. Too often it is like trying to see the hazy shore through the fog shrouded water or the forest across the foggy field.

That got me to thinking about memory and exactly what it is that calls it back to us and why we can't recall some things no matter how hard we try. Why don't we remember the things that happened when we were young? Why can't we play back year eleven, or year twenty-one of our lives like a movie? I would like to, I think. I love pulling out old movies of me playing basketball or when the family was up to camp. Those videos are my only memories sometimes, and that makes me sad.

Where are memories stored? Are they stored as images (to be replayed like a flipbook?), as feelings (how do you *store* a feeling?)? Is a feeling only a chemical formula that can be manufactured by my body like mixing a pack of hot cocoa?

I have read research that, when boiled down, says that events as they unfold are encoded in different places in the brain related to storage. These encoded events are like formulas, or ingredients that can be retrieved later on and replayed as memories. So some images are recorded here, and some feelings recorded there, some smells recorded there, some pain recorded here (all different parts of the brain, all connected together like hyperlinks in an email and triggered like the game mousetrap). When we go back to relive that memory, or recall it, it is like playing an orchestra piece where all the instruments contribute to successfully play the piece. The memory (formula) draws those bits from all of those areas and plays them back, sometimes as vividly as the first time it happened.

Ok, ok. Makes sense. But it's not nearly so poetic, nor does it help when the retrieval doesn't go so smoothly, or when the memory we recall is distorted from the truth. Perhaps we were made that way on purpose. Maybe we don't want to remember pain so striking, or beauty so unique it leaves us with a sense of loss when it is gone, or the ordinary happenings that we have so skillfully turned into great adventures.

SC

The Unicorn Hunter

By Brian Dolton

Brian Dolton has spent many years trying to accumulate enough weird life experiences to make his writer's biography sound interesting. Having ridden a camel in the Sahara, stayed in a Zen monastery on a sacred Japanese mountain, and played volleyball on a sandbar in the middle of the Pacific, he finally feels he's ready to actually concentrate on the writing. He has been previously published in Intergalactic Medicine Show and Abyss & Apex.

“Left,” Sam said, putting the stone back in the bag.

I stamped my foot and spun the wheel. The Civic threw grit and snow out in an arc as the tires bit down.

“You better be right about this,” I told her. I could hear the rattling of the stones as she shook the bag.

“Stones say left. Stones don’t lie,” she told me. I’d heard it before. “But we don’t have all day.”

“Takes as long as it takes,” I told her. The snow was piling up on the windshield and the heater was whining in protest. Damn hunk of crap car. Still, the pay-off from this one was going to get me a nice new Chevy. Proper American truck. I grinned, thinking about it.

Outside, everything was dirty white, like the snow needed cleaning. The engine whined like a leashed dog. I was keeping the gear down, making sure I got traction. Road hadn’t been plowed since morning. In a nice new Chevy, we’d have made it up in half the time. Nice new Chevy with a proper gun rack, so Alice wouldn’t have to lie wrapped in a blanket on the rear seat.

Damn car.

Three miles and another fifteen hundred foot up took us near twenty minutes. The cloud was all around us, but the snow still came on down in big, dirty flakes. The wheels were slithering every damn which way.

“You better be right about this,” I said. I knew soon as I opened my mouth it was the wrong thing to say, but my nerves were shot.

“Stones don’t lie,” she told me. “Can’t be far now.”

“So you say,” I muttered. But she was right. Barely another half mile, and the gate across the road. I pulled up and cut the engine. Heater wasn’t doing a damn thing anyhow.

We got out the car. There was nothing; nothing but trees and snow. Never heard silence like it. Guess it was the snow, guess there weren't much to make any sound anyhow up there, but damn, it was like I was deaf.

She walked up to the gate, and slipped through it. I got Alice out of the back seat.

"You better be right about this!" I yelled.

She turned, and gave me a look. I felt the cold of it, and it weren't just that I was standing in a foot of snow freezing my butt off. When she gives that look, it's colder'n'heck.

I knew what I had to do. I shut up, and I got behind the car, and I settled the rifle up ready on the roof. Didn't need no sights. Couldn't have made any kind of shot at more than fifty yards, and that close...didn't need no sights. I made Alice myself and she shoots truer'n'any gun you ever saw, I'll wager on that.

Sam started singing, then. That weird kind of singing, ain't like nothing else I ever heard. Like she just opened up her throat and let her heart out of it.

The song of the unicorn.

I squinted down the barrel and waited.

Damn if she weren't right again. Damn if it didn't come trotting out of the forest like a trick pony. Color of it... well, like I say, the snow was looking kinda dirty. But the unicorn...man, that thing was just white, like no white you ever saw. Joe Harden's store got a dozen kinds of paint that all call themselves white, but ain't none of them you could splash on the unicorn and it wouldn't look like a dirty smear.

Unicorns. Damn beautiful critters. Most beautiful things I ever saw.

I pulled the trigger.

The blood of a unicorn is green, you know that?

I put Alice back in the car and got the knife. When I get up to Sam, she's just sitting there, cradling the damn thing's head in her lap. It's like it knew. It's like it knew, and it didn't care.

"Hold it steady," I said. And she did; she held it there while I got the horn out. Ain't easy, digging out a unicorn horn. They're set in pretty good. But I got it out.

She stood up.

"Bears," she said. "Bears'll eat it. Nobody'll know." Wrapped her arms around herself. Cold, maybe. Maybe not. Her eyes were shining, like she was trying not to cry.

"Ain't nobody gonna believe it's a unicorn even if they do find it," I told her. Hell, first time, I didn't believe it. But cold hard cash made a

believer out of me. Lived damn near a year on what she paid me, first time out.

That was six years ago.

She sat there with the bag in one hand and the horn in the other. Unicorn horn makes real good money if you got the right contacts. Leastways, that's what she says, and she's the one pays me a hunk of it. I read one time that a unicorn horn can be used to show if your drink is poisoned, maybe even make so you're immune to it. I guess there's a good market for that. Find the right guy with the right money, I guess there's a market for damn near anything. Ain't no business of mine.

All I care is that I get my cut.

And that's what I was counting, in the back of my head. Guess I wasn't paying attention. Just barely slammed the brakes on in time to stop from crashing into the big black SUV parked across the road. Civic slithered all over the damn road, almost sideswiped a tree.

Sam swore. I hadn't ever heard her swear like that. I guess I figured, you know, her being a virgin and all, she wouldn't swear like a goddamned Marine. But she turned the air in that damn Civic a shade of blue, I can tell you.

"What the hell?" I asked. Sam was pushing at the door, but we must have been up against a snowbank. She couldn't shift it. I pushed the door open on my side.

There was a guy stood by the SUV. Kinda made a good fit; big black guy in a parka over a black suit.

"Been hunting, Mr Michaels?" he asked, and there was a flash of blue when he said it. Damn if he didn't have a sapphire or something in one of his teeth.

"I got a permit," I said, wondering how in hell he knew my name.

"Really, Mr Michaels? You have a permit that says you can take unicorns on state land?"

"Unicorns?" I tried to give him a grin, but I don't reckon it came out too convincing. "You gotta be kiddin' me. Ain't no such thing as unicorns."

"Then you won't mind me searching in your car, will you?"

That's when the other door of the Civic finally opened and Sam flew out of there. And man, I mean flew. I just stared like a dumbass. But the big guy, he just slipped something out of his pocket and made a few signs in the air. Like he was, I don't know; writing letters with light, or something.

Magic. I goddamn hate magic.

I heard her scream, then. No idea what he done to her, but it didn't sound like she cared for it none. I almost grabbed the guy, but then I thought better of it. Didn't know what he could do. And hell, weren't like I'd broken

any law. Ain't no law in the state of Montana says you can't shoot a unicorn, is there?

So I just stood there and waited. She came out of the snow screaming like a cat with her tail on fire. The big guy, he gestured, and it was like she hit some kind of wall. Fell to the ground, in a big bank of snow.

"Give it up, Sam," the big guy said. "I'm taking you in."

She told him she weren't going to be going in, in no uncertain terms. Where'd she learn language like that, anyhow?

"Want me to use the big gun?" he asked her. I didn't see no gun on him, but I kinda figured he didn't mean a real gun. Weren't sure what he did mean and weren't keen to find out.

She got up, spitting snow.

"All right, Beech. I won't make any more fuss."

"Sam Cottonwood, I am arraigning you for breach of the Truce. By the Four Wards, you will place yourself under my Seal." He said it formal, like he was Mirandaizing her or something, but I didn't have a damn clue what he was on about.

She said one more word. It wasn't polite. Then it was like she was pulled up to him, holding her hands in front of her like they were cuffed. When she got close enough, I saw they were cuffed. Red light, tied tight around them. Magic.

"Does the money really mean that much to you, Sam?" he asked softly, shaking his head.

She didn't say nothing, but she wouldn't look at him neither. She just got in the big black van, meek as you like. Door closed behind her, and there were just the two of us. Beech just smiled at me. Weren't the kind of smile I liked the look of.

"I don't reckon I'm gonna like the answer, but you want to tell me just who the hell you are?"

"Antwoine Beech. I'm with the Bureau."

Should have guessed he was a fed. Feds love black.

"I ain't broken no law," I said.

"Do you think so? That's the fifth unicorn you've shot in six years, Mr Michaels. Unicorns are an endangered species. Protected by the Federal Bureau Of Magic. You've killed half the unicorns in the USA, all by your damned self."

"You gotta be kidding me." But I guess it made sense. Feds like to stick their damn noses in anyplace.

"Do I look like a man who's kidding you, Mr Michaels?"

He didn't look like he was kidding. What he did, though, was weird. He sniffed me. Like a dog, or something. Then he smiled again, big and happy.

"So that's your secret."

"What?"

"You don't have a scent, Mr Michaels. Unicorns are very sensitive creatures. Sure, they'll go to someone like Sam, they trust those virgins, but only if they feel safe. If a unicorn knew there was a man with a gun anywhere inside five miles, it'd never come to her call."

"So what now? You going to lock me up or something?"

"We could...arrange that. Arrange that for a very long time." I didn't like the sound of that.

But then he put his arm round my shoulder, as if he were my best friend. Let me tell you, when a Fed makes like he's your best friend, you're in real trouble.

"But I believe, Mr Michaels, that a talent such as yours should not be locked away. A talent such as yours should be put to good use. There's plenty more creatures out there than unicorns. Creatures a lot more intelligent, a lot more wary, and a whole lot more dangerous. And you mark my words, some of them need hunting. So it looks to me like you are now working for the Bureau."

I did a double take.

"Wait. Let me get this straight. You're offering me a *job*?"

"I'm not offering," he said, and he wasn't bothering to be friendly now. "Tell me, Mr Michaels...that gun of yours. Can it fire silver bullets, do you think?"



Chernobyl Motorbike Ride

By Timalyne Frazier

Timalyne Frazier has been published in Nantucket Magazine, Polyphony, Tomorrow SF, and previously in OG's Speculative Fiction. She won 3rd Place in the Playboy Fiction Contest and recognition in Asimov's Fiction Contest. Her story, Paper Cuts, will appear soon in the anthology, Forbidden Speculation. Her poetry, and her stories, continue to awe us with their unique vision. This poem is no different.

Chernobyl Motorbike Ride

a half-life reduces the danger
only half
half again
half again
so we are always left with something
toxic, deadly, invisible and eventually
very
very
small
human error

if you ride right

right down the middle
maybe you won't get any on you
remain the uncontaminated witness
to all the dropped lives

even the misplaced souls
haunt somewhere else
welcome to the ghostless ghost town

the men at the checkpoint
seem disappointed
the power
of chemical showerhead in their hands
impotent in the face

of daring, educated moderation
Let's face it,
they don't get many visitors

you rode through
right
in the middle of the road

through the dead zone
radiant breeze in your hair
the thrill of scenery at each silent vista
and then the click of your Geiger counter
sped your pulse
and raced your two-stroke engine



A Few Words With Teresa Edgerton

After finishing The Hidden Stars, I knew I had to interview the author. That author is Teresa Edgerton, a fantasy author of ten novels, with A Dark Sacrifice, the second novel in the Rune of Unmaking series, coming out in December. Hers is an interesting story, nearly as interesting as the threads she weaves. We were glad to catch up with her and talk about her books, the Faire, and writing.

When did you start writing, and what made you want to be a writer?

I started *writing* down my stories at about the age of eight, but there were already stories before that. I'm not sure when those first unwritten stories began taking shape in my mind. It might have been as soon as I knew enough words to tell them. Making up stories was just what I did; it wasn't until I was about nine or ten that it occurred to me that writing was a job I might have someday, when I grew up. And I wrote down stories on and off all through my childhood and early adulthood, but I didn't get serious enough to work at it steadily until I was about thirty.

What was your first story about?

The first stories I remember are those I told my little sister, about the pair of us flying up into the clouds and discovering they were all made of whipped cream. The first story I remember writing down was *heavily* influenced by The Wizard of Oz—the book, not the movie, although I did love the movie, too. So it seems like I started life as a fantasy writer, and after a few excursions into other kinds of writing (I was a big fan of Nancy Drew, so of course I had to try my hand at writing a few mysteries), I started writing fantasy again in my late teens. That's when I discovered writers like Andre Norton, T. H. White, and J. R. R. Tolkien, and learned that it was possible to write fantasy with a level of complexity I had never dreamed of before.

What authors have had the greatest impact on your imagination, both in your own reading enjoyment and getting you to want to write stories of your own?

There are so many of them, and sometimes the influence goes so far back it would be hard to identify it. Of course, White, Norton, and Tolkien. C. S.

Lewis and Lloyd Alexander both had an early influence on my writing. Probably one of the greatest influences, though it's not so apparent on the surface, was Laura Ingalls Wilder, whose books I loved so much as a child; almost certainly the Little House books first sparked my fascination with the past—not so much the big events, but how people actually *lived* from day to day. Before I rediscovered fantasy and science fiction, I read so many historical novels as a teenager, I would have to mention Thomas B. Costain, Margaret Campbell Barnes, Gladys Malverne, Anya Seton. And it would be impossible for me not to recognize the influence of Charles Dickens and Rafael Sabatini in some of my later books, like Goblin Moon and The Queen's Necklace. Among fantasy authors, Patricia McKillip, Ursula K. LeGuin, Joy Chant, Hope Mirrlees. The older I get, the more I'm aware of how very much a book can be enhanced by the style or prose in which it's written—of how much more vivid and emotional a passage becomes with just a few well-chosen words, and how word choice affects tone and atmosphere. So I am drawn more and more, and I think influenced more and more, by writers who do that sort of thing exceedingly well: in addition to McKillip, LeGuin, and Mirrlees, I would add Tanith Lee, C. J. Cherryh, E. R. Eddison. Sylvia Townsend Warner and Angela Carter—both considered literary writers rather than fantasists, but have nevertheless written some of my favorite fantasy short fiction. And there are many writers of books for children that have a great facility with the language—even though they have to keep it comparatively short and simple, they really make the words count—and I read those books and love them, and am no doubt influenced by them. Leon Garfield and Susan Cooper are two such writers who come immediately to mind.

You have a love of history, most notably medieval and renaissance, and it shows in some of your past careers. Can you tell us about a few of those careers and why you chose them?

There was the fortune-telling, which I did because I loved doing it and because it was so intuitive—and I was very good at it. But it seemed to draw on some of the same inner resources as writing, so the more involved I became in the writing the less Tarot readings and crystal-gazing I did. And there was a time when I was making puppets, which was a fun and creative way to try and make a little extra money during the Faire. It was something I could do during the week, and then John could sell them while I was doing the readings. And of course there is still the writing.

What parts of the Renaissance Faire do you like the most?

In the beginning, I loved everything about it: the costumes, the forest setting, the sheer magic of it all. But later, I spent so much time working in my own booth, I didn't really have many opportunities to wander through the Faire and experience it all. Also, over time they did eliminate a lot of the fantasy elements, and went for a more purely historical approach. Which was very good in its way, but ... I missed some of the magic.

I've heard you met your husband at the Faire, and that he was part of a troupe doing medieval tourney combat. Would you say that marrying a knight in shining armor was part of the reason you fell in love with him?

Finding someone who shared and understood my own interests so completely was the greatest part of the attraction. When you grow up reading about things and caring about things that none of your contemporaries seem to have any interest in at all, and then in your twenties you meet someone who cares about the same things you do, you feel like you've truly found your soul-mate.

Is it easier for you to create fantasy worlds and characters, and fleshing them out, after having been so deeply involved with the Faire?

The Faire was only a small part of it. There were also several years in the Society for Creative Anachronism, and years and years of research since. I feel that you have to know how things actually work (or worked) in the real world before you can put together a consistent secondary world. But, yes, sometimes wearing the costumes or eating the food of a period in history can enhance your sense of what it was like to live in that particular era.

I've also written books in settings more closely resembling Europe and America in the 18th century. I love researching that period: it's so extravagant and fantastical, even before you bring in the magic.

What was the first book you published? What was it about?

My first book was Child of Saturn, which is volume #1 of the Green Lion Trilogy. It takes place in an imaginary Celtic kingdom, and I incorporated a lot of alchemical symbolism into the story, which I think works really well because the main characters go through all sorts of transformations, physical, mental, emotional. Teleri is eighteen, but because she has the potential

to become a powerful sorceress, and because she's terrified of growing up and growing into that power she has subconsciously used her magic to essentially stop the clock at a much younger age, and remains permanently about twelve-years-old, physically and emotionally—until, of course, the events of the story force her to grow up in spite of herself. The other main character, Ceilyn, is just the opposite, he's rushing toward maturity, toward responsibility. His own magical gifts lead him to believe that he's under a curse, the result of some unconscious sin or flaw—although in fact these gifts are natural to him, they're in his blood—so he's obsessed with the idea of redeeming himself. He's a tormented young man, with strong emotions that he's trying to keep in check. And he becomes attracted to this girl who never seems to feel anything, and who is a strange combination of child and woman.

What was your reaction the first time you went into a bookstore and saw your book on the shelves? Did you buy that copy?

It's always exciting—and, at the same time, it's always a bit of a let-down, because there is such a long build-up to that point, and then the book is there and you're still waiting for reviews and readers' reactions. I think it was especially true the first time, because I was so excited leading up to that big moment—and then it was a little moment. The stages leading up to that point: the book being accepted, signing the contract, receiving an advance copy in the mail, those were all quite thrilling. I know that I didn't buy a copy, because I'd already been sent a few copies, and I wanted those books to be *in* the bookstore to be there for *other* people to buy.

I just finished The Hidden Stars, your most recent novel, and loved it! However, your name is not on the cover, Madeline Howard's is. Was this pseudonym a publisher's choice, or a personal choice?

It was more or less a mutual agreement. We knew the sales and marketing departments would be happier with a “new” author and a fresh start. These are the kinds of decisions that have more to do with satisfying distributors and booksellers than they have to do with the actual readers who ultimately buy the books. It's the same thing with book covers; you have to please the distributors first, or the book won't even *be* there on the shelves for the readers to look at and decide for themselves.

Why did you choose the name Madeline Howard? Was it a name you always fancied or does it have other significance?

Not really. My editor and I just suggested names back and forth (I suggested first names and she suggested last names) until we came up with something we both liked. I thought Madeline was a pretty name, and had almost used it for a character in a book, once. My editor wanted a last name that began with an “I” or an “H” so that my books would be shelved between Jordan and Hobb—which she seemed to think would be an auspicious location.

Was your new name and new book a successful venture?

It seems that it has been. The Hidden Stars has been selling better than any of my previous books, and I hope that trend continues with the sequels.

What changed, that allowed your identity to be revealed? Were you happy that your old fans could enjoy your new book?

It was never intended that it should remain a secret forever—I certainly didn’t think that it would last more than a year or so. Near the end, I was very impatient to “come out of the closet.” I didn’t like compartmentalizing my life that way, and I did want to be able to tell people who liked the new book about my old books, and vice versa. It was frustrating not to be able to do that. So, yes, I was very happy when it finally became possible.

In The Hidden Stars, most of the characters (Sinderian, Winloki, and Ouriana) are women, a rarity in fantasy, which has typically and unfortunately been a boy's genre. What made you decide to go this route?

I don’t think it was a decision, as such. Being a woman myself, I can’t imagine writing a story of any scope where they aren’t *any* of us present, playing at least *some* of the important roles. I think they are there just because that’s how my mind works. I actually did intend for more of the scenes to be written from the viewpoint of one of the males in the Sinderian/Faolein/Prince Ruan plot-line, but when it came time to write those scenes I realized that I was more often seeing the world from Sinderian’s viewpoint, so that’s how I wrote them. But then, there are subplots where the male characters dominate, so it probably balances out in the end.

Many of these characters, and even Cuillioc and Kivik, have moments of feeling inadequate. Yet, in each instance there is an underlying strength or internal drive to succeed, and sometimes a fortunate turn of circumstance,

that allows them to conquer this fear. Was it important for you to have the characters, especially the women, display this heroic quality?

I absolutely believe that under extraordinary circumstances some people rise to the occasion in surprising ways. I've seen this in my own life, in the people around me. And in order to learn from your mistakes, you have to acknowledge them. You can't say, "I was perfect; there was nothing else I could do; other people let me down." With that sort of attitude you can never adapt to new situations; you break rather than bend. Or you just walk away when things become too difficult. I've seen that happen, too, with people I thought were very strong, while the less confident parties were displaying an unexpected inner strength. So for me, if my characters are going to be able to do heroic things, they need to be the kind of people who never stop questioning themselves, and yet have that inner strength that allows them to pull through under the worst circumstances. Also, I've put them in an unforgiving situation; if they kept making the same mistakes over and over, they'd be dead and out of the story.

And yes, it is important for me that the women in my books should have that kind of strength. In the really old, traditional stories—the legends and sagas, even fairy tales—so much of the action is of the sort usually associated with masculine heroism. The challenges the hero faces are certainly difficult, but he just rushes in and does the—slays the dragon, kills the giant, fights the battle—and then it's over, and he collects his reward. Even when it's a series of tasks, they're very often of that same sort; do what needs to be done and get it over with. But in these oldest stories, when it's a female protagonist, the challenges are more realistic, they're usually things that take grit and endurance—tasks that take a year or three or seven to complete—or that require extreme cleverness, or both. These heroines don't get to accomplish whatever it is they do accomplish in one big rush of adrenaline. To me, their sort of heroism is far more admirable, and far more typical of genuine acts of heroism in the real world. No matter how fantastical the events and the setting may be, a fantasy tale ought to have psychological realism.

So in this story, each difficult decision that a main character makes leads on to further decisions and further tasks, and usually it just gets harder and harder. And they tend to be aware of this—in part because some of them have been engaged in this war, this struggle for such a long time—so it's a bit hard for them to get too cocky.

I love the names in The Hidden Stars. They seem to be a mix of Gaelic and Greek and Norwegian with dots and dashes my computer can't duplicate very easily! Can you tell us about this choice?

I had already written several books, and I went through all my usual sources for names: the mundane ones like “What to Name Your Baby,” as well as history books and mythology books, and maps. And I just could not find the right names for most of my places and characters. I did use some names that are variants of Celtic, Nordic, or Finnish names, but for the rest, and especially for some very important characters ... nothing felt right. That’s what it came down to; I just never felt that I had found their real names, their true names, as hard as I looked. In the end I realized that the only way that I was going to come up with enough names that did suit those characters and their setting was to create a language, and have names based on that. So I spent several months working on the language, and that provided me with the elements I needed for the names; it also provided me with a language for the magic spells. All the names based on that language have a specific meaning, and there’s a glossary in the new book that explains some of those meanings.

I’ve only just realized the irony in all this: I went to so much trouble to give the characters their “real” names, and I’m the one who ended up using a false name on the book.

Another aspect in The Hidden Stars which impresses me is your vision of underwater kingdoms and beasts. The images jump out of the page and plant fascinating and terrifying images in my mind. Where did you get your inspiration?

Well, I don’t really know. I read so many things and bits and pieces of them get mixed up together, sometimes to such an extent that it’s hard to separate out the different influences. There are some marvelous underwater sequences in The Merman’s Children, by Poul Anderson, that might have been one inspiration.

But it is something that fascinates me. The idea of going diving myself makes me feel claustrophobic just thinking about it; on the other hand, the idea of peering down into an utterly alien world, vaster by far than the lands upon the earth, has an undeniable allure. And I’ve lived on the west coast all of my life, so the idea of the ocean, just over the horizon, is always present. I think it has a very powerful hold on my imaginations.

The Hidden Stars has many stages of romance in its pages. I can see tinges of romance blooming with some characters (Sinderian and Ruan), and some that are in the midst of romance (Winloki and Skerry), and some that have none (Ouriana). How important is romance for you in your novels? Will these romances play out in the coming books?

Realistically speaking, human beings spend a lot of time searching for love in one form or another, and romantic love is very often a driving force in human affairs—certainly our personal affairs, whether we’re the ones romantically involved ourselves, or just catching the fallout from the people we are closest to, but sometimes it impacts the big events, too. So with any story that is going to have an epic scope and a lot of characters, I just think it would be unrealistically lopsided to leave out that aspect of life entirely.

On the other hand, in this particular series, the characters are in very stressful situations almost the entire time, and they usually have far more pressing and immediate concerns on their minds, so naturally the love stories can’t take center stage. But I want those stories to at least be present as part of the background—if only so that we know what it is the characters are fighting *for*: a chance to return to ordinary lives and ordinary human affairs. And, of course, not just for themselves; they’re trying to make the world a safe place for everyone to live their lives more fully. That may not be possible, but it’s the goal they are striving for. It’s easy when you’re reading a book to see the adventure itself as the goal, but that would be trivializing the characters’ struggles. They’re fighting for their lives, and I think we need to see what those lives are or could be.

Or at least that’s what I look for in a story. In the end, you usually end up writing the kind of story you would like to read if somebody else was writing it.

What can we expect in the second book of the series? When will it be out?

The Rune of Unmaking II, [A Dark Sacrifice](#) is scheduled for release in December 2007. By the end of the book you can expect answers, or partial answers to some of the more important questions. Ruan will acknowledge his feelings for Sindérian more openly. A character only briefly seen in [The Hidden Stars](#), but very, very significant to the story will begin to play a much more visible role. I hope readers will find him as fascinating as I do. The stakes for all the main characters will get higher and higher.

What advice can you offer aspiring writers?

It's just the same advice that everyone gives: read, read, read. Be prepared to do a vast amount of writing before you produce anything even remotely good enough to deserve to be published—because that's how much it's going to take. Learn to revise and edit your work. Don't be in a hurry to break into print. And don't do it unless you love it.

To those that have chosen or been forced to use pen names?

My advice would be to *not* use a pen name unless you have a very good reason for doing so. It can be very inconvenient. But people take on pseudonyms for so many different reasons, and each situation is so different, I don't think there is any advice that applies across the board.

A lot of readers automatically associate writing and pseudonyms. And it used to annoy me when people found out that I was a writer and immediately asked what name I wrote under. That's another one of those little ironies: I thought pen names were an unnecessary affectation, and now I'm using one.

What do you do to get into a writing mode?

I don't have one infallible method. If I did, I'd be a lot more prolific. Really, it's all about momentum. If I have it, there's hardly a moment of the day when I'm not working on the story, at least subconsciously, and then I'm all eagerness to get back to my computer and continue putting my thoughts on paper. If I'm not already in that writing mode, it can be hard for me to get started. Sometimes reading something really good can inspire me. I feel like I have to fuel my writing engine by putting a certain number of words *in* before the words will start coming *out* at a steady rate—or at least the kind of words that I want: the most appropriate, the most expressive.

Best time of day to write? Best writing snack?

Mid-morning is the best time to get started. If I get a good start then, I may be able to keep up my momentum for the whole day. The best snack is definitely chocolate. Since I don't drink coffee, and sometimes tea doesn't sit well on my stomach, chocolate is my principle source of caffeine. Just about any kind of chocolate will do, but I go through stages where I prefer

one kind of candy bar over another. The more expensive chocolates I save for when I can concentrate all of my attention on *them*.

Thank you Teresa for you time and responsiveness. We wish you the best of luck with your series and are eagerly awaiting the re-release of Goblin Moon.



Master Yung

By Sara Genge

*Sara Genge is a doctor studying her internship in Madrid, Spain. She's a founding member and regular contributor at www.dailycabal.com, a blog of speculative microfiction. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons* and *Cosmos*, and is forthcoming in *Apex Digest*.*

I met Master Yung on the first day of my internship at Lhasa General Hospital. I struggled through decontamination, desperate not to botch up but not wanting to admit that I'd never scrubbed for surgery without supervision. It took me almost two hours to shower, shave every hair off my body, including my testicles, shower again with a betadine scrub and towel off with sterile paper wipes. Nanobots are injected sterile into the pregnant woman's body, but the instruments that control them have to be close enough to the target cells so that chemical signals have some effect. The womb has to be opened, and germs, prions and pollution stick easily to uneven surfaces such as body hair. And the surgeons have to be close enough to the instruments to work them.

Bald and eyebrowless, I slipped into hospital pajamas, took a deep breath and entered the surgical room. I knew that if I didn't do anything stupid, I would assist one of the greatest nanotech surgeons in history.

Master Yung arrived ten minutes late, pushing the door open with his rear and turning into the room:

“My ass is contaminated!” He hollered and laughed.

Even the students laughed.

Facing me was a wrinkled man who, some said, was too old to perform precision surgery on microscopic human beings.

I realized it was a joke: his ass wasn't contaminated; the door was sterile so touching it wasn't a problem, but I must have worn a baffled look because a nurse felt he had to explain:

“It's just the same lame joke he cracks every day. Decon wasn't as thorough in the old days and surgeons used to enter the room backwards to keep their hands sterile.”

I nodded; my face burned. “Master” must be an honorary title, there was no way this man was really a monk. I couldn't imagine my Buddhist tutors telling vulgar jokes.

He jerked his head in my general direction and pointed to where I should stand. After the first five minutes, I forgot my embarrassment,

mesmerized by his hands working the nanomagnetic controls. On the screen, in molecular amplification, the nanobots found their targets. The Master never wavered, never took a wrong turn. Most surgeons have trouble steering the nanobots into the lumen—the small intracellular organelles that are the machinery of life—but not him. I could understand how he inspired religious awe, even if he himself was not religious.

Master Yung spoke to me for the first time to tell me to wipe his forehead. He knew I was the son of the Regent, but in this hospital I was just his intern, and wipe his sweat I did. This was not what I'd been spliced for: I'd been modified for a high-flying political career. Dad wouldn't be happy to hear that I spent my time mopping the forehead of my boss. I decided not to tell him.

* * *

Two days later, between complimenting the nurses and making unpatriotic jokes about the war, he asked me if I was sure I was sterile. When I answered "yes," he dumped the controls into my hands without warning. I am proud to say I didn't flinch; my nanobots hit the target, splicing the gene that would have caused this unborn baby to die of congestive heart failure at age fifty-eight. Then I took a deep breath and added my personal twist, the artistic licence that makes the difference between a good surgeon and great one. I had spent years researching for this moment, but I knew my career would depend only on what the Master thought. If he didn't think I was up to the job, everyone else would assume I'd gotten the internship through political connections. I'd chosen to study with him because I knew he was the only master who would not cave in to political pressure, and everyone that mattered knew this too.

Master Yung looked at the modified DNA chain on the screen which, if it won his approval, would be the subject of my PhD for the next four years.

"Resistance to pain, I see," he said, scrolling down the molecule. "Others have gone for good looks, resistance to cardiovascular disease or higher IQ. You do know this could make this patient reckless, foolhardy even? He'll have more accidents than the average population if he doesn't feel too much pain each time he bumps his head against something."

He spoke for the students huddling in the corner, who lapped up his words as if they came from the mouth of God.

"I've left enough pain for most purposes," I responded. "I've just eliminated the surplus. And that's not all, if you will just look a bit further down, towards the tenth methylated sequence."

"Oh, I see, you've also included resistance to emotional pain."

"Physical and emotional pain are linked together. The brain defines emotional distress in relationship to physical pain. One can't go without the other," I said and hoped he noticed that I too was teaching-oriented.

"Interesting choice, can't say I approve of it without seeing more data, but yes, interesting." With that, he left the room.

* * *

"You weren't born for this, were you?" Master Yung asked me one morning when he caught me shaving in decon.

It was useless to deny it: everyone knew I had body hair, that was the reason decon took me such a long time. If my parents had ordered me spliced to become a surgeon, I'd have been born bald from head to toe.

He stood naked next to me and I looked at the wall, but not before I saw a couple of rebellious hairs poking through the skin below his navel.

"Some Asians have quite a bit of body hair. Did you know that?" He asked.

I blushed. I couldn't believe the greatest surgeon of the era hadn't been spliced for the job. Just goes to show, sometimes nature can be smarter than all the genetic scientists in the world.

"If you use a chemical shampoo, it goes faster." He passed me a battered can of something that smelled foul.

"Come on, go ahead," he said.

It did go faster but I later developed a rash that lasted a week, so from then on I decided to stick to shaving.

"You know, splicing isn't all that it's shaped up to be," he said.

"Well, let's hope our patients don't notice," I said.

He smiled.

"You are not bad at this," he told me, "not bad at all. I don't care how long you take in decon, as long as you do a damn good job in the surgical room."

I nodded. He was telling me that he didn't care that I'd gone against my spliced abilities. It was then that I started to believe that I could do this job.

* * *

The Master came to see me in June of his last year, almost two decades after the day we met. He was late, as always, and leaned heavily on

his cane as he stepped out of the armored vehicle. I had almost forgotten there were people who had been born before splicing was routinely available.

"You've never heard about this," he told me. Each time he breathed, his skin sunk into twin pockets over his collarbones. "It's called chronic bronchitis. Since nobody gets it any more, nobody feels the need to make a law about how dirty vehicles can be. Factories can churn out as much trash as they want, since nobody gets sick from it. Nobody important, that is."

"I don't understand, splicing was available when you were born!" I said.

"Yes, but my parents refused it for religious reasons."

He coughed into a rectangular piece of cloth. I imagined he'd had it specially made for that particular use. He was thorough in that way. Each time he coughed, he brought up a yellow froth, sometimes lined with blood. There were handfuls and handfuls of the stuff, coming out of his lungs like popcorn, in bursts. As long as he breathed in and he coughed out, he was alive, he said. That was the measure of his life.

We went out to the park. He could walk as long as I carried his oxygen tank. I could hear the rasp of his lungs, drowning in so much liquid. I knew which gene was at fault. Inside my pockets, my fingers played on imaginary controls, searching for a particular codon in the monstrous DNA chain. My hands wished they could go back in time to when Master Yung was a bunch of cells, to fix the mistake.

"I've been thinking about your twist," he said.

"Thanks." I smiled. My twist had become legendary, and I had perfected it so the side effects were manageable. I had won a few prizes, and there were rumors that the Nobel itself would be mine next year, but it was just like the Master not to give too much credit.

"It does seem to have its advantages," he said. "If I had my choice, I'd like to be pain free right now." I followed his eyes towards the river. The fire from the oil spill was routinely put out before the river entered campus, but smoke still rose from the iridescent water and clusters of foam floated downstream.

"Don't they still have chemicals for pain?" I asked, concerned about him.

"For physical pain, yes."

His eyes were liquid and I could not read them.

"I've come to tell you that you won't have my vote for the Prize."

"May I know why?" I didn't dare tell him my candidacy was the strongest. I really felt I should win.

He lifted a trembling hand and pointed at the river:

"The trees and the grass were spliced to stand pollution. Now the river is too dirty even for them, but the biologists found a splice that makes them stay green even after they're dead. Most of the plants you see aren't alive any more."

I shrugged, I didn't care much about non-medical research unless it included lab mice and was eventually intended for humans. He smiled sadly.

"Why should we care about anyone, if they don't feel pain? No, you haven't cured the human race of its suffering. You've cured the human race of its humanity."

"You are going to vote against me because of philosophical angst?" I shouldn't have said something like that, but I was angry.

"Yes, because of that and because of the river."

"I've taken your discoveries and pushed it further than you'd ever imagined. I've even given you credit for everything, and God knows I didn't need to do that." I regretted it as soon as I said it. I was doing what I'd seen my father do countless times: when you cannot convince, coerce and when you cannot coerce, play the guilt card. I'd sworn to myself I'd never fall so low.

He chuckled softly.

"But don't you see that we've gone too far? Look at you! What did they take from you to turn you into your father's perfect diplomat?"

Was he reading my mind?

"I chose differently. I don't see what this has to do with anything," I lied.

"Precisely, you don't see. You only notice things when they are of use to you and you only care about knowledge when it has practical application. And yes, you are good at finding useful information, scientific and political. But you miss the point. You are a great surgeon, John, but sometimes I wonder if you wouldn't have been even better if your dad had had less power and more common sense."

It wasn't true; I was sure of it.

"You are only seeking a justification to your death," I said. I'd done it again: I'd noticed the lever to his emotional balance and I'd used it without thinking. This is what I'd been born to do.

He stared at the river for a while and then turned back to me and squeezed my shoulder. I was forgiven, but I didn't know why.

He didn't live long enough to cast his vote. I won, and in my speech, I dedicated my achievement to Master Yung. Whatever the press said, I never spoke out against him or wished him ill, but I felt proud for my invention.

His book was published the day after he died. A small book, almost a pamphlet. He claimed that there were now two races inhabiting the Earth, those who were human and those who weren't. He said we should go back to being born with the full burden of our defects.

His theory spread. The editor claimed he'd sold over a billion copies although I don't know if that was even possible.

The press called him a lunatic. I could see the hand of my father in this, tangling those sycophants who call themselves reporters in a web of guilt, blackmail and promises. His old colleagues claimed he'd been demented in the end, which, of course, brought down the man that had kept them in his shade for forty years and kept my father's grant money flowing.

I was asked to do interviews, but I declined. I would only talk about my own work, I said, which was almost true. Truth is, I didn't know what to think about Master Yung's last book. In anyone else, it would have been cowardly to publish it after death, but he had suffered in the end, I could understand that he needed peace in his last days.

Eventually, his book was forbidden, taken off the shelves and in some cases burned. He was stripped posthumously of all his awards and titles.

Whoever claims that I asked the Regent to forbid Master Yung's words is a liar. I wish we could find the gene for that.

Master Yung's supporters took over the streets. The hospital and campus were surrounded by barbed wire and concrete. The elite still want what I can do, so my safety is ensured as long as I don't try to leave.

Every morning as I wash up for surgery I remember Master Yung. As I run the razor over my chest, I can almost see him, handling the controls with a flippant spring in his hands as if it were only a game and not a matter of life-and-death. Then I remember his razor and penis jokes and laugh and have to get control of myself before I can shave my pubic area.

Sometimes I wonder if he wasn't right. My hairless face in the mirror reminds me of how far we've come, from ape to caveman to me. But then it is time to finish dressing and get in front of the controls. I have a legion of nanobots do my bidding and I feel that power surge that Master Yung used to joke about. For a few hours, I am God, and nobody is going to take that away from me.

