

TALES OF THE SERENDIP

TALES OF THE SERENDIP

Volume I

Compiled by Mike the Janitor and John
Borneman

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Tales of the Serendip

Volume I

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Any resemblance to actual people and events is purely coincidental.
This is a work of fiction.

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To the fine members and staff of The Online Writing Workshop for Science Fiction and Fantasy.

Your great service on the internet, support to the Serendip, and individual members has made these stories and this book possible. A special thanks to Charles Coleman Finlay, premier science fiction and fantasy writer and Karin Lowachee, author of WARCHILD, for judging the entries in our contest.

Tales of the Serendip cover artwork graciously provided courtesy of Lisa Clardy.

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Preface

This is a book written by writers about the process of writing.

Wait! Before you close this book and place it back on the shelf, realize that most books about writing aren't co-written by wizards and dragons, or talking heads and damsels in distress, or giant trolls and frenetic leprechauns.

But this one is.

See. First you must understand that writers of speculative fiction, that is to say; science fiction, fantasy and horror stories, do not have a complete grip on reality. In fact, most writers firmly believe that during the process of creating a story, the characters in the story actually begin to tell the writer what comes next.

Scary, isn't it?

Which is how the Serendip Pub came into being. It is a virtual, imaginary bar created and maintained by members of the Online Writing Workshop. It exists only in the imaginations of the workshop members and is a place where, given a few rules and a common backdrop, writers can create small vignettes to explore new story lines, break writer's block, or experiment with new characters.

Plus it helps to keep them all out of the psychiatric ward.

These vignettes are posted and maintained on a web site so that others may share the vision and enjoy the humor. For, if nothing else, the Serendip is about having fun.

Where else can you go to sip fine Akuvian cinnamon wine and have a heart-to-heart with one of your more troubling characters? Or maybe you choose to sit in the Writer's Nook discussing magic spells and

comma usage with other writers while slugging down mugs of Korone Dwarven Dark Ale.

Bar fights, bad puns, a bouncer named Grendel (yes, *The Grendel*), and a bartender who can dispense advice and drinks simultaneously, all exist inside this fabulous place.

The Serendip was created from a unexpected and fortuitous idea. Thus, its name. It has become a place that is filled with fabulous treasures and fueled by the collective imaginations of people who are destined to become tomorrow's Asimovs, Heinleins and Le Guins.

Although hundreds of "Tales" have been written about the Serendip Pub since it opened its electronic doors, *Tales of The Serendip* is a collection of stories from the first writing contest centered around the virtual pub.

Our judges for the Tales of the Serendip writing contest were Charles Coleman Finlay and Karin Lowachee.

Editorial Method

Tales of the Serendip was written and edited by writers of science fiction and fantasy. Therefore any grammar or punctuation errors which you may find within this book are not actually there. They only appear to be there through an errant bit of magic that escaped from the Serendip, or maybe from a time-travel experiment gone wrong (for you science fiction fans). I'm sure that next time you pick up this book they will all be gone.

Oh. You will also see American and English spellings scattered throughout this book. We figured that, given the intellectual level of our readers, this would present no problems.

List of Contributors

Amber Blair
John Borneman
Greg Byrne
Deb Cawley
Wendy Cross
Jessica Ebacher
Michael Finson
Rhonda S. Garcia
Karen L. Gordon
Greg Jackson
Tammy Jones
Cecilia Lombard
Melinda Kimberly
Bill O'Dea
Joshua Rode
Mary Satlin
Tan Min-Wei
Jaime Voss
Larry West
J.W. (Ally) Wrenn
Chandler Zedac
Mike the janitor

INTRODUCTION: A CAST OF UNCOMMON CHARACTERS

JOHN'S WELCOME

The other day while shaving, I accidentally looked into the mirror with one eye closed while thinking furiously about my latest story and humming 'Die Niebelungenlied'. Blinded by a flash of light, I found myself transported to another place. I was in a dark cobblestone alley, facing a door. Over the doorway hung a smudged sign that read, The Serendip. I went in.

I found a place where Ellen and Charlie tend bar and dispense advice. And you and your characters are anything your choose. Here's a chance to sip fine Akuvian cinnamon wine and have a heart-to-heart with one of your more troubling characters. Or you may choose to sit in the Writer's Nook discussing football and comma usage with other writers. If you request you can be seated in the villains corner, or drop in on review groups in the back room. I'm sure The Serendip, like all good fictional bars, is much bigger inside than the outside suggests.

GRENDEL (THE BOUNCER'S) WELCOME

“Welcome to The Serendip! I’m glad you found us. Is this your first time? It is? Great! Come on in. Would you like a table. I have a nice four-top near the fireplace in the mead hall if you’re expecting friends. The bar? Fine. Follow me.

“Please step over the dragon’s tail. He’s feeling a little short-tempered...or well-tempered, depending on how you look at it. We had a Brobdignagian in last week who was about seventeen sheets to the wind. He stepped on the poor darling’s tail. Today is the first day we haven’t smelled burnt flesh. Did I mention that our pub grill is featuring a nice arm roast tonight? The portions are giant!

“Keep walking this way please. If you are interested, I think that some of our guests are playing trivia on the big holo screen in the Moonview lounge. You are welcome to join in any time. And the writer’s nook always seems to have a seat available. Just ask anybody for directions.

“I’m am so pleased that you found our little place. We keep the location intentionally obscure. Whoops! Watch your step.

“Larin. Please pull your sword out of the aisle.

“Now, where were we. I mean one can’t let just any hack into a place like this. After all, this isn’t the Vulgar Unicorn! I remember a certain snockered elf, who shall remain nameless, who swore that he got here by taking the second star to the right and traveling straight on ’til morning. I mean, come on! That’s ridiculous. That place only serves Kool-Aid. The only intellectual discussions that those people have revolve entirely around the various means to dispose of pirates.

“One lady told me she was actually looking for Calahan’s Place, but took a wrong turn at Albuquerque. Philistine! Anyway I’ve talked long enough. Here is your seat. Charlie will be along soon to serve you—he’s bartending tonight. My name is Grendel. I’m the greeter and the bouncer. Enjoy yourself, but don’t let this sweet, innocent fang-filled face fool you. You cause trouble and you’re out on your ass!

“Don’t worry. You’ll do fine. About the only thing that will get you tossed out is unrepentant bad writing. There is a couple more things you should know, then I’ll leave you. All drinks are on the house, courtesy of Mr. Redley. You can see him sitting over there in his private booth. We leave him alone, but most people like to raise a glass in appreciation towards his table.

“Last of all. Most of our patrons aren’t too dangerous, but we do have our share of surly warriors and out-of-sorts space cowboys. Oh! I almost forgot. It’s always good to keep a general purpose reverse-peristalsis counter spell handy. Some of the magicals have a very weird sense of humor.”

THE SERENDIP STAFF

Grendel the bouncer. Yes. THE Grendel from Beowulf fame. Hey, he hasn’t had a gig in over a thousand years. Give him a break! Grendel is one of the constants of the Serendip. He maintains order, occasionally has to throw out disruptive elements, and although he can be loquacious, he usually does not talk much.

Charlie the Bartender. Not the Online Writing Workshop Charlie, but close. So, we at least tried to be respectful. A quote from the OWW Charlie: “I don’t really care if people are respectful, as long as they give me good lines. And you can quote me on that.”

The Dragon’s tail. The dragon’s body is off stage, maybe in the kitchen keeping the stove lit. All we see is it’s tail extending out into the bar.

Mike the Janitor. He lives in the basement, keeps the furnace lit, maintains communication with the ‘real world’ by writing on old potato peelings (spud notes) and ejecting them into various e-mail servers. Mike is usually found behind the furnace leaning back in his chair and napping.

Mr. Redley is the Serendip Bar’s patron. He is a shadowy figure who sits in a dark corner sipping a drink. Most new comers raise their first

glass of drink towards Mr. Redley and thank him (the drinks are free, after all!). Who's Mr. Redley? Well, come into the Serendip some night. Ask Charlie to speak with Miss Gramme. Her first name is Anna. She'll tell you.

Charlie is well on his way to becoming one of today's premier science fiction and fantasy writers. His stories have appeared in *Fantasy & Science Fiction* and elsewhere including, *Footnotes*, *F&SF*, August 2001, and *The Political Officer*, *F&SF*, April 2002. Karin is the author of *WARCHILD*, winner of the Warner Aspect First Novel Contest for 2000.

Before you wander through these pages, you might like to know a bit about the place.

Enjoy!

John Borneman and Mike the janitor

March 200

Winner of the first Tales of The Serendip Writing Contest

Congratulations to Bill O'Dea, winner of the first *Tales of the Serendip* writing contest.

WRITE TO LIFE

by Bill O'Dea

Winning entry in the first Tales of the Serendip Writing contest.

I've created characters before that were killed off for the good of a story, but I wondered how the character felt about it all. What if the character didn't want to die? I'm new to the Serendip, so no real people are used for this tale.

Write To Life

No one turned to look when the doors flung open and in raced a woman dressed in a pre-Civil War ball gown. The customers of the Serendip had gotten used to all manner of people coming through that door, even people who weren't technically "people." However, everyone took notice when she screamed, "He's trying to kill me!" at the top of her lungs.

A table of barbarians promptly got into a fight over who would rescue her first, while a man sitting by himself only smiled. Grendel quickly glanced at the newcomer, made a quick estimation of what threat she posed, and went to help the barbarians settle down.

The bartender starting making a mint julep and said, "Welcome, miss. Would you care to sit? Mind the dragon's tail." He gestured to an

open stool at the dark wood bar. The rest of the room saw that Charlie was handling the distressed girl and returned to their drinks and conversation.

The lady scurried around the end of the long, scaled tail and over to the bar. Her dress was white with peach accents and blossomed to a large bell shape below the tight waist. Long curls of deep, red hair hung down on either side of her pale, frightened face. When she got to the bar she said, "You've simply have to help me. I am a women in distress!" Now that she had stopped yelling, her thick Southern accent came through with every syllable. "A vile man wants to kill me. You have to help me! You just have to!"

Charlie put the mint julep in front of her and again gestured to the stool. "You'll be fine here, miss. Grendel will see to that." Grendel dropped a barbarian and puffed up his chest to emphasize that point.

Her eyes widened when she finally noticed the huge, muscled man. Grendel smiled at her, and she started to relax. She sat down and took a sip from her drink.

"My, my," she said while fanning herself with her white gloved hand. "This is a strong julep, Mr...."

"Just Charlie," he said. "A julep should be strong, but sweet. I hope you like it."

"Oh I do," she said. She extended her gloved hand for Charlie to kiss. "My name is Catherine Ascott Mayweather. Please excuse my rude behavior, but I am just a bit flustered. I am in mortal danger! There's a rather brutish man after me!"

Everyone familiar with the Serendip knew the laws of coincidence and looked at the door in anticipation. The doors flew open again, and this time a man dressed in jeans and a Chicago Bears sweatshirt came through. He had lost most of his hair and was wearing thin, black framed glasses.

Grendel was at the door faster than his size seemed to allow. The man was about to run to the bar when he found his sight blocked out

by a massive hand. This gave him time to think about what else a hand that size could do to his sight.

“Excuse me,” he said, “could I get past, please? I’m looking for someone and I think I saw her over at the bar.”

“That’s him!” said Catherine. She jumped off the stool and pointed at the man. “That’s the man who is trying to kill me!”

One of the barbarians started to get up off the floor. Grendel looked at him, and the barbarian remembered how comfortable the floor was and lay back down. “You can come in,” said Grendel, “but if you start any trouble you’ll regret ever leaving this place.”

The man looked confused. “Don’t you mean I’ll regret ever coming into this place?”

Grendel smiled and said, “Not the way you’re going to leave.”

The man was trying to find something interesting on the floor to look at when Charlie said, “I’m sure he understands your message, Grendel. Why don’t you let the man pass so we can work this out? Do you mind, Miss Mayweather?”

Catherine looked again at Grendel. “I have no objections, but thank you for asking. You are too kind..”

The man walked carefully past Grendel, across barbarians on the floor, over the thinner part of the dragon’s tail, and over to the bar. Charlie gestured for him to sit two stools away from Catherine and served him some Dwarven Dark Ale. “I’m Charlie. I believe you know Miss Mayweather. And you remember Grendel, yes?”

“Look, there’s been a misunderstanding....”

“And you are....?” asked Charlie.

“I’m Mike. I’m a writer.” He drank his beer and looked with pleasant surprise at the mug. Then he shook his head to keep on track. “This lady here is one of my characters, and I need her back. My story will fall apart without her!”

“Your story,” Catherine said, “is quite simply horrible. Charlie, he wants to kill me!”

“Why do you want to kill her?”

Mike leaned forward and said, “It’s necessary to the plot. Her death will push the protagonist to take care of their son. He doesn’t care for either of them now, but her death will make him realize how much he loved her.” Mike sat back on his stool, crossed his arms, and smiled. “That’s some real emotion there. Right?”

Charlie looked around the bar. Several writers and characters were eavesdropping on the conversation, biding their time until they can join in. Charlie had seen these discussions countless times, and they usually ended in bloodshed. He had met many types while tending bar at the Serendip. Knights, bloodthirsty aliens, wizards, mutants, and demonic fiends from some really twisted imaginations all needed a drink now and then. However, none were as violent as a writer who feels attacked by fellow writers. Grendel could only handle nine or ten at a time, and bar fights always made him feel like smashing a bottle over some guy with a gun. Even with the chandelier removed, the dragon might wake up.

This situation needed to be corrected, and quickly.

“Listen Mike,” Charlie said. “I’m not a writer or anything, but why kill her? Can’t you find another way to get the protagonist to realize his love?”

“You don’t understand,” said Mike. He took the deep breath that all writers take before explaining their story to the uninitiated. Charlie recognized this and leaned back against the cabinets behind him.

“This story is about time travel,” Mike said. “The main character, John, is black. His great-grandfather was killed while a slave in the Old South, so he builds a time machine and travels back to before the Civil War to rescue his ancestor. But once he gets there, see, he can’t find his great-grandfather. But then....”

Other guests interrupted him before he could continue.

“He falls in love with the master’s daughter...” said a red-robed wizard.

“He has a kid with her, and then she dies...” said a blue-skinned demon.

“And he stays in the past to raise his son...” said a woman dressed in a dark blue business suit.

“Who turns out to be his grandfather...” said a man in a leather jacket and fedora.

“Making him the great-grandfather he wanted to rescue!” said the Talking Heads behind the bar. They smiled and congratulated each other on their intelligence.

Mike didn’t know which person to look at. His head turned from left to right, over and over again, until Charlie put his hand on Mike’s shoulder. “Sorry about that,” Charlie said, “but we hear a lot of stories here. Time travel stories are kind of predictable.”

“And cliché!” said Catherine. “You might have created me, but I am an overused cliché. The way I look and talk, you might as well have named me Scarlet!” She held her gloved hands to her face and sobbed softly.

The anger was welling up inside Mike. He stood up and clenched his fists. “Damn it, I created you! You are mine! If I want to kill you, then you die!”

Grendel was stepping over the dragon’s tail when Charlie held up his hand. Grendel stepped over but waited there. “Mike,” said Charlie, “if you had a son, would you have the right to kill him just because you created him?”

Mike shook his head but kept staring at Catherine. She had stopped crying and was looking at Grendel.

“But I wrote her!” said Mike.

“And who wrote you?” asked Charlie.

Mike blinked a few times and said, “What?”

“Look,” Charlie said. “You wrote her, but she’s real. You’re real, so who wrote you?”

Mike said nothing. He blinked. Then he blinked again. By the third blink, Grendel had picked him up and was carrying him to a nook in the back where he could reassemble his reality in peace.

Catherine's face was streaked with tears but she was smiling. "You saved me! However can I thank you, kind sir!"

"You can start by talking normally. And by raising your glass to Mr. Redley over there. He covers the drinks for everyone.

She picked up her mint julep and raised it. Mr. Redley smiled in return. Catherine turned back to Charlie and said, "I'd like to say thanks for your help but..."

"But," said Charlie, "you don't want to say how you've always depended on the kindness of people you haven't met before."

"Something like that," she said with a smile.

About the Author

Bill O'Dea tries to balance a fiancée, a teaching job, alcoholism, and a video game obsession with writing science fiction. All this while maintaining that he is not a geek. He has never published, as he never has enough ink to print out his stories and he's too lazy and cheap to go to Kinko's. He lives in a small Chicago apartment so close to public transportation that he has to raise the TV volume when the train goes by. He swears that he never takes pleasure in killing characters.

WRITING TO EXCESS

by Karen L. Gordon

Writers find inspiration in many places. However, an author should choose his muses very carefully. You can't be sure of what could inspire you when the drinks are free, the atmosphere conducive and the imagination has a life of its own.

Writing to Excess

Cwenwyn pushed open the door to the Serendip with more than a small measure of trepidation. She wasn't sure exactly what to expect and drew back as the figure of Grendel loomed into the doorway. He stepped aside, giving her plenty of room to enter. But Cwenwyn just stood there, mouth agape, trying to wrap her mind around the possibility that she was safe with this ancient giant from times past looming about.

"Hi," he said.

"Hello," Cwenwyn replied, good manners overcoming her initial fear. She hugged her notebook to her chest. "Um, can I come in?" The fearsome figure smiled.

"Actually, it is encouraged." He closed the door behind her as she took a few steps into the room.

“I’ve never been here before,” she told him.

“That’s okay. Just follow the rules and you’ll be fine. No place safer. Trust me.” His friendly manner set her at ease. She was certain, however, his attitude would change if any trouble happened. She looked around at the mostly empty bar. A shadowy figure sat in a private booth on the opposite end of the room, Grendel stood by the door and the dragon’s tail that snaked across the floor twitched. Other than that, the place was empty.

The bar along the wall to her left looked to be the best lit spot in the room, so Cwenwyn made her way to it, stepping carefully over the tail. She hoisted herself up onto the bar stool and put her notebook in front of her. When she looked up, she jumped in alarm. She could have sworn that nobody had been behind the bar when she first sat down, and she never heard anyone moving, but standing in front of her was the Serendip bartender, Charlie, polishing a glass tankard with a clean, white cloth.

“Tools of the trade,” he said, gesturing with his full hands. Union regs say we have to be seen with them at least 90% of the time.” He smiled, trying to set this new visitor at ease.

“Hey! Where’d you come from? You weren’t here when I came in.” Cwenwyn looked around again to see if she missed anybody else. The bar was as it was in the first place.

“I wasn’t? Hmm. How curious.” Charlie put down the tankard he was polishing and tossed the cloth over his shoulder. He loved surprising his guests.

“I’ve never been here before,” Cwenwyn needlessly whispered.

“That’s okay. Neither have I,” Charlie whispered back. “At least, not here, alone, with you.” Cwenwyn blushed.

“Do you have a menu or anything? I’m not sure what to order.”

“The menu is in your mind. Anything you can think of, and a few things you never would have guessed.” Charlie wiped at an imaginary spot on his impeccably polished bar.

“Really? Anything? That must be expensive.” Charlie shook his head no.

“All drinks are on the house, courtesy of Mr. Redley.” He indicated a private booth in the back of the Inn where a shadowy figure sat alone.

“He looks lonely,” Cwenwyn commented, quietly. Again, Charlie shook his head no.

“Mr. Redley always has exactly what he needs. So, in light of that, what can I get you?”

“Oh wow, I mean, cool. I’m usually a peppermint schnapps and Bailey’s Irish crhme sort of girl.” An elegant shot glass slid down the bar, coming to a stop in front of Cwenwyn. Inside, a beautiful swirl of clear schnapps and crhme swirled. She picked it up, turned to raise a toast to Mr. Redley and drank. Her eyes lit up. “That is absolutely the best slippery nipple I’ve ever had!” Charlie suppressed a bad joke or two. “Um, you know what?” Cwenwyn added.

“What?” Charlie said, a mischievous gleam in his eye.

“I have always wanted to try grog. I have no clue as to what is in grog, but I’ve read about it before and imagined how it might taste.” Before Cwenwyn could even finish her sentence, a porcelain tankard, painted with a scene of tall ships at sea, was before her. Inside was a liquid that looked a bit like dirty water. She raised the vessel to her nose and inhaled. The smell wasn’t too strong and was familiar. Raising the tankard first to the unknown benefactor behind her, she took a sip. “Hey! It tastes like rum and Coke., without the Coke. part!” Charlie nodded.

“Grog. A watered down rum named after Old Grog, Admiral Edward Vernon, so called because of the great coat he wore which was made of a thick silk material that is called program in England. Newer versions of the drink, which he gave his sailors to keep them from getting drunk and unruly, has additions of sugar and lemon juice.”

“Wow, you know a lot about grog.” Cwenwyn took another drink.

“It is, after all, my job and my vocation. You a writer?” The question, Charlie knew, was unneeded. Most patrons at the Serendip were

writers of one sort or another, or figments of a writer's imagination. But since this one carried notebook and pen, the signs pointed to an aspiring author.

Cwenwyn smiled, took a deeper draught, and nodded. She opened her notebook, sliding her pen from the spiral binding.

"I came in for some inspiration," she answered, nervously clicking the pen on and off.

"Well, I won't distract you any more," Charlie replied. Cwenwyn looked down to the intimidating empty page in front of her and then back up. In that instant, the barkeep had disappeared.

"Where'd he go?" she asked aloud. She looked around at the tables and at the shadowy Mr. Redley. Nothing. Ah well, I do have work to do, she reminded herself.

Three paragraphs later, she had drained the tankard. As she set the empty down, she looked up into the eyes of Charlie, accouterments of his trade in hand as if he had been standing there all along.

"How do you do that?" she asked, the grog warming her tummy and relaxing her. Charlie just smiled.

"How's the story going?"

"Pretty good. The grog started me off writing about space pirates. Different, at least for me."

"Can I get you something else?" Cwenwyn thought for a moment.

"Yeah. How about some honey mead? Like Viking-saga-Valhalla type stuff?"

A silver goblet, chased with runes replaced the tankard. The amber liquid inside nearly glowed golden. She took a sip. A smile eased across her face as the molten liquid spread across her belly. She smacked her lips.

"Ooh! That is so good!" Charlie nodded in amusement.

After five chapters, two more goblets of honey mead, a Vulcan ale, a glass of Akuvian cinnamon wine, a flask of Korone Dwarven Dark Ale, a strawberry daiquiri, three shots of tequila, tee martoonies and a bubble dourbon accompanied by toasts to Mr. Redley, Grendel, Charlie,

the dragon and Iron Chef Japanese who made some terrific cheese sandwiches, Cwenwyn was toasted. On her way back from a third trip to the ladies' room, she tripped over the dragon's tail, landing in a very relaxed heap on the smooth, giant appendage. The tail twitched in alarm, and a voice started yelling in the kitchen. Cwenwyn, however, had never realized just how much she loved dragons. She wrapped her arms around the tail, squeezing and kissing and murmuring sweet nothings. Whether the dragon was a forgiving sort or he could hear her declarations of affection, the tail calmed down and Cwenwyn fell to sleep, drooling on the great green scales.

Morning is a relative term at the Serendip. When Cwenwyn next awoke, she was certain that the dragon, in a fit of rage and violence had trampled and torched her fragile human body. He must still be mad, because he was stomping about somewhere and his tail was moving like mad. Charlie looked at her sympathetically from the bar, where he was polishing glasses. Of course.

"Is it safe for me to move?" Cwenwyn croaked, eyes cracking open to stare at a very blurry barkeep. Charlie nodded.

"He hasn't moved all night, afraid you'd fall off and hurt yourself. I think you made a friend."

"Friend?" Cwenwyn groaned as she began to move her protesting body. "If he's my friend why is he stomping about? And why are you yelling?"

"I'm not yelling," Charlie answered, slightly softer. "And the thumping is the great beast's heart. Don't you break it by being mean." Charlie slid a glass of tomato juice and a napkin with aspirin on it down the bar and Cwenwyn hobbled to the nearest seat. She looked suspiciously at the juice.

"It isn't just tomato juice, is it?" she asked. Charlie smiled.

"It will help. A little. Not a whole lot can help you now, anyway. Go ahead. Won't make it worse." Cwenwyn sipped the breakfast and her stomach settled the littlest bit. Her head slowed its thumping to quarter time. She noticed her notebook.

“Could you?” she asked, motioning to it. Charlie hesitated.

“I don’t think you should look. Not just yet. In a little while when you are feeling better. When you’re stronger.”

“Huh?”

“Well, you were pretty far gone last night. It...it isn’t pretty.”

“Just pass me the book.” Cwenwyn insisted, her mood not improving quite as quickly as the hangover. Charlie reluctantly slid the spiral bound down to her. She opened it.

At first it was okay. A nice story about space pirates, inspired by the sane tankard of grog she had. But as the chapters went on, it was harder and harder to endure. Not only did her punctuation, grammar and style degenerate, but the story she did try to write became more horrible and nonsensical as it went. She began to grimace in agony. Oh, it was her writing alright, the penmanship was unmistakable. Gads, it was awful. She had to read it aloud.

“What was I doing? ‘The door, wasn’t a door, but it was a door, but when you opened it, I mean the door, it was like a time machine, no not really, it could be like a portal in time and space, no, no, it’s a black hole or like one of those space thingies like a rip in the time and space continuuuuum. Yeah! Oh, that’s good and there’s little teeny, tiny, wee, small, diminutive ants. Ha! Ants! But they aren’t really ants, no, like, see they’re Martian ant, ants, ant-unicorns! Yeah!!!” Cwenwyn closed her eyes in shame.

Charlie leaned on the bar encouragingly. “It’s okay. You don’t have to keep it. Things like this happen from time to time. At least nobody was hurt.”

“Nobody was hurt? I’m hurt! Look at the mess! Oh, it’s awful, just awful! I’ve disgraced my profession, I’ve wasted paper and ink, not to mention time. You must have been subjected to my insane ramblings at some point last night.” Charlie winced in remembrance. Cwenwyn clasped a hand to her mouth. “Oh my god! Did Mr. Redley hear any of this?” Charlie slowly nodded.

“He had me finally cut you off. Took away your pen. And made sure you didn’t have any car keys.” Cwenwyn sat looking at the highway wreck of her writing as it laid bare, exposed, mangled on the bar top.

“How can I ever recover?” she whispered, a tear in her eye. Charlie leaned over and patted her hand.

“I’ll tell you a secret. Every writer has a piece like this. One that is so terrible, so awful, so bad that it never sees the light of day again. They simply go on. And that’s what you must do, Cwenwyn. Go on, start today anew. Learn your lesson from this piece and then grow as a writer. And never, ever, write drunk again.”

About the Author

Karen L. Gordon is a time traveler who married an alien in 1996. While she mostly dallies in the past, she assures her readers that this is an excellent time to become hooked on her works, since she will be a BNA (Big Name Author) in the near future. You can catch her here, on the workshop, or in *2001: A Science Fiction Poetry Anthology*, published by Anamnesis Press.

A DRAGONS TALE

by Jaime Voss

It's late, and there's almost no one in the place. The fire burns brightly in the fireplace as Charlie the bartender cleans up after another night of serving drinks to vampires, elves, knights in shining armor, and the authors who love them. But as our hero is about to discover, not all is as it seems, and there is often more to a person than what you see on the surface...

A Dragons Tale

It was late on a typical dark and stormy night. The fire in the fireplace sizzled and popped, while flickers of light from the flames played along the brass rail around the bar. Claps of thunder could be heard growling overhead, and the sound of rain drumming on the roof filtered in between the rumble of Grendel's snores. The pub was almost empty as Charlie meandered through the room, picking up forgotten items, and placing them in a wooden box Mike the Janitor had built for him. The box was half full of notebooks, quills, pens, gauntlets, and scribbled notes on the back of cocktail napkins. Writers and characters always left something of themselves behind.

Charlie picked up a couple more Rules of Grammar napkins before he noticed they led like a trail of breadcrumbs to a table near the kitchen door. One of the writers who came in now and again was frantically scribbling in a spiral notebook. File folders, binders, and stacks of paper surrounded her. More napkins had spilled off the table and lay in a pile on the floor at her feet.

Putting the box down, Charlie scooped up the rest of the napkins and took them to the writer's table. "Do these belong to you?" he asked.

Pushing her glasses back up on her nose, she looked distracted as she peered up at Charlie. "What? Oh, thanks. I wondered where those were."

She added the napkins Charlie handed her to a teetering stack of papers, and gestured to the chaos strewn around her. "I really need to get organized. I keep losing bits and pieces. Nothing important, mind you. Just the odd note here and there. I need to get one of those portable file boxes to carry it all."

"Looks like a big job," Charlie said. He flipped a chair around backwards, straddling it as he sat down, and resting his arms on the back. "What are you working on?"

"Cedric asked me to help him write his biography." She shook her head as she surveyed the piles around her. "Seemed like a simple enough project at the time, but it's turned out to be more complicated than I thought."

Looking slightly puzzled, Charlie asked, "Cedric? Is he one of the writers?"

"You're kidding, right?" She cocked an eyebrow as she studied his face. "You know; the big guy. Some of his friends call him Ric. Sound familiar?"

"No," Charlie said, shrugging his shoulders. "Sorry, I don't know who you're talking about."

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” She grinned at him. “Man, you’d think after you worked with someone this long, you would at least know his name. The dragon, Charlie. Cedric is the dragon’s name.”

Charlie looked at the long, spiked and scaled tail that snaked past the fireplace, between the polished wooden tables, and eventually disappeared into the kitchen without revealing the rest of the dragon.

He smacked his forehead with the heel of his hand, looking sheepish. “Cedric! Of course! Grendel told me his name when I first started here, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone call him that. He stays in the kitchen most of the time, and I stay out here. We nod in passing, but we rarely talk to each other. It’s the language thing. I speak two dialects of Troll, but I just never learned to speak much Dragon.”

He turned back to her, shaking his head. “You learn something new everyday, I guess. So, have you decided on a title for this book?”

“Actually,” she said with a chuckle, “Cedric decided on the title before he asked me to help him write the book. He has all the chapters outlined and knows exactly what he wants to do with each section. It took a while for him to convince me, but I think he’s right about dividing it in two. Let me find that piece of paper.”

She pawed through several stacks, before finding the one she was looking for. “Here it is.”

She handed the paper to Charlie, who read; Cedric: A Day in the Life.

“Pretty catchy title for a book, don’t you think?” she asked.

“Yeah, not bad.” Charlie handed the paper back to her. “What else did he come up with?”

“Well, as I said before, he wants to do this in two parts. The first section is about the years before he came to stay at the Serendip. He actually had a pretty exciting life. Big cave, large treasure cache, lots of fair maidens around; most of your typical dragon stuff.”

She frowned as she pulled out a file folder from the pile and read the top sheet inside. “I’m having a couple of problems with the first part. The fact checking is turning into a nightmare. Because of the longer

life span of dragons, I'm having a hard time finding anyone who's still alive who can confirm any of this for me. I don't want to put my name on this, and then find out most of it isn't true."

A small smile curved her lips. "Not that I think Cedric would outright lie, or anything. But dragons do have a way of stretching the truth."

"Yeah," Charlie agreed. "That's a tough one. You don't want to get a reputation for not doing your research."

"Exactly." She picked up her glass, sipping diet coke as she gathered her thoughts. "The biggest problem with part one is convincing him to maybe tone down the fair maiden and village torching sections a tad. I want to aim for a PG rating, and he has definitely given me R rated material to work with."

She closed up the file folder and extended it across the table to Charlie. "Would you mind taking a look at this and telling me what you think?"

"Not a problem. I must admit, you have me curious now." Charlie read the label on the outside of the folder. "Is this the title for the first section?"

"Yup, Knights in White Satin: The Early Years. All his idea. He insists on it and won't listen to anything else."

Shaking his head, Charlie opened the folder and started skimming the first few pages. He only made it to page five before he looked up at her in shock.

"Whoa. I see what you mean. Cedric says he did all this? Our Cedric? Is this even physically possible between a dragon and a maiden?" Charlie dropped the folder back on the table and wiped his hands on the legs of his jeans.

"Well," she said grimly. "If it is, I don't think she could rightfully call herself a maiden afterward, do you? And that's not even the worst example."

"Wow," he said. "Is the second section that bad?"

“Not so far, which is a huge relief. The second half is about his years here at the Serendip, his relationships with the staff, and customers who come into the bar. At least with these chapters I can verify what he’s telling me.” It took her a few minutes of sorting through piles to find all the files she was looking for.

She handed the stack to Charlie. “These are all just research notes, and outlines of the stories Cedric has given me. I haven’t confirmed any of it yet. The chapter titles he gave me are written on the outside. I have to meet with everyone he names and give them a chance to refute what he says.”

Charlie looked a little confused. “Why would anyone from the Serendip have to worry about what Cedric says about them? No one here has anything to hide...do they?”

She grimaced as she answered him. “Well, I guess that depends on how much of what he tells me is accurate. There’s a folder about you in there somewhere. Since you’re here, and I’m here, I would appreciate it if you would take a look and let me know how much of it is true. I’d be interested in any comments you have on the others, too.”

Grendel’s snores as he dozed in his chair were the only sounds as Charlie leafed through the file folders on the table. He smiled as he read the first few titles, Mike the J: Man or Myth, Grendel: Not Easy Being Green, The Talking Heads: Just A Face With A View.

He looked up in surprise when he reached Bats I Have Loved—And Lost. “Did something happen to some of the bats I don’t know about?”

He dropped his voice to almost a whisper. “None of the bats have, you know, died or anything—have they?”

“Oh, no,” she reassured him. “Nothing like that. I think Cedric likes being over dramatic. When he says he lost the bats, he means he really lost them. Doesn’t have a clue where they’ve gotten to. Probably still down in the basement, if you ask me.”

She took the last sip of her diet coke, setting her glass back down in the same wet ring on the tabletop. “I really tried to get him to change some of these chapter headings.”

Wincing slightly, she gestured to the last folder in the pile. “Keep that in mind when you read the next one. This was Cedric’s idea, not mine.”

Gingerly, Charlie picked up the thick manila packet, not sure he wanted to know what it said. His mouth opened and shut a few times before he managed to squeak out a few words.

“Charlie Dearest! He called my chapter Charlie Dearest? What the heck does he mean by that! I hardly know the guy!”

He whipped open the folder, flipping through pages, scanning the contents rapidly. He pulled one page out, shaking it at her. “He has some nerve saying this about me. It’s not true, I tell you. Not true at all!”

“Hey, calm down,” she said. “Don’t kill the messenger. Let me see that.”

She pried the page out of his fingers, only slightly tearing one corner. “Oh, the coat hanger incident,” she said after glancing at the offending page. “I’m not sure you can wiggle away from this one, Charlie. I’ve heard about this one from people other than Cedric.”

Charlie started to sputter, his face turning red. “But he makes it sound so much worse than what really happened. What was I supposed to do? The clothes dryer was broken, there were towels and aprons that needed washing...”

“Yeah, I get that,” she interrupted. “But, honestly, wasn’t there another way? You used his tail for a clothesline, Charlie. During business hours. The guy does have his pride. To hear him tell it, everyone that came in for the next week used him for a coat rack. It was very embarrassing for him.”

“Do you think there is any way I can make it up to him?” Charlie asked anxiously. “Could you convince him of how sorry I am and to tone it down a little?”

She sighed deeply. “I can try. Maybe I can get Morgan to talk to him about it.”

Charlie thought hard for a minute. “Morgan is your dragon, right? Tall, silver and blue eyes? Spends lots of time in human form?”

“That’s her. She’s the one who got me into this; the least she can do is help out.” Tipping up her glass, she shook a piece of half melted ice into her mouth, crunching it before she continued. “When he started talking about finding someone to write his life story, Morgan volunteered me for the job. Do you have any idea how hard it is to tell two determined dragons no? Morgan and Cedric have been dating pretty hot and heavy for the last couple of months, which just made it worse.”

Charlie’s eyes widened. “That explains why she’s been around so much lately.”

He glanced towards the kitchen. “What do you think they do back there?”

Holding a hand up between them, she said, “Nope, stop right there. I try not to think about it, and I really don’t want to know. There’s such a thing as too much information.”

As if on cue, the sound of sultry laughter drifted into the bar from the direction of the kitchen. The door swung partially open as Morgan leaned out around the edge. She gave Charlie a nod before turning to her author.

“You should go on home if you’re ready to leave. Cedric is whipping up a late snack for the two of us,” Morgan said. She started to pull back into the kitchen, and instead turned back to Charlie and her author, a Cheshire cat smile on her face.

“I’ll be late,” Morgan purred. “Don’t wait up.”

About the Author

Jaime Voss recently started writing again after a twenty year hiatus with the goal of making dreams into reality. She hasn’t sold anything yet, but hope springs eternal.

THE CULLING

by JW wren

Alandra, patron who often talks with her characters, one of which being Shanoa, an elf mage in her land of Gea. Her characters refer to authors with the respectful title of Sherheia or informally to Alandra herself as 'Ally'. Chiva is a favorite drink with a cinnamon sugar flavor. Kissa is a cat that visits Alandra often.

The Culling

Alandra closed the book she had been reading, placing it on the table, and rubbed her eyes. She had a long way to go yet, but she needed a break. The bar was silent. Alandra scanned the room. Empty. The bar was there, the fireplace, tables and Mr. Redley's table, but no one was visible. Alandra studied the shadows at Mr. Redley's table, but couldn't discern if he was there or not. She knew better than to disturb him, though.

As she stood, Shanoa appeared. He looked around and gave a worried frown.

"Ally..?" he asked, waiting for her explanation of the odd occurrence.

Alandra shook her head. She didn't know what was going on, which was why she had summoned Shanoa with a thought.

"Is it invisible day and no one thought to tell me?" she asked the empty room, hands on hips.

"Uhh, Ally?" Shanoa pointed to the floor by the bar.

"What is it?" Alandra asked, bending down to study where Shanoa was pointing, dark brown tresses falling over her shoulders as she did. It looked like the regular hardwood floor that was always there.

"No dragon." Shanoa said when he saw she didn't comprehend his point.

Alandra blinked and snorted. "Must be invisible day," she muttered. "But if so..."

"What?" Shanoa asked as his Sherheia mused.

"There would still be sound, and I wouldn't be able to do this..."

Shanoa's eyes widened in alarm as she brought her foot down hard where the end of the dragon's tail would have been. His expression changed when her foot struck the hard floor. He raised his eyebrows and looked at her.

"Maybe Mike the Janitor has an explanation. He always knows what's going on around here."

Alandra swept past him, toward the basement stairs. Shanoa saw her tangling her hair around her fingers. She only did that when she was worried. He followed her down into where the Janitor lurked. Being taller than she, Shanoa could easily see over top her head. The basement was dark so he used his mage abilities to lighten it. It too was empty.

Alandra's brow furrowed as she viewed the basement. "Mike?" she called. No answer. "Oh, Janitor Mike..." Still no answer.

She played with her tresses. Something felt wrong and the first inklings of fear crept into her heart. The Serendip was not a frightful place, well, only to the unwary, but the emptiness was eerie and the feeling of fear, unsettling.

Kissa bounded out of an open storage door, startling Alandra. She laughed with relief as the cat rubbed against her leg. “Well, now. You’re still here,” she remarked, puzzled. Alandra bent down to pick the cat up, but Kissa streaked from her grasp and ran up the basement stairs, stopping on the top stoop.

“Mrrrow. Mmmrrrow.”

Alandra looked at Shanoa who returned her gaze. With un-vocalized agreement they followed the cat up the stairs. Once in the common room, Alandra stopped short, facing the fireplace. She sensed more than heard Shanoa stop behind her.

“Mrrrowww,” came Kissa’s warning growl.

A man stood there, or at least she thought it was a man. He wore sparkling silver pants and matching shirt. His face was smooth, a pale peach with no marks or blemishes. Short metallic teal hair crowned his head, but that was not what drew Alandra’s gaze. It was his eyes—purely golden where the whites should be and dark as pitch, square pupils.

“Who are you?”

The man laughed. “Ahh...the question of the day,” he said, his voice smooth. “You may call me Cull.”

Alandra accepted the information with a tilt of her head. “Do you know where everyone has gotten to?”

The stranger before her smiled, pale pink lips thinning. He motioned with his head to one of the windows. Curious Alandra went to it and looked out. Shanoa followed behind her.

They were all there, all the other visitors and regulars of the Serendip, in their various attires. Alandra’s brow furrowed with Shanoa’s intake of breath. She glanced at him. He was frowning and his hand was on the sill.

“What is it?”

“They’re not...No Sherheia. No Sherheia anywhere.”

Alandra looked out the window again. “That’s impossible...but it couldn’t be.”

She gave the former inhabitants of the Serendip a closer look before darting out the door. The stranger's laughter followed her out. Among the crowd outside, Alandra listened and watched them with disbelief. Several passed wearing jeans and a tee shirt while a few here and there wore their Sunday best. There were no characters in the group.

"Eggs, yes. My daughter needs one for school," a passing patron remarked. Alandra glanced at the paper he held. It was a grocery list.

"What happened to them?"

Cull appeared in front of her in the crowd. "Why, life of course."

Alandra frowned at him, but her attention was drawn to the bar attendant, Charlie, as he stood on an overturned crate and began to read from a book.

"And as a general rule, writing for writing's sake is a most ridiculous idea. What good is fictional nonsense to the everyday person? None. It only serves to distract from the beauty of life and the great mind that is society. It is a useless waste of time to ponder and think on things that never have been and never will be. Look at what lies before you. This is reality and what should take precedence in the lives of living breathing people."

Alandra couldn't believe her ears—Charlie, the bar tender, who always enjoyed stories and a good joke, advocating the demise of all writing related to works of the imagination. She squinted to get a better look at what he read from. *Thou Shalt Not Write*

"What is this?" Her voice was barely a whisper. Taking a step back, she jumped as she ran into Cull who stood behind her.

"Ahh, that one's subconscious has finally stopped holding on to this farce," Cull stated with a smile. A passing patron suddenly faded away. Alandra gasped. Patrons popped in and out, but only characters faded in her experience. She shook her head. "Who are you?"

A mocking smile played on Cull's lips. "I am life. I am reality. I am that voice that tells you what you should be doing instead of making up stories. I am what reminds you of the need to eat and sleep. I am the

one that will cull the passion to write from their minds to let the imagination be used for dreams that can be achieved.”

Alandra turned her back to Cull, searching for Shanoa. He was gone.

The scenery shifted and her vision blurred before clearing. Lifting her head from the red book on the table she surveyed her surroundings. She was back inside the Serendip, sitting in her normal chair. A sigh of relief escaped her as she saw that patrons were about her. What a strange dream that had been. Summoning Shanoa with a thought, she went to the bar for some more chiva, seeing her cup empty.

“What can I getcha?” Charlie asked from behind the bar.

“Hot chiva if you please.”

He frowned, and then nodded. “A cup of java.”

“No, not java. Chiva,” Alandra re-iterated.

“Can’t say as I’ve ever heard of that. What’s in it?”

It was then that Alandra spied the large volume of ‘Thou Shalt Not Write’ on the bar. In surprise she turned and realized that the patrons ignored their pens and papers beside them. Laptops lay dormant by the side of a few at the bar as they laughed and drank regular drinks, nothing exotic to be found. The magical quality of the Serendip seemed strained. A lonely patron at a corner table faded away. A culled victim.

She noticed Shanoa stood ghost-like beside the fireplace, unmoving. Cull stood beside him and sighed. “Another stubborn one like Charlie. I see I shall have to convince you in an imaginative way.”

Grendel appeared in the doorway carrying a circlet of woven gold and silver. Alandra leaned back against the bar as Grendel advanced at an agonizingly slow pace like the adagio beating of drums.

“Wha...” Alandra licked dry lips. “What are you going to do?”

Cull smiled, showing golden teeth. “You’re a sharp girl. You tell me.”

Alandra’s mind whirled, but she was so entranced by the coming circlet that she could not move. Grendel raised the circlet as if to crown her.

“Brainwashing.” The word tumbled out of her mouth as she realized Cull’s scheme.

“Ahh yes. And per the archvillian-protagonist contract, specifically the section highlighted in pink, blue, and glittering silver, I will reveal my plot. You writers have a tragic flaw. Your imagination is so enhanced that the use of a brainwashing device to rid you of the passion to write is quite easily managed and because you are so open to the idea of the device, it actually works on you. You create the stories, you read them, and so you will fall victim to them. It’s a simple device, really. Created from your imagination. Each one is unique to its creator. Doesn’t that make you feel any better?” His voice wavered condescendingly.

Alandra grit her teeth and managed to glance one last time at the authors whose stories she’d come to know and others she’d not know...unless.

Eyes blazing, she turned her gaze on Cull and said the oft-quoted protagonist line, “You won’t get away with this.”

True to villain fashion he laughed and with typical ‘bad guy’ cockiness asked, “How will you stop me?”

“I won’t stop fighting you. Neither will they. All it takes is one. One writer who will pick up their pen or ready their fingers above a keyboard and write words of nonsense about worlds that never existed until they brought them to life. Others will follow.”

“There’s no one left.”

And with his words, the circlet descended.

Thus ends this one tale of the Serendip, but not the last.

About the Author

JW wrenn is an avid reader who enjoys writing and hopes others will enjoy her works as much as she enjoys writing them. She currently is working on several story ideas one of which is *The Dawning*.

JUST DUCKY

by Tamara Siler Jones

Unbeknownst to the staff of the Serendip, the bar has acquired a small, furry pest. Seven inter-dimensional exterminators have received the assignment to extermin...er...capture the aforementioned vermin. Until they arrive, everything at the Serendip is...

Just Ducky

A fellow as tall, dark and scrawny as a sugar maple tree in the death-clutch of midwinter ducks his head as he enters the Serendip. His jumpsuit is silver, with black knee and elbow pads and a bright assortment of patches and commendations. He carries a cage in one gloved hand as he pushes up the face-plate of his feather covered helmet in the other. "Air's clear," he says into the mike curled beside his mouth.

Grendel looks this new arrival over as six more silver jumpsuited folks press into the bar. "Can I help you?"

The tall dark fellow nods and presents a card. His voice is somehow strained and lilting, his pronunciations impeccable, as if he's speaking a language alien to him. "Snowball Pochard, from Anatinae Drake Exterminators. We hear you have a, shall we say, ahem, a vermin prob-

lem.” The other exterminators fan out around him and lift their feather-rimmed face-plates. All seem restless, their fingers trembling, the edges of their mouths attempting to curl into eager smiles. One, a little bald guy with a flattened face—as if he was hugged too much as a child—pulls a great big gun off the harness on his back. Another, a tall curvy blonde, fires up the glowing box strapped to her hip and unsnaps a nozzle.

Grendel looks at the card and frowns. “I haven’t heard of any infestation trouble ’round here. Not since the pixies decided to bake some brownies in the kitchen. We had brownies running around here for weeks though, gettin’ into everything, giggling, knocking over drinks, but they’ve followed most of the regulars home.” He turns his great green head toward the bar. “Charlie! Know of any pest problems lately?”

Several patrons look up, their eyes interested, as Charlie shakes his head and wipes his ever present freshly washed mugs and goblets. Behind him, one of the talking heads says, “You betcha! We’s got pests aplenty! Writers in here all the time, looking for story idears. Like we’s can come up wit those!”

“Yeah,” says another head. “And do they ever thank us when they do glean a bit o’ wisdom in our hallowed walls? Do they ever leave us a tip? Ever give us a credit in the author’s notes?”

While Charlie puts a bar towel over the face of the two-most-talkative heads, Snowball smiles at Grendel. “Mind if we take a quack, er...quick look see? Might save you some time and trouble before the little booger gets a chance to breed.”

“Kwak! I see it! I see it!” The little guy with the big gun bursts from his spot and runs deep into the bar. “Get back here, you little red-furred bastud!” On his back, mostly covered by the harness and a row of slim yellow rockets, is an embroidered portrait of a duck on the wing. Around the duck, the company name is emblazoned in white.

Another exterminator, this one a middle aged woman with a motherly look about her, trots after him. Her name tag identifies her as

Jemima. “Now Chirpy, stay calm, hon. You don’t want to upset anyone.” The rest of the group hurries after them, most pulling weapons.

“We don’t want no trouble,” Grendel says as he squints at the card again. “We have a certain decorum to maintain around here.”

Snowball nods and even Grendel sees a streak of red brown zip beneath a table. Three patrons leap from their chairs and spill their drinks, one, a massive burly fellow in spike-studded plate armor, stumbles back and lands rump-side-down on the dragon tail.

A grunt and a roof shaking howl shake the bar, closely followed by a huge plume of fire bursting through the kitchen door.

Three fire extinguishers lift off the walls and fly into the kitchen as the red brown thing scurries away, toward Mr. Redley’s alcove.

“What the crap was that thing?” Grendel says.

“Fox.” Snowball replies and hurries toward the alcove, cage in hand, the duck on his back fluttering as he moves. Ahead of him, six other exterminators run after the fox; each quacking comments and instructions into their mouth-mikes. Throughout the bar, patrons leap to their feet to avoid the stampede.

Faeries and other winged folks take to the air, poofs of magic smoke send wizards to other dimensions, the skeleton in the corner collapses into a pile of bones, the Dragon tail whips back and forth, scattering people, tables, and chairs like dominoes. Charlie leaps onto the bar. Near total bedlam has erupted.

“I don’t know what kind of fox can do this, but get him the heck outta my bar!” Grendel growls.

Snowball nods then ducks to avoid the flying body, and the flying fox.

Chirpy had been right on the fox’s tail, close enough to grab it—Kwak! Kwak! Both he and the fox reached Mr. Redley’s alcove at the same time, and both were expelled away without benefit of gravity. They crash into the wall near the basement door and a rocket shoots from Chirpy’s big gun.

“Quack! What a force field!” the curvy blonde says appreciatively as her hands glide up the teak molding of the alcove doorway. She appears to not hear, or mind, the rocket blast, even though plaster is raining onto her hair and into the shiny curves of her uniform. A light dusting clings to the top edge of her name tag and its lone word: Icicle.

“Force field?” a short brown haired man squawks. A laser pistol is in his hand, the name on his uniform identifies him as Silver, and he shakes plaster off his head and squints. “Why a field? I thought we forced him in here!” His eyes, like dark liquid beads of half blind glass, waddle throughout the room and settle on a man in a fur lined cloak “Qwak! There he is!”

BBZZZAAAPPPP! A beam of iridescent light shoots from his blaster and instantly incinerates the cloak.

“Hey now! the man says, turning, his hair smoldering and his eyes flashing a half-crazed mix of confusion and fear. “I paid twelve hundred ruppas for that cloak and...”

“Musta missed”, Silver mutters and shoots again. “Damn thing never aims right...”

The man ducks under the table just in time, cursing as he disappears from sight. Behind him a painting of dogs playing poker erupts in flames. The dogs drop their singed cards, leap from the frame, and land growling on a table. Silver incinerates them.

The fox, terrified of such insanity, sprints for the stairs even as Chirpy pulls another rocket from the harness on his back. Chirpy tears after the fox and takes the basement stairs two at a time.

A regular-looking guy in an exterminator suit lifts a horn and blows to signal a change of venue for the hunt. “Tally ho, mates! Little blighter’s gone underground!”

“Thanks, Coffee,” Snowball says and five of the remaining six exterminators pull night vision goggles from their helmets.

Grendel growls, “What do you think you are you doing to the bar! I demand...”

“Sorry, sir,” Jemima says with a sweet wink in her motherly eye just before she settles the goggles over her face, “we won’t be but a moment more. Once they run aground, they’re all but spent.”

“Get your crap and get the heck outta...” Grendel growls then the demand dries in his throat as his eyes land upon a seemingly quiet member of the exterminators.

A sweet young thing, reddish curling hair, eyes as green as Grendel’s skin, sits curled on the lap of a wart covered dwarf, her fingers running through his dusty beard. The dwarf sighs in complete bliss, his eyes half closed, his hands on the girl’s waist. He has the expression of a man who has just won the lottery.

“Aren’t you sweet,” the girl says to the dwarf. As Grendel reaches for her, the name tag winks her name at him. Ducky it says, but Grendel really does not care. He grabs Ducky and tosses her toward the door as he stomps toward the rest of the group. “Get the hell outta the bar!”

“She was mine!” the dwarf snarls as he leaps to his feet. He flicks his hand over his belt then leaps at Grendel. Boots afire with propellant, the dwarf screams through the air and hits Grendel’s mid back, hard.

The dwarf bounces off, boots still shooting flames, as Grendel turns, a snarl on his scaly lips.

As Grendel lifts the dwarf from the floor, Snowball hollers, “Ducky, get your butt over here! We’re going aground!”

“Yessir,” she says as she blows a kiss to the dwarf and hurries to the rest of the group.

A few moments later the dwarf is ejected, flaming boots and all, through the door. Grendel turns, growling, to the ransacked, singed, plaster dusted, half-burnt bar.

“What the heck was that?” Charlie asks, peeking over the bar.

“Quackin’ trouble,” Grendel snarls and he stomps toward the stairwell.



In the dark, in the fox's chosen lair, the members of Anatinae Drake Exterminators are quiet. Even Chirpy is quiet and the rest of the group steps over his prone body laying at the bottom of the stairs. His flat face has acquired a new flat dent across his forehead. All the others take a moment to duck under the ductwork and most shake their feather-trimmed heads. "Chirpy forgot to put on his goggles, poor ducky. He didn't duck the duct!" Jemima whispers and kneels amongst the rockets while the rest of the team check their weapons.

The basement spreads out before them like a dark pond. Bought on clearance at Duk-Mart, the goggles only show a four foot range. Everything else is swirling and black. "Be very, very quiet," Snowball says into the mike, but beside him Ducky squeals and no one hears his instructions.

"Oooo! Oooo!" she says. "I see one!" Flicking her fingers in excitement, she bounds into the dark.

"Shall I blow the horn, sir?" Coffee asks, his fingers curled around the feather-trimmed bugle.

"No! We need to keep quiet."

From the darkness, the team hears an "Ooof! What in the world?"

"Arm up, folks, we've got a situation here!" Snowball says into his mike.

From the dark, "E...E...Excuse me, miss, but I think you've mistaken me for someone else."

Icicle and Silver move toward the surprised voice in the dark.

"Forget about Ducky!" Snowball says as he glances up the stairs. The big green guy was coming, and he sounded angry. "Just find the fox!"

"Yessir," Icicle replies and flicks the tip of her nozzle. Golden flame puddles out. "Here foxy, foxy. Time to get cooked!" She moves to the left, Silver to the right.

Ducky squeals. “Oh, no, don’t get up! They’re just friends of mine!”
“Miss, please, get off my lap.”

The sound of wet sloppy kisses fills the darkness, followed closely by a half-hearted plea for help. Icicle turns suddenly. “Quack! What the...” and an iridescent beam shoots from the nozzle. Tools, peg-board, duct tape, and old crusty spud-notes scattered on the workbench burst into flame.

Jemima shrugs. “At least we can see now.” The others quack their agreement.

Visibility does not last long. The basement is filled with flickering firelight and billowing smoke. An old laptop on the workbench sputters sparks as the flames swim over its casing.

The exterminators scramble over the hodge-podge of stuff near the bottom of the stairs—old dictionaries, thesauri, typewriter ribbons, crumpled paper, and tear stained rejection slips. They scurry past the flames, their voices quacking over one another as they look for the fox, or Ducky. Even with the Duk-Mart goggles, visibility is soon at a minimum. Behind them, flames lick at a scattered pile of manuscripts and notes.

“Chirpy!” Jemima squawks then waddles to the growing flames.

From behind the furnace, a voice says, “Miss, as pleasurable as this is, I must insist that you get off my lap! I’m losing my...”

The remainder of the words are lost beneath a barrage of smooches.

Something big lumbers down the stairs and Snowball quacks, “Find the fox and find him now!”

“You!” Grendel’s voice grumbles over the smoke, the fire, the quacking. “Hold it right there!”

Jemima squeaks and jumps back, Chirpy in her ample arms. She backs into Snowball who trips over Icicle who bumps Coffee who lands face first against Silver’s back. Another iridescent bolt screams through the air, this one incinerating a shelf crammed with paperback books. Anthony, McCaffrey, Donaldson, Asimov, Niven, Weis, Hickman and Tolkien all erupt in flames.

Someone screams an all too human scream of anguish. “My books! Good gracious my books!” the voice says. “Please, miss, you hafta let me up! Oh dear me, my books!”

“Where is that fox!” Snowball grumbles as he looks rabidly around the smoke filled room. His eyes settle on a can of Kerosene. He lunges for it, again knocking Icicle into Coffee...

“Ok, ok,” Ducky quacks. “I’ll get up. But don’t you go too far, now. Ya here?”

As the man whose lap she’d been sitting on stands, the furnace tips over to land on the other workbench. All the duct-work collapses, including the duct work over the stairs. Grendel growls and shoves the ducting aside.

Dodging dropping ducts, Snowball tosses the can of kerosene onto the flames and the explosion is quick, loud, and essentially directed upstairs. Much like the propellent-booted dwarf, Grendel is ejected from the basement.

The man with the cozy lap, the burnt books, toasted spud notes, and charcoaled workbench, stands in the midst of the fire and smoke, his plain honest face struggling decide which expression it wants to show. Fear? Anger? Sorrow? Humbleness? Responsibility? In the end, the Janitor’s lower lip quivers and he falls to his knees.

Silver quacks, “I see him! I see the fox!”

BBBZZZAAAPPP!!!

The Janitor’s chair explodes, knocking the Janitor and all the exterminators every which way. Icicle and Silver land on the un-burned portion of the workbench. Chirpy lands on the bed. Snowball and Coffee each land in a different storage room. Jemima quacks in the midst of the duct-work. The Janitor lands hard to sit in a corner.

“What the!?” the Janitor says as he reaches beneath his backside.

The only one left standing, Ducky spies a lap, prime for the taking.

She leaps, lands on the Janitor’s lap and covers his face with kisses. Beneath them both, something squeaks then never squeaks again.

As Snowball crawls from the storage room, the Janitor flashes an odd expression on his earnest face. “Think I found your fox,” he says as he pulls a flattened fur-covered lump out from beneath his rump.

Smiling and dusting old spud notes and pencil shavings from his uniform, Snowball bows and accepts the flattened fur. “Many thanks, kind sir,” he says as he shoves the thing into the cage.

“Don’t mention it,” the Janitor replies from behind slobbering kisses.

“Time to go, laddies and ladies!” Coffee blasts two quick quacks on his horn and all the members from Anatinae Drake Exterminators assemble around him. Ducky blows one last kiss then they disappear in a burst of white light, leaving a dusting of feathers behind, almost as if someone had ripped apart a goose-down pillow then danced around the basement. Just the feathers and a single red box.

The janitor grabs a fire extinguisher and douses the burning books first, then the workbench. He has most of the fires out when Grendel lumbers down the stairs.

Grendel rubs his head and squints through the thinning smoke. “Banged my dod-gurned head, the blighters did. Where’d they go?”

The Janitor chuckles to himself and holds up the red box, Ritz on the front. “Dunno. Got their fox and left, I ’spose. But they left me a box of quackers!”

Grendel rolls his eyes and lumbers back up the stairs.

About the Author

A wife, mother, and graphic designer, Tammy spends her free time either writing or making quilts. The past few years have turned the writing aspect of her life into more of an obsession than a hobby. Her sewing machine is currently suffering from extreme withdrawal symptoms and dust accumulation while her computer is well loved and pampered. Her current obsession, *Ghosts In The Snow*, a novel about a serial murderer in a castle, is in the final editing stages.

THE AUDITION

by Larry West

You can meet anybody in the Serendip Inn—past, present, even future. Mundane, fantastical, mythical. Absolutely anybody.

Larry is the author of *Ariana*, a warrior woman who is half-elf and half-dragon (don't ask) and the heroine of several of his novels. Pen is the author of another warrior woman, *Brena*, who is a truly reluctant queen. Lisa, an author who created *E'loria*, the Queen of an extra-Solar world, while Melinda created *Miranda*, a highly talented musical heroine with an unusual love life (something all of these uncommon women have in common). John invented a race of intelligent mechanical beings called Brass Men. Charlie is the chief bartender; Mike and Ellen are other members of the staff. Grendel is the bouncer, logically.

My portrayal of the characters is based on their authors' writings. My portrayal of the other authors is based on reading, correspondence, and some (I hope) shrewd guesses. As far as I know, the authors are all real people, although I suspect Melinda doesn't really have wings.

The Audition

Grendel was nervous. He was dressed in his best rags and very much on his best behavior. He knew as well as anyone how much depended on the success of this evening.

Not that it was ever anything but ‘evening’ in the Serendip. As with any inn outside of time and space, night was a perpetual condition, and since this particular establishment had no windows, the light emanating from the hearth fire, lamps along the inside walls, and the magical spotlights, just then being tested for the performance, which would focus attention on the stage that had been recently constructed against the inner wall, who could tell anyway? Such a determination would be harder than diagramming the last sentence.

Grendel slapped his huge arms against his ogreishly buff chest in sheer frustration. Everyone was on his or her best behavior. There was nothing for the Serendip’s legendary bouncer to do except to watch. Things had been dull ever since Charlie, the barkeep, had taken to confiscating weapons carried in by customers.

“Move that music stand to the right!” Melinda gestured furiously toward the perfect placement as her wings fluttered. “Further. Further!” The Brass Man she was directing lacked the capacity for being irritated, fortunately. John had written him that way, which was why, along with his metallic strength, he had been dragooned into doing the actual work on the stage and its furniture.

Ariana, who was just-visibly pregnant, E’lora, who was spectacularly in the same state, and Brena, who looked as morose as usual, were having an argument about the arrangements, while their authors—Larry, Lisa, and Pen(elope, not to pun)—watched with interest from a nearby table.

Lisa whispered, “Don’t you just love it when they forget they’re only characters?”

Larry nodded. “The Serendip has been more enjoyable and I’ve felt much safer since Charlie started disarming them, even if that does result in Ariana being less than her usual, superhuman, and overbear-

ing self.” He glared at Pen, since she had once or twice expressed doubts concerning his favorite character.

Pen glared back. “It would be even more enjoyable if you wouldn’t force us through that thicket of labyrinthine sentences.”

“Okay,” he said. “Done.”

Charlie brought drinks. Larry took ale. Pen took Merlot. Lisa took Chardonnay. Charlie met their needs. He was a good barten...

“Stop that!” Pen and Lisa cried.

The characters looked at their authors. “Do you mind?” demanded E’lora. “Some of us are trying to work!”

“Sorry,” said Larry. “That was my fault. You’re building a set; I was playing with sentences.”

“Watch it!” warned Brena. “Or else you’ll have three queens putting you in three dungeons.”

“Simultaneously.” Ariana grinned wickedly, patting her thigh where her sword usually hung. “Now, that would be a sentence!”

Pen grinned at Larry wickedly, thereby inviting a comparison she probably wouldn’t have liked. “You created her. What did you expect?”

Larry sighed. “Life was so much simpler before they built this place.”

“But less fun,” suggested Lisa. “Especially for us authors who created nice heroines.”

* * * *

Why were these authors and characters in the Serendip Inn? They were preparing for the auditions scheduled to begin in little more than an hour.

Who was being auditioned? Potential chanteuses to entertain the customers. Now that sword fighting and quick draw contests with phasers were verboten, the management had decided that live music would draw more customers to the inn.

The suggestion of a male stripper had been summarily rejected. No one was certain by whom.

At the appointed time the inn's common room was filled to the ceiling, as some of the more limber characters (and a few well-lubricated authors) perched among the rafters for a better view of the contestants. Word spread that four characters would perform, but no authors.

The Serendip Lute Band, led by Sharonna of Kolmar, tuned up. The house lights dimmed magically; the spotlight came up likewise.

The first to appear was dressed as no one in the inn had seen her before, in a forest-green gown that showed off her feminine attributes in a way she had avoided for most of her life...

That doesn't tell you which fantasy heroine she was, does it? I'll give you a clue—it was Brena.

The Queen of Nordmark executed a fine pirouette, bowed to the audience, and began to sing in a pleasing contralto. She performed a love song that was popular in the Kyladan court during the same spring in which she left it, received good applause, especially from the rafters, and bowed off the stage. Hers had been a fine performance. But who would be next?

She was replaced by another warrior never before seen in a dress—Empress Ariana. She was tall and well-proportioned, her shape barely concealed by her white, floor-length gown with golden trim at the hems. A gold disk hung between her breasts (who knew she had them?) from a chain of the same metal, echoing her gleaming hair. The audience waited eagerly to hear her performance.

She started to sing, but her voice wandered all over the register. The listeners stared in amazement as they realized that this magnificent woman couldn't stay on key to save her life. The applause at the end of her song was barely polite.

Ariana bowed off the stage and was replaced by Miranda. The audience grew silent as this songbird, the one professional singer in the group, opened her mouth. Her beauty, equal to that of her predecessors, was instantly overpowered by her voice, a glorious instrument

that shook one inebriated author right out of the rafters. He landed with a thud and shook his head. Nobody but he noticed he had fallen.

Miranda's phenomenal soprano delivered a heart-felt rendition of Rogers and Hammerstein's "I'm Gonna' Wash That Man Right out of My Hair." Those who knew her best looked around in vain for her lover, and wondered...

As she bowed to the swelling applause, Charlie glanced at his fellow bartender, Ellen, and at Mike, the Janitor. "This isn't much of a contest, is it?"

"I think we have a winner," said Mike.

"One more to go," said Ellen.

"Who?" asked Charlie.

She nodded toward the stage. "We're about to find out."

The lights dimmed; Sharonna strummed the opening chord of a Miridan ballad. E'lora, her belly becomingly straining at the front of her blue gown, stepped forward.

Somebody giggled. Grendel, who was standing behind the churl, thoughtfully knocked him unconscious. The room grew still as the Queen of Mirida opened her mouth. And glory poured forth over the audience. Who would have guessed she had this in her?

She sang of love both faithful and thwarted, of two brave men who desired the same woman, and of the terrible challenges they overcame to save her, though only one man had hope of her love.

When she finished and began to bow, only sobs could be heard for a few seconds. Then the hearers rose as one and clapped until she was finally rescued by Sharonna, who led her back into the dressing room.

* * * *

The contest was voted a tie. Twice each week Miranda performs a set. Two other nights, E'lora does. Brena filled in when E'lora went into labor in the middle of a performance.

By general acclamation, Ariana was forbidden to sing in public again. That was a pity; she actually had a very pleasant voice.

About the Author

Larry West has authored a series of High Fantasy novels. The first four are the memoirs of Ariana, and are entitled: *Maiden Warrior*, *Saintly Avenger*, *Empress in Exile*, *Reluctant Queen*.

The others are stories of other people in her saga, including her children and grandchildren. Two of these are: *The Silver Paladin*, *Death in Midgard*.

LOLA

by Rhonda S. Garcia

An unusual woman decides she wants to invest in the Serendip and she's not willing to take no for an answer. Like the song says, whatever she wants, she usually gets. This time, though, things turn out a little differently for...

Lola

She was, as the old saying goes, a sight for sore eyes—a guaranteed cure for that malady.

Her appearance had been swift and unannounced—no flash of light, no whirlwind. She was just suddenly there standing between Grendel and the dragon's tail, hands on her hips as she took in her surroundings with an expression on her lovely face that spoke of a woman on a mission.

Her red dress left her shoulders bare, and went past her ankles. It fit like she had been poured into it, and she had the kind of nipped in figure that would have put a Coke bottle to shame. Her hair was almost as red as the dress and curled seductively past her shoulders in thick waves that managed to look glossy, despite the dim barroom interior.

What little talk there had been in the almost empty bar died a quick death, as a dozen pairs of eyes focused on her. The one female present, a Troll who had dropped in while her author was undergoing a bout of writer's block, gave an unimpressed growl, and went back to her cup of goat's milk. As for the men...well...they were men. Ogling would have been too fine a word. There was a small thud as someone's jaw dropped open.

"Excuse me, but the newbies usually enter through the door," Grendel's voice was apologetic, but firm, nonetheless.

The woman glanced over her shoulder, "Oh, my!" she turned to face him in a fluid, graceful motion, one hand to her throat. The smile on her face was dazzling.

"Aren't you just the cutest thing!" her voice was a smooth contralto that somehow managed to carry like a bell.

Grendel blinked, "I beg your pardon?"

"And what a voice!" She circled him admiringly, taking in the huge, green monster with an appreciation that seemed to have little to do with his vocal abilities.

"Such eloquence, such diction! Have you ever considered voice-work?"

"I believe you just indicated that I didn't need any," Grendel said slowly, not quite certain how to respond to the unbridled enthusiasm that was coming off her in suffocating waves.

"I mean for commercials, promos, trailers, that sort of thing. You would be FANTASTIC!"

"Your compliments are appreciated, but I already have a job."

She came to a stop in front of him again, her amber cats' eyes expectant. He added quickly, "I'm the bouncer in this establishment."

She waved a hand airily, "Oh, please, you call that a job?" She drew a little closer, dipped one hand into the front of her dress (there was a soft, longing sigh off to her left as she did so) and handed him a small gold rectangle. It sparkled and flashed every colour in the spectrum.

“My card. You ever need representation, just call my name three times out loud. I can fix you up with an agent and a job in no time flat. And if you signed a contract or something, don’t worry. I have lawyers that can take care of that, no problem.”

Grendel eyed the paper clutched in his claws distrustfully without really reading it. “Thank you, but I don’t think I’ll be needing it.” As she opened her mouth, he added hastily, “it’s not the contract. I’m just not interested.”

She seemed to consider this for a second, then she brightened. “Playing hard to get. Inspired! You’re even smarter than you look. You’ll go far.”

She grabbed his arm, her red, manicured nails barely managing to curve around its muscled girth. The look on her face was suddenly serious. “But if anyone else comes around and makes you an offer, remember, I saw you first. Mr...?”

“Grendel. Just Grendel.”

“Grendel...one word, powerful, to the point. I like it. Don’t be a stranger—call me, okay!”

She turned and stepped over the dragon’s tail without really looking at it, exposing a dainty ankle above a gold stiletto heel. She made her way to the bar, where Charlie stood behind the polished wood counter, the rag he had been using to wipe down the bar still in his hand, his task forgotten in the light of this new development. She took a seat next to the big, hunched over figure of a cloaked man, his hood thrown back to reveal a broad, tanned face, half obscured by a heavy growth of blond hair. He was staring bleary eyed into his cup of ale and didn’t look up as she sat.

She looked him over for a second, a slight, speculative frown on her face, and started to say something, but just then, a dwarf slid into the seat on her right. Swarthy and shifty-eyed, he barely got the chance to open his mouth. She looked at him, read the lascivious intent in his face, sighed and said, “Sorry, but I really don’t have the time for this.”

She snapped her fingers. There was a subdued blue flash, and when everyone had stopped blinking (everyone except the man in the cloak—he was too far-gone to care), the dwarf was no longer there. A huge green and yellow toad had taken his place. From his position standing guard at the door, Grendel saw what had happened and frowned.

“Miss, I’m afraid you can’t do that.”

She threw him a glance, “Why not? He was about to bother me. And the way he looked at me...so disrespectful!”

“Be that as it may, I can’t allow you to take such action against someone who hasn’t bothered you yet.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not like he won’t change back. He’ll only be that way for a decade or so.”

“I’m sorry, but if you don’t reverse the spell, I’ll have to ask you to leave. We don’t condone malicious acts of magic—unless it is a clear case of provocation and/or self defense.”

“Well, if you insist...” She shrugged. There was another blue flash, and the toad was gone. Grendel snorted, annoyed.

“What have you done with him?”

“Sent him home, to his appropriate hole. You said I had to change him back, but you didn’t say I had to let him hang around me,” she cast a challenging look around the bar that seemed to say, ‘and that goes for you all as well’. As a deterrent, it worked wonders. Suddenly, everyone became very interested in whatever they had been doing before. Or at least, they tried to do a good job pretending they were.

She turned to Charlie, “You’re Charlie, the barkeeper. Right?”

“Last time I checked. What can I do you for?”

She dipped into her dress again and extended another gold card. Charlie put down the rag, took it and read:

Her Divine Celestialness

LOLA

*Illusium Goddess of Persistence and Adulation
Patron Deity of Advertising Professionals In 700 Universes*

Senior Partner in Lola & Ogilvy Inc.

He looked up curiously. “Lola and Ogilvy Inc.?”

“Finest PR firm in the known universes, and then some.” She leaned forward a little, the sparkle in her almond-shaped, topaz eyes clearly visible. “Who do you think got Julius Caesar past the Senate in the first place.”

“It didn’t work out too well for him though, did it?”

“Not my fault,” she raised delicate arms in a ‘what can you do?’ gesture, “I was away advising another client. I sent him an old witch by way of warning, but without me there, his ego got in the way. It’s so important to keep some clients on a tight leash. Just today, I had to get all dressed up for a Hollywood director’s soiree, in order to stop him from ruining a perfectly good career by doing a documentary. Can you imagine? The guy has made millions doing perfectly good, big budget thrillers, and he wants to sacrifice it all for artistic integrity!”

Lola sighed and shook her head, sending wafts of heavenly perfume Charlie’s way. “It’s the creative people that give you hell. I’d rather deal with military conquerors and their over-inflated egos any day.”

“Well, not to imply that your presence here less than an honour, but what brings a goddess like you to the Serendip?”

“Business, of course!” her laugh was a silver tinkle. “You think I’d come all the way out here for a drink? Sorry, but I do my fraternizing at Olympus...when I have the time, and Zeus is in a good mood. The Greeks really know how to throw a party.”

“So you’re meeting a business associate?”

“No. Making a deal.” She leaned forward intently. “And what you can do for me, is to point me to whoever runs this place.”

Charlie raised his finger and poked at his chest. The look in her eye became calculating, and an almost feral gleam replaced the formally good-natured sparkle.

“Well-l-l, what an unexpected stroke of luck. You do realize what a potential gold mine you have here, don’t you?”

“Gold mine?”

“You bet your ass.” She leaned back and crossed her legs, revealing part of a shin so perfect, even the drunk next to her glanced down for a second.

“Word is starting to get around. I mean, when news of a place like this reaches my dimension, you can bet you’re on the up and up. Cosmopolitan holes-in-the-wall like the Serendip can become wildly popular, especially among the European and Istakian jet set, if the management plays their cards right. And of course, any public place that the government hasn’t made off limits to smokers is hot, hot, hot!”

She looked around and wrinkled her tiny nose slightly. “Unfortunately, the heat in here is a problem. You’ll need to get a more efficient—and not so smelly—heating system in the kitchen. Dragons are just not trendy anymore. But install some track lighting so that you could actually see your way to the bar, an air-filtration system to handle the smoke, brighten up the décor a little from all this depressing wood and brass, and you’ve got something worth shouting about.”

Charlie raised an eyebrow. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m always serious this time of the millennium. All that chaos and world-shifting. A goddess has to keep her eye on things or she’ll miss an opportunity for business. It’s been even harder since my partner went on vacation with some Pletuvian whore last year. I’ve been doing it all myself lately. You wouldn’t believe the mess some of my temples have gotten into.”

“But,” Charlie said with a frown, “why would a goddess need to go into the PR business?”

It was her turn to raise a perfectly arched eyebrow. “Are you kidding? You can’t imagine the number of useful contacts I’ve made in the

last eon. Do you think any goddess can stay at the top of the deity game for eons without a little self-promotion? There's no substitute for backing the right rebel or King at the right time. They still sacrifice to me daily on Rahmon, even though I haven't been there since the War of the Two Moons, and that was centuries ago."

"So what you're saying is, if you successfully help your clients obtain power in their world, you take some of the credit, and use it to increase your number of worshippers."

"Boy, do you have a grasp on the simple things," even her sarcasm came out sounding as smooth as butter, "yes, that's what it's all about. And profit, of course. Everyone wants to be represented by someone that can help increase their income and make them look like part of the Divine in-crowd at the same time.

"Which is why I'm here today. If you let my firm represent the Serendip Pub, I can guarantee increased profits." She cast another look around the room, and several curious heads ducked as she did so, "a better class of clientele, and fame, fame, fame! All for a very reasonable fee."

"Just out of curiosity," Charlie said, crossing his arms on his chest, "what would you call, reasonable?"

"About two hundred thousand guaranteed, lifetime converts from among your regular clientele, a thirty percent share in the gross and a shrine established here, in my name, as the patron deity for the Serendip, with a commitment to perform the necessary devotions according to the Illusium calendar. Your standard contract, really."

Charlie shook his head. "Impossible. Can't do it."

She sat up straight, the line of her generous lips suddenly a little less pleasant. "Excuse me?"

"I'd be happy to. As long as you understand that the Serendip is not in the market for either a PR firm or a deity."

Somewhere in the distance, a faint rumbling began. Lola leaned forward, her palms face down on the counter. "You're...refusing my offer?"

The rumbling grew louder. The customers started looking around for the source of the sound; worried frowns creased more than a few faces. A glass behind the bar began to tinkle ominously. Charlie was not deterred.

“Yep. That’s exactly what I’m doing. No offense, but the Serendip is for the sole use of writers and their characters. Jet sets and worshippers need to get their own bar. I hear there’s a temple on Greater Polcar that does strip shows, maybe that would be a better place for you to focus your attentions.”

The rumbling was very loud now, and even the man at the bar was starting to look vaguely alarmed. The bottles and glasses behind the bar had set up an orchestral clashing in the wake of the sound vibrations. The ground began to shake slightly as Lola got to her feet, her hands still on the counter, her face grim.

“You don’t understand. I’m not the Goddess of Persistence for nothing. What I want, I get. And I want this deal. I don’t make a lot of personal appearances, but once I do, I’m not leaving until I get what I came for. No one turns me down! Either I leave here with a new deal in place, or no one else will! At least, not in one piece. I will shake this bar into a pile of firewood if I have to!”

Grendel started toward her, but Charlie shook his head at him surreptitiously. He had an idea that the creature would be no match for an angry Illusium goddess.

“Before you get your panties, or whatever goddesses wear, in a bunch, let me explain my position a little better. To start with, it’s not that you wouldn’t be a great patron goddess, I’m sure the clientele would just love you. But the Serendip already has a patron, and he doesn’t cost us anything.”

Lola’s eyes narrowed, tiny red flames danced in them. “Ridiculous! I sensed no other deities when I did my initial sweep. If he really is here, he can’t be much of a patron.”

“We think he’s great.” Charlie nodded to a table in the corner behind her, on her left. “He pays for the drinks after all.”

She turned, her eyes piercing the dark with two pencil-thin, red beams that still stopped short of the shadowy figure. She cursed under her breath and the beams blinked off as she turned back to Charlie.

“For Pete’s sake! Why didn’t you tell me Redley was here!”

Charlie shrugged. “You’re the goddess. I’m not the one that can read minds. You never asked.”

The rumbling and shaking ceased abruptly as Lola sat down again, pouting prettily. There were cautious sighs of relief from everyone except Charlie, Redley and the drunk. At the back of the room, an elf got up quietly, and with one eye on the goddess and the other on the exit, eased past Grendel and out the door.

“Redley!” she muttered disgustedly, “a shadow-dweller! Of all the rotten...! He probably has a privacy ward in place, so that no one can even talk to him.”

“We do advise people not to attempt to make conversation, yes.”

“Roc’s eggs! The Illusium Celestial Handbook on Supernatural Hierarchy clearly states that no deity shall offer patronage where another supernatural being has already established territory. I can’t violate a privacy ward, so there goes my chance to negotiate.

“I can’t believe this is happening! I make an appearance and Redley forces me to leave with nothing! This must be where he disappeared to after that fiasco in the Solon Underworld.”

“Well,” Charlie said, relieved that she had been thwarted, and trying hard not to show it, “them’s the breaks, as they say.”

She glared at him, annoyed. “Oh, put a sock in it. Jeez...this so...!” She slammed her hand down on the bar in frustration. The clap of thunder that resulted shook the Serendip and tumbled the drunk onto the floor.

“I need a drink!” She glanced across at the cup next to her. “Give me one of whatever this guy’s having.”

“One Korone Dwarven Dark Ale coming up.” Charlie got busy pouring the drink. As he set the glass in front of her, there was a muf-

fled shout from the floor, and the cloaked man leapt to his feet, his blue eyes bloodshot and furious.

“Who dares to lay hands on Ged the Hewer? Stand forth and make yourself known, coward!” he bellowed, fumbling beneath his cloak for something.

Lola snorted in derision and swallowed a surprising amount of ale in one sip. She swung on her stool to face him slightly. “Cool it, Conan. It was an accident. You fell off your own stool.”

“You lie, wench! You play me for a fool!”

“Actually, you’re doing such a good job, I wouldn’t dream of trying to outshine you.”

Charlie shook his head. “Hey, Ged. I wouldn’t if I were you, or did you miss everything that almost happened a little while ago?”

Ged was in no shape to listen. With a roar worthy of battle, he drew out a marvel from beneath his cloak. It was a huge broadsword, engraved along the blade with curling script. It pulsed with a yellow-white glow that seemed to have been born of what little light there had been in the room. Lola’s eyes widened and she uttered a little squeal.

“Balmain!”

“My name is Ged, I tell you!” he shouted. She waved a hand and the sword blinked out of his clenched fist and into her waiting fingers.

“Not you, silly,” she said, “the sword! I’ve been looking for this thing for ages!” She took a closer look at him, snapped her fingers, and his beard disappeared, leaving behind a firm, clean-shaven jaw and a handsome, if somewhat dirty, face.

“I thought you looked familiar!” she said triumphantly, the excitement in her voice filling the air with electric tension that sparked in the gloom. “You’re Ged, the son of Gad, aren’t you?”

In his inebriated state, he had barely managed to grasp the fact that his weapon had disappeared, when suddenly, he noticed that something had happened to his beard.

“By the Rings of Moshan, my whiskers!”

She made a frustrated sound. “Forget about them, you look better without it. Answer my question. Your father was Gad the Carpenter, wasn’t he?”

Ged, realizing how must he look, lowered his arm, blinking. “And what if he was?”

“Well, that makes you the inheritor and only authorized wielder of Balmain the Light-giver. What in all the heavens is someone like you doing here?”

“Mourning a friend,” his voice broke a little on the last word as his mood shifted with the suddenness of the truly intoxicated.

“My beautiful Paloma died yesterday.”

Lola backpedaled immediately, trying unsuccessfully to temper her excitement with concern. “Oh, I’m sorry. Was your wife ill?”

“Not my wife—my horse. I fell asleep in the saddle last evening, and we slid down a hillside in the dark. She broke her neck in the fall.”

Lola recovered quickly from the slip. “Well, that’s almost as traumatic as losing a wife. No wonder you’re upset.”

“She was better than a wife,” Ged sniffed, taking his seat again, “they nag. Paloma never did.”

“Quite true. But Ged, you need to stop wasting time like this. You’re a Chosen One, there are only about two billion in all the Known Dimensions. You have way more important stuff to do than sit in a bar crying over a hor...a loved one.”

“Like what?”

“You know, save your world, correct the balance between right and wrong, knock up a Princess with a Savior, the usual stuff. The point is, a man with so much to do, and so much on his mind, needs someone to help him get the important things done. Someone to help organise his strategies, his goals...his fan club.”

“I do?” Ged looked mildly surprised. Lola got up and moved so that she could encircle his broad shoulders with the slender arm not holding the sword, as she said smoothly, “You certainly do. And I know just the person.”

Charlie shook his head, “Lola—your divineness—you really shouldn’t take advantage of someone like this. He’s barely conscious.”

She looked up quickly. “Listen, I’d stay out of this before I send you where I put the dwarf. Do you know how hard it is to find a Chosen One? I’ll have more followers than I can accept tribute from in a decade. Not to mention the fact that I won’t have wasted an appearance like I did the time I tried to halt the Goblin Wars.”

“Goblin Wars?” Ged rubbed his head. Lola said soothingly as she urged him to his feet, “Don’t you worry your head about that. That’s my job. Right now, you need to come with me somewhere we can talk without anyone listening in. I have a proposition for you.”

Ged brightened as he took an unsteady step. “A proposition? Of course, that explains your manner of dress!” His eyes twinkled craftily as he looked her over. “Indeed! Let us depart for more private quarters.”

With a slight grimace of distaste that she hid magnificently, Lola replied, “Oh, Ged, I usually go for the big, green types, but you flatter me...business first, though, okay?”

They disappeared as suddenly as Lola had arrived.

“They don’t call her the Goddess of Adulation for nothing either,” Charlie said under his breath.

He sighed, glad that she was finally gone, got out his rag, cleared away the two glasses, and started to wipe down the empty counter.

About the Author

Rhonda S. Garcia is a long time novel writer, but has recently been working on improving her short stories. Rhonda is presently in the process of writing her new novel, *The Way of the Warrior: The Last Voyage of the Marena*. It is the first of a five part, science fiction series called *Children of Fate*, about five unusual women whose lives change Mankind’s history forever.

THE JANITOR'S RETURN

by Mary Satlin

Makronwa of Vurka settled into a comfortable seat in the back of the Serendip, tucking her satchel under the table out of the way of her feet. She nodded at Redley in his shadowy corner [the required toast had been given months ago], and waved at various humans and unhumans she recognized. No others of her particular “universe” were here today.

Behind the bar, Mike the J was filling in for Charlie and Ellen, flashing a friendly smile at his customers, preparing for a long shift.

Just as he had done one grim day last year.

When he'd disappeared from the face of the earth.

Makronwa hadn't known him well at the time. She called him friend now—and the Vurka were fiercely loyal friends and implacable enemies.

After Mike disappeared, his many friends held a wake for him. When traces of blood were found in the basement, suspicion fell on the basement's least likable inhabitant, a brown bat known for trouble-making.

Makronwa shivered. Many Earthers despised and feared bats. There were too many associations with Terran mythology: bloodsucking parasites, vampires, undead things. And “Brownie” triggered all those emotional connections.

Justice, of a sort, was done. The Serendip regulars were bitter with grief and vengeful impulses. With the help of the other bats they roused him out. Life in the Serendip went on, for a time subdued: Mike's friends and comrades missed him badly.

One day Charlie went to the dentist, leaving one of the visitors to watch the place for an hour or so. People were likely to drop in at any time, and Charlie was reluctant to close the place. It was a bastion against writers' block and self-doubt and frustration. Someone might need its peace and solace, its bulwark against personal demons. Someone like the woman left in charge.

When no one came in after a short time, she went downstairs. The outside door was not quiet, and she'd hear customers come in.

Instead of a quiet afternoon, she'd gotten the shock of her life.

Beyond all hope, Mike reappeared, hurled back into the basement through some kind of portal. On the other "side", a replica of the Serendip was burning.

It had taken Mike weeks to get a coherent story out to his friends. His attempts to describe the indescribable—his passage through the "Gate"—sounded bizarre at first: references to potatoes and gravy and swirls of butter that made some people smile. But, Makronwa and her friends reflected, no academic in his ivory tower could have done any better. Who else had gone through a Gate, and returned to tell the tale?

Other aspects of his story were unsettling, even terrifying. But the Serendip is a place where fantastic stories are everyday fare. And Mike was Mike, unfailingly honest, and no one doubted him.

He went through a brief stage of drifting in and out of sight. "Out of phase" in clinical terms, "invisible" to Mike and those who saw him disappear [all but his clothes]. The disappearances ended as quickly as they'd begun.

Mike's story had been more than a fantastic adventure. In the alternate society—a dystopia worthy of the name—misguided "reforms" had run amok. Cultural police—the feared CeeJays, Cultural Justice forces—were everywhere. The battle had been joined, to rescue not

only creations, but the creative spirit itself—a society's heart and soul—which was outlawed. Outnumbered, the dissidents did what they could. Drawn into the conflict, Mike and his counterpart, Mikorin Blum, were heroes.

But sometimes heroes fall, despite their best efforts. Sometimes heroes die...

Makronwa, with Mike's permission, had kept the written record for herself, and was drawn to it again. As Mike trudged up from the basement with a barrel of Korone Dark on a cart, Makronwa raised her arm, mimicked a pouring motion, and went downstairs herself. In short order a heavy mug and a bowl of trail mix followed her down the stairs, floating on a flying tray. Makronwa noshed, and drank, and read Mike's account of his return.

"Like I told ya," the last pages began, "Miko was due back, an' that Anla Davenga with him..."

Not for the first time, Mike wished for a dog like John Borneman's beloved Zoë to keep him company and help him keep watch. He prowled around anxiously, occasionally stopping to unclench his jaw and stop grinding his teeth in frustration. Miko, hurry up already! He'd heard sirens in the distance. In his mind's eye he could see the CJ car, sickly green lights flashing; see the fugitives running, see the uniforms in pursuit...

There was a key in the lock. Thank goodness. Miko entered the dim room, alone. "Mike?"

"Yeah. Where's Anla?"

"We had to separate. One tunnel blocked. She got through, slim like she is. I went the other way."

They waited. At a cautious knock in the prearranged signal, Miko opened the door a crack. Anla slipped in, dirty and scratched.

"Boy, that tunnel was something." She gave him a quick kiss. "How long have you been here?"

“Not too long.” As they drank Garoda, this side’s analog to Korone Dark, Miko and Mike began to relax a little. Another mission safely accomplished—

Abruptly the klaxon of sirens filled the air. Green lights flashed outside. Miko peeked through the spyhole. “Two cars. Coasted in with lights dark, to conceal their arrival until the last minute. Come on, let’s go.”

“Where are we going?”

“Basement. Got a way out you two don’t know about—”

“No.” Anla held a gun on them. “They know about the ‘way out’, Miko. There’s no escape.”

“Anla, what have—”

“I’ve been working with them for weeks. I’m sorry. I wasn’t given a choice.”

“The people we were running out—”

“They’re safe. Out-country. The price of my cooperation. Miko, surrender, please. I don’t want to use this—”

Without thinking, Mike reached out and clipped her one on the jaw. Startled, she dropped the gun. Miko kicked it away.

As they hesitated, still in shock, glass shattered. The mirror behind the bar exploded in a shower of gunfire. “Come out of there!” an amplified voice boomed. “Last chance!”

Miko shook his head. “No,” he whispered.

More glass shattered. This time flames shot up. Firebombs! One fell dangerously close.

And the wind started again.

Mike, transfixed, looked toward the far wall. That whirlwind thing!

It was their only chance. “Miko, come on!”

“Where?”

“There! Now!” Mike began to run toward the opening portal. Miko started toward him, Anla tugging at his arm.

And a firebomb fell between Mike and the others. “Miko!” he screamed.

The flames hid them from sight. Terror and grief surging through him, Mike was picked up by the whirlwind—

When he came to himself, he was on a seat in the basement of his old—his own—Serendip, dizzy and sick and aching all over, explaining incoherently to the woman in the basement.

Makronwa put the papers away and finished her draft. That was what had been eating at him, she knew: that he couldn't save his friend.

But he was home, and among friends. He would recover. That was all that mattered now.

About the Author

Mary has several interconnected stories. A world is being considered for inclusion in an interstellar society. Everything is going fine...until the morning the alien negotiators' dome collapses. With all apparently dead, the planet's chief negotiator flees, grieving for his friends and for his counterpart, whom he had loved. Finding himself in a rainstorm, somewhere else, he has to rebuild his life. But his otherworldly friends have survived, warned at the last minute, and the negotiation goes on.

Her world's four continents have three democratically oriented governments, and one, Boldoi, which is teetering on the brink of religious dictatorship. Boldoi's most able politician, Ambassador Tazin, is fighting against repressive forces—and for his life, aided by a woman from another continent. The one who had given the warning—a captain of militia who knew some of the negotiating team—is apparently dead and is in hiding, while his friend, an outspoken woman doctor, renders medical aid to impoverished villages elsewhere in the country.

In the distant past, an ancestor of Makronwa of Vurka encounters a species of intelligent spiders, and then must fight against xenophobic trends which endanger his own society's progress. In the world's past, a battered queen and a royal bastard have the same enemy: the king, a brutal lout who punishes his wife for infertility, and fathers offspring on girls unable to refuse him. His day of reckoning is coming.

An excerpt from one of the stories was published as “Pawns” in the ezine *Rose and Thorn*. It concerns a deceitful politician and his betrayal by the shadowy conspiracy he secretly serves. A short story, *Argha’s Day*, concerns the last day of a young dinosaur, who achieves maturity only to be lost in the great cataclysm that destroyed the dinosaurs about 65 million years ago. It received honorable mention in a contest run by Albacon, an SF convention held annually in Albany, New York, and is printed in a chapbook printed by the contest.

Beta Test: Back in this world and time, two girls are friends, interested in music and soccer and making their way through school, two lively preteen girls. So far so good...but these girls are different. Jenna survived a hideous car accident. Implants keep her on her feet instead of in a wheelchair. Liette is Jenna’s robotic companion, but more like the sister Jenna never had. And now there’s another development... one that will take them into the world of music, and into the science books.

DED CHARACTERS CLUB

by Tan Min-Wei

Licen moved through the crowd, ignoring the incessant chatter of the monkeys. His movements were unsuitably fluid for one of his mass. His seven-foot tall frame and broad shoulders made for an imposing look, but his wolf like face was surprisingly gentle. Well, usually anyway.

Today he just looked pissed.

“Charlie!” Liven roared.

“Wadjawan?” Charlie leaned on the bar counter, cigar and all, with an amused look in his eye.

“I WANT TO KILL THESE MONKIES!” Licen grabbed one monkey off the overhanging lamp and flung it at the craps table. “And a glass of milk.”

Charlie snickered and took the milk from the counter fridge. “Be my guest.”

Licen looked rather shocked. The piko frowned and looked around. “You mean it?”

Charlie smiled warmly and passed the glass of milk to Licen. “Hey, you just threw one at the craps table. Don’t see me complaining do you?”

“But...” Licen was confused.

“Now, just don’t throw nothin’ at the jukebox. I jus got that damn thing fixed.” Charlie waggled a finger at the Piko. At that moment a song began to play and Charlie’s face turned a heated red.

“HEY PUNK!” he reached for his gun. “That had better not be what I think it is!”

“What?” a voice shouted back. “It’s just MC Hammer!”

Charlie opened fire.

Licen recoiled in horror.

“You shot him!”

“Yep.” Charlie grinned, satisfied.

“In the mouth!” Licen took a sip of his milk. “With a paint gun! That’s just evil my dear sir.”

“So is MC Hammer.”

Licen nodded. “True. So, about the monkeys...”

Charlie sighed. “Look, do whatever you want with them, just don’t make a mess and don’t hurt anyone else with it.”

“Them,” Licen corrected.

Charlie pointed the gun at Licen with the same casualness of a psychopath. “Don’t you get snarky with me boy.”

“Sorry sir. But won’t the monkeys mind?”

“Look, don’t ask me about the damn monkeys. All I know is that late last night, your boss, yes yours, he brought them in and now they’re still here. We had Mikey burn them out with this morning but it seems that they’re infinite or something.”

“Really?” Licen looked doubtful.

“How many of you do you see there?” Charlie pointed towards a typewriter.

“Nice typewriter,” Licen commented.

“Shut up and answer the question.”

Licen looked at Charlie. Charlie glared back.

“Um...a lot.”

“Infinite to be exact. This is, apparently, how your boss does his writing. He hires an infinite number of monkeys and gets them to the typewriters and he lets them loose.”

“Really? That would explain why he writes like crap on wheels.”

“Indeed.” Charlie nodded. Then he looked at Licen. “Well, enjoy your milk.”

“Thank you sir.”

Licen waded through the hoard of monkeys and made his way to a corner of the bar. The bar had a pink neon sign blinking above it with the words “DE D CHARATER’S CL B”

“Hey, Charmick, we ever going to fix the sign?” Licen grumbled as he sat down. “Charmick?”

His friend seemed to be missing. “Charmick?”

A small pile of monkeys exploded and Charmick stood in its place. “What?”

“What the hell are you doing?”

“You won’t believe this fur-ball, but these monkeys have perfectly assembled Rolex’s on them!” Charmick was grinning from ear to ear, holding up a chain of high quality Swiss watches.

“And you’re taking it from them.”

“Yeah!” Charmick tossed a watch at Licen. “You might like this one. It tells the phase of the moon and has a blue ruby set into the middle!”

Licen took the watch and put it on. “Niiiiice. Thanks friend.”

“No problem,” Charmick grinned and resumed his sacking of the monkeys.

Licen looked at an oldish looking man sitting opposite him. “So, how things going Merek?”

“Good, good,” Merek was sipping a large tumbler of ale, looking at a relatively new timepiece.

“New watch?” Licen asked, sipping his own glass of milk.

“Yes my friend,” Merek replied absently. “Your friend is very generous. And has a fine eye for what suits people, in terms of watches.”

Licen frowned. Merek was quite intent on staring at his watch. “Expecting someone?”

Merek smiled a sad sort of smile. “Any moment now.”

“Shame.”

“Indeed.”

At that moment a small man stopped at the table, grabbed Licen’s milk and started drinking. A larger man arrived a moment later and smacked him on the head with a monkey. He caught the glass before it hit the ground.

“Here man,” The man was panting.

“Thank you friend,” Licen took the glass with and bowed his head slightly. Then he noticed the stake. “You have a stake in your stomach.”

The large man frowned. “Yeah, it’s a San Diego thing, don’t ask.”

“Hey, your guy’s running away!” Charmick shouted to the large guy. The large man started then took off after the smaller man.

“We should tell him to take that stake out,” Licen mused.

“Yep,” Charmick nodded and resumed his search.

They sat in silence for a while, and someone decided to play ‘Walk On’ on the jukebox. It s a short while when another two people joined them in the corner.

“Hey,” the first one said. “I’m Tayman Leandro.”

“Hey,” Charmick popped up from the pile of monkeys. “Nice to meet you.” And he offered his hand. Then he looked Tayman up and down and ruffled through his pockets and took out another watch. “I think this one will suit you nicely.”

“Thanks man,” Tayman smiled but put his hand up. “You should give it to Tahir here,” he said, pointing to the second person who had a large bruise on his forehead. “He just got mugged in the ally behind the photo shop up front.”

“Naw, you take it, there’s plenty more where this came from,” Charmick’s hand was still sticking out.

“Does this anything to do with that exploding watch factory outside?” Tahir asked weakly.

“You betcha. Dude. You look like you need a drink. And a watch.” Charmick said seriously. “Hey! Chuckles!”

Charmick ducked the paintball.

“Screw you man! MC Hammer rocks!” Charmick screamed. He was pelted by a dozen more paintballs, most of which failed to explode and instead ricocheted everywhere. “Hey! Relax man! I’m just trying to order here!”

The firing stopped.

“Wadjawan?” Charlie’s voice came from the bar.

“Round for everyone in the corner, including the monkies! And a pack of ice!” Charmick took a seat at the booth. The beer came soon after and soon the small group was sitting around, sipping their beers.

“So this is where you go when you die,” Tahir commented timidly.

“Indeed, child,” Merek nodded solemnly. “The outcome could have been far worse, I feel.”

Licen rumbled. “Yes, but if we fixed the damned sign, it wouldn’t be quite so bad.”

“Drink your milk furball,” Charmick said, in way of reply.

Again, a silence fell over the group. Even the monkies were solemn.

“If this is death,” Tayman spoke quietly. “I sure as hell hope I get employed again soon.”

They nodded as one.

About the Author

Tan Min-Wei is a 17 year old Singapore. He has written a Star Wars Fan/Fiction novel (unpublished) and is working on two novels, *Psychic Awakening*, and *Velo City: King of all the Lands*, a political/fantasy story. He has also written several short stories.

FOLLOW THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD

by Melinda Kimberly

This was inspired by an amusing and rather disturbing nightmare I had.

Follow the Yellow Brick Road: Exotic Neurotica for the Serendip (With a nod to the style of Terry Pratchett.)

Follow the Yellow Brick Road

Melinda had been on hiatus from the Serendip for what seemed like ages. Dissonance (her second novel) lurked in the back of her mind, though she hadn't yet turned to listen to its dark song, preferring to focus on the innocence of the Impromptu for now.

She at once noticed the lack of patrons and characters as she stepped through the familiar wooden door. Even Charlie, Mike (not the Janitor) and Grendel were missing. The bar had an oddly eerie and abandoned air, like a freshly-opened mausoleum—suitably dank and musty without that icky “what crawled in here and died” odor.

Melinda had a Han Solo-ish Bad Feeling about the whole thing, but entered anyway. She figured if anything bad happened, she could write herself out of it. This WAS the Serendip, after all.

Deep shadows lengthened and soupy fog emanated from somewhere in the walls. An Orchestra (as yet unseen, but required for a tense situation) hovered on a painful trill, the violins in agony—thumb position on the A string is a killer. A pipe organ rose up from the floor as seamlessly as the candles in Andrew Lloyd Webber's Phantom of the Opera. But no Opera Ghost manned the keys. Instead, a little pygmy frantically reached for notes which no sane composer should write.

Melinda armed herself with pen and paper.

A curtained stage soared to the heavens in front of her. Melinda's diaphanous robes sifted in the breeze. A disembodied and slightly transparent bald head hovered before the curtain. From somewhere, everywhere, and nowhere a basso profundo voice boomed forth, "I AM THE GREAT AND POWERFUL ODDS!!!"

The violins managed to trill even higher despite Melinda's best efforts to glare them into submission. She turned to stare up at the head. "Don't you mean, the Great and Powerful 'Oz'?"

The face registered shock and momentary panic. It vanished briefly. Melinda heard the sound of pages in a script being flipped, then the head returned and its voice resumed its terrific rumble. "SILENCE, MORTAL! I AM THE GREAT AND POWERFUL ODDS!!!"

Melinda tried not to snicker. She threw the trench coat that hid her Poet-Sprite wings onto a handy chair and fluttered up to face the head at eye level. She folded her arms and set her robes to Extra Billowy for effect. "Explain yourself, Odds."

"I AM THE DREADED POWERS THAT BE!" the head thundered, cueing thunder and lightning. "I AM THE FORCE THAT MAKES AUTHORS EVERYWHERE QUAKE AND TREMBLE BEFORE ME!" Unfortunately, not even the sulphury smell of brimstone could cow the fluttering author before it.

(Odds was unaware that Melinda wouldn't have made the connection. Being an agnostic, instead of quaking at the olfactory suggestion of hellfire and Judgment, she thought the orchestra had gone flatulent.)

Melinda cocked her head at the cryptic reply. "You're in charge of disbursing royalty checks?"

"NO!" the head became annoyed. It had commiserated with Terry Pratchett's Death on several occasions about having to speak in all capitals. "I AM IN CHARGE OF SUBMISSIONS!!!"

Melinda fluttered back, suitably impressed. "You decide who stays and who goes?"

"YES!!!" roared the head, triumphant. "QUAKE AND TREMBLE BEFORE ME, OH UNAGENTED, UNPUBLISHED AUTHOR! I AM HE WHO CHOOSES!" The organ pygmy went berserk on the keys, trying to reach the foot-pedals and upper registers at the same time. After a moment's frustration, it enlisted the aid of two like-statured colleagues. The three of them achieved an impressively dark and foreboding fanfare to punctuate the head's words.

The Poet-Sprite before the curtain decided that, for all her bluster, she felt much less flutter than before. Submissions scared the flap out of her. She returned to the ground, finally cowed about her submission. However, she did finally locate the orchestra and fling a handy spud or two at the violin section to limit the number of offending instruments in the scene. The tympanis sulked, but continued to thunder.

"HA!" cried the head, undaunted by the lack of strings. "BRING UNTO ME YOUR QUERY, MELINDA KIMBERLY, THAT I MAY CHOOSE!"

A drop box thrust itself out from the curtain. Melinda looked down at her query letter, which she'd been hiding in her robe for the sake of the plot. She squared her shoulders and strode forward. Her hand only shook slightly as she placed the precious bit of paper (with SASE, of course) into the box. Her heart sank as the box retracted.

She was about to turn away when she heard mortal shuffling. Curious, she went back to listen at the curtain. The sound of paper being sifted was as unmistakable as the nauseating stench of White-Out.

“HEY! GET AWAY FROM THERE!” The head sounded much less sure of itself.

Undaunted, Melinda found the center of the curtain and thrust it apart. Delighted at what she revealed, she fluttered off her feet and went inside to investigate.

The head was shrieking, “PAY NO ATTENTION TO THE SUB-EDITORS AND ASSISTANTS BEHIND THE CURTAIN!” It began to fade and the pygmies had to abandon their pipe organ as it sank back into the floor. They made a hasty exit through a handy bat-proof cat-flap that had opened in the front door of the Serendip.

The stage curtains opened on a curious scene, then vanished into the ground.

The Serendip, though still empty, began to resume its former dimensions. A desk perched on top of the bar. Melinda fluttered menacingly (or as menacingly as it possible in filmy robes and faery wings) above it, glaring at a very hassled-looking woman. A rubber stamp wavered above Melinda’s query letter.

Melinda put her hands on her hips, sharpening to ice-pick lethality the glare she’d learned from her own gothic-genius hero. “You’re not an Odds at all.”

The Reader looked sheepish in a harried sort of way. “Well, actually I am. The Great and Powerful Odds is sort of the creation of all the young authors’ fears about submitting. They wouldn’t be as likely to use proper format and etiquette if they knew I would be reading their queries. No one fears the Overworked Slushpile Reader.”

Melinda conceded the point but refused to relax her glare. She folded her arms. “What are you doing to my query?”

The Reader stamped the work and handed it back. “I’ll save you first-class postage.”

Melinda wilted as she read the mark. “Does not follow DIRECTIONS?”

The Reader shrugged and commenced slitting open queries and stuffing alas-o-grams in envelopes. “You didn’t get the appropriate form off the website.”

Melinda billowed her filmy robes in vexation. “There was no form on the website.”

“Ah!” the Reader cried. “That’s because you didn’t check in the third subdirectory of the ‘useless articles’ page. If you’d clicked the magic icon to the right of the pointless gifs, you would’ve been able to access the ‘Magic Password’ screen. Reciting the works of Pliny in Portuguese—”

“Pliny was Roman,” Melinda interrupted.

“That’s why reciting it in Portuguese would be so much more impressive,” retorted the Reader. She returned Melinda’s glare. “Now as I was SAYING before I was so rudely interrupted...”

Melinda obediently began to take notes.

The Reader straightened, looking Official and Important. “After you recite the works of Pliny in Portuguese, you will be able to enter the ‘Final Password’ screen. You should have contacted the agency in print five weeks beforehand so you have the correct catchphrase (the password is case-sensitive, so be careful) for each one of the Ten Terrible Test-boxes. After that, wait another 7 weeks and we’ll mail you the correct form. THEN you can submit.” The Reader shrugged and returned to stuffing SASEs. “It’s really quite simple.”

Melinda stowed her notebook and tried very hard not to lose her temper. “Why can’t you just e-mail me?”

The Reader stared, then laughed, then turned on the voice of the Great and Powerful Odds so she could thunder in full basso profundo. “E-MAIL?! ARE YOU MAD?! E-MAIL IS A FAD FOR HACKERS AND TEENAGERS. HARD-COPY IS THE ONLY TRUE WRITING.”

“But it’d be so much easier,” Melinda cajoled. “Besides, I know you’re online. You already have a website.”

The Reader switched off the voice of Odds. “Yes,” she explained, dripping condescending patience. “But that’s only because one of our consultants told us that we must put up a 21st century front.”

Melinda was confused. “So what would’ve happened if I’d just called and asked for the form?”

“We would’ve mailed it the next day,” the Reader replied. “It might’ve taken a week to get to you.”

That did it. Melinda officially lost her temper. The sweet persona of the Poet-Sprite melted away. From the alter-ego, shed handily a snake’s skin, stepped a burnished and glistening warrior, clad head to toe in golden armour (complete with nifty English spelling for ambiance). The warrior produced a similarly impressive helm, topped with crimson plumes, and donned it with great ceremony.

The Reader blinked from behind her desk, trying not to drop her rubber stamp.

The warrior drew her shimmering rapier. A saddled lioness, snarling and fresh from the fight, leaped down from the rafters. The warrior swung into the saddle, which creaked as the lioness arched her back. The point of the bejeweled, basket-hilted rapier leveled at the Reader’s nose. “EXPLAIN YOURSELF!” the owner of the rapier commanded.

The Reader swallowed hard. “Who are you?”

“Lionsmane the RED,” the warrior replied. “Poet Laureate and Supreme High Commander of the armies of the Serpent Queen of the Isles.”

The Reader raised her hand.

“Inside joke,” replied Lionsmane the RED. “It’d take too long to explain.” At a gesture, a battalion of the finest soldiers of the Serpent Queen of the Isles appeared. “Answer the question,” commanded the golden-armoured warrior.

The Reader decided she hated days like this. “It’s company policy to let the website be a game. The rules haven’t changed, we’re just

expanding.” She held up the correct form in supplication. “Look. It has exactly the same information as you gave. We just want you to read the site so you won’t make all the Stupid Newbie mistakes. It’s not even the How that matters in querying, it’s the Which.”

Lionsmane the RED regarded the proffered paper but did not lower her sword. Her troops shouldered their arms (which is kind of redundant, as arms are attached to shoulders in the first place.) “How do you mean, ‘the Which?’”

“Well.” The Reader tried to figure out how to explain in layman’s terms. She didn’t want to become a permanent resident of the Serendip by being slain by an author. “A lot of getting considered is following procedures, but mostly it involves getting the right information in front of the right Which at the right time. The right person needs to see the right query in the right format. That’s why the curtains show you the Great and Powerful ODDS.” She moistened her lips. “If you understand the How and have a whole list of Whos (whom you should query one at a time out of politeness), sooner or later, you’ll get the right Which.”

Lionsmane the RED skewered the form with the tip of her rapier and retrieved the paper. “So are you a good Which, or a bad Which?”

The Reader fidgeted. “I’m not a Which at all. I just open the envelopes so the right author gets to see the Which.”

Grinning behind her helm, Lionsmane the RED mustered her troops (as in summoned and organized to battle, not to be confused with the condiment.) “And where is the Which?”

The Reader decided to preserve her job and intentionally pointed in the wrong direction. She hid under her desk as the plumed and sparkling Lionsmane the RED led two thousand brave soldiers off on a quest worthy of Don Quixote. They even remembered to close the door behind them.

When they were gone, the Reader hummed “If I Only Had a Brain” under her breath. She collected her stuff, folded up her desk and left

the Serendip before any other authors could assail her. “Newbies,” she muttered.

About the Author

Melinda Kimberly has decided to live several lives at once. An actress, performer, author, teacher, student, lecturer, costumer, and all-around lunatic, she is currently working on refining the second book of her trilogy, *Duet, a Novel in Three Movements*. She finished the screenplay in two months and is regrouping to prepare for her next attempt to secure an agent. Aside from the *Duet* trilogy, her projects include a Revolutionary-Era screenplay, a novel in which the villain gets away with everything, a tetralogy involving a red-haired vampire, and an epic saga on the African plains (told from the point of view of the animals.) Her motto remains, “Sanity is relative.”

THE SERENDIP HONKY TONK

by Chandler Zedac

Howdy friend.

Well, I just thought that I would mosey on in here. Don't mind if I sit down a spell and take a load off my feet.

I been hard at it tryin to get all my cattle up to the north country for good grass for the summer. It's too hot to leave them down here in this place. If something don't stick ya, it will bite ya, if it don't bite ya, it will come out of nowhere and grab ya before you even know that it is around. You go to sleep at night, and no matter how tight you close up the bunkhouse, you always manage to wake up with something in bed with you, and you never have any lovers because nobody will live in this God-awful wilderness. It's just me and the critters.

Anyway, the cattle will be all fat and happy. They're the only family that I got...they'll be happy.

I had some family one time; cousins. They would hide in the sage and shoot at my house. They put fifty-two holes in the tin roof. They wanted my land. Their daddy and my daddy were brothers, and they think that they ought to have part of it. Their daddy already got his

share. They just want to take over. Out here, you could get shot and nobody would ever know it. I'm glad I got a lotta friends in here.

You ask how I got in here?

Life went on for me like this for so long that I can't remember when it even started. Every day it's another bug bite, or another chicken carried off by a coyote, usually it's my favorite chicken, or I hear something growling on the front porch in the middle of the night. It would be the middle of the night. Something might be caught in the coon trap and I will have to listen to him holler all night long unless I get up, get the flashlight, and stumble over rattle snakes to let him out. Nine times outa ten it's an ole bobcat. I have to wait till morning to tangle with him, so he continues to howl.

But you know, this gives me a chance to look up at those stars and thank God for what I have.

One night that is just what I did.

Y'all will never guess what happened. God spoke at me. Thanks right. I wanted to write down everything he said. I'm not going to go into it much, but I decided right then and there, that I was going to live my life right. The problem was, there wasn't anybody around so I couldn't sin a whole lot, and the cat would give me an evil look once in a while, but that was ok. I decided to go out and buy a computer with my egg money and change the course of my life.

...And that I did.

I had a stinker of a time getting all the book reading done to even turn on the thing. Half the time it would just sit there and stare at me while I tried to figure out how to get the word processor to punch in right. When I finally learned that, I'd write somthin, and then the damn thing would shut off on me. (sorry bout the cussin, God)

Anyway, one day it was hot, (when isn't it hot), and I ran in the house to get a drink. I had left the computer on. I turned around and there it was, my favorite honky tonk! It was the Serendip something or other, I just call it my honky tonk with a purdy door.

You wouldn't believe how it sorta changed my life. They have a whole lotta critters in here, too and a few ghost turds under their chairs, (you know, those dust balls), which makes me feel right at home. The janitor here is busy all the time sleeping, and who can blame him for that. But he always keeps it fresh and air conditioned and I can just shut the whole hot mess out when I enter here. I never saw one bug, either.

The people are mighty nice. I think they all go to Sunday school regular like and catch up on all the news, because they always talk about something they picked up along the way that I don't know anything about. So I just sit around and listen. Once in awhile, I learn something. Mostly other places to visit and how to write in "Word." I think these are a lot a hard-working people, and I think they got a lota calves dropped this season, because they are always sayin how this one sucked and that one sucked.

This guy Charlie shags up to me and asks if I need anything, I never need much, just a friendly smile. You might know him; got a face kinda like a armadilla?

Then there is my friend Mike. He's kinda quite until you ask him something, then it's "Oh, Momma, it's time to come home!" He acts like a critter sometimes, and he likes art. We get along fine.

I'd like to invite them all over for bar-b-que sometime. The honky tonk is the best place to have it. That's what I'm a gonna do. Yes, get everybody here. I've got a few extra hands that can watch their calves if they need em.

Tis an on-going Bar-BQ at the Serendip Honky Tonk where it's got a purdy door and its COOL! Y'all come.

About the Author

Chandler Zedac resides at the ranch in George West, Texas, on La Para creek, and the "Northern Home" in Poulsbo, Washington. As a former Research Psychologist at UCLA, Zedac now spends time as a computer

graphic artist and a freelance writer while raising various “critters” to cook at the Bar-BQ.

A QUIET EVENING AT THE SERENDIP

by John Borneman

This story was inspired by a news item published last year about a man attempting to break the record of free fall from the highest altitude. Look it up. Truth is very often stranger than fiction.

A smoky bar, a magic dog, fiction authors and their fictional characters, talking heads and ‘walks into a bar’ jokes. What more could you want in a good story? Well, think back to the real-life story about an Australian ex-commando who wants to break the sound barrier by jumping out of a balloon from 130,000 feet and you get...

A Quiet Evening at the Serendip

For once, it was quiet in the Serendip. Oh, the usual blend of writers and characters were there, but there were no pie fights, no brawls. Just talk and drinks.

Charlie stood behind the bar catching up on the never-ending job of cleaning glassware. He picked up peanut shell off the bar and flicked it over his shoulder towards the trashcan, but it was intercepted and swallowed by one of the Talking Heads.

“Hey!” said the Head. “Watch it. Toss the whole peanut next time! And clean up that bar. I’d also suggest that you get more Dwarven Dark up from the cellar. You’re getting low. And I was thinking, maybe it would be smart to have free hor’deurves on—”

Charlie stuffed his bar towel into the head’s mouth. You had to watch out for Talking Heads. They liked to tell you how to run your life. If you weren’t careful, they’d start talking for you. Telling everyone else how you think about politics, sex education, or the environment.

Heads! Charlie thought. I can’t imagine what made me write them into this madhouse.

Charlie finished his glassware cleaning and walked to the end of the bar. John was leaning against the brass finishings having a drink with a skeleton. Charlie looked over the bar at John’s feet. Sure enough, John’s magic dog, Zoë was lying there asleep. “Well, you’re in the right place.” He looked at John and pointed down towards the dog. Zoë always knew where John needed to be. All he had to do was follow her, and he ended up in the right places at the right times.

“Yeah. She’s never wrong. Say. If you have any of those leftover hash browns that Cook made from the Mike the Janitor’s leftover spud notes, you might give Zoë a few later. She’s good at removing scraps and snips.

“Oh. Could you get a beer and a mop for my friend.”

“Sure. How ’bout you?”

John placed his hand over the top of his beer mug and inhaled the delightful scent of wood burning in the fireplace, stale beer, and smoke from various types of cigars and pipes.

“Nope. I’m good. Thanks. Say, its kind of nice tonight isn’t it? No excitement. Just regular bar-type camaraderie. Quite a change from normal isn’t it?”

Charlie looked around the bar. A couple New-B’s had stumbled through the main door and smacked into Grendel’s ninety-inch chest. He smiled, raised the dragon’s tail and led them to a table by the fire.

“Yeah, but don’t argue. Enjoy the moment.”

John smiled and shrugged. Just then, one of those ‘twenty minute after the hour’ kind of silences fell. John looked down at Zoë. She was awake and listening to something.

“Charlie. Wait...Do you hear anything?”

“Nothing special. Clinking glasses. Rumbling dragons. Ob-Noxious New-Bs. Is that what you hear?”

“Nooo. It’s just. Well, Zoë hears something that’s for sure. Look around. Do you see anything out of the ordinary?”

Charlie looked out over the room. “Nope. Pen’s telling some joke about a piece of string, Larry and Ariana are over by the back door, Melinda is fluttering from table to table being her usual delightful self, I see Dorian, Kimber, Kishma and most of the regulars. Mike’s even poked his head up from the basement and is having a drink with Amber.”

“Still,” John mused, “Zoë is usually never wrong. Wait! Listen. Hear that?”

Charlie listened closely. He could hear a faint, almost subliminal sound like air moving fast past an object—interlaced with a very faint human cry.”

Zoë got up from under the barstool and stood motionless. Several other characters and writers must have heard something as well. The room became silent.

“There.” Charlie whispered. “It’s getting louder.”

The room listened. What was once a faint sound, became more pronounced. Air in wind tunnel. Whooshing louder. The sound of a human-like cry clearly accompanied the whooshing. Less than a scream, more than a yell.

Louder. Louder. Louder.

Zoë trotted away from the edge of the bar and lay back down twenty feet away under a table. Of course, John followed her, since that was where he needed to be. Or, in this case, where he needed to not be.

Then the rushing sound of air and the human cry joined and became almost deafening.

“Oyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy !!!”

BOOM!

The ceiling of the Serendip exploded and a space-suited figure fell through. Wood and plaster erupted into the room covering everyone with dust and debris. The figure crashed onto the floor next to the bar where, seconds before, John had stood.

The suit stood up slowly and dusted itself off. It unlatched and removed its helmet revealing the good-natured face of a man with sparkling eyes. He was a large man who, despite having just crashed through the ceiling of the Serendip, looked none the worse for wear. He picked the skeleton up off the floor and leaned him against a brass rail. Turning around he stared at Charlie who was still standing motionless—his bar towel swaying at the end of his hand. The man unlocked and removed his gloves. He extended one hand slowly and closed Charlie’s gapping mouth.

“Roight,” said Ex-Commando Rodd Millner. He looked over the group with an impish and dusty grin, “How about a Fosters?”

About the Author

John Borneman has sold several humor/feature articles for a national magazine. He has also had one short humor/horror story published in the on-line magazine “Morbid Musings.” He pays his bills through a career in engineering, but lately has been practicing calling himself a fiction writer. John is currently trying to convince several magazine editors to call him a writer as well. You may visit John’s web site at; www.zmfarabian.com/Pith_and_Vinegar.

THE DART

by Cecilia Lombard

The Door was scarcely visible in the shadows. Almost just a shadow himself, Berdon waited and watched. Sooner or later someone will come and open the door to enter the Serendip. Then he would take his chance. He was only a couple of meters from the door, watching from inside his spell.

There were footsteps on the cobbles. He tensed, but then forced himself to relax again. It was one of the regulars. He couldn't enter with a regular. They would notice.

He waited.

The stories he had heard of the Serendip! The fights, the brawls, the heroes that came there, the dragon...Especially the dragon. A fascination very close to obsession drew him to the dragon.

But there were other things to do tonight. Again he heard footsteps and again it was a regular and he relaxed. A regular would know the feel of entering the Serendip, but not a newbie. So he waited.

Four more times it was regulars that came, four more times he had to force himself to relax. It was getting harder, the tension getting all but unbearable.

Footsteps. More than one pair of feet. He listened intently. Was it his imagination or were some of them very hesitant? No. He peered

intently into the light mist. Newbees! A very large group of them. Grimly he smiled. Now he was calm, his grey eyes showing his concentration.

The newbees were chatting quietly amongst themselves. It had taken a while, but finally they had managed to scrape together enough courage to come.

“What do you think it will look like inside? Do you think we’ll see Mike the Janitor?”

“I don’t care about Mike the Janitor! Just think if Chelsea was there! Oh, my!” The speaker shivered with anticipation.

Someone snorted.

“You! We don’t even know if she ever comes here!”

“I hope the dragon is quiet. They make me nervous.”

That silenced them.

“I’m not going near it,” someone said very firmly.

None of them even noticed the little extra shiver that went with them as they opened the door and entered.

Berdon had never been inside. He knew a lot about the Serendip, and has seen all of the regulars, but he had never been inside. He liked it: the dark wood, the space, the buzz of friendly people talking.

Now however was not the time to stand around and stare, he had something to do. The newbees were intercepted by a big, grim looking guy that looked like Grendel. Berdon smiled at the rather terrified, involuntary huddle they formed and drifted over to the bar on silent feet. No one noticed him pass, he was just a shadow among a million other shadows against wood so dark, you could use it as a night well.

He chose an open space at the bar and drifted past, one hand brushing against it. A tiny, hot glow sprang to life in the bar’s edge beside a dressed up punk. He was already meters away when that part of the bar exploded into roaring fire.

The punk screamed.

“Fire! Fire!” Help! I’m on fire! Help! Hel...”

The screams were smartly doused by Charlie the bartender, a bucket of sand and a fist smashed to the punk's jaw.

It wasn't long before most of the patrons went back to whatever they had been doing. Near the dartboard an author was arguing hotly with some of his characters. None of them had even noticed that something had happened.

Among those who had noticed were a dedicated group of dart throwers. They were now returning to their game.

"Let's see what you can do this time round, Tell."

The man named Tell smiled and picked up one of the darts. It was like all the others: a steel reinforced tip and blue shimmering tail feathers. He took aim, still smiling.

Berdon was smiling as well as he took a last look around and ducked behind the dragon's tail.

The dart left Tell's hand.

The dragon was surprised to see a young man with winter grey eyes and an impish smile, step out of the shadows in front of her nose. She blinked.

"Good evening, Mistress Dragon," he said.

Chaos exploded in the barroom. He chuckled.

"Do you play chess, Mistress Dragon? I rather like the game and I was wondering whether you would play against me. It seems to me a dragon would be a challenging opponent."

Several screams were coming from the direction of the barroom. The dragon blinked again, quite slowly, and yawned.

"Why not?"

The young man nodded and seated himself cross-legged in front of her. From somewhere, he produced a board and chess pieces. The pieces were all about as big as his head.

In the barroom, chairs were scattered everywhere, people were hiding under tables, and several were bleeding. Charlie the Bartender and Grendel crouched behind the bar. Suddenly Grendel stood up and a

small, shining object came hurtling towards him. Charlie threw himself across the top of the bar in front of Grendel, hands outstretched.

“Gotcha!”

The dart quivered in his hands and made a violent wrenching movement, breaking free. It changed direction and aimed straight for the dartboard. It whizzed passed Tell, made a couple of summersaults and hit the bull’s eye.

The dartboard screamed.

About the Author

Cecilia Lombard is a great writer who has been writing stories off and on since primary school (about 11 years). She lives in Pretoria, South Africa, and has just finished her degree in Electronic Engineering. She has a novel in the rewrite/edit stage and has started three others. She is unpublished as yet, but hopes to start sending off manuscripts to publishers this year. Most of her stories are fantasy with a subdued/alternative/almost-background kind of ‘magic’. So far the magic is a very fundamental part of the societies/stories she has created. The societies themselves are fairly low-tech, but not Stone Age! She is bilingual and writes in both English and Afrikaans, but mostly in English.

JUSDI AT THE SERENDIP BAR

by Wendy Cross

Jusdi floated into the bar. He has been busy on Earth for the past year. He is a shapeless mass covered by a brown monk's habit, and he floats because he has no legs. He is like a covered cloud. No part of what is under the habit is visible. He frequently changes his form to resemble whatever or whomever seems expedient at the time.

"I see you're legless again, Jusdi!" said Charlie.

All laughed, even though this was said every time Jusdi entered the bar as himself.

"Keeping you busy on earth are they Jusdi?"

"Yes, especially a country called UK. Those silly UKers have a habit of locking up the victims of crime as well as, or even instead of, the bandits."

There was a sudden loud roar.

"Uh oh, Griffin wants another drink."

Griffin was the dragon, whose tail everyone was in danger of tripping over in the bar. Charlie poured a drink and put it into a special 'butlers shelf.' He pressed a button and the shelf rose upwards through the ceiling to the dragon above, Griffin being too large to fit in the bar.

Jusdi said,

“Hey Charlie, how about my Martini?”

“Coming up. How’re you gonna drink it this time?”

When he looked up again, a middle aged earth man stood where Jusdi had been.

Charlie handed him the drink.

“Aaah, now that is good! Almost a year since I had one of these.”

“So who are you now then?”

“I’m in the body copy of a bloke who kept getting burgled. I had to help him out before they locked him up.”

Jusdi’s modus operandi was to change into a copy of whichever person needed some help. He had done this several times over the past year. However, sometimes he was able to help from afar also, without becoming visible at all.

“Locked him up? Why the heck would they lock him up?”

“I told you, they are quite mad. He would have attacked the burglars sooner or later and they would have locked him up for that.”

“Geesh, I can see why you’re busy. They are a strange lot down there.”

“Yes, I’ve had some challenges over the years. D’y know they even sack people from their jobs for telling the truth?”

“No, go on, tell us about it.”

“Well this is the latest one. There was this woman, Jennifer, who worked in a children’s home. She complained that a visiting doctor was assaulting the girls.”

“How did she know? Was she right?”

“Well initially one of the girls told her about it. She was a bit skeptical—some of those kids are practically psychotic, and many have learned to be dishonest. This girl, Leanne, had a history of petty crime since her Mother died when she was six. At this time she was fifteen and a bit of a hard case apparently. Jennifer is the sort of woman that the kids confide in. Not a soft touch, but a sort of kindred spirit. She too grew up in various homes. Anyway, Jennifer decided to keep a

closer eye on this doctor, and sure enough, the next time he came, he said he must examine some of the girls including Leanne. The doctor was a tall imposing African, who would brook no opposition or questioning. He said Jennifer had no business to ask him why he needed to examine the girls. Wasn't it obvious? He was a doctor and was checking up on them. Well, Jennifer decided to find out for herself. She 'accidentally' walked in to the sick room unannounced, knowing that the doctor was in there with Leanne. The doctor was assaulting the girl on the bed."

"Blimey! What did she do?"

"Well Jennifer blew her top naturally, but, as the doctor hurriedly pulled up his pants, he warned her to keep her mouth shut. Informed her that it was her word against his, that the girl's word wouldn't count as she had a record of dishonesty. He had obviously checked their files."

"So did she tell?"

"She certainly did. However, it was as the doctor had said. No-one believed Jennifer."

"How come? Why wouldn't they at least wonder what motive she could have for making up something like that?"

"The doctor said that Jennifer had once made a pass at him, which of course he had rejected. The authorities were also worried about the fact that he was black and did not want to appear racist. So Jennifer was sacked and found it impossible to get a similar job. She stacked the shelves in the supermarket for the next few months."

"So how did you manage to solve that one then? It must have been a hard one for you."

"Yes it was, but I am Jusdi and have ultimate power to order events. Leanne gave birth to a black child some months later, just after her sixteenth birthday. Jennifer took both her and the child to live with her. Jennifer and Leanne then started to take in other single mothers. They received bed and breakfast fees from the local authorities. Then they decided to start their own childcare agency. It flourished, and although

they didn't set out to get rich, this is what happened. They now have a string of private homes with many others working for them. They have been able to buy themselves a nice house and garden and a villa in Italy. Leanne now has a boyfriend who knows the whole story and they are very much in love. Jennifer is happily running the business and it seems she has at last found her true niche in life."

"What about the wicked doctor then?"

"Well his wife found out about her husband's activities, and contacted a witch doctor. She had him put a voodoo curse on her husband, to make him unable to continue to attack children in this way. With a little help from me the curse worked."

"So what happened?"

"Well, there was a freak accident. The doctor was attending a house call, which was in a large house just outside town. In the vast hallway were various suits of armour, and ceremonial swords adorned the walls. The doctor slipped on a rug and skidded into the nearest wall. He landed on his back with his arms and legs akimbo. As he came to a stop, one of the ceremonial swords 'fell' off the wall, and his manhood was sliced off, and one of his legs was almost severed. It was said that he was lucky to escape with his life!"

"Oh wow! Talk about poetic justice!"

"No, no. Divine justice. That is my full name, Jusdivinium. That means Divine Justice in an older language."

About the Author

Wendy is a new writer from the UK. Former college lecturer, now partner in family business but semi-retired.

LOLA

by Jessica Ebacher

I was sitting at a table, tucked back into one of the deep, smoky recesses, sipping my Shirley Temple when she walked in. Lola. A beautiful vamp. Long, thick black hair, slim legs, and sharp fangs. Her bite was much worse than her bark, and oh how I loved that bite.

Her short red dress clung to every curve of her body, flowed over her hips and breasts as she leaned back against the bar, turning her head a little to the side to order. I stood, wending my way through the crowd and around the tables to the bar. When I arrived at her side, I grabbed her arm, spun her around.

When she saw who I was, immediately she raised one long nailed hand to slap me, full across the face. I caught the hand before it could begin to descend, though, and held it there.

Finally she dropped the hand, and turned to get her drink from the bartender, Charlie. She gave him one of her famous smiles, one that made her blue cat eyes shine and Charlie rise up on his toes. The smile slid off her face as she turned back to me, and spoke in lushly sibilant after taking a sip on her drink.

“What do you want, fur ball?”

“I heard you were coming here tonight, and I wanted to see you.”

Her eyes flashed, and her voice became a hiss. “I don’t like you checking up on me. I go where I want, and unlike you, I am welcomed anywhere I care to go. I am not a private dick who cannot keep his dick private.”

“Now wait a minute—” I grabbed her again, spinning her into my arms and not noticing that I knocked her into several other people clustered around the bar, or that her thick, red drink splashed from her glass onto the floor and those same people. I didn’t notice, but apparently someone else did, for a moment later my arm was taken into a very tight grip.

A strange, rolling, hissing, growling, spitting voice firmly told me that I could either walk out the door myself or be helped, but either way I would leave. I turned in the grip to face...

The Grendel. Or more relevantly, the bouncer. Even a wolf man doesn’t take on a Grendel—I left. Lola wasn’t that hot.

A SERENDIP EVENING

by Deb Cawley

A normal night at the Serendip, the local writers hangout where they discuss their favorite topics. References made to topics discussed lately by many of the members. Enter then, an unusual newcomer, a small dog.

A Serendip Evening

The soft scratching could barely be heard above the din of the Serendip. A hangout for writers and soon-to-be writers, business was usually brisk for at least an hour or two each evening. A fairly busy night, the clink of glasses and raised voices filled the room. The scratching came again. Grendel looked around. Again, Grendel heard the faint scratching sound. The dragon's tail moved slightly on the floor. Grendel relaxed, it was just the tail moving, he thought. They would definitely need to sweep the floor tonight.

The scratching came again, this time a bit louder. Grendel looked at the tail. It was not moving. Mystified, he glanced about the room. Scratching. He turned back to the door. Someone, or something, was scratching at the door. He leaned forward and opened it.

A small dog quickly trotted in with an indignant woof directed at Grendel. Grendel raised his eyebrows, this was a first! He watched as the dog trotted straight to the couch by the fireplace and leapt up. Digging at a pillow there, it turned several times and then curled up in a small ball of fur, heaved a sigh, and closed its eyes.

The patrons watched, then looked at Grendel to see his reaction. Grendel shrugged, and then resumed his surveillance over the bar. All resumed their conversations. For the next hour Grendel kept a close eye on the little dog that slept on the couch. Other than some muscle twitching, it never moved.

The fire gave a loud pop and the small dog finally stirred. It slowly opened its eyes and blinked. A yawn came, its mouth opening widely, a delicate small pink tongue amidst the tiny rows of white teeth. The small dog stood, then stretched. Front feet out in front, small rump high in the air, it stretched with its neck and head out low over its front paws giving another dainty yawn. Then with a shake it sat down, surveying the occupants of the room.

Grendel shook his head with a grin as the tiny creature lifted a paw and licked it, to then wash its face like a cat. Huge ears dominated the small delicate face of the dog, heavy black hair hanging like fringe off the ears. The dog's black liquid eyes quietly watched the room inquisitively as it gave itself the quick bath.

A shatter of breaking glass had the dog jump to its feet, giving Grendel a chance to study it further. Ears cupped forward, the fringe of hair falling a good four inches, the ears moved like butterfly wings, giving the dog a light dainty appearance; its fine bones adding to the illusion even more. Only about ten inches tall at the shoulder, the tiny dog was obviously no threat to anyone in the bar. The dog was mainly white, the hair silky looking, flowing almost to the couch, while the culottes hanging from the rear legs touched the couch. Black covered its ears and down around the face, leaving the nose band and a blaze of white going up between the ears. Its tail was a glorious plume of white, up

over the dog's back, and hanging down over one side dragging on the couch.

Mike, the janitor, had come up from the basement to enjoy a Dwarfven Dark. He looked askance at the small dog and then at Charlie. "When did that get in here?" He thumbed at the small dog on the couch.

Charlie smirked. "Grendel let it in. I sure am not arguing with Grendel, but you be my guest."

Mike looked over at Grendel, who raised his eyebrows in challenge. Mike sipped his dark ale, "Nah, guess I won't. But if that dog pisses or piles in here, Grendel can clean it up!"

Charlie laughed as he polished another glass. "With the smoke and lack of light, how are you going to know anyway?"

Mike glared at him, "Funnyman tonight, aren't you?"

The small dog leaped lightly down off the couch and stood a moment, studying the patrons. At each table a small argument seemed to be ensuing. Ears fluttering back and forth, it decided on a table and trotted over, then jumped into a woman's lap. It sat there quietly as the woman gently stroked it as she argued with the two men at the table. "I think you should write your story, and then let it sit a few days. Then you reread it and revise."

The man to her left snorted. "If you think that a few days is enough, then you are wasting valuable time! Let it sit at least a week or two. Work on another story, then go back to it, and read it aloud. Does it make sense still? That's using your writing time wisely."

The other man listened carefully, "I write my chapter, reread it and then post it. What is wrong with not waiting?"

The small dog could sense the argument about to ensue and jumped off the lap of the woman. It walked over to the next table. Once there, it jumped up into an empty chair and looked at the three women and the two men. They were into quite a lively debate. Repartees on verbs, adverbs, and adjectives were bouncing in the air from one person to

another. The man next to the dog laughed. "Use strong verbs and you don't need to add all the adjectives in!"

The woman to his left argued. "Adjectives give the reader a visual to latch onto! It gets boring to read a story with no adjectives!"

"I didn't say no adjectives, just that you don't need to pepper your story with them as if you are making a stew! Look at a stew, you have all these things floating in it, nothing stands out. Then look at a plate of meat, potatoes, and a vegetable. You can clearly see what is there without having to dig through it all."

The man across the table took a drag on his cigarette. "Interesting analogy. Personally, I think it is adverbs that are highly over-used."

The small dog hopped down from the chair and on to the next table, leaping up into a man's lap. The man jumped up. "What? Who let a damn dog in here?" The small dog lifted its lip at the man before turning its back and heading on to the next table. A young man laughing at the scene patted his lap. "Come on little beauty, you can sit on my lap." The small dog jumped up placing her front feet on the man's chest, and gave his cheek a quick lick. Then she settled down to listen again.

The young man slowly ran his hand down the small dogs back without realizing he was, as he picked up the conversation where he had left off. "I cannot force myself to write everyday! I write like some third grader when I do. I just can't come up with the ideas."

The woman across from him scowled. "How can you even begin to give your brain the exercise it needs if you don't write everyday? The brain is a muscle, it needs to be exercised to get stronger."

The small dog hopped down again. She looked around and headed off towards the dartboard where two men were playing.

The older man tossed the dart, grinning at the younger one as it struck a bulls-eye. "Let's see you follow that! And as to making outlines, how can you know where you are going if you don't have an outline?"

The younger man took up his dart and carefully aimed. He threw it and frowned as it hit just off center. "I can't write an outline. Even when I do, the story never comes out as I planned it." He looked at the older man. "My stories write themselves. The characters take me where they want me to go, not where I think they should go." He shrugged and went up to retrieve the darts. "To each his own, I guess. You know what really bugs me? The use of the wrong word. Spellchecker is wonderful to catch a misspelled word, but it is up to the writer to reread his work, or have someone else do it for them to find the words that are the wrong one, like piqued, peaked, or peeked. That kind of stuff when I am reading or criting drives me insane!"

The older man nodded, "Me, too. Another thing is when I critique a story for someone who says they will do crit for crit, and then they never ever critique a story for me."

The younger man nodded. "I know, it drives me crazy, too. I go to check on my story and see that it has been viewed thirty-seven times, and only three times did someone actually take the time to then tell me what they thought. I mean, if it was so terrible they couldn't get through it, I'd like to know that, too. Maybe it just didn't interest them. I can understand that. Maybe it was too long and they didn't have enough time, heck, there has to be some reason they just left it and moved on to another."

The small dog hopped back down and walked around the room some more, stopping at various tables, but not joining any. Thirsty, it went up to the bar and jumped up on an empty stool. Charlie looked at it questioningly.

The air around the dog began to shimmer. The Serendip grew silent as each noticed the strange phenomenon happening at the bar. The shimmer of air grew stronger, distorting the view of the small dog, as a bright light began at the top and slowly cascaded down. As the light descended the shimmering air above it began to reveal a woman where once the small dog had sat. Long silky, black hair tumbled to her waist. Liquid black eyes in a delicate heart shaped face took definition. The

light reached the bottom revealing a small delicate boned woman, a soft smile on her face.

“Evening, everyone.” Aislinn turned to Charlie, “a Dwarven Dark, please.” She turned and smiled, one eyebrow lifted at the man who had dumped her from his lap. “You just never know, do you...”

About the Author

Deb Cawley, a life time writer of stories who finally decided to actually try to publish some and found a wonderful group to help her. She makes her living by teaching, bills do have to be paid. She is currently working on a young adult fiction, “Dreamcasters.”

INTERVIEW WITH THE... WELL, YOU KNOW

by Melinda Kimberly

It had been a long damn day.

Blinking against fatigue, Melinda put on her trench coat and rose from her seat at her desk in her office. Her new black-and-white kitten, Quattro, perked up and bounded after her, almost tripping her on the stairs.

As soon as she stepped outside, she closed her eyes and sighed in satisfaction as the murky, muggy mid-summer air turned to a cool English fog. When she opened her eyes, the smooth cobbles of Stratford-Upon-Avon gave firm reassurance beneath her feet. She began to pick her way through quaint alleys to find the entrance to the legendary Serendip.

“Evenin’, Lady,” said a soft voice.

Melinda turned to see Justice caressing Quattro’s head. The kitten’s black fur melded into the dark vestments of the vampire. Melinda was amused at the thought of meeting one of her characters in a darkened alleyway. “You like cats,” she remarked.

Justice chuckled. “No, Lady. YOU like cats. I reflect you, so it’s no surprise I do as well.”

Melinda smiled at the irony of the vampire's astuteness. "And so you come to the crux of the problem."

"Aye, Lady," the vampire replied. A stray wisp of ebony hair freed itself from the tight braid as she bent to nuzzle the kitten. "He's adorable. Thank 'ee for bringing him." She set Quattro down. Melinda waggled her fingers and the white-footed little beastie trotted over and maued to be held.

Justice waited with absolute stillness, watching with eyes like the sea at night.

Melinda smiled as Quattro purred loud enough to rumble her breastbone. "I don't know what to do with you. Mekka and I were comparing notes the other day. I just don't feel qualified to tell anything about you."

The silence of motionlessness enveloped Justice. She considered the dilemma for a moment, then cocked her head. "I have little good counsel for ye, Lady. But, being mortal, perhaps a bit of refreshment would do ye good." The sign for the Serendip seemed to appear out of nowhere above her head, swinging on its horizontal mounting pole.

"You've been hanging out with Maestro, haven't you?" Melinda teased. The lines around Justice's eyes barely creased. Quattro squirmed to be putdown. When Melinda obliged, he trotted into the bar, his tail waving like a plumed quill.

Meg was polishing glasses at the bar. She spat into one and rubbed it down. She grinned as Grendel took Melinda's trench coat. "Welcome, ladies! Hmm, an author with a mind of her own and a vampire. Lemme guess: one Cat's Meow and a non-vegetarian Bloody Mary."

Melinda glanced around as she and her ebon-tressed companion sat down at the bar. "Where's Charlie?"

Meg pulled a heavy mug of a dark-reddish liquid from beneath the bar. "Night off." She took another steaming mug from beneath the bar. Melinda's mouth watered at the familiar smell of chocolate, ginger and soy. Meg smiled. "I told Charlie to go conjure himself a basketball

court and play a little one-on-one dream team stuff with himself instead of worrying about all us saps.”

Melinda wrapped both hands around her mug. “You’re sweet, Meg.” She glanced at Justice. “You want to do the honors?”

The vampire raised her glass to the shadowy figure in the corner. “Strange friends in strange places. May chance meetings bring joy and enlightenment to us all.” She took a deep draught of her glass.

“Hear hear,” Melinda replied, sipping her own beverage.

Mr. Redley might have tipped his hat, if he had one.

“Now then,” Melinda began, setting down her mug. “Let’s get down to business. I don’t know how to write you because I don’t know who you are.”

Justice almost smiled. “A common complaint.” She leaned forward on her elbows. “Where was I born?”

Melinda fidgeted. “I’m not sure yet. England someplace.”

“Who was my father?”

“A merchant?”

“Of what?”

“Ummmmmm.” Melinda wracked her brain. “Fine fabrics.”

Justice shrugged. “Expensive and risky business in the 16th century. Who were his investors, that he could continue to seek profits?”

Melinda didn’t have a pat answer for that one, so decided to turn the tables. “What are your hobbies?”

Justice blinked. “Hobbies?”

Melinda took another sip from her mug. “Fun. What do you do for fun?”

The ethereal being before her looked vaguely puzzled. “Last I checked, Lady, I served the Goldsmiths as their personified system of defense.” She seemed intrigued at Melinda’s suggestion. “Do vampires HAVE fun?”

“You must.” Melinda thought about it for a moment. “What about Michael?”

A smile finally reached Justice's eyes at the mention of her fiancé. "He's a lovely lad. I thankee for him."

Melinda wrinkled her nose at her creation. "You know what I mean. Do you ever pose for sculptures for him?"

If she'd been mortal, a flush would've colored the pallid cream of Justice's cheek. "I'd rather not say."

Melinda leaned forward, fixing Justice with a piercing gaze while resting her chin on her folded hands. "Look. I don't want you to be Maestro in a dress—"

"I never wear dresses."

"Don't interrupt." Melinda paused long enough to take a thoughtful swig of hot not-chocolate. She realized that Justice had finally shown signs of a personality. "You don't wear dresses?"

"Not in a hundred years at least. Bloomers before that. More sanitary."

Melinda was suddenly listening. "You're fastidious?"

Justice laughed, a sweet, ringing sound. "To a fault." Quattro leaped up onto the vampire's lap with a mighty effort. As she began to stroke his fur, her hands shrunk from the long-fingered gothic ideal to stubby-ended but functional hands of a woman who works for a living. "I've seen too much pox and bad air in my time to tolerate untidiness."

Melinda conjured herself a notebook and plumed pen. "But you're a vampire. Doesn't that make you disease-proof?"

Justice grinned. "Would that were true, Lady. I cannot be killed by mortal means, but I suffer the evils effects of night vapours as much as the next mortal."

Melinda suddenly had images of a head-cold which could last for centuries and scribbled notes to herself.

The hand stroking the kitten stopped for a moment. Justice looked up with eyes that had ceased to be a definable color. A spattering of freckles spread across her snub nose. Her eyes warmed to something that might have been a muddy green. "It's not so bad as that, Lady. I'm seldom laid low by such things." She glanced down at the kitten. "Poor

little puss. In earlier times, only his white gloves and nose would've saved him. Black cats are unlucky, you know. The servants of the Devil." She looked up. The dark of her hair lightened to bright copper and rebelled against the braid. Within moments, a mass of ringlets surrounded her face. "Like redheads."

Melinda grinned. "You DO reflect me, don't you?"

"P'raps, Lady, but I also reflect me." Justice winked. "If I'd been the morose creature you envisioned when you were fifteen, I'd have been terminated long ago by those who believe what the preachers say. Perhaps a bit of wit and unusual looks would serve me well." A faint touch of pink gave a more healthy pallor to her cheeks.

Melinda smiled, more intrigued by the moment. "I like what you've done with your hair."

Justice gave a girlish grin that revealed twin dimples. "Satan's own, I guess. I've dyed it black on occasion, sometimes blonde too. Fortunately, this is not the only century where pale skin has come back into vogue. At least now I don't have to hide the freckles." She smiled over the rim of her glass as she drank the last of the Bloody Mary.

A gentle tap on Melinda's shoulder made her turn. Miranda, smiling, handed her author a deck of cards. Grinning, Melinda took them and looked back at her other creation. "So do you play gin-rummy, Justice?"

Justice stroked Quattro's head, considering. She brightened after a moment. "As a matter of fact, Lady, I do not. "Her grin revealed elongated incisors. "But I am positively lethal at poker."

RIEBALD THE IMPETUOUS

by Joshua Rode

Riebald the Impetuous stumbled through the door and held his arms out in front of him. “Home!” he cried happily.

Giving little heed to the heads nearby that turned and looked at him, he ran off through the tables, this way and that, veering left and right, peeking into every crevice and corner he could find. Sudden cries of alarm and anger followed him wherever he went as he stumbled heedlessly past tables and chairs of writers, characters, reviewers, and even an odd editor or two. He had made it through roughly half of the building’s many dark and purportedly private corners, interrupting secret conversations and insistent haggling, and by the time he made it to the bar, most of the business had come to a halt—all eyes in the room were on him, although he failed to notice.

In his state of ecstasy, he didn’t even notice the fairly hard to conceal figure of Grendel, as the sometime-bouncer stepped up behind him. He did notice, however, when a large hand was placed on his shoulder.

Riebald looked back, and then up, and the large, blurry mass in front of him. “Hello, there,” he said in a high-pitched warble. “I say,

could you me where the restroom is? I'm having a devil of a time in here."

"I noticed," Grendel agreed. "So did everyone else. Did you lose your glasses, or something?"

"Oh, no, I don't need glasses," Riebald responded. "Perfect vision, y'know, 50/50."

"Indeed," Grendel said. "That much is obvious. How did you get in here?"

"I was just biding my time upstairs, don't you know, when I ran across your janitor."

"You know Mike?" Grendel seemed surprised.

"Well, I can't say I know him, exactly. I happened to notice him sliding through a hidden doorway, and I must admit my curiosity was aroused."

"Our doors aren't hidden, really, but we don't care to advertise them, either." Grendel said. "Now, about..."

"Well, I followed him down, you see," Riebald interrupted as if he hadn't heard Grendel speaking, "and I thought to myself, 'Now this looks like a fascinating place! I best have a look around!' You know, you can't judge a room by first impressions. My granny told me that."

"Yes," agreed Grendel, "now..."

"And once I was in," Riebald continued, "I just had to see everything. Inspect every corner, don't you know."

"Yes, that's what I wanted to talk to you about..."

"And absolutely lovely corners, too. Why, you wouldn't believe the people I saw! Warriors, and mages, princesses and zombies, elves, sprites, a couple of werewolves, and I do believe I even saw a giant, carnivorous chicken."

"That was Fred. He's had a little too much Tangeryian ale, and lost control of a polymorph spell. Now, may I..."

"This is exactly the sort of place I have been looking for. I may just stay here. Do you have rooms?"

"Now, look..."

“I don’t even need a room,” Riebald chatted on. “Just a cot, right in front of the fireplace would do. Do you have a midnight buffet? I get a little peckish around elevenish, and I...”

“That does it!” Grendel snapped. He scooped the little man up in his huge hands and strode to the front door. “Get out!” Grendel yelled. “And don’t come back until you know how to act!”

And thus did Riebald become the first to be ejected from the Serendip for failing to read the back stories before making his presence known.

RIEBALD RETURNS

by Joshua Rode

After I finished the first Riebald story, the little guy kept popping back up, asking for more. I resisted for awhile, but he's a stubborn fellow, so I finally gave in and wrote him another. This story also shows that the Serendip is open to characters of all kinds—not just the nice ones.

Riebald Returns

Riebald poked his head inside the door of the Serendip and looked cautiously around before nervously sidling in. He paused for a moment, adjusting himself to the gloom, then started toward the bar.

“Back again, are you?” A voice boomed behind him.

Riebald jumped, then froze.

“Um, y...yes sir,” he stammered, not wanting to look at the green monstrosity he knew stood behind him. “I...I've read the back stories,” he said. “Or at least some of them. I know how to act now.”

“I'm sure,” Grendel responded sarcastically. “I'll be watching you. Don't go poking your head into private corners or I'll rescind the ban on weapons for tonight.”

“Oh, no, of course, sir,” Riebald hastily agreed. “I'm just going straight to the bar.”

“Very well.” The bouncer folded his massive arms over his chest and resumed his vigilant watch.

Riebald breathed a sigh of relief and moved quickly toward the bar, trying to keep his eyes in front of him, even when he thought he glimpsed a purple unicorn prancing on a table. He kept his eyes so resolutely on the bar, in fact, that he didn’t notice the dragon tail sitting on the floor in front of him until he had tripped over it and crashed to the floor. He felt his cheeks flushing as he climbed back to his feet and found himself the center of attention once again.

“Er, sorry everyone,” he said. He made his way to the bar among titters from the audience, and seated himself on a stool red-faced and shaky.

“What’ll you have?” the bartender asked.

“Um, I don’t know,” Riebald answered with a start. “What have you got?”

“Everything. You name it, it’s here.”

“Oh. Ah, well, I’ll just have a...um, whatever that guy’s having.” He pointed at a dwarf sitting a few stools down who was busily slurping down a purple-colored drink.

The bartender looked at the dwarf, then sized up Riebald quizzically. “A Moonbeam Lager?” he queried. “You must be braver than you look.”

“Er, I suppose,” Riebald answered, too nervous to back out of his order.

The bartender shook his head and turned away. Riebald took a deep breath and blew it out, rubbing his hands. So far, so good, he thought. At least he hadn’t been kicked out again.

It took only a moment for the bartender dropped the Lager in front of him, and Riebald looked down at the murky liquid for a long moment before picking the cup up in his shaking hand. This time he knew to tip his drink to Mr. Redley. The bartender threw an encouraging smile, and Riebald smiled back and took a sip.

Fire ran down his throat and into his stomach, and he gasped for breath as his entire body burst out in sweat. The bartender laughed as Riebald choked over the drink.

“Here, pal, try this,” the bartender finally said, handing Riebald a small amber vial.

Riebald didn’t question the order, just sucked down the clear liquid inside. Immediately the fire inside him was quelled, and he collapsed on the bar with a relieved sigh.

“Quite a rush, Huh?” a rough voice said beside him. Riebald peeked over his folded arm and found himself facing the grinning dwarf.

“Um, yes, I suppose,” he answered weakly.

“Don’t see too many humans drinking Moonbeam,” the dwarf continued. “Most can’t handle it.”

“I see why,” Riebald agreed.

The dwarf stuck out a large, rough hand. “Name’s Tau,” he said.

Riebald shook the hand carefully. “I am Riebald,” he said.

“Good to meet ya, Rie,” Tau slapped him on the back. “How ’bout another round? On me.”

“Oh, I don’t know...” Riebald started, but the dwarf had already summoned the bartender, and soon Riebald found himself holding his Moonbeam Lager in one hand and another amber vial in the other.

“A toast!” Tau stated, holding his cup in the air. Riebald hesitantly followed suit as the dwarf continued, “Here’s to us!” So saying, he took a gigantic swallow from his cup. Riebald cautiously sipped his, hoping to keep the effects to a minimum, but even the little bit he swallowed lit his body like a torch. He hastily downed the contents of the vial, and once again collapsed in relief.

“No, no, you’re doin’ it all wrong,” Tau complained. “Ya gotta hold it in for awhile, let the fire cleanse ya. Ya wait until the last second, when you’re sure you can’t bear it any longer, then ya hold it just a moment more. Then ya drink the antidote.”

“Ant...antidote?” Riebald repeated.

“Aye, antidote.” The dwarf looked at him skeptically. “Don’t ya know what Moonbeam’s made of?”

Riebald shook his head. “No, I don’t,” he replied.

“Well, slap me on the head and tickle me uncle!” the dwarf responded. “You must be the stupidest human alive!”

“I am beginning to feel that way,” Riebald agreed. “What is... oonbeam made of?”

“Well, it’s an admixture of various things,” Tau answered. “A little bit of rock viper venom, some guano, a touch of Amberellyn vampiric-albatross blood—very hard to get, that—and the most dangerous poison in the known universes, FD&C Red number 5. Add a little Bailey’s and some Triple Sec, and bam! You’ve got yourself one *#@& of a drink!”

Riebald nodded and stumbled to his feet.

“Hey! Where ya goin’?” Tau asked as Riebald wobbled his way toward the door. “Ya haven’t hardly even touched your glass!”

“Well, you know,” Riebald answered, “I think I’ve had enough to drink for one night. Have a nice evening.”

“Well, sure, you too,” the dwarf called after him. He watched as the human stumbled to the door and exited the building.

“Why’d you tell him that?” the bartender asked.

“What’ya mean?” Tau asked innocently.

“You know very well that Moonbeam is simply whiskey with purple food coloring.”

“Well, sure,” the dwarf agreed cheerfully. “But if I told him that, he might have finished his. Now I get to drink it!”

The bartender shook his head. “You also know very well that the drinks are free,” he responded. “You could have just ordered another one for yourself.”

“Well, what would be the fun in that?” the dwarf queried angrily.

The bartender merely shook his head and moved on down the bar, while Tau sat back on his stool and watched the room for more victims.

RIEBALD AND THE DISC OF POWER

by Joshua Rode

Riebald really is full of curiosity about his world. Frankly, it's a wonder he has survived this long. Tian is from a book that my friend Heather Williams is hoping to get published, and is used by permission (thanks, H!).

Riebald and the Disc of Power

Riebald sat on a stool at the bar and discreetly surveyed the room. The usual conglomerate of disparate characters, authors, et al filled the place, and Riebald was fascinated by the various people (and not-quite-people) he saw.

The sound of the door opening behind him caused Riebald to look back curiously, just in time to see a woman enter the bar. She hung a curious metallic disk on the weapons rack and, stepping lightly over the dragon's tail, moved toward the bar. In just a few seconds, she was standing next to Riebald.

"Excuse me, bartender," she called out.

Charlie turned toward her with an inquiring expression on his face.

"I'm looking for the Heather Williams party," the woman told him.

"Ah, you're Tian, right?" The woman nodded. "Yeah, they told me to look for you. Your party is in one of the private rooms, right through that door."

"Thanks," Tian replied, and started away.

"Hey!" Riebald called out cheerfully. She turned back. "Is that a frisbee?"

"What?"

"That disc you hung on the wall," Riebald said. "Is it a frisbee?"

"Frisbee? What is that?"

"A game using discs like yours. You toss it to someone, and they catch it and toss it back. It's fun!"

The woman laughed at him. "No, it's not a 'frisbee'. If I tossed that to you, it would cut off both of your hands when you tried to catch it."

"Oh." Riebald found himself turning red. "Well, that doesn't sound like as much fun," he admitted lamely.

The woman laughed again. "No, I didn't think so." Still chuckling, she disappeared through the door to the private rooms.

Riebald watched the door close, then looked at the disc hanging on the wall. He felt an urge to touch its smooth metallic surface, and after several nanoseconds of resistance, got up from his stool and walked to the weapons wall. He studied the disc carefully, enjoying the way the light reflected off its shiny surface, then, after looking around to make sure he wasn't being observed, he reached up and took the disc down.

It was lighter than he had anticipated, but the edges were much sharper than he had imagined. He held it carefully in both hands, twisting it gently, watching the reflections chase each other across the circumference of the disc. He held it in one hand and pretended to throw it, making a whooshing sound as he imagined it flying effortlessly through the air.

The edge of the disc nicked his hand, cutting him sharply, and he cried out, "Ow!" and loosened his grip. The disc immediately sang from his hand, careening off the weapons wall and bouncing across the

room, leaving a trail of blue energy in its wake. The room was soon filled with cries of alarm as the disc continued on its journey, rebounding off walls and ceiling, floor and tables. Everyone in the room huddled on the floor, hands and shields protectively covering their heads as the disc hurled ever faster around the room, cutting plaster chunks from the walls wherever it hit.

The door to the back rooms slammed open, and Tian stormed out, anger etched in every inch of her body. As the disc approached her, she snatched it out of the air and hung it back on her belt. A collective sigh went up from the crowd as they climbed back to their feet. Riebald stood with knees shaking as Tian focused an angry scowl at him before turning on her heel and disappearing back through the door, which she left quivering behind.

“Er...sorry about that, everyone,” Riebald called out. The other patrons merely frowned at him before turning away.

Riebald walked slowly back to the bar and sat down on his stool, leaning his shaking elbows on the counter. Charlie walked up to him, wiping down a dust-covered glass.

Riebald looked at him.

“I think she likes me,” he said.

RIEBALD SPEAKS OUT

by Joshua Rode

Ask any writer, and they'll tell you that characters sometimes have a mind (and a will) of their own. Such is the case of Riebald, who started out as just a silly character for a silly story, and has since grown into...well, a silly character in four silly stories. That's still three more sequels than I ever imagined he would get. This story is a good example of what happens when a character thinks he's bigger than the story.

Riebald Speaks Out

Riebald entered the smoky Serendip, and...

"Hey! Excuse me! Hey!" Riebald suddenly called out.

There was a pause.

Are you talking to me?

"Yes, I am. You're the author, right?"

Yes. What do you want?

"Well, I'm allergic to nicotine, don't you know. Could you do something about this smoke?"

Do something about the smoke. This is a bar, you know. And I can't control other author's characters—they're allowed to smoke if they want.

“I know, but I’m dying down here. Could you at least add a little ventilation?”

Fine.

The spud-powered ventilation unit kicked in, and all of the nicotine-related smoke was swept from the room.

“Looks like there are some people enjoying other recreational smoking items,” Riebald commented.

They’re allowed to. Here, anyway.

“Well, sure, I know, but help me out. Please? I can hardly even see.”

Sigh. If I clear the room of smoke, will you stop interrupting the story?

“Oh, of course, old chap,” Riebald responded. “I didn’t mean to get in the way.”

The spud-powered ventilation system kicked into high gear (sorry about the extra work, Mike), and soon the air was as clean and fresh as a mountain breeze. Riebald continued on his way...

“Um, excuse me again,” Riebald said.

Now what?

“Well, I’m afraid of heights, don’t you know. Does the air have to smell like a mountain?”

You’re not actually *on* a mountain. The air is just fresh, like mountain air is supposed to be.

“Yes, I understand,” Riebald explained, “but this reminds me so much of that fateful trip I took with Jack and his sister.”

There was another pause. A long one.

You mean Jack and Jill?

“Yes, that’s them. Lovely people, but it’s too bad what happened to them. They were climbing a mountain, you know. I was there with them, but I’m never mentioned, you see, because I didn’t fall.”

You didn’t.

“No, just them.”

As I recall from the poem, they were climbing a *hill*, not a mountain.

“Well, sure, the rhyme *says* hill, but that’s just poetic license. They had to make it rhyme with ‘Jill’, don’t you know, so they changed the facts just a little bit. But I assure you, it was much more than a hill. It was in the Alps—Mt. McKinley, I believe.”

Mt. McKinley is not in the Alps.

“Well, the Pyrenees, then, I don’t remember. The point is, I have a terrible fear of mountains.”

Fine.

The air lost its mountain-like edge, and settled into a comfortable, air-conditioned, humidity-controlled freshness.

Anything else you’d like?

“Well, now that you mention it, how come I’m not in your book?”

What?

“You know, the only place you write about me is in these silly little Serendip pieces. I want to be out there, in the wide world, chasing dragons and rescuing damsels in distress!”

How cliché of you.

“Speaking of damsels, how about bringing back that lady from the previous story? Tian, right? I think she has a thing for me.”

First of all, Tian is not my character. I just borrowed her for awhile. Secondly, she thinks you’re a silly boob—she is not at all interested in you. If you’re so into having things your way, why don’t you write something yourself? It’s not as easy as it looks, you know.

“How do you know what she thinks of me if she’s not your character? Hmm?” Riebald smiled smugly. “You know, I think I will take your advice, even though you meant it sarcastically. I *will* write my own story! And it will star me! Let’s see, I need a good pseudonym. How about Riebald Caesar? No, no, Riebald Xerxes? Ooh, I like that one...”

While Riebald was muttering to himself, I brought this Tale to a merciful end.

The End

“Well, I never!”

About the Author

Josh has had stories running through his head his entire life, and has finally found an outlet for them. With a huge amount of luck, he will someday be a published author and will then be able to quit his job in the pharmacy and work on his writing full time. Well, ya gotta dream...

THE OTHER BAR WHERE EVERYBODY KNOWS YOUR NAME

by Amber Blair

Amber stepped through the tall arched doorway cautiously. She had heard of this place, oh yes, she had read the Tales. Just as she expected, Grendel rose from his chair near the fireplace and stalked towards her.

“Welcome to the Serendip. Are you sure you belong here?”

“Well, of course. I am a writer.” Amber replied as she lifted her chin and glared haughtily.

“You young ones, you’re all the same. Thinking you’re the next Stephen King or something. Come in and have a drink, see if time doesn’t change your attitude.”

Amber blushed deep into her mohair sweater and turned towards the bar, pulling the notepads in her hands close to her chest. She slipped onto a barstool with an attempt at grace next to a stone-faced man with a shifting cloak. The Coors were singing *Breathless* in the background.

“Good evening to you. What are you having tonight?” Ellen the bartender asked as Amber licked her lips and tugged on her left earring.

“Do you have Corona? And not the Light. I hate light beer. With a lime, of course.” She laughed, trying to settle her nervousness and excitement. Ellen just smiled and pulled a frosty beer out of the cooler. Amber called out thanks to the air, not really sure where the infamous Mr. Redley was.

“Cool hair. Is it natural?”

“Are you kidding me? I paid over \$100 to get these kool-aid red streaks. Thanks, though. Have you seen a girl here, early twenties, raven dark hair, green eyes, sort of snotty? I’m waiting for her.” Amber looked around, noticing the main room had filled to near capacity with all sorts of delightful creatures. “I don’t really know anyone else here yet,” Amber added as an afterthought.

“Besides you? No, we don’t usually get characters from Harlequin romance novels in here.” Ellen smiled to let her know she meant no real harm with her comment and walked to the other end of the bar to serve some literally spineless men. Amber placed her elbows on the bar and stuck out her bottom lip. It’s not bad writing to have a dark-haired green-eyed lovely as your heroine, she thought to herself. They do exist, you know.

As if the thought willed her into existence, Raven breezed through the front door of the establishment. She blew Grendel a kiss and headed straight for the bar. She had been here before.

“My dearest Amber, I have been looking forward to our evening together since the sun rose this morning. I do believe we have some things to discuss,” Raven said with a smile as she pulled a cigarette from the folds of her silk dress and grabbed a book of matches from the bar.

“What are you doing?!” Amber shrieked. “You can’t smoke! You’re not even supposed to know what a cigarette is!”

Raven laughed as she pulled a long drag from the Marlboro Light. “A few of your writer friends were kind of enough to let me in on the secret.”

“Give me that. I’ve been needing one of these anyway.” “Fine, have it your way. You always do in the end. Now, down to the details of business. I have been reading our reviews and I’m not sure I like what I see. These people want action, and fast. They want despair and sadness, and of course, they want a flawed heroine. As much as I hate to admit it, perhaps they are right. Someone even commented that your writing sounded like it was for young adults. I shudder at the thought. I bet you mulled over that comment all the way home from work, didn’t you?”

“Why don’t you just stick to what I write for you, okay?”

“Don’t you get snippy with me. These are all good people here at Serendip, at least the writers anyway. They just need to warm up to you. And don’t be so sensitive. Not everyone likes a good fairytale.”

“Not everyone likes a good fairytale,” Amber said in a mocking tone as she ground the butt of the cigarette into a large glass ashtray. Frank Sinatra burst into April in Paris, his voice drifting out from one of the rooms in the back. Good grief, it must be that damned karaoke machine.

“I’m going to migrate over to that handsome bald man in the corner. Would you like to come?” Raven asked with a gleam in her eye.

“No, I think I’ll have another beer or seven and see how can fix you. Be gentle. Don’t forget you were accosted by your betrothed-to-be in Chapter 5.”

“Well, I know in my heart of hearts that you’ll decide against that, so I’m pretending it didn’t happen. Good luck!” Raven called out over her shoulder as she adjusted the neckline of her dress so that no imagination would be necessary. Amber just smiled as Ellen brought her another drink. She did belong here.

About the Author

Amber Blair currently resides in Texas, moonlighting as a corporate professional until she can finish her current work in progress, a high

fantasy novel set in an alternate renaissance Italy following the life of a former courtesan and her efforts to restore the family jewelry business.

THERE AIN'T NOTHIN' LIKE A DAME

(In which John holds auditions for a female protagonist)
by John Borneman & Melinda Kimberly

John and Melinda sat at a table near the fireplace in the main lounge of the Serendip. He had placed several sheets of paper on the table in a neat stack and laid two freshly sharpened number two pencils next to the paper. He slid his cup of coffee precisely three inches to the right. Reaching across the table, his arm brushing past Melinda's face, he moved her drink, a Cat's Meow", to the left exactly two inches. Melinda pushed his arm back and looked at him quizzically. "Just what are you doing?"

"I am getting ready for the auditions. I want everything to be right."
She smiled and winked. "Nervous?"

"NO! I mean...no. Of course not. Don't be ridiculous." John ignored her question by adding some Equal to his coffee and jotting notes on the paper in front of him.

Melinda grinned. "Then why are you stirring your coffee with a pencil and scribbling furiously with your spoon?"

John hastily switched implements and glanced at the red-headed sprite sitting next to him. "Well...maybe a little nervous. I don't know

how I let you talk me into this. I was doing just fine with my Brass man and my Lincolnesque detective.”

“You let me ‘talk you into this’ because the few female characters you do have, threatened you. And you like it in here...” She waved her hand in the direction of the bar, “...too much to let your characters throw you out.”

“Now. Who’s first?”

John studied a wrinkled piece of parchment that looked like a peeled and flattened potato skin. “Hmmm. Mike the Janitor prepared my list for me, but it looks like he left it in the fryer too long.” He broke off a piece of his audition list and popped it in his mouth. He flipped the rest of it under the table where Zoë, his magic dog, snapped it up.

“I know—” John glanced all around the bar. “Ah, there you are. Grendel!” He waved at an incredible bulk lurking in the shadows of one of the Serendip’s 100 darkened corners. Grendel propped up a six foot long shank of roast creature in the corner. He used his mouth to wipe the barbeque sauce off of his hands, and stomped over to their table.

“Errrr?”, he rumbled.

“Grendel would you mind helping me out? I need someone to escort the various ladies that will be coming in for my audition. Do you know of anyone here in the bar today that might volunteer?”

“Grrrr!”

“Oh, well yes, I suppose you are the best qualified.”

“Jrrrrrr?”

“Why I’d be honored. Thank you for your assistance. The first lady should be here. Would you mind...?” Grendel lumbered towards the main door to find John’s first audition.

Melinda looked up at John. “I thought Grendel was supposed to have an excellent vocabulary? What was all that growling and er-ing?”

“Because, dear Melody-linda, it throws off the New-B’s who are reading a Serendip tale for the first time. If they then write a tale that

has Grendel unable to speak, I will know that they haven't read any of the first five Serendip Volumes." John smugged.

"You, John, are a devious man. Look! Grendel's back."

"No, Actually I think that's his front. It is difficult to tell the two sides apart." John received a hard kick from a glass slipper for that one.

"Srrrrr. Hrrrrr." The green bouncer waved his hand back toward John's first lady auditionee. A young woman ducked as the arm swooshed by and approached the table.

She appeared to be only about eighteen or nineteen. She was dressed in a frilly white dress with tiny flowers in the print. Her hair was blonde-red, straight, but very full. She had left her hair down, with two strands pulled back over her ears and tied off behind her head. Her face was light cream, with deep blue eyes and a mouth that came with a permanent pout. She moved to the table.

"Hello," she breathed. "My name is Miss Samantha Saccharin. You must be John!" She folded her hands in front of her tiny waist. This had the effect of emphasizing a very ample bosom. She giggled.

"Next!" yelled Melinda.

"Next?" John panted. "Why next?"

"No giggling, bosom heaving, jailbait allowed!"

John saw her point and reluctantly met Miss Saccharin's eyes. "Sorry, Samantha, thanks for coming." She faded into nothingness.

Grendel appeared from within dark corner number fifty-seven. Striding next to him, was a very tall, very athletic woman. She slapped Grendel on the back in appreciation or camaraderie, John wasn't sure. Her good natured smack made the usually immovable green object stumble. John and Melinda sat with mouths gaped.

Her skin was a very dark brown which, in an unexpected way, did not clash with fierce red hair and eyes the color of fire. She wore armor over her chest with a simple sky-blue headband around her forehead. She wore leather breaches, cut above the knees, with tough leather sandals her feet. She strode to the table raised a well formed, yet extremely muscular leg up and sat her foot on the edge of the table.

“So. Who’s runnin’ dis show. Youse, or da bimbo!”

Melinda looked over at John as Grendel pulled the lady soldier away kicking and screaming. He seemed to be getting the best of her, but not without some bruises.

“Brooklyn?” Melinda asked, unbelieving. “Brooklyn? Why in the world did you give that epitome of a female fantasy warrior-hero a Brooklyn accent?”

John again had to adopt his best sheepish look. “Well, actually... ’cause it was funny?” Melinda burst out laughing.

“Yes, John, that it was. That it was.” She looked around the bar and realized that Grendel had not yet brought the next lady in. She glanced over at a table near theirs. Two women were sitting and sipping on International Coffees. They both looked very much alike. They were both wearing white muslin tops with the words, ‘Old Navy’ printed on them. Dark blue shorts completed their matching ensemble and two small politely sized purses swung from the backs of their chairs. They would have been twins if not that one of the two appeared a little older than the other. Melinda nudged John and whispered. “Look! At the next table. How about them?”

John looked past Melinda’s wings toward the two pretty ladies. As the writer of this tale, he conveniently arranged better than average hearing for his and Melinda’s Serendip persona. They could now overhear the two ladies perfectly.

“Oh, thank you Daughter,” the older lady was saying. “This International Coffee is a delightful way to relax at the end of a day. I love that rich mocha flavor”

“Yes it is perfect, Mother,” Daughter replied. “I knew you’d like it. But, I ask you to come here with me for a reason. I have a very important question.” She lowered her voice. “Do you ever have days when you feel...not so fresh?”

“Eeuwwww!” John and Melinda exclaimed together. Melinda reached over and smacked him on the arm.

“Now come on! You’re not trying! Cut out the comedy.”

He rubbed his arm and smiled at her. "Okay, okay. I'll try. But every time I try to think like a woman, clichés pop out."

A deep resonant voice spoke. "Maybe I can help?"

John and Melinda both jerked their heads to the table on the right. Sitting there was a man. He was wearing all gray, but not just one shade of gray, but many different shades of gray. And the shades shifted as he moved.

He did not appear to be a big man, maybe no more than five foot ten, but he had a presence. John and Melinda saw that he was staring at them. But not staring like a nosey aunt. More like he really did care. Like he wanted to help and he knew with certainty, that he could. A large brimmed hat that was clean and neatly docked into an elegant shape sat on his head. It too was gray, but departed from his color scheme by sporting a tiny blue and green feather in the band.

"May I join you?" He stood and indicated an empty chair to John's right.

Funny, John thought, *I don't remember that chair*. He nodded at the stranger and noticed out of the corner of his eye that Melinda was nodding as well. John straightened up in his chair and broke the spell. "Yes, please. have a seat. How do you think you may help, and how do you know what we are doing?"

The stranger chuckled. "First, I must introduce myself. My name is Gil and I am a sorcerer. I specialize in glamours. I already know that you are John, and that you..." He applied a hypnotic gaze into Melinda's eyes. "...must be Melinda. Melinda placed her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands. She sighed. John leaned over to her and spit out a whisper.

"Melinda! Snap out of it!"

"You are writers, correct? And, John. You are interviewing characters for a new story? I apologize for eavesdropping. I have been sitting over there, nursing my drink, when I realized that you two were having difficulty finding a female protagonist. So, I ask again, may I help?"

He gave Melinda another glance, but then turned to look straight at John. John saw that his eyes were amber, set well spaced on both sides of a strong almost roman nose. He felt himself sinking into those eyes and understood Melinda's fascination. The Serendip was fading from his consciousness.

He snapped awake with a kick from Melinda's foot into his leg. John regained his composure and looked at Gil, although he avoided staring at his eyes for too long. "So how might you help? Do you know of any women who might be appropriate for me to use in a story?"

"Possibly.

"Or, possibly you have already found her. He looked over at a blank section of wall. But I see that I must leave. Here. I will give you this." Gil tossed an object onto the table. It bounced once and rolled toward John. It stopped at the edge of a puddle of spilled coffee. John cautiously picked up the object. It was about the size of a golf ball and white. It was firm, but not hard.

Melinda spoke. "John, turn it over." He turned it over and stared at what he saw. The object stared back. He was holding an eye. An eye with amber irises just like—

"Gil!" The man in gray stopped. He had risen from the table unnoticed, and was already part way toward the door.

"Yes, John?"

"How will this help? Is it really an actual eye?"

"You will know how it will help when the time comes. It is a piece of my power. It is an actual eye. My paternal grandfather's eye to be exact." Gil straightened his shirt cuffs and raised his hand to run it along the brim of his hat. He turned to leave again.

"Wait! I haven't found my female character? I thought you were going to help, but here I sit, and I am not any closer than before I started." John slumped down in his chair and stared at his cold coffee. Melinda patted him on the shoulder in comfort.

"But, John." A dulcet voice spoke. "Are you sure you haven't found her already?"

John and Melinda's heads snapped up at the sound of the voice. It was Gils voice, but different. Throatier. Higher.

Where the stranger who had called himself Gil once stood, was stunningly beautiful woman. She was dressed in shades of gray. She held a wide brimmed hat in her hand. She swung around to face the doorway. As she walked away from the two writers, neither.

John nor Melinda could keep their eyes off of swaying hips, long legs clad in gray silk pants, and long dark red hair tumbling down over a very, very feminine set of shoulders.

Just before she walked out, she turned around, winked at them with deep amber eyes and said with a throaty whisper, "See you later, John."

THE TIRED BOOKSELLER

by Jaime Voss

Once upon a time there was a tired bookseller who took the risk of doing something she had never done before. She joined a workshop of others who had some of the same dreams she did. Hoping this would be a safe place to try new things she posted a short story that was unlike anything else she had tried before. She knew the story wasn't perfect, but she hoped others would give her some ideas on how to improve it.

As she went through her long ten hour day in the bookstore, she wondered if anyone had read the story yet. While pulling copies of the Kama Sutra and the Illustrated Guide to Lesbian Sex out of the toddler book section in the back of the store for the tenth time in five hours, she wondered if anyone had taken the time to review the story that day. Still being new at this, these thoughts helped her through another mind numbing day.

At the end of her shift she hurried home. Still two loads of laundry and dishes to do, and then she could fire up the computer and have some time to see if anyone had read her story yet.

All her contractual obligations at an end, she logged on to the workshop and pulled up the story. Someone had already posted a review to her amazement. She opened it and started to read.

“Ouch!” she cried as a huge chunk of her self confidence fell to the ground and shattered. Her humble offering had been roasted, toasted, sliced and diced by the person writing the review. She read it again to see if she had missed any positive comments or ways to improve the story the first time. Nope, it was just as she thought. Without spelling it out the reviewer had said that the story was pretty much Completely Random Asinine Prose.

“Wow,” she thought. “Now I know why some other members of the list were wondering if anyone did helpful reviews.” She crawled off to bed for a full six hours sleep before doing it all again the next day.

Early the next morning before work, resolving to be the better person, she pulled up the review again to email the person and thank them for taking the time to review the story, even if they hated it. To her surprise, there was no email address for this ungentle reviewer. This person also had no submissions of her own on the workshop. This reviewer had sixty reviews online, but no work of her own out there. Hmm. Wondering what was going on, the bookseller read seven or eight of the other reviews this person had posted.

“Oh, I get it,” said the bookseller. “She hates everyone!” Seems that no one was up to her standards.

More reviews had shown up during the night, and it was with some degree of nervousness that the bookseller read them. These were much more useful to the bookseller. They offered ideas for improvement and they actually got the point.

Even so, it took the bookseller a few days to deal with the hostile tone she perceived in the first review. Becoming a little wiser from the experience, she resolved

1. Never to read reviews after midnight again.
2. If she was going to keep doing this, she had to find a wizard to make some dragon scale armor for her ego.
3. No one can steal a piece of your soul unless you let them.

COMPETITION AT THE SERENDIP

by Gregg Jackson

Griff entered the bar cautiously, unsure of the place.

“Hello, welcome to the bar,” said a burly barman. “Haven’t seen you here before.”

“No. I’ve peeked through the window, but I’ve never come in before.”

The barman nodded. “What brings you to the Serendip tonight?”

Griff shrugged and looked sheepish. “The competition.”

“Ah, yes, the competition. Doesn’t start for an hour. Better make yourself comfortable. I’m Charlie, by the way” said the barman.

“Griff.”

“Feel free to order some food. You’d be surprised by what’s on offer from our kitchen.”

Griff looked through a hole in the wall and into the kitchen. On the inside of this hole were orders pinned against the frame. As he looked past the cooks he could see holes on the far side of the kitchen, servicing taverns and bars in other places. Beyond one of these service holes Griff thought he could see what looked like characters from a space-port bar.

“Drink?” said the barman, pulling Griff back to the Serendip.

Griff sat down on a stool next to the bar and ordered a drink. After taking a sip, he looked around the room. There weren’t many people here right now. One guy stood at the bar with a small notepad, pen in his ear. Two or three more sat alone dotted about the room at various tables, taking notes or thinking furiously. A few small gatherings in hidden corners laughed and joked among themselves.

Griff grimaced as he looked at the fire. “Geez, you sure do have your fire hot. Are those asbestos sofas?”

“Yes,” said the barman, wiping a glass with a cloth, “they are. Sometimes the fire giants come out from behind the fireplace for a drink. It’s the only furniture we have that doesn’t burst into flame when they sit on it.”

Griff peered into the world behind the flames. “Pretty stiff drinks I imagine.”

“You have no idea...”

“Dammit, barman, turn down the fire,” came a voice from somewhere across the room.

“Hey, could you do me a favour and turn the fire down?” asked the barman.

“Sure.”

“You have to go through to the other side. That’s where the valve is.”

Griff peered into the flames once more. There did appear to be some sort of world on the other side. “Is that some kind of portal?”

The barman nodded. “You’ll need this,” he said, handing Griff a ring. Griff looked at it. “It’ll protect you from the fire. I’d do it myself, only I have got a lot of glasses to clean—I’m expecting a large party, you see. You’d be doing me a great favour.”

Griff slipped the ring on his finger. He didn’t feel any different, other than he no longer felt the heat from the fire. “What if the ring comes off?” he said. “What if a fire giant or something pulls the ring off my finger while I am in there?” he said again, more worried.

“One second.” The barman opened the optics cabinet, and took out a bottle filled with a fluorescent light blue liquid. Griff noticed that each time the barman opened the drinks cabinet, an entire different set of spirits and liquors was on display. There must have been an awful lot of drinks on offer here, thought Griff. He looked down at one of the price guides chained to the bar. It looked like a telephone directory.

“Here, drink this.” The barman came out from behind the bar with a glass. Griff took the proffered drink nervously. Should this glow in the dark? wondered Griff. “Will this stop the ring from slipping off?”

“It’ll stop you caring,” said the barman.

Griff wasn’t sure this was a healthy attitude. Oh well, just this once. He took a small sip of the ice-cold blue liquid, then necked it. It went down his throat cold, but when it hit his stomach it exploded into a searing heat. He closed his eyes tightly and clung onto the barman’s jacket with one hand. All sense of balance and orientation deserted him. A moment later, he opened his eyes, and everything looked just great.

The barman wondered off among the many tables to collect glasses, so Griff headed for the fireplace. He walked past a number of writers. One was standing, tapping her pen against her notebook. “Characterization, characterization,” the woman pondered.

There was a man sitting around the corner of the bar, leaning over a similar notepad, asking questions of his character. “Why would you do that, I wonder? Think I’ll phone one of my writing friends.”

A group tucked right in the corner, not visible from the front door, were heard debating good writing. “The plot is what makes a good novel,” said one. “Plot first, everything else secondary.”

“No, good characterisation, I say,” said another, deeper voice. “If you get your characters right, everything else just falls into place.”

“Theme. Or conflict, perhaps?”

Griff approached the fireplace. He didn’t feel hot as he lowered himself to enter. It seemed just large enough to allow him access with-

out causing discomfort. Perhaps it was like that for everyone, he thought. He stepped through to the other side.

* * * *

Torrents of molten lava flowed through a blackened, rocky landscape. Huge explosions of fire and magma shot thousands of feet into the air. Fields of flame reached upwards in an ever-futile attempt to touch the waves of burning gases, which undulated high above in an endless, cavernous sky.

Griff turned around to face the fireplace he had stepped through. Sure enough, there on the molten wall, was a dial, standing proud. It only had one setting: Hot. Griff assumed turning it back the other way would mean 'less hot'. He did so. Sure enough, as he turned the valve back, the flames near the entrance died down to cinders. Griff took one last look at the landscape behind him. Huge winged beats soared the gaseous sky. They looked like they were enjoying themselves.

Griff re-entered the bar. It had got busier. In fact, it was packed. Must be a time difference when going into the fireplace, he thought. He also noticed that the bar looked bigger. It wouldn't have fitted this many people before.

Griff walked up to one of the temporary staff. "Excuse me. Have you seen the barman?"

"I believe he's downstairs, love. See the stairs over in the corner there? Go down there."

Griff weaved his way through the crowd towards the stairs. The stairs themselves were full of seated poets.

The barman was down here, re-arranging furniture and making space. Griff walked over to him. "Oh hi," he said. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Yes," said Griff. "I have the ring you gave me."

"Oh, thanks." Charlie put it into his pocket. "Thanks for doing that for me. I've been rushed off my feet today. Couldn't spare the hours."

“Hours?” said Griff. He looked around the room. “What’s with all the props?”

“We are putting on a play.”

“I don’t remember seeing a stage-” began Griff. “Wait a minute, I see now. The walls..”

The sound of a bell ringing came from upstairs.

“That’ll be the competition., said the barman. “Better run along if you want to enter. Make your way to Grendel at the weapons rack. He’ll fit you up with what you need. And good luck, by the way.”

“Thanks,” said Griff.

* * * *

Griff made his way back across the crowded, noisy bar towards Grendel.

“You entering the competition?” shouted someone near him.

“Yes,” said Griff. “What actually is the competition?”

“The dartboard,” shouted the man, as though that was all Griff needed to know.

Griff looked at the large crowd that had gathered around the dartboard. The noise was occasionally punctuated by good-natured laughing and congratulations.

Griff finally reached Grendel at the weapons rack.

“Hi”

“Hi,” replied Grendel.

“I’d like to enter the competition,” said Griff. “The barman told me to come and see you.”

“You will need a weapon to enter the competition,” intoned Grendel.

“Okey-dokey...” said Griff thoughtfully. “Westinghouse Variable Cartridge Blaster, please.” Griff looked around the room to see if anyone recognised the model. No-one had. “Erm, Napalm Blister-

Blaster?” Still no response. He felt a little downcast, and stared at his feet. When he looked up, Grendel stood, patiently holding up a dart.

“Oh,” said Griff.

* * * *

The barman had returned by the time it was Griff's turn to shoot. Many had taken part already. The last contestant had created merry laughs for everyone with his go. Everything was good natured.

“So what are the rules?” asked Griff.

“Well, Charlie began, “There are rules on composition and rules on grammar. There are rules on characterization and rules on plot. There are rules on...but those are all suggestions, and you can violate them if you need. There's really only one rule.”

Griff waited in the pregnant silence that followed. Then Charlie smiled.

“Just give it your best shot.”

Griff threw...

THE RENOVATORS

by Greg Byrne

I called them in when the fourth regular was seriously injured and taken to hospital. Hit by a falling ceiling rafter, of all things. Of the other three to be disabled, the first had tripped on a loose floorboard, dislodged it, and fallen through the various antediluvian structures that separated the Bar from the Basement, where he had awoken the irritated Dragon, and had various nameless and delicate parts of his anatomy scorched badly. His wife had cancelled all her psychiatric appointments when she had first visited him, discovering that laughter was indeed the best medicine. To add to his misery, the pain of the nurses applying tinctures, salves and creams to the blasted organ was enough to slide him into grateful unconsciousness. Charlie, when he heard, quipped, "Well, their family was big enough anyway." A prosthesis was ruled out fairly quickly by giggling doctors, and no plastic surgeon could be found to effect repairs. The family was never told why thereafter he walked like a cowboy.

The second was only marginally worse. Grendel was the culprit this time, although he was most fixed in his account to the Authorities that he was quite within his legal rights as bouncer to Remove all Disruptive Elements, section iii, paragraph 3.a.i., line 4 of the Serendip Code, which he quoted in his wonderful Beowulfian brogue, and had the lin-

guists back a second time just to hear the Old English as she was meant to be spoke. The victim was that distasteful character from a rival publishing empire who was nosing about the regulars, talent-spotting, armed with honey-trap contracts and any amount of merchandising and movie right deals. When Grendel had a word in his ear in his native Upper Scandinavian, the talent scout jumped so high that he knocked down a chandelier and had to have it surgically removed from his ample girth where it had become irretrievably wedged.

The third was mysterious, but no less frightening for the regulars. It was the little old lady who stopped past on her way home from shopping with a copy of Mills and Boon issue #9850426 'Ravisher of Hearts' under her arm. She entered the Bar for her regular three pints of Korone Dwarven Dark Ale before watching 'Neighbours' with old Mrs Edith Mills from next door but, wandering erratically towards the door after downing the aforesaid three pints, she found herself in the path of an errant dart, and unaccountably vanished! Screams of 'Not the Prancing Pony again!' and 'I thought the One Ring was thrown into the Cracks of Doom forever!' echoed about the walls. Regulars were sure she was temporarily visiting Frodo, but she never returned. The dart game stopped immediately, and all but Mr. Redley returned to their drinks, muttering indistinctly and starting darkly at the place. In their minds, they were sure it was a black hole, and were decidedly uncomfortable about going anywhere near the place. Dart games shrivelled up thereafter, and the dart which caused the vanishing was seen spookily sliding in and out of vision at the exact mathematical centre of the dartboard with a scrap of her M and B book attached.

It was just too much! Customers weren't coming back, and the local media were starting to send their reporters around on the fiercest dragons they could find. Although nothing existed outside the serendipitous doors but a Hawkinsian non-space-time-string-theory-cosmological-constant Einsteinian thingy, still they came until the dire day dawned that the Serendip door was shut (with Mr. Redley still inside) and a sign was hung on it which read 'Closed for Repairs'.

I knew it was going to be tough. The longer the Serendip was closed, the less likely it was that the regulars would return. That night, I cried. Wept indulgently and full of self-pity. The next day, I bawled on Grendel's massive horny scaled shoulder until he shoved me unceremoniously off and demanded I do something.

So we did. Charlie, who had not gone home, had a copy of the Yellow Pages, and we looked up Renovators, right after 'Renounce your bad habits NOW!' and just before 'Renowned Nose Hair Trimmers'.

They sent a team over immediately on an exotic Turkish flying carpet, which smelled of old rope and incense and mosques, and had Grendel salivating capitalistically, and mischievously considering a "wee bit of borrowin'."

There were three of them: the boss, an Elven chappie called Elerionian, who dictated specifications to his Pentium X 20 Terabyte voice recognition handheld, a raven haired seductress who shimmied and shook and wiggled until the air itself giggled, and a wiry little fella with enormous glasses, tight green trousers he wore up under his armpits, a rotating bow tie, and a row of quills, pens, laser styluses and VERY sharp pencils in his button up button down check shirt.

'Renovators?' I huffed. 'No more renovators than I am—hey, what am I anyway? I'm the POV character here in a 1P limited omni, and I haven't even been given a name?' I decided to see the author about it, but there's a whole plane of existential systemics to overcome before we can address that one. In the meantime, I just huffed.

And the renovators went about their work, taking notes, measurements, drawing diagrams, walking around holos that projected in air, building virtual Serendips in the boss's tres funky handheld and overlaying them virtual reality-style on the actual physical Serendip. They cleared away the tables, and the seductress had our hormones in our mouths salivating worse than Grendel as she defied all known laws of thermodynamics and danced this little number that sealed up the black hole dartboard, slid out the errant dart, and had it following her like a lustful Scud for her stay at the Serendip. For a while I watched in awe,

but when nothing happened after that, and the customers didn't come back, I started watching Neighbours and reading M and B.

Life was tough. I let Grendel go visit his folk and blast some unwary Norsemen who were self-flagellating with birch branches, and Mike... well, Mike wrote spud-notes and napped, and did stuff, and he was wonderfully happy in the process. Charlie used the time to scrub the bartop, and get into all those hard to clean surfaces using a revolutionary new technological breakthrough in power cleansing his mum had given him, until Mr. Redley gave him the eye, and he stopped, mid-cleanse. When the regulars did come back (this is a foreshadowing incidentally!), many sniffed the air uncertainly, and made sad wistful comments about the homely smell of dragons breath and stale beer.

On the third day, the Elven boss man approached me.

"Verily, yea I spake unto thee," he stated in a peculiar high-pitched squeal. "We have forthwith discovered a most remarkable pattern unto this establishment."

"Eh?" I muttered, deep in profit and loss projections and cashflow forecasts. They were dire, lemme tell you. DIRE.

"A pattern," he stated. "Furthermore, we have established that it was planned according to the Laws of Doom foretold by the prophet of Old in the Years of Beginnings that The Serendip (being the *sob* nameless POV character, I could tell he was using capitals just by the way he spoke) was ordained as I will now outline."

"Ordained?" I repeated weakly. This was sounding direr than my P and Ls.

"Yea, I speak the truth," he said. I wanted at that moment to whack him with the Yellow Pages, which I had conveniently at hand, but I was intrigued by this quasi-religious stuff. Charlie, who was experimenting with a new imported Basque liqueur nearby, leaned forward eagerly as he carefully spooned in two teaspoons of powdered newts brains according to the cocktail recipe. The dragon's tail twitched microscopically, but hey! I knew the beastie was keen to hear as much as I was.

“Oot wi’ it, laddie!!” growled Grendel, who had enjoyed front row seats (actually, the entire front row) at a Billy Connolly concert, and was affecting a Scottish accent on his return to the Serendip.

“Well, it be this way,” said Elerionian. “This bar was intended as a portal between worlds, our world and the other, where oddly clad folks sit before beige chests of exotic mechanicks and magicks atop benches of work, and watch us.”

“Watch us?!” we all echoed in horror. I was sure even the Dragon squeaked sub-audibly.

“Yea verily,” squealed Elerionian. “Even as these words that I speak are being spoken, yea in the same instant, there is a person I cannot see slipping the words as though by celestial arts into my mouth.”

“NO!” we muttered in shock. Elerionian rose to the moment.

“An’ my words?” said Grendel, quivering, and hopefully, “Be it The Big Yin?”

“Nay,” declared Elerionian. “Tis another, a writer he calls himself, who speaks through wires, I have heard it said, to others throughout the world he calls Earth.”

“OOOoooooooooooooooooooooh,” said Charlie. “Sounds like fun.”

“Sounds uncomfortable,” said Grendel, squirming. “I cannae see hoo anyone could be a-fittin’ through sech narroo wires.”

And then, the moment happened. I knew one day it might, but I doubted it would be in my lifetime. But it did, and we all stopped. MR REDLEY SPOKE! Charlie spilled his imported Basque liqueur. The Dragon twitched. I coughed nervously, aware that others might not like my adverb use. Mike popped up out of the hole made by the first victim, scribbling scene-summary linkages on spud-peels, his mouth as wide as a black hole.

We waited. Mr. Redley lowered his glass, and said the words again.

“Let’s go.”

So we did, and it was a hoot. We set up franchises of the Serendip in every major city on Earth, and our P and L problems were over forever. The Dwarves made a killing out of Korone Dark Ale, and what’s more,

we became famous for the place where beginning writers wrote their first drafts, sitting at a table amid the likes of Pen, Min, Charlie (both of them), Mike (who emerged from the Basement with the complete 14 volume epic Amarath scribbled on spud peelings (the editors, while loving the story had no end of headaches joining the peelings together to make the complete tale)), and the largely unknown Greg Byrne, writer of the Ring of Calbannin, who told reporters at the launch of the epic hit movie (which outsold Harry Potter, Star Wars and Titanic in its first HOUR),

“I owe it all to the Serendip.”

Epilogue

Oh, the renovators? They fixed everything. Grendel married the seductress, and she made him into such a nice bouncer that a mere frown from him was enough to send any wrongdoer scurrying. The Elven chappie and the nerd married each other, then realised they couldn't, so they both vanished into a black hole together to study non-entropic quasi-Newtonian fractal theory

About the Author

A compulsive writer, a delighter in the sounds, shapes, textures and etymologies of words, histories of all kinds, genealogy, all things English, Tuscan and Norse, Baroque music, Mozart, Bach and the tight craft of Beethoven's 6th and 9th.

Currently unpublished, but in preparatory mode for submitting the first few chapters of 'The Ring of Calbannin' to an agent.

Married with three wonderful children, and engaged also in the noble (and equally lifelong) craft of fathering and husbanding, I steal time for writing mostly at night, and in the crevices of the day when school, swim squad, athletics, violin, orchestra, choir, church, basketball, homework, shopping and...oh...work permit.

CAREER COUNSELING

by Melinda Kimberly

Melinda fidgeted with the paper draft of Chapter 14 of *Impromptu*. She'd tried to set it aside, but it kept sprouting legs and walking back to her. Balling it up didn't help—as soon as she threw it across the room, it would pick itself up, uncrease its pages, and march back over to her. Melinda put her head on her arms, feeling frazzled instead of filmy and poetic. “I need a drink.”

“Nonsense,” replied a stern voice. “You don't drink.”

Melinda sighed even more deeply, not needing to look up. “Hello, Madame.”

The movements of the air currents around her let her know that Madame had taken up residence beside her. The older woman ordered a dry vodka martini and raised it to Mr. Redley, saying something that might've been either clipped Russian or slurred Klingon before turning back to her author. “Now then, child. I've come to speak to you about your future.”

Melinda watched her raise the glass to her lips, incredulous at this new insight into her character. “I didn't know you drank martinis, Madame.”

Black eyes sparkling, Madame chuckled. “There is a great deal you do not know about me.” She indicated the glass. “I handle Maestro's

personal and professional affairs. As such, I've learned to drink damn near anything in the course of a negotiation." She raised a sardonic eyebrow. "Strychnine is palatable with a little vermouth." Her gaze hardened. "But that's not why I'm here."

Melinda glanced over at the far table where Maestro and Miranda were making goo-goo eyes at each other. Melinda put her chin in her hand, gazing wistfully at her beloved hero and heroine.

"He's grateful, you know," Madame commented, a hint of kindness shading the steel tone.

Melinda nodded, eyes misting. "I know."

Madame set the glass down sharply. "Then why are you moping about like a first-time storyteller with writer's block?"

Remembering John's unfortunate transformation in a previous tale, Melinda genuflected. "Don't say things like that. Not here where it's so damn literal."

A low chuckle. "You worry too much." Madame leaned closer. "Answer the question."

A sharp pang of fear ricocheted around in Melinda's stomach. Looking for comfort, she watched the way the auras around Maestro rippled the air. When she closed her eyes, she could almost catch a hint of the scent of magic and roses. "What if people don't love him the way I love him, Madame?"

The corner of Madame's mouth quirked. "No one loves him the way you love him. It's impossible and unhealthy."

Fidgeting with the footed manuscript before her, Melinda clung to her self-pity and moodiness. "You know what I mean. What if they don't understand him? What if Impromptu flops?"

Madame snorted. "Then you should fire your agent when you get one, which you will."

Melinda summoned Charlie with a practiced gesture. "A Cat's Meow, easy on the Hot Sex."

Charlie decided the joke would be too easy and set about blending soymilk with the mixed liqueur. He even managed not to grimace at the bizarre concoction. “Warm or chilled?”

Scenting sharp ginger and smooth chocolate, Melinda’s mouth watered. “Warm, please.” She accepted the steaming mug, then raised it so the ceramic lion’s head faced Mister Redley. “To first time authors and lucrative book deals!”

Madame covered the mug with one hand before Melinda could sample its contents. “Before you drink yourself into fuzzy tipsiness on something with half the proof of Nyquil, I think you should hear me out.”

Melinda lowered the mug, bracing herself for the lecture.

Madame speared the olive from the bottom of her martini glass and contemplated it. “Let us assume for a moment that, due to hopeless mismanagement, your first novel is a commercial failure. What then?”

“Sell *Dissonance* to another publisher?” Melinda offered hopefully.

Madame wilted her with a glance. “If there was no market for the first of *Maestro’s* adventures, why should the sequels be valued properties?”

Melinda yearned for the half-finished character sketches and plot threads for the prequel in her office.

“Don’t even think about it,” Madame admonished. “Forget *Maestro*. Be practical. What about *The Crystal Flute*?”

“I haven’t touched that in decades.” Melinda sipped her drink, leaving a soymilk mustache.

Chuckling, Madame offered her a napkin. “You’re only twenty-five, child. You aren’t old enough to think in decades.”

“Ten years is a decade,” Melinda retorted. “I stopped writing that plotline when I turned twelve.”

“The *Mirror*, then,” Madame suggested, consuming the olive. “That would be easy to turn into a parody. It’s silly enough as it is.”

Melinda looked slightly more cheerful, her poet-sprite wings beginning to flutter again. “True.”

“And Justice is still waiting,” Madame reminded her. “You always did want to try your hand at a nontraditional vampire story.” She sipped her martini, barely wetting her lips with practiced temperance.

Melinda shook her head no. “I need more years behind me before I can write a true immortal.”

Madame regarded her with a level gaze, eyes probing. After a moment’s contemplation, she conjured a little ball of spotted fur. She placed it on the smooth wood of the bar. It mewed pitifully and uncurled, displaying oversized paws and an undersized head with black-lined eyes.

Melinda puddled. “Oh! Oh! Oh! Kitty!”

Chuckling, Madame nodded. “I thought so.” She scooped up the little fuzzball and deposited it into her author’s hands. “Melinda Kimberly, meet Seelah-Eh-Nah of the Spotted People.”

The cub looked up at her author with the clouded blue eyes of a newborn. It maued. Smiling, Melinda set it into the cloud of gossamer robes that comprised her lap. Seelah-Eh-Nah yawned impressively, curled up, and began to purr. Her heart warming, Melinda mused, “She has an awful long way to go before she’ll be ready to end the feud with the Big-Mane People.”

Madame scratched the kitten’s rounded ears. “She’ll grow into it, and the Sea-of-Grass peoples will thank her for it. You haven’t even named them all yet.” She smiled. “And in the meantime, you promised Farah to team up with her for *_Curses, Foiled Again!_*.”

Melinda paused mid-pet, her eyes widening. “Oh, bugger. That’s RIGHT!”

Sensing its cue, a presence oozed its way across the bar. It made the hairs on Melinda’s neck stand on end with its approach. The sulphur stink of pure evil sauntered over to stand behind her. Melinda stiffened as a hand brushed back the long, red tresses from her neck. “Who are you?”

A low, malevolent chuckle. “Your next project.”

SNIP SNIP

by Mike the janitor

This tale features Mike the Janitor, a member of the Serendip permanent staff and Amber, a workshop member. The snipping is in reference to Amber's frequent reminders to Workshop members to snip their notes on the Workshop chat message board. Snipping is the practice of not sending the whole original message back along with your reply comments. Without snipping, messages can grow to unwieldy size.

Snip Snip

The sound of whoosh, thunk, thunk, thunk, woke Mike the Janitor from his nap. Both the sounds and the small cloud of dust over the Hoover, was a clear sign that more spud-notes had just arrived. Scratching himself with one hand and half stretching with the other, he headed for the message system while another steady staccato of thunks began.

It wasn't really one of those pneumatic tubes with the message canisters like they used to have at drive-up tellers in the old fashioned banks back in the 21st century. Mr. Redley was a nostalgia nut and wanted one for the Serendip. So Mike had adapted the central vacuum

cleaner pipes to work like one of the antique systems. He made a quick note to himself about checking the flea markets for more type-30 Hoover vacuum bags.

Before he could get to the jury-rigged spud-note system, the access panel blew off and chunks of potatoes began piling up beside the Hoover and dust filled the furnace room. The sounds stopped and a last spud chunk rolled down the large pile and onto the floor. While coughing, Mike waved his arms, as if he could shoo away the dust. When his waving just added more dust from the top of the pipes, he stopped and grabbed his old WWI gasmask. With the mask in place, he knelt down by the pile of spuds.

The first spud chunk began with “oww-sff-chat,” scratched into the skin, but the potato was cleanly sliced just below the words. He examined another spud and found the same. The next had part of a message from one of the mailing list members, but it looked more like a reply to someone else rather than the usual work orders Mike always got. After checking all the spuds, he realized the center section of each potato was missing. Curious to solve his new mystery, he cautiously crept up the cellar steps.

The door to the main bar gave a small squeak. He froze, waiting and listening for any unfamiliar sounds. A better idea than just standing motionless on the stairs, flitted into his mind and he pulled off his boots and snuck back down for his oil can. He couldn't find it. Instead, Mike grabbed a plastic replica of a unicorn horn from the storage box of leftover party favors. He smeared a bit of green colored grease on the tip and moved back up the stairs. After greasing the hinges, he silently pushed the door open, just enough to peek out.

At a table near the bar sat a solitary figure with her back towards him. She wore a strange crown on her head fashioned from several pairs of golden scissors. Beside her on the floor, was a bucket of spud-notes. She leaned over and took one. In her other hand she held a long pair of jewel-encrusted shears. She looked at the potato, clipped off the top, took another look and snipped off the bottom. She threw

the top and bottom chunks into the pneumatic spud-note hopper, and the middle section onto the floor.

“What are you doing?” Mike tried to yell as he stepped from the cellar door to confront her, but the gasmask muted his words. “Oh!” sorry, he said and hastily hid the unicorn horn behind his back. “Didn’t recognize ya from the back...well from the front neither. Heard lots about you though. You’re Amber, ain’t you? Why don’t you rest them scissors for a sec, and maybe we can talk.”

The scissors snickered in the air as Amber gave him menacing look. “Whose character are you? What retro, alternative war fantasy story are you from? Speak English.”

“Oh, I...” Mike hastily shoved the unicorn horn into his pocket and yanked off his gasmask. He fiddled with the gasmask straps for a second, then spit in one hand and tried to smooth back his hat-hair. “I’m Mike the janitor, ma’am. Um...those don’t go there,” he said pointing at the message hopper.”

“I don’t care about those,” she said. “This is what I care about!” She used her shears to stab a spud midsection and lifted it from the pile on the floor. She held it up and waved it at him. “They just clog up the system!”

“Ahem...But ma’am, the other parts don’t go in ta my hopper. I just get the Serendip Tale spuds. You’re clogging up my system and now I have to figure out what to do with all them spuds. We can’t do baked potatoes out of ’em, and the cook says no more garlic mashed for awhile.”

“I don’t need to hear about that.” Her scissors snicked in the air again. Mike’s snipped words floated back to him as if returning from a long echo. “Not mine. Just Serendip.”

“See isn’t that better? Now go away. I’m busy!”

Mike simply nodded and then had an idea. As quietly as he could, he rolled an empty pickle barrel over to the table. He looked at Amber and simply said, “snips,” and pointed at the barrel.

Amber gave a nod of approval but did not pause in her snipping. Mike backed slowly to the stairs and eased the door shut behind him.

“Well, now what do I do with all these?” Mike asked himself as he stared down at the pile of snipped spud-notes back in the cellar. Grendel don’t want no waste. Ah,” he said and scooped the spud chunks into a bucket.

Smiling to himself, he walked to the paper shredder and flipped the switch. He used his shirttail to wipe out a second bucket and placed it under the shiny slicer. He dumped the spud-notes into the top of the shredder and watched. “There,” he said and placed the

processed spuds where the cook would find them later that night. “Oh. I better leave a note.” He pulled out his crayon and scribbled HASHED-BROWNS on the pail.

Pleased with handling yet another potential crisis at the Serendip, he went back to his nap.

About the Author

Mike the janitor is a long time storyteller, but new writer. He is working on book 6 of his epic fantasy novel, *Amarath, the Birth of Magic*. He’s also the janitor at the Serendip and lives down in the cellar behind the furnace.

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