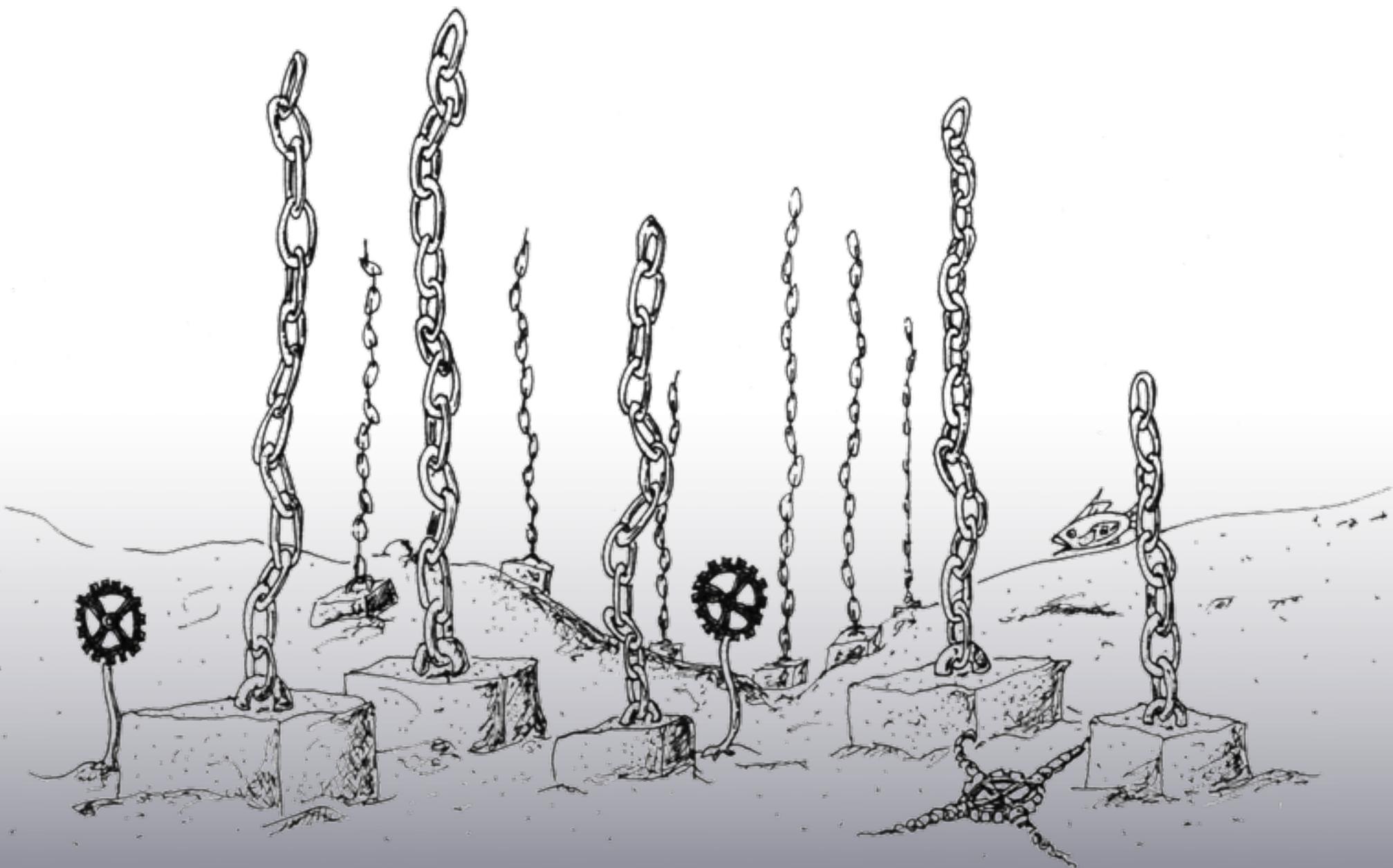


No. 1 (December 2013)

Ecdysis



Masthead

Ecdysis

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“The Opera of ‘Pacific Rim’” first appeared on the author’s LiveJournal. “[Ernest Hemingway Outside His Paris Residence](#)” (1924) courtesy of Ernest Hemingway Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston. [Coelacanth photo](#) by Flickr user Matana_and_Jes, used under a Creative Commons licence.

Editorial / Reimagining Fanzines

The problem with fanzines isn't format. It's content.

Those who persist in publishing fanzines in the era of online publishing tools are largely interested in the *fanzine as artifact*: they're deeply in love with the *format*. The content is often beside the point; they just love making, sharing and reading fanzines.

And there's nothing wrong with that. But do fanzines have to be so, well, *faanish*?

"Great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, small minds discuss people"—it's a quote attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt, though she might not actually have said it. Science fiction is supposed to be a literature of *ideas*, so why are so many fanzines focused on the social ins and outs of fandom itself? On *people at events*?

To say nothing of the column-inches devoted to defending the format itself, usually against online publications (especially blogs), and usually in the context of the Hugo Award for Best Fanzine, which said online publications appear to have no business winning. Their arguments are usually traditionalist in vein, and focus on small differences in format: the fact that fanzines have discrete issues and blogs do not is somehow important. The quality of the content, regardless of where it appears, is not.

What is going on here is nothing more than the defence of a fannish tradition that has been expressed in fanzines for decades. In [BEAM 7](#), Joseph Nicholas notes that "the focus on fan history one finds in a number of fanzines, taken together with attempts to promote the virtues of a particular form of fan activity and defence of the fan Hugos, is less about fan history *per se* than an attempt to protect and promote an older model of fandom (a model which may be perceived in some quarters as under threat of extinction from the bay-ing hordes without the citadel—a.k.a. Pop Culture Fandom, probably) and, through that, to validate their own role in it."

And there's nothing wrong with that either. But consider how this might look to people outside the fanzine community.

I've gone through a lot of the fanzines at [eFanzines.com](#), and while there *are* some gems ([Journey Planet 16](#), for example, is one of the best single fanzine issues I've seen in a while), a lot of them are frankly disappointing. Unless you share their enthusiasms, are deeply immersed in (and fascinated by) the lore of fandom, or are already in their circle of friends, these fanzines aren't always interesting to read.

To say the least, it's not a strategy for growing your audience.

The end result is a fanzine culture that is defensive with respect to sf fandom at large, and an sf fandom that is increasingly dismissive of the fanzine project. The symptoms are easy enough to spot. The two sides snipe at each other: a Hugo-winning fanzine is dismissed [by one commenter](#) as “a newsletter discussing your last vacation and a couple of films you happened to watch last month”; there are loud protests from some quarters when an online publication that is actually read by people who don’t attend [Corflu](#) makes it onto the ballot. Battle lines are being drawn, but the rest of fandom is increasingly disengaged: this year, for example, Best Fanzine got less than half the votes of Best Novel (820 vs. 1,649; see chart on page 22).

In response to that low voter engagement, David B. Williams, writing in [Drink Tank 355](#), toys with a number of ideas, including a tighter voting cohort for the fan categories, as though the real problem is that fanzines are being judged by *the wrong sort of people*: outsiders who don’t appreciate them. This is insular thinking. Insiders already have the [FAAN Awards](#); who do fanzines speak to, outside of fanzine culture? Is there any interest in finding a wider audience?

If arguments like this are being made, then the answer to that might well be *no*. As well as *and we’ve given up trying*.

Then why ask outsiders to vote on them? Why even have a Best Fanzine Hugo?

Now don’t get me wrong. I like the *idea* of fanzines, even if the format has a lot of

missed potential. And my critique of fanzines is not necessarily an endorsement of online fan writing, which in its tendency to get carried away by the latest outrage sweeping across the sf community, is problematic in its own way.

Whoever complains loudly enough about a task is deemed to have volunteered for that task. It’s in that vein that I present the first issue of my new fanzine, *Ecdysis*.

I’ve wanted to do a fanzine for a while, but I have no interest in recapitulating other forms of fan writing. I want to do something a little different. If I wanted to post book reviews, convention photos, or my opinions on the publishing business, I can already do that on [my blog](#)—in fact, I’ve been doing it there for years.

The difference between a fanzine and a blog should not simply be format—i.e., one appears on an article-by-article basis on the Web, the other comes out on an issue-by-issue basis in PDF files. It should, I think, be one of *content*: a fanzine should do things that a blog does not, or there is no point in doing one instead of a blog.

But what are those things?

First, a fanzine is—or should be—read differently than a website. A fanzine comes out in those all-important discrete issues; a website can be updated dozens of times a day. That has implications for the sort of content a fanzine can and should present. The best analogy I can think of is daily newspapers vs. newsweeklies: *Time* and *Newsweek* can’t de-

liver breaking news, but they can summarize, synthesize, provide analysis.

In the same way, a fanzine should differ from a blog in the kind and length of its content. Longer pieces rather than quick hits, presenting a worked-out argument in one article, rather than incrementally, or through links to material. Thoughtful. Considered. Polished.

Which leads to the question of how such a fanzine could be read. A magazine issue should be an immersive experience, something to be read over a period of time, rather than something picked at furtively while at the work computer. For that reason I've decided to build *Ecdysis* for the iPad, rather than print (or landscape PDFs for reading on computer screens, as some fanzines do).

Outside our little field, tablet-native publications differ from their print and Web siblings. We're seeing that in the larger media world, in small publications like [The Magazine](#) and in larger ventures like [La Presse's iPad app](#): neither is a simple port of content available on the Web *or* in print. They're *designed* to be read on tablets, and it shows in terms of their user interfaces and their graphic design.

I am neither a programmer nor a graphic designer, so I've opted for something a bit more turnkey: I'm building it with [iBooks Author](#). The resulting enhanced ebook file can be read in Apple's iBooks app on the iPad and (as of OS X 10.9 Mavericks) the Mac. (For users of other platforms, a PDF version is also available, but does not include certain interactive features like photo galleries.)

I'd also like to focus as much as possible on the *art* of science fiction and fantasy, by which I mean the books, the TV shows, the movies—the creative output of the field. Not the controversies, not the social life of conventions: these are already amply covered, thank you. I have nothing useful to add.

Nor do I want to feed into what I call the writing-industrial complex: the insatiable demand from aspiring writers for writers talking about writing with other writers. There is entirely *too fucking much* material geared toward aspiring writers and the writing life, with readers (the people for whom all this is ostensibly for) relegated to an afterthought.

Or to put it another way: we used to be such dreamers. Now we're accountants.

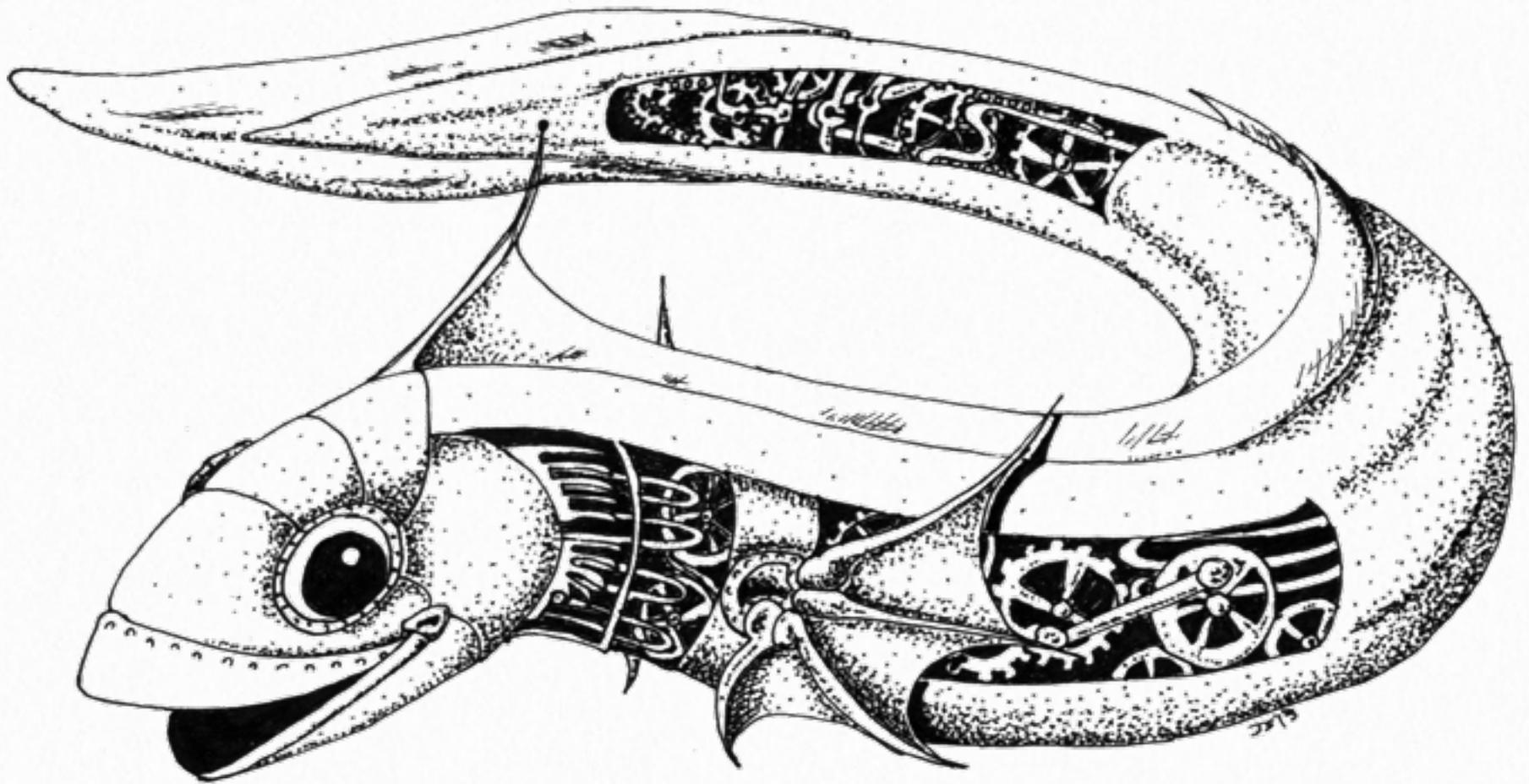
So that's the impetus behind *Ecdysis*. In practice this means a mix of serious criticism, postmodern buffoonery, and the frankly unclassifiable. (Plus graphs.)

Above all else, I wanted to create something *interesting*. Something worth reading. Something *I'd* read.

To my shock some of my friends are joining me on this errand. It's encouraging. Even more shocking: you're reading this. That's even more encouraging. Thank you.

Our first issue is heavy on the movies—Tamara has a long piece on *Pacific Rim*, and I give a brief overview of recent snake movies (the so-called “snakesploitation” genre)—and, for some reason, on fish. Future issues will no doubt obsess differently.

—Jonathan Crowe



Clockwork Fish

1.

In order to catch a clockwork fish, the scientist observes, one must be patient.

They are uninterested in food of any kind, he writes in his field diary. He makes a list—numbered, alphabetized—of the lures he has tried. Live and frozen bait, jigs and plugs, spinnerbait and swimbait. None has attracted the slightest interest from the clockwork fish, or diverted them from their regular, cyclical, predictable paths around the pond of clear viscous fluid.

He becomes uncharacteristically inventive: wind-up toys, little walking and spinning robots tied to the end of fishing line. They elicit no response.

The scientist has watched the pool for thirteen days. (He believes this to be so. He is not correct.) Not once has he seen the clockwork fish eat. They must eat; they must have some kind of sustenance. What keeps these fish going?

He did not think to bring a net.

2.

If William Paley (1743-1805) were to encounter a clockwork fish, it is likely that he would have found some other metaphor.

Paley's 1802 work, *Natural Theology, or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity collected from the Appearances of Nature*, is the

holotype of the watchmaker analogy, an intelligent design argument that the complexity of creation implies the existence of a creator. “Suppose I found a watch upon the ground,” he wrote famously. “When we come to inspect the watch, we perceive ... that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose, e.g., that they are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day; that if the different parts had been differently shaped from what they are, or placed in any other manner or in any other order than that in which they are placed, either no motion at all would have carried on in the machine, or none which would have answered the use that is now served by it.”

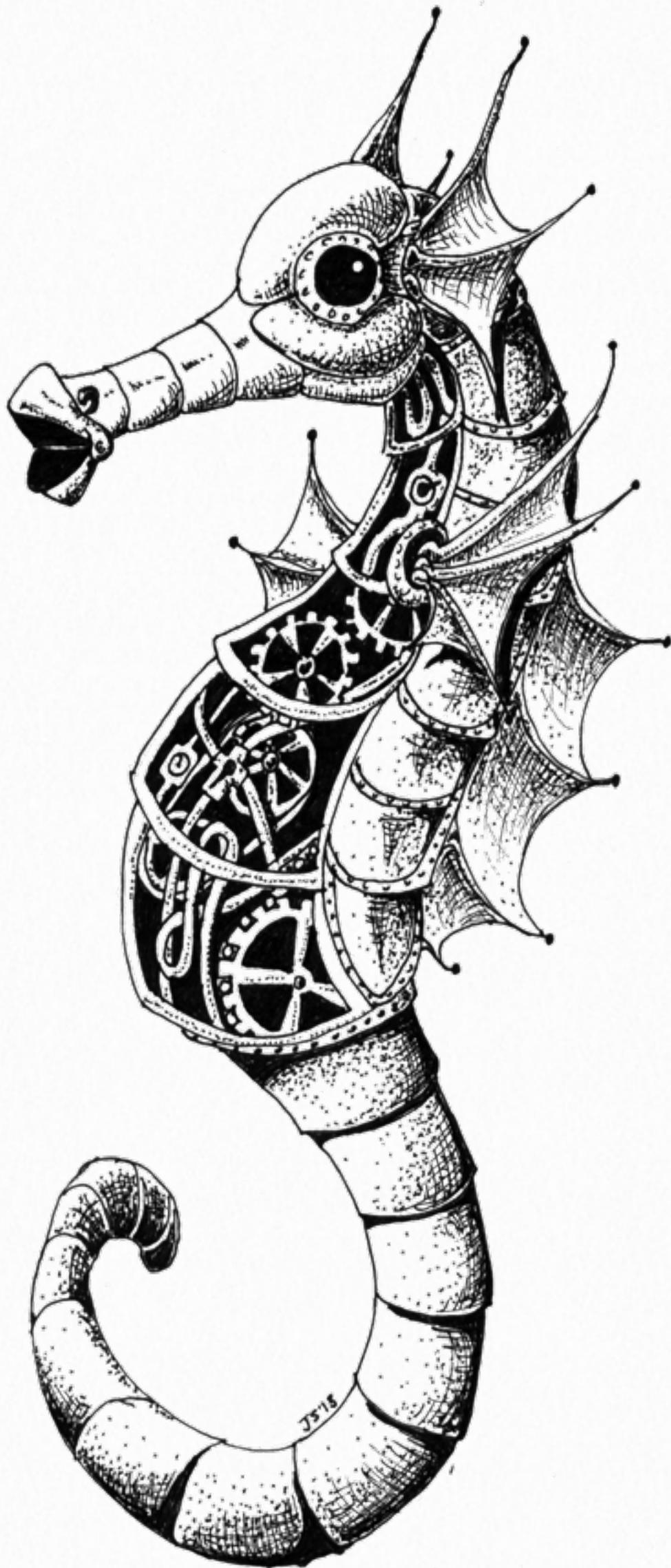
For Paley the watch was a metaphor for the complexity of nature: “In every nature, and in every portion of nature, which we can descry, we find attention bestowed upon even the minutest parts. The hinges in the wings of an earwig, and the joints of its antennæ, are as highly wrought, as if the Creator had nothing else to finish.”

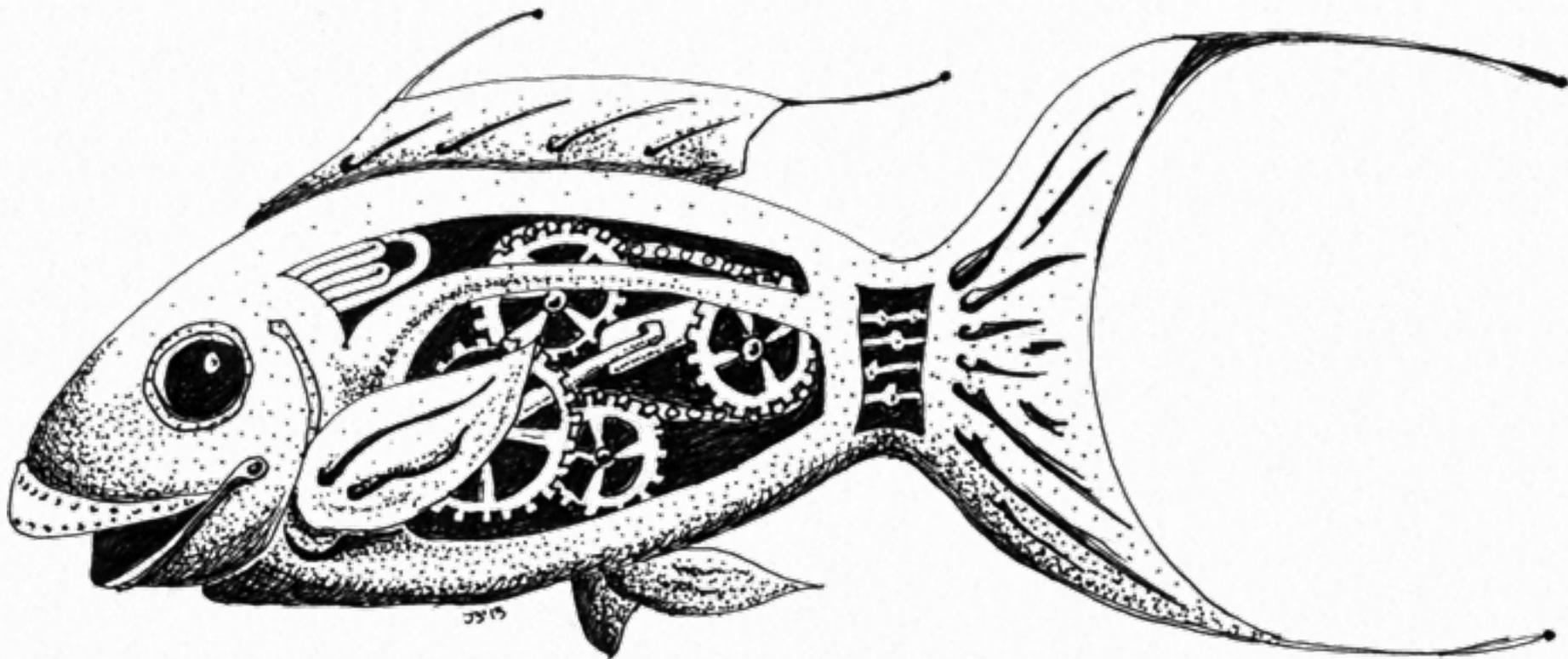
Considering this, watching the clockwork fish, the scientist finds the fish banally heavy-handed, as though their Creator was worried that we were at risk of missing the point. He is a man of little imagination—a cataloguer, not a theorist—and even he is offended by them.

They are too *literal*.

3.

The scientist is frustrated. The clockwork fish don't nibble, and (see above) he didn't bring a





net. Desperate, he wades into the fluid (it's not water, but it's not quite oil) and tries to catch them by hand, but the fish slip through his fingers effortlessly. The fluid is an excellent lubricant, and now his clothes are mired in it.

For a moment, he wonders whether the fluid is flammable.

In the end he finds his specimens. From time to time a clockwork fish simply winds down. Its mechanism stops, and so does it. He is able to scoop them up, examine them, describe them for science.

4.

The scientist is a watchmaker's son. That he did not follow his father's trade was not a disappointment to the father, who could see natural philosophy as horology on a grander scale, and appreciate the aspiration to observe and understand the intricate workings of the universe.

On his too-rare visits home (he often forgets), the scientist and the watchmaker would talk into the night. They made hobbies of the

other's profession so that they would never run out of things to say, so that uncomfortable silences might not lead to uncomfortable conversations.

The scientist wonders what his father would make of this juxtaposition.

It is at the least fortuitous.

5.

His taxonomy is typically unimaginative. Cataloguing species is his strength; naming them, not so much. He applies the *Mecha-* prefix to the nearest organic analogue: *Mechaconger* for the clockwork eel; *Mechacyprinus* for a clockwork teleost with large, rubbery fins; *Mechahippocampus* for the clockwork seahorse. In a fit of dreariness he names each species *horologicus*. *Mechacyprinus* is covered in tiny metal scales: a literal goldfish; *Mechahippocampus* in thin plates of armor; *Mechaconger* in a dense rubbery skin.

The scientist finds the hidden clasps and pulls back the scales and skin, the better to see

the inner workings. He cannot tell them apart once they are open: as far as their spring-and-gear innards are concerned, their chablons and and dials, gears and escapements, they are practically identical.

Paley associated the complexity of creation with the care of the creator: “We see no signs of diminution of care by multiplicity of objects, or of distraction of thought by variety. We have no reason to fear, therefore, our being forgotten, or overlooked, or neglected.”

The scientist thinks about this as he explores the tiny movements of the *Mechacyprinus* pithed on his dissection tray. The fish, he thinks, have indeed been forgotten and overlooked. “The watch must have had a maker,” as Paley said, but these pieces of workmanship have been left to run down unattended.

A watch, after all, must periodically be serviced by its matchmaker.

Moreover, it must periodically be *wound*.

He returns to the opened *Mechacyprinus*, now surrounded by its disassembled *ébauche*.

He reassembles the fish with little real effort: its mechanism is relatively uncomplicated; his fingers’ muscle memory suggests a deeper familiarity, which he dismisses as the long practice of a watchmaker’s son.

There was nothing mechanically wrong with the stopped fish: no corrosion, no broken parts. It just needs a winding.

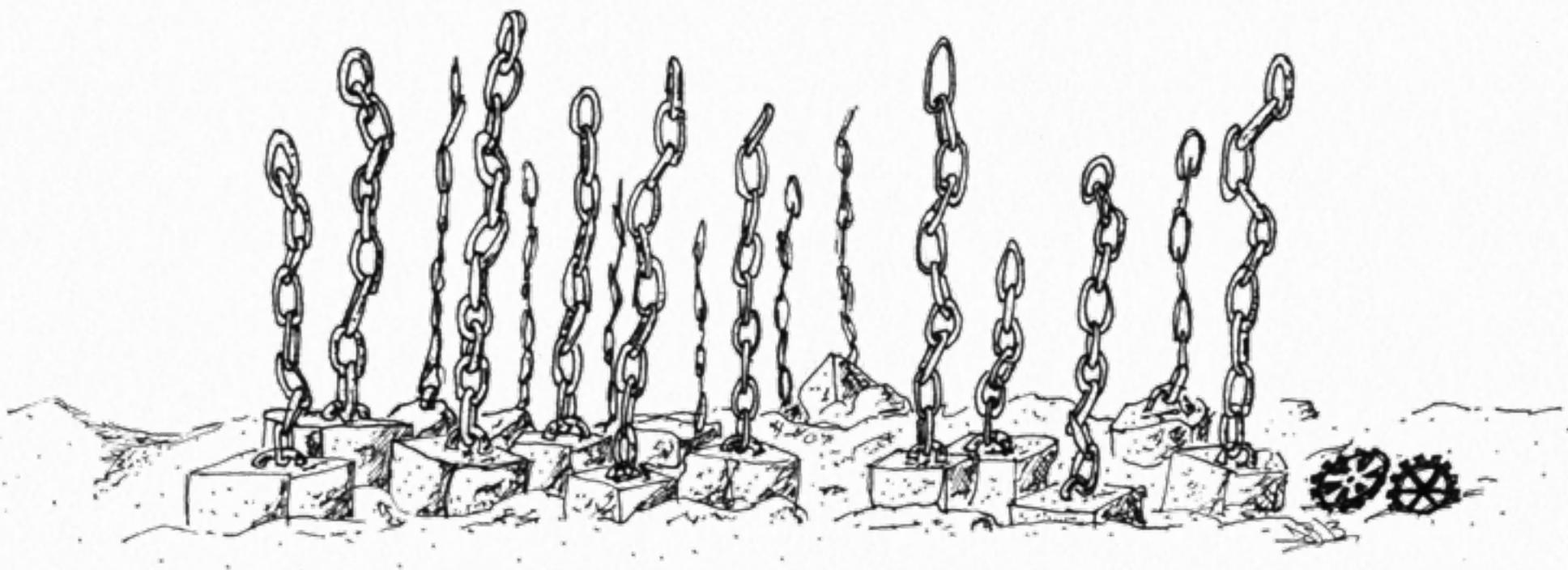
He finds the keyhole in the fish’s mouth. The keyhole is tiny. One of his picks is sufficient to turn the mainspring. He is amused that the mouth is, after a fashion, the means by which the fish receives its sustenance.

The fish comes alive, wriggling brainlessly on the tray. With a tenderness that surprises him, he carries the fish back to the pond, where it resumes its regular course.

Every watch has a maker. Not for the first time, the scientist wonders who made these clockwork fish, and why he abandoned them.

Not for the first time, the scientist forgets how long he has been here.

—Jonathan Crowe (text), Jennifer Seely (art)





So after Monday evening Colin and I came out of *Pacific Rim* at the SilverCity Gloucester (where there were possibly a dozen people for the Monday night showing), I said, “*Neon Genesis Evangelion* this is not, but I enjoyed myself.”

“This reached entirely new levels of bad,” he said.

“Yes, but it was visually *beautiful*,” I insisted, with a rather giddy grin.

I think it was Madeleine L’Engle who said that the good thing about getting older is that you are still all the other ages you ever were. And one of the ages I have been was a girl of seven or eight, who did not yet understand English that well, but who adored watching *Batman: The Animated Series*, and

whose few glimpses of *Mighty Morphin’ Power Rangers* and the animated *X-Men* set a fire inside her and a longing for more that has not quite died in twenty years.

I didn’t *care* that the dialogue may have been awful; I didn’t have the English to care. Yes, there are people who say that this is why Hollywood blockbusters with dumb scripts do so well in overseas markets. I say, “And is that a bad thing?”

The more subtle the script, the more each line of dialogue sings and packs a punch, the more inaccessible it would be to people outside the culture. Even with a good translator. A great script relies on being more than the basic words on the page by picking up the audience’s absorbed cultural knowledge; someone

from outside the culture would just have the words on the page, and to her some of the ways the characters behave may simply be incomprehensible. I would adore to pieces a work that referenced Shakespeare, Auden and Yeats every third line; someone who had not read Shakespeare, Auden and Yeats would find it as bewildering as you would if you read some brilliant parody of something you've never heard of and went, "Why is this listed as a humorous work?"

A skilled translator can do a lot, but it takes a certain kind of genius in its own way to convey genius into another language. I've done enough of this kind of stuff that I know.

What does translate is beautifully shot SF that does not depend on a particular cultural sphere. The other cultures make their own movies, hopefully, that have the delicately subtle scripts that reference their own poetry and political slogans and advertisers and pop songs and the truth of living there (and subtitled versions of which which people in the Western English-speaking world get dragged to by their arthouse-film-fanatic friends and go "I don't get this at all, and I was bored out of my skull"). What they go to Hollywood for is to do what Hollywood does best: throw a bunch of very beautiful CGI for an easily translatable concept.

You know what else is easily translatable, on a grand scale, with dazzling visuals and music, overblown emotions, and often criticized for dumb plots? Opera. Afterwards, reading about the film on Wikipedia, I encoun-

tered the quotation from Del Toro: "Del Toro conceived the film as an operatic work: 'That was one of the first words I said to the entire team at ILM. I said, 'This movie needs to be theatrical, operatic, romantic.' We used a lot of words not usually associated with high-tech blockbusters . . .'" This. This is totally it.

Frequent readers of mine know that I've ended up watching at least eight operas a year the last two years, possibly more than I do movies, as I love the art form. Superhero films, mecha and kaiju films, are the opera of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, even if the soundtrack is overdriven guitars. And I suspect the departure from the grand overdone traditions is why most twentieth-century operas are not the hits and crowd-pleasers of Verdi, Puccini and Mozart, *because* they try to be more psychologically realistic and script-focused and approach theatre, to their detriment. Operas about sea monsters and giant robots, on the other hand, would be totally awesome; I did, after all, love *Rinaldo* to pieces by interpreting it as *Dragonlance* on stage with *da-capo* arias and *fioritura* runs. It doesn't *matter* that it's in eighteenth-century Italian!

(I was relieved that they didn't show the Sydney Opera House getting destroyed by one of the kaiju. I was all ready to complain, "Oh, what did opera ever do to you?")

But I probably should write a very long essay on the relationship between opera and the superhero/epic fantasy genre, and this is not that essay. So what did and didn't I like

about *Pacific Rim* seen as a movie rather than an opera?

Larry Niven has many flaws, but one of his points that made me go, “This; this is absolutely it” is the concept of a “playground for the mind.” As a child, I watched *Mighty Morphin’ Power Rangers*, and *Batman* and *X-Men*, and the “Street Fighter II” and “Mortal Combat (I)” in the video arcades I would tag after my older brother to on the way from Russian school, and they were fascinating to me for the world. I didn’t understand the dialogue; I had the imagination to supply my own, to layer my own dreams on top of these settings and the people who dressed like that and could do these things. To learn that there are such worlds out there, and the rest is up to me.

There are films that are criticized for existing as “merely” a method of selling toys: Pixar’s *Cars*, *My Little Pony*, the merchandising empires that got built around these same

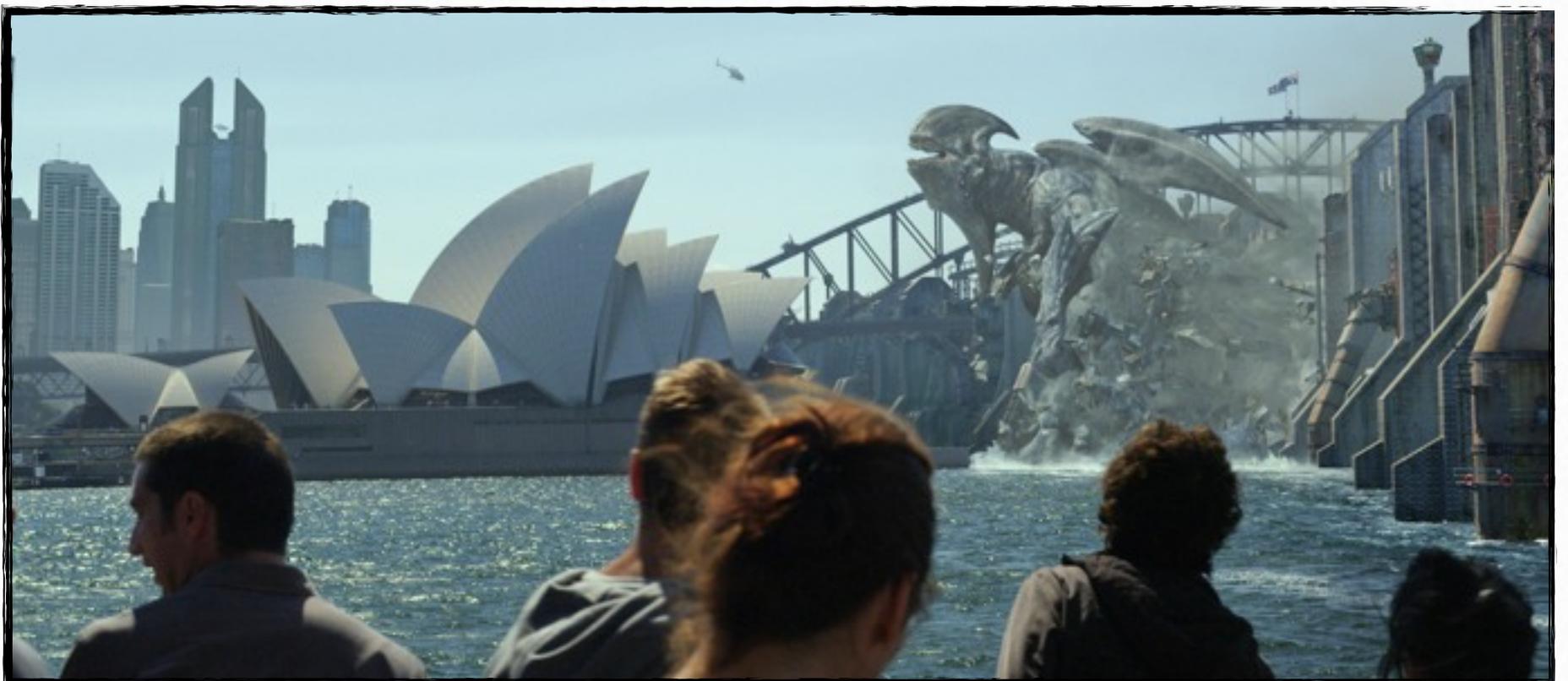
Batman and *Power Rangers*.

Perhaps they did make children nag parents to spend money better spent elsewhere on the action figures. But what that meant was that the child, with a fifty-dollar action figure or with a hand-drawn paper doll, went and *created* something that never existed before.

Adults do the same; they may just write fanfic.

Am I claiming that every act of creation, play-story or fanfic, is sacred and wonderful? No, from a professional standard, 99 percent of fanfic is staggeringly awful. But then when Joshua Bell or Midori first picked up a violin, they were, I guarantee it, staggeringly awful too (unlike the piano, where you can kind of pick out a melody and sound tolerable on a first try, the violin is *that* kind of instrument). They *kept doing it*. With enough practice, bad art becomes good art.

My point is, even a bad piece of art can



inspire good art. And it's a piece of art that is *flawed* but had other qualities that may inspire the best art. A beautifully written cheaply shot film may inspire a director with a bigger budget to do a remake (this doesn't often end well, but that may not be the director's fault, and on rare occasions, it might work). A beautifully shot cheaply written film may inspire someone to try to think of other stories set in that world, or in a world that they will file off the serial numbers and make deeper and make theirs: the old SCAMPER model we were taught about inventions in grade school: Substitute, Combine, Adapt, Modify, Put To Other Use, Eliminate, Reverse/Rearrange. (I went to grade schools that would do a student invention convention. Twice.)

What were the flaws in *Pacific Rim* that would make the kind of person I am think, "Go. Play. And do better"?

Not the dialogue, as such. Nor the acting. I know that people who make it even to the part of "seventh construction worker on the left" in Hollywood, unless they are Paris Hilton, have usually gone to theatre school for years, have survived a cutthroat competition, and can act circles around you and me. Acting is damn hard; I know, I've done it. I will blame most failures of believability I see on the director or the script, not the actors.

But the fact that the film raised a whole bunch of cool concepts and didn't go farther with them.

- There are monsters coming through a portal between worlds, at the bottom of the

sea. That concept is taken completely at face value, other than by the two scientist-types (I rather liked them; at least, for Hollywood, they were treated with love rather than with the idea that something is wrong with them and by the ending of the story they would fix it), to colonize whilst being a hive mind. It is analyzed at the Hollywood-physics level, but not the philosophical level. What does it mean to come from another world? What does it mean to face beings that were completely alien, that didn't have the same laws of physics? (That's my head-canon explanation as to why the beastie can fly, deal with it; I am going to pretend the line about "DNA" doesn't exist or was a simplification as much as "supermarket barcode.") *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, if I remember it correctly after seven years, milked that theme to pieces and shards, as to what the coming of otherworldly aliens mean for us as humans, and as God's creatures (within the religious framing of the series). If *Pacific Rim* even tried, this was left behind on the cutting-room floor.

Go. Play. And do better.

- To manage the giant mechas, the pilots have to work in pairs, decided by compatibility (somehow revealed through jo-do sparring). Does that show compatibility of mind or compatibility of body? It is important that your copilot move at the same speed of you (see Fred Astaire and Rita Hayworth dancing) *and* think similarly to you (the "minds" that we see are all visual). Does being an

auditory thinker rule you out as a Jaeger pilot? The movie does explore, to a certain extent, the issues of trust. But how do the pairs that are family (brothers, father and son) differ from the pairs that are a sexual couple, or an unrelated but mostly non-sexual couple such as the protagonists?

Go. Play. And do better.

- The names seemed to *almost* make sense at first, seemed to have been chosen for a reason, and then make less and less sense the longer you look at them. Stacker Pentecost: what about him is ascendant, and what does he stack, and why would anyone name their child Stacker? (But then, I admit I do feel strange about English personal names derived from surnames derived from professions, such as Parker, Taylor, Harper, Carver: if you name your child Patience, Faith, Hope, Grace or Victor, you at least imply you want them to have those traits; if you name your child Taylor, does that mean you want them to be skilled at sewing? But then I come from a culture that very clearly delineates personal names from surnames, and for centuries had the Church, and later on the registration office, rule over what names you can give your children.)

Gipsy Danger—what on earth is that supposed to reference? I think several people have pointed out that the name reinforces stereotypes against the Roma. I have the sense that the screenwriter was trying to get the connotations of freewheeling, unconventional, unpredictable, not stuck in one place (reinforced by Mako's comment that Becket is unpredictable) but the combination of "Danger" just doesn't make very much sense. All of the jaeger names just seemed to be "cool word + cool word" with the hope that this will be more than the sum of its parts.

The Russian jaeger is named "Cherno Alpha" which just means "Black Alpha" or literally, "alpha, blackly." Oo-kay. According to online sources, however, this is supposed to be a reference to Chernobyl—blithely ignoring the fact that the word "chernobyl" actually means something in Russian and Ukrainian: "has-been-black" or "black legend," literally; more practically, a word for "wormwood."

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And ... I'd rather not believe that it's a reference to Chernobyl. I'd rather not believe it because then, as a former nuclear power worker who had had family affected by Chernobyl fallout, I will get angry. How *fucking crass* do you have to be to name a Cool Giant Robot after A NUCLEAR ACCIDENT OF INCOMPETENCE AND CORRUPTION THAT DIRECTLY KILLED HALF A HUNDRED PEOPLE AND SICKENED AND DISPLACED HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS? I don't see the Americans naming mecha "WTC." Or "Three Mile Island." Or "Triangle Shirtwaist Fire." No. Cherno Alpha means "Black alpha." It may be dumb. But it's not offensive. I'll be kinder to del Toro than perhaps I should be.

(In case you wonder, Black people in Russian are called "black-skinned" or "dark-skinned" or a word derived from "Negro"; Russian has many racially charged words, but 'black' by itself isn't one of them, at least as far as I know slang.)

Go. Play. And do better.

- Indeed, in the edited version (there are suggestions in the Wikipedia article that there is another hour of character arc footage out there that didn't make it into the theatrical release) the minor characters didn't get enough screentime at all, while I wanted to know more. I don't think the Chinese triplets even get a full-face shot. The Russian pair, the Kaidanovskys, I actually found fascinating. The touch that Sasha, ice-blond to the last, wears bright red lipstick into battle is an interesting touch, and I would have put in a shot of her

putting it on if I were director. And I cracked up right in the theatre at her saying "V rozhu evo!", translated roughly as "Sock him in the face!" (may not be the right subtitles, but the subtitles were accurate).

"Rozha" is a mildly insulting word for face, always meaning a human face. There is a more insulting term, "morda", used to describe an animal's muzzle. If you say about a person "V mordu evo!", that is a term of great scorn, and at first I thought it would have been a more appropriate term to show Sasha's battle-fury; however, "morda" is a completely appropriate and not-at-all-insulting term for what English would call the "face" of an animal, such as dog, shark, or kaiju, and would not have the insulting impact. I'm still thinking about that word choice, because I think about word choice. Or rather, Russian linguistics.

Anyhow, I was sad and disappointed when those two other crews died, and I wasn't clear what *for*. They had defended the Siberian coast for six years; what error did they make this time? Yes, there were two kaijus involved, but the fights were choreographed as engaging them singly, so that made the mistake of not being clear why one kaiju killed both crews. What did they die *for*?

Go. Play. And do better.

Also, the apparently Asian-American technical director of the jaegers; I didn't think I even caught his name but Wikipedia says it's Tendo Choi. Looking for any reference to Evangelion (there wasn't much) I mentally

dubbed him Major Katsuragi, and so he stayed for the rest of the film. He will always be Major Katsuragi to me.

On the other hand, I can completely imagine that more scenes that solidify the characters were actually shot, and the producer replied, “You’ve only got two hours! People come for the monsters and robots, not this! Less talk, more whacking!”

- One story choice that completely threw me off was in the opening scene, where Becket and his brother save the shipping boat, and then his brother gets killed and Gipsy Danger half destroyed by the kaiju. I was completely expecting that the fishing boat crew would be the ones rescuing Becket from the carcass of his jaeger. That would be the kind of mythical reference that Hollywood tends to love to do, since it *does* pander to the lowest common denominator—so many cultures have a story analogous to the Aesop’s Fable of the Mouse and the Lion: “Help the small today, for tomorrow you may yourself need help.” All of a sudden, the fishing boat disappears (I was never clear whether it was destroyed or not) and instead these beachcombers appear for one scene. Was this an editorial decision? Gimme that fishing boat back, because it may be a hackneyed trope, but it’s in every culture because it’s *true*.

- One theme that they really should explore more is the fact that the jaegers are more valuable as defenders than the wall because of the morale issue. It is more uplifting to people to see humanoids duking it out saving

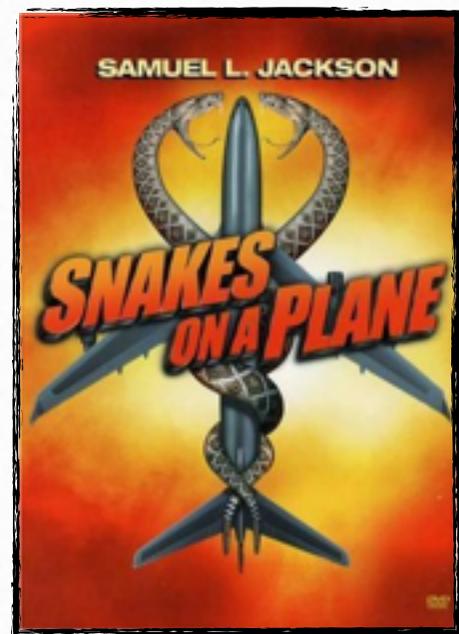
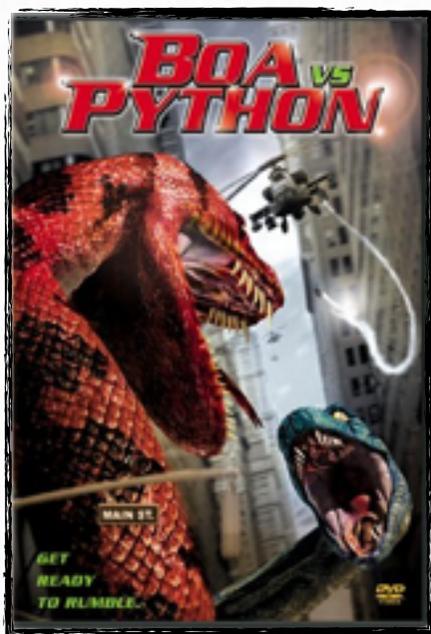
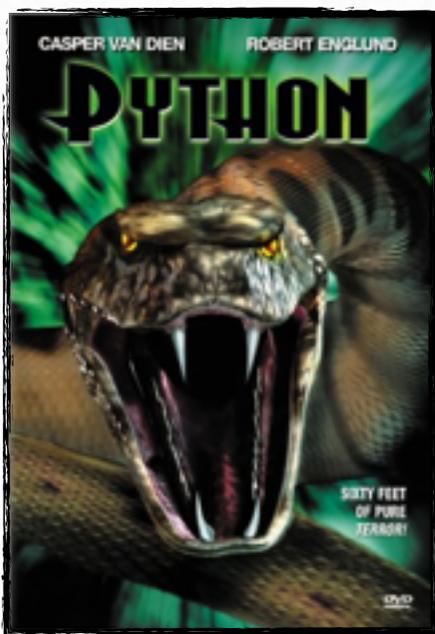
their lives, instead of just a wall for the kaiju to smash against/just smash. Anne McCaffrey had it right with her own model of a threatened world—the grubs may be effective at eating Thread, but the Pernese colonists need to *see* heroes on dragons in the sky, KILLING THREAD WITH FIRE. There is a hint at this theme, the role of the media, at the beginning with the Australia attack (again, what did the Sydney Opera do to you?) but it could definitely be explored deeper. Go. Play. And do better.

In summary, I enjoyed *Pacific Rim* for the same reason I enjoy opera. For the same reason I enjoy superhero movies. The world was very well-rendered; the art directors and cinematographers definitely earned their pay and then some, and created a world to inspire dreams.

I can think of many ways to make the movie better. All of them (except for smarter names) are also ways that make the movie *longer*, and I can see why the decision was made to cut in favour of more pretty, pretty robots fighting pretty, pretty monsters, with lots of pretty, pretty explosions that would make WANO and INPO split their sides in disgusted laughter, to account for the money we blew on that CGI and to keep the movie to two hours and ten minutes. But if a director’s cut does come out, with that extra hour of character-development footage, I would be very interested in seeing it.

It will definitely be *beautiful*.

—Tamara Vardomsкая



Equally Large Boas and Snakes on Planes: A Brief Guide to Snakesploitation Movies

When you're a geek about something, seeing a movie feature the thing you geek out about can be kind of fraught. Ever see a military history buff nitpick a war movie? You know, like when he points out that the Japanese planes used in *Tora! Tora! Tora!* aren't really Zeros, but training planes painted to look that way?

I'm like that with snakes. I know a lot about snakes. It's hard to take a scary movie seriously when I can immediately see that the snake they used in the movie is not only completely harmless, but I've got three of them in the next room. Or when a snake does something that is a complete and total biological impossibility. Or when a snake from one continent turns up on another—that's like finding polar bears in the Antarctic.

Knowing too much about a subject can give you a little thrill when you see it done

right on the big screen: the Slashdot nerds just about wet themselves when Trinity used valid UNIX code in *The Matrix Reloaded*. But when they get it wrong, it kind of spoils the fun.

For a few years I wrote [Snakes on Film](#), a blog in which I nitpicked snakes' appearances in movies and TV shows—everything from James Bond to Indiana Jones to Harry Potter, from brief appearances to full-on snakesploitation movies.

Ah, snakesploitation movies. Those were always the most fun. These are the monster movies in which snakes—usually improbably deadly or impossibly gigantic—threaten a town full of young, nubile and incredibly stupid residents.

They have a long history: [Brian covers three examples of 1970s-era snakesploitation films](#) on *Reel Distraction*. But the ones you've

probably heard about are more recent. Yes, *that* one—we'll be getting to it in a moment.

Snakesploitation movies made in the last decade and a half tend to be in the vein of Sci-Fi Channel/SyFy monster flicks with the camp turned up *way* past eleven. Apart from being awful, plodding, badly written, cheaply produced variants on the teen horror genre, they share a number of characteristics:

- bad CGI used sparingly (and usually only showing up toward the end, leaving the bulk of the movie fairly flat and tedious);
- foreshadowing with an appearance by an ordinary, harmless snake at the beginning of the film;
- gratuitous nudity;
- gore; and
- ludicrous snake biology that is explained away by mad hand-waving.

This last point is important, because, I suspect, there are too many people out there who know something about snakes. Too many of us have watched the Discovery Channel. More people are keeping them as pets than ever before, and fewer people are afraid of them. A snake movie has to be a bit more than a snake movie in order to provide a jolt to the amygdala. So the snake has to be more than a snake—and that's where the bad CGI (they're on a budget here) comes in.

In *Python* (2000), a movie that allows you to watch a blue-haired Wil Wheaton get killed in his underwear, a mere Burmese Python wouldn't be enough to get us excited: in

fact, a pet Burmese Python turns up as the Harmless Snake at the beginning of the film, during the Gratuitous Sex Scene. Sadly, the film does not end there; and the Hideous Science Experiment literally drops out of the sky: yes, the eponymous python was on a plane!

And that eponymous, 129-foot python breaks every rule of snake biology for purposes of plot. It's only because this snake breaks those rules that it poses a threat to our heroes and their shitty little town. And the reason the rules are broken is to solve plot problems. Need something to happen? No problem! Have the snake do it!

So we have a giant python that spits acid, decapitates anti-vaccine Playmates with a flick of its tail, can hear, has sensitive eyes (real snakes have clear scales over their eyes), and is impervious to explosions, gunfire and blunt force trauma. Because plot.

Or take *Boa vs. Python* (2004), the movie that reveals that the only way to deal with a marauding giant python is to release an [equally large boa](#). Here the two snakes sound like slaving beasts, rip their food apart (real snakes only swallow whole), have glowing eyes, and—once again—are apparently impervious to gunfire, flame throwers, and ordnance capable of levelling small villages in Bulgaria (where this atrocity was filmed).

Or how about *Vipers* (2008), which eschews computer-generated giant snakes for venomous ones? Not so fast: ordinary venomous snakes aren't scary enough. *These* vipers are genetically enhanced to be more danger-

ous. (And to be able to disconnect phone lines, apparently.)

It's a plot point that turns up again and again in 21st-century snakesploitation movies: *these aren't ordinary snakes*.

It's as if more and more of us know that ordinary snakes aren't all that scary.

That can't be a bad thing (at least in terms of snake conservation, a topic near and dear to my heart), but it does require a snake movie to up the ante considerably.

If the snake is insufficient to the plot, modify the snake.

It certainly happens with the snakesploitation movie that *everyone* has seen, if they've seen any snakesploitation movie at all: *Snakes on a Plane* (2006).

This film is a nitpicker's wet dream. The snakes doing the biting were obviously computer generated; the real snakes were all harmless pet species, many of which I've kept myself. And snakes are illegal to import into Hawaii, which makes the whole premise of the film—snakes getting loose on a flight from Ha-

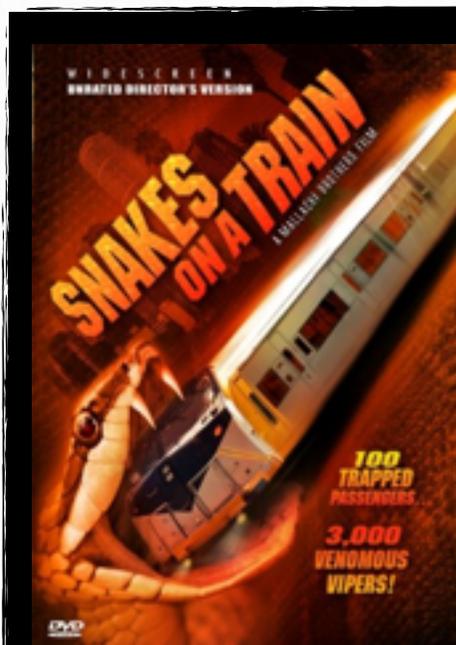
waii to Los Angeles—completely moot (like a movie whose plot hinged on the U.S. availability of Kinder Surprises).

But it does do the same thing as those lesser-known snakesploitation films: it acknowledges that regular snakes aren't scary enough for a scary snake movie. To get around that, the movie uses pheromones as a plot device: the snakes are exposed to snake pheromones sprayed on leis, which makes them more aggressive. Now this is the herpetological equivalent of [teching the tech](#): pheromones will make snakes horny at best, and no one pheromone would have the same effect across so many different species. But you get the idea.

Ordinary snakes aren't good enough any more. Ordinary snakes are solitary, unaggressive and prone to avoid human contact; thanks to antivenom, the bite of even the deadliest species is now quite survivable in developed countries.

Now where's the fun in that?

—Jonathan Crowe



Worst. Snake Movie. EVAR.

What's the worst snake movie ever made? That's easy. *Snakes on a Train*, a [mockbuster](#) released just three days before *Snakes on a Plane* to cash in on its hype. It's also quite possibly the worst movie I've ever seen—and yes, I've seen *Plan 9 from Outer Space*! Tedious and boring, its dialogue painful and its characters disposable, it actually uses garter snakes and even toy snakes! But its basic flaw is that it takes until the very end for everyone to figure out how to deal with snakes on a train: 1. Stop the train. 2. Get off the train. Problem solved!

Reading and Remembering 'THE HEMINGWAY HOAX'

In September we took a day trip to Toronto. The audiobook we listened to on the way there and back was *The Hemingway Hoax*, the Hugo- and Nebula-winning novella by Joe Haldeman. I read the shorter version of it when it was published in the April 1990 issue of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* (as it was then called), but hadn't reread it since.

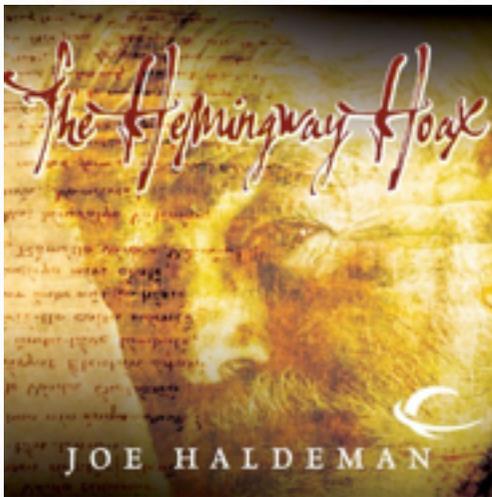
(The version published in *Asimov's* was shorter than the final book version—at the time, Gardner Dozois suggested, to help sales of the book version, that he'd cut out ten thousand words of explicit sex—but I don't have the magazine to compare with the original book version or its reprints in collections.)

Listening to *The Hemingway Hoax* more than twenty years after I first read it in *Asimov's* was a revelation. Twenty-three years is a long time, but to my surprise there were elements in the story that were new to me. I blame my memory (which at one point I thought was awfully good) and my surpris-

ingly faulty reading methods.

I remembered the basics of the plot: an academic engages in a scheme to recreate Ernest Hemingway's lost manuscripts; to prevent him from doing so, a mysterious agent kills him; each time he dies he shifts into a parallel universe. But I had forgotten many of the details (which you might expect after nearly a quarter century) and, it seems, completely missed a good deal of the symbolism: the theme of memory and forgetting, the use of war wounds (which match Haldeman's own at the start of the story, as he recounts in the story notes in the *None So Blind and Other Stories* reprint), its violent exploration of machismo.

And I was startled to find that my recollection and interpretation of the ending was completely off. The tour-de-force backwards-in-time reverie? No memory of it. And for some reason I'd thought that Baird actually became Hemingway himself, rather than the



The Hemingway Hoax

by Joe Haldeman

narrated by

Eric Michael Summerer

Audible Frontiers

January 2008

4 h 30 m

entity known as *the Hemingway*. That's a debatable reading of the text; *at best* you could argue that it's not totally ludicrous.

Some of this has to do with memory's inherent unreliability. Some of this has to do with the fact that a 41-year-old reader will pick up on different things than an 18-year-old reader. And some of this has to do with how I read.

I have to confess that I don't always read very closely. I skim. I absorb the gist of whole paragraphs and move on. My attention wanders. I miss things, if I'm not careful, or am in a hurry to finish (as I often am). I don't always remember what I've just read.

This has implications when what I'm reading isn't light and evanescent. If I have to focus on the individual sentences I frequently lose track of the whole, as when I read French or am, in English, confronted with lovely but challenging poetry or prose, such as Greer Gilman's work. It also happens when I'm confronted with a narrative that requires close attention for subtextual or structural reasons (Gene Wolfe's *Peace* or even John M. Ford's *Growing Up Weightless* come to mind).

The answer is rather obvious: challenging books that *require* rereading also *reward* rereading. I shouldn't be abashed if I miss things the first time around, even if I'm astonished at just how much I've missed.

What audiobooks do is force me to pay attention to every word the first time around. If I'm behind the wheel, I'm a captive audience; if I can't pay attention to the words, I probably shouldn't be driving. It engenders some impatience, and I find it's sometimes too much to absorb, but my God do I get *all* of it in one go.

As for *The Hemingway Hoax* itself? My reacquaintance with it via audiobook was positive. It's a far, far better work than I remembered, its depths far more profound than I'd originally noticed as a callow lad. In general I'm a fairly serious fan of Joe Haldeman's work, though there are works of his, like the recent *Marsbound* trilogy, that don't do quite as much for me. *The Hemingway Hoax* is, it turns out, one of his best. You should totally check it out.

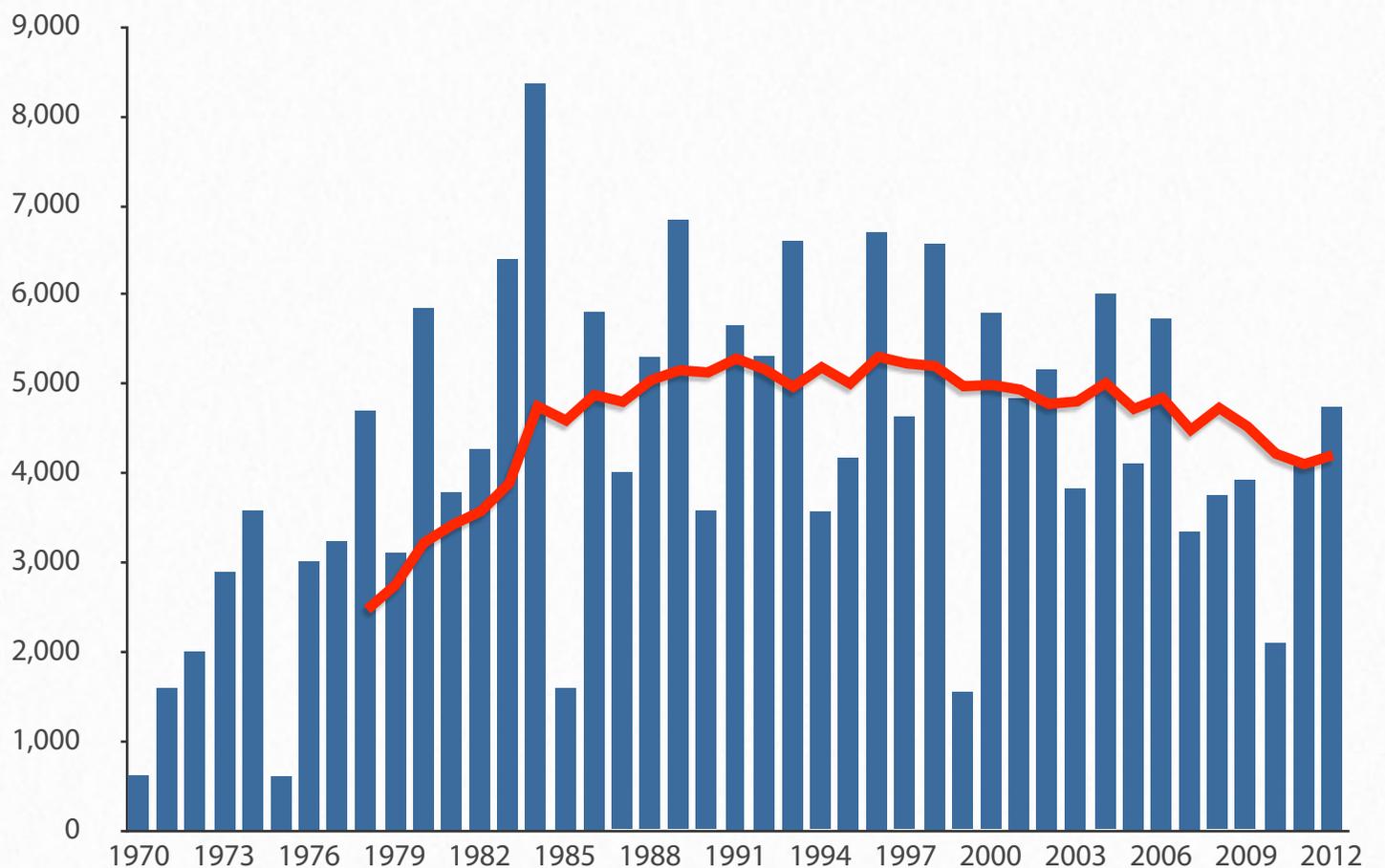
—Jonathan Crowe

Data / Worldcon Stats

Worldcon Attendance

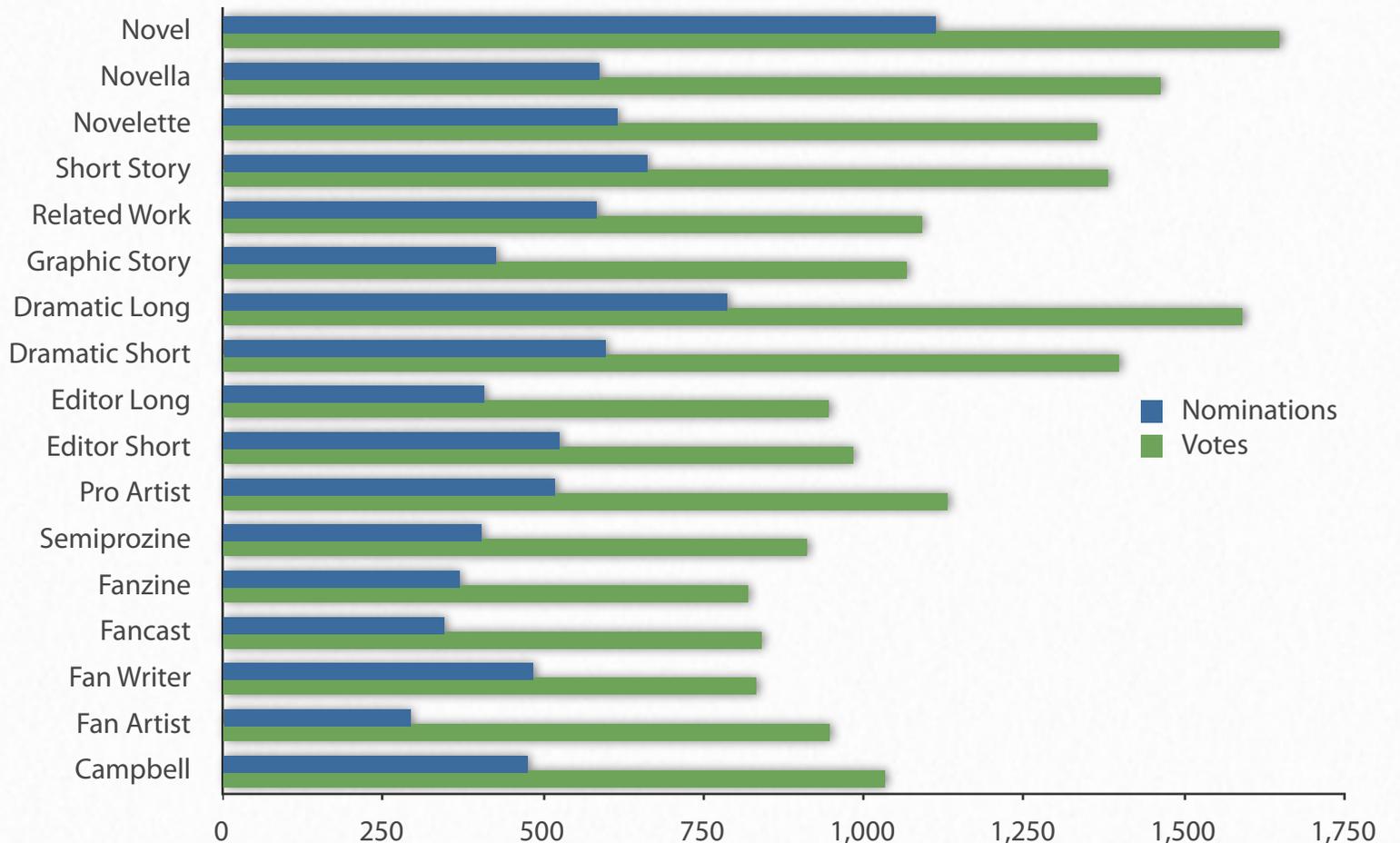
1970-2012

(with 9-year moving average)



2013 Hugo Awards

Number of nominations and votes per category



Miscellaneous Correspondence

Letter to the Editors of *Nature/Science*, 20—

(This letter has been translated into English and edited for clarity; the translator takes no responsibility for the accuracy of the citations therein.)

Dear Editors,

This letter suggests a new proposal incorporating the conclusions of the recent paper of Grant and Meyer (January issue of this magazine) about the current undead overpopulation problem, and the recent paper of Robinson, Bradbury *et al.* (December issue) about the unfeasibility of human-crewed missions to Jupiter, Europa, and Proxima Centauri.

We humbly suggest that NASA ally with the Center for Disease Control to use the undead for their rightful purpose, and send them on the missions to Jupiter, Europa and especially Proxima Centauri.

The main concern Robinson and colleagues raise about human-crewed missions to the outer planets and into interstellar space is that for a multitude of reasons, these are extremely likely to leave the living human crew dead.

Since the undead cannot be made dead, by definition, they immediately bypass the most crucial concerns with the mission. At the same time, since some of the undead, particularly the vampiric subtype, possess the intelligence and communication abilities of living humans, with ade-

quate computerized support they should prove perfectly capable of crewing a starship.

We acknowledge that a somewhat similar proposal has been made earlier in a 2006 paper by Watts, which the translation available to us titles “Four Men In A Boat (To Say Nothing of the Vampire)” (we ask for correction if that is not the title of the original publication). However, Watts’s proposal assumes that the crew is still partially human, and the titular vampire is a genetically engineered living being, not recognizable as a member of the class of undead discussed by Grant and Meyer. A single vampire, or even a single member of the undead on a five-person crew, would not adequately address the undead overpopulation problem. For these missions, we must consider crew sizes on the scale of those of the *Enterprise* described in a series of publications by Roddenberry *et al.* (1966-1969), which, to account for the spaceship continuing to be adequately crewed despite an extremely high death rate among junior officers, must have had personnel numbering in the tens of thousands.

Tens of thousands of undead would also avoid the supply problem that the equivalent numbers of living humans would face. Food, water and oxygen supplies are only necessary to keep living human crew from becoming dead. As mentioned in paragraph 3 above, the undead cannot be made dead, by definition. Hence, by

avoiding the extra load of food supplies, we may include more undead aboard the spaceships, while still conforming to weight restrictions. In addition, there will be little need for portholes on the ship, as the vampiric subtype of undead would wish to avoid sunlight; this will increase strength and durability of the outer hull.

A further advantage that this scheme would provide is the opportunity for valuable education and internship in the STEM fields for young persons, particularly young women aged 15-27, currently occupied as undead-hunters or vampire-slayers, or, even more disturbingly, involved in romantic entanglements with the un-

dead. This wealth of talent does not seem to have been previously attracted to the space program, and our initiative will doubtless help inspire them to grow into the next generation of aerospace engineers and astrophysicists, while keeping them off the streets, graveyards, and crypts.

We thank the space agencies and disease control centers in advance for considering our suggestion, and look forward to blasting the rotters and sparkling bloodsuckers into deep space where they can at least do some good.

Yours,

[Authors redacted]

MEMO TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE IMPERIAL TORTURERS' GUILD:

RULE CHANGE, EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY

Although masters, journey(women and apprentices of the Guild are generally permitted to visit the Nahemoth's Temple of Love during their off-duty hours,

EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY, assignations with members of the Temple's St. Algol and St. Agnia Sub-order (Yielders to the Dolour Exquise) are STRICTLY PROHIBITED.

Violators will be subject to five days under the justice of Master Eirich.

PERSONAL NOTE FROM GUILDMASTER HALLEX:

Look, blokes and gals, I know what you do in your free time should be none of the Guild's business, but we've got professional standards to upkeep and we can't piss off Nahemoth and her saints. NO MORE.

And because some people have already asked: "But I was the one getting tied up!" is NOT an excuse. See Master Eirich if you need more explanation.

Ezimund Hallex,
Guildmaster
Imperial Torturers' Guild

Quadrifolium Junior College Alumni Association

[Return Address]

Dear Alumnus/Alumna/Alumnum/Other,

It is our pleasure to bring you the Quadrifolium Junior College Alumni Newsletter for Fall 2013 CE / Summer 20,337 Th.Y / Storms 1864 NPD / Third Quarter 516 LY or 1 ADW [please circle as appropriate to current residence].

News:

We are pleased to announce that QJC finally has a swimming pool. After five years of negotiation with the New Pelagian authorities concerning zoning laws, use of public waterways, and endangered species protection acts, the harbour at the East Entrance is now certified for use of the swim team and gym classes. The students are thrilled that the swim team no longer has to train at the Brewer Community Pool, a two-kilometre drive from the West Entrance, although the team is expected to rise to the challenge of differing water consistencies. Safety rules will be strictly enforced, and the students are particularly reminded that it is against New Pelagian law to interact with the mosasaurs in any way, and the school cannot legally be responsible for the consequences.

Repairs to the fifth-floor labs after the unfortunate incident during the Lourh rebellion are almost complete. The new labs will boast the latest in chemistry, biology, physics and thaumaturgy equipment, allowing the school to finally offer AP Physics in the following term. AP Physics will be cross-listed as Natural Philosophy 301 and Third-Year Magic Without Magic, but is explicitly not applicable towards thaumaturgy credit. Students who are not citizens of a subdomain of Earth and wish to take the AP Physics exam will need to contact the school administration for special petition, although the odds of a plea succeeding with the U.S. College Board are warned to be low.

We are happy to add the following to the list of QJC wear available for purchase by alumni: along with t-shirts, ties, cufflinks and invisibility cloaks, we now have the option of enchantment on the class rings (please read the fine print before purchase) and QJC-branded household androids and miniature *Triceratops*. Shipping is not available to certain jurisdictions and warranties are void where prohibited by law.

Alumni Memorial Dinner:

We encourage all alumni to attend the memorial dinner at 19:00 on the Saturday of Week 2 for the students and teachers of the class of 2012/20,336/1863/515 who have perished in the most recent liberation of Lourh against the Dark Side. We appreciate their courage and sacrifice, both citizens of Lourh and citizens of other jurisdictions who joined their Lourhian comrades. We note that fully 92% of the de-

Missive to all servants and postulants of the St. Algol & St. Agnia Sub-order:

It is the will of the Powers we venerate that although Love as thy desires bid you should be the whole of our law, unlike other gods, Nahemoth and her Saints allow martyrs only in the most dread of circumstances. Even St. Algol and St. Agnia hold with that precept. Our Saints' servants should hold their safety and integrity paramount in their minds, and not lose their heads in the fervour of service. Servants who fail to be aware of risks of love are not doing their duty to their Saints, and risk blaspheming against the Sub-order.

Do not lead your sisters, brothers and lovers astray.

Personal note from Abbess Jacinth:

Loves, stay away from the Torturers' Guild, do?

Abbess Jacinth

St. Algol & St. Agnia Sub-Order, Nahemoth's Temple of Love and Delight

Love as thy desires bid you

~~Yield to the Dolour-Exquisite~~

Know your limit. Play within it.

ceased have noted in their wills that "in lieu of flowers, donations to the charity of your choice will be encouraged"—and we encourage you to consider a donation to Quadrifolium Junior College, the school that so many of your comrades loved so well.

We note that if you choose to arrive by car to the West Entrance, parking is currently restricted due to ongoing negotiations with the City of Ottawa concerning parking by-laws for thaumaturgical vehicles. If you are coming by the South Entrance, we regret to inform you that handicapped access is no longer available, due to thorn-vines being declared a protected species by recent Tharonian legislation, although we

will allow jetpack access through the upper window at the time of the event only. If arriving to the East Entrance, please be aware of the use of the harbour as a swimming pool as mentioned above, and that, again, approaching mosasaurs is prohibited by law. If you are able to make your way through the current situation in Lourh to the North Entrance—we salute you.

We hope to see you all there, but if you cannot make it, we will still accept donations in most prevailing currencies.

Best regards,

Your fellow QJC Alumni

—*Tamara Vardomskaya*

Data / SFWA Pay Rates

On 26 November 2013, **SFWA** [announced](#) that the rate for qualifying short fiction would rise from 5¢/word to 6¢/word, effective 1 July 2014. Which publications currently paying SFWA qualifying rates will have to raise their rates to maintain qualifying status?

Some SFWA qualifying markets that already pay 6¢/word or more

Some SFWA qualifying markets that currently¹ pay less than 6¢/word

Analog

Apex

Asimov's

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

Clarkesworld

Bull Spec

Daily Science Fiction

Buzzy Mag

Dragon

Escape Pod

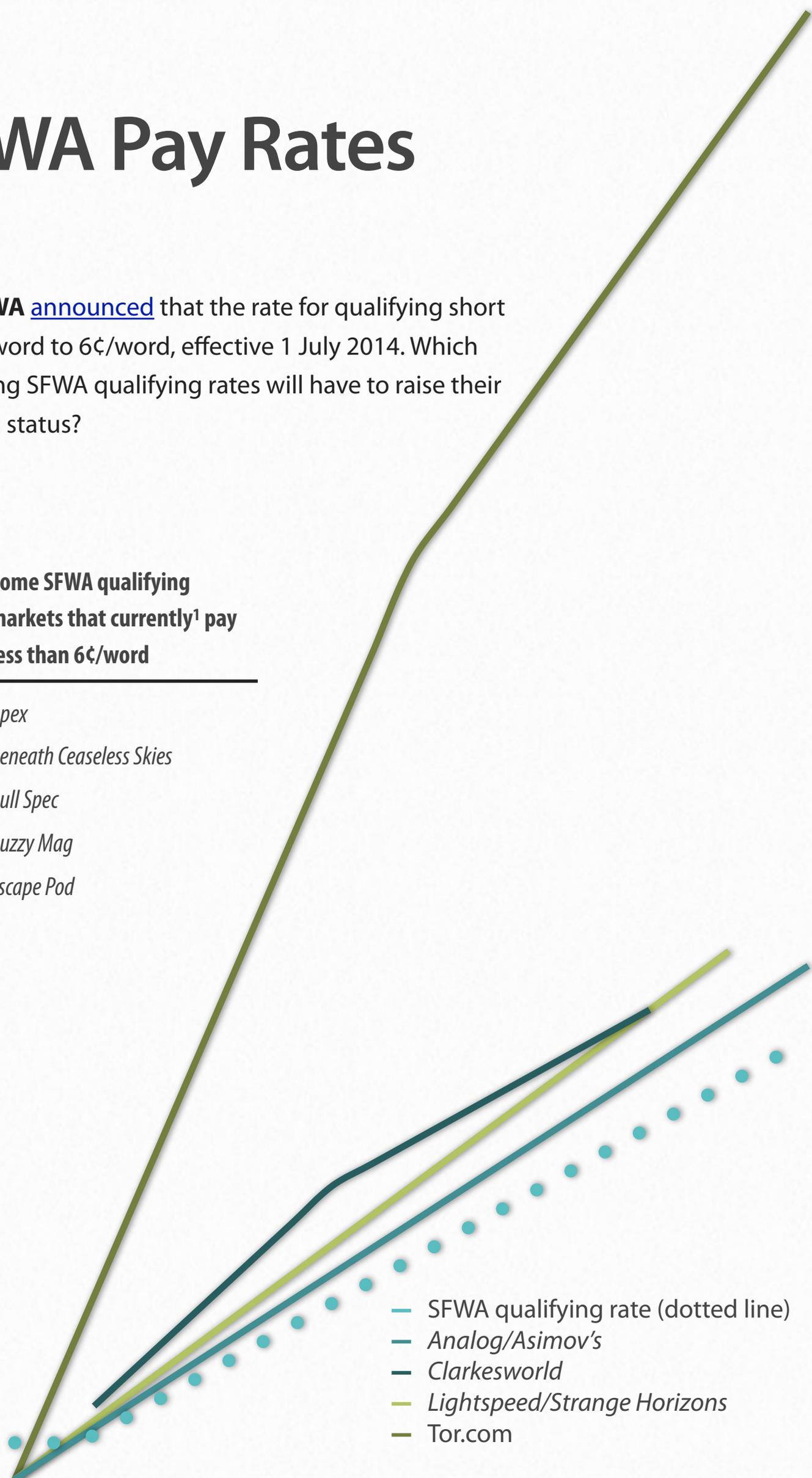
Lightspeed

F&SF

Strange Horizons

Tor.com

¹ As of 17 December 2013



'Contraceptive Brown' to Be Movie Series

The controversial children's book *Contraceptive Brown and the Magic Flying Coelacanth* is heading to the silver screen, and some parents are preparing themselves for the worst.

The book is the first in a series by Susan Sondersnauch featuring main character Travis "Contraceptive" Brown, whose antics have famously made his parents rule out ever having another child. In the series, Brown is visited by a series of magical creatures who swap out his ADHD medication for magic pills that whisk him away to adventures in faraway lands.

Some parents are recoiling in horror at the thought of a movie version. "Do I need to spell out how problematic this is?" asked concerned parent Margaret Cope. "I couldn't get my son to take his meds for a month after reading those books." At this point she grabbed the interviewer firmly by the lapels. "Imagine a *theatre* full of these kids."

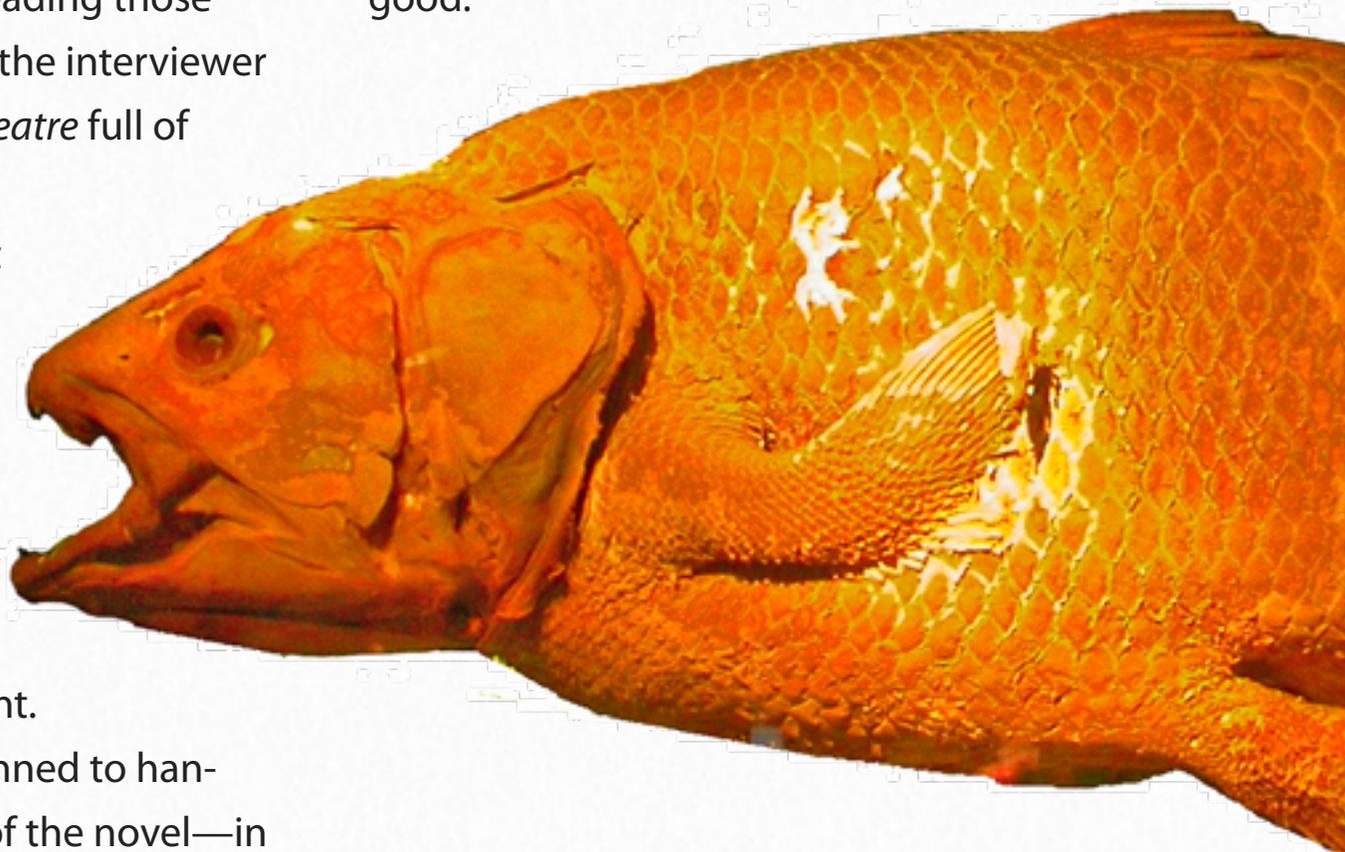
But it's widely expected that the novel's trenchant critique of ADHD treatment will be dropped for the film version, as Retromingent Pictures has announced that famed action film director Simon Syllogism will direct the first installment. He refused to explain how he planned to handle the more controversial parts of the novel—in

particular, the scene in which Max the Golden Coelacanth is eaten by a horde of stereotypical savages—but averred that some changes were inevitable to make the story fit the big screen.

"Oh fuck, not Sillygasm. He's going to put in a gratuitous epic battle scene, isn't he," said Mark Mustard, who operates the Contraceptive Brown Fan Site. "He always puts one in. I still haven't forgiven him for the one he put in *Lud-in-the-Mist*."

There is no word from the studio as to how they plan on handling the second novel, *Contraceptive Brown and the Underground Empire*, in which a talking caecilian takes Brown to visit a subterranean kingdom of mole-men.

"Wait, that's the one with the, ah, the penis snake, isn't it?" said Mustard. "Yeah. That won't be good."



Conventions / Can-Con 2013



Rob Sawyer calls the convention to order. Also present, left to right: Farrell McGovern, Hayden Trenholm, Clifford Samuels.



Can-Con (4–6 October 2013, Minto Suite Hotel, Ottawa, Ontario). **GoHs** Mark Robinson, Robert J. Sawyer, Hayden Trenholm. Hosted Convention 33, Aurora Awards.

After a few shaky years since its revival, Can-Con is beginning to find its feet. Attendance is more than double the previous year, thanks no doubt to the combination of a downtown location and the Aurora Awards. Hotel facilities were

first rate: I hope they use the Minto Suite Hotel again. The con could benefit from more on-the-ground volunteers (registration Friday night was slow and chaotic). The dealer's room was thin (too many self-published authors!); the program, while solid, is a bit too focused on science and writing. But I think they're getting there.

The next Can-Con will be held 3–5 October 2014; **GoH** will be Jo Walton. —*Jonathan Crowe*