

# Editorial

## VISITING 1983

Sheila Williams

Recently my thoughts turned to 1983—the first year my name appears on this magazine’s masthead. These reflections were precipitated by Lynell George’s feature article on Octavia E. Butler, which was published in the November 27, 2022, edition of the New York *Times*, and by the death of Greg Bear on November 19th. Important work by both authors appeared in *Asimov’s* in 1983. It’s been said that the Golden Age of Science Fiction is twelve. It is certainly true that the stories that I read in my teens and teens by writers like Ursula K. Le Guin, Samuel R. Delany, Arthur C. Clarke, Roger Zelazny, Isaac Asimov, Kurt Vonnegut, James Tiptree, Jr., Norman Spinrad, and many others left deep imprints on my psyche. Yet, I have also been profoundly influenced by stories I’ve read over the course of my career and the stories that I read during my earliest years at *Asimov’s* may have left the deepest impressions of all.

Due to the necessities of magazine production and the science fiction award schedules, a year for me always seems to include a little bit of time dilation. For example, I started reading for the January/February 2023 issue in June 2022. I’m writing this editorial for the March/ April 2023 issue in late November 2022, and should a story from 2023 receive a Hugo nomination, we’ll know the results in August 2024. Although we published thirteen physical issues a year in the eighties, the arrangement was similar. I joined *Asimov’s* staff as an editorial assistant in June 1982. I worked un-credited on late-stage production of the last three 1982 issues and soon began proofreading the 1983 stories.

“Hardfought” hit me like an explosion. Greg Bear’s novella appeared in our February 1983 issue. The story’s introductory blurb begins: “Before we tell you about the author, let us first warn you that the story you are about to read is like nothing else you’ve ever seen in these pages. It’s a difficult story—not one you can skim before going to bed at night. But it is also, we think, a very rewarding story. Give it time and attention and we don’t think you’ll regret it.” Set in the far future, this is a tale of love and endless war against ancient aliens that almost seems to span the Universe. It’s a tale that experiments with storytelling techniques and demands much from its reader, but it was a hit with them, too. The novella went on to win the Nebula, and it was a finalist for the 1984 Hugo.

I don’t remember when I first met Greg, but I do remember telling him and his wife Astrid how much I loved “Hardfought.” 1983 was a splendid year for Greg. In addition to the accolades for his novella, he married Astrid, and his *Analog* novelette “Blood Music” would go on to win the Nebula and the Hugo Award. At the time, I did not suspect that “Hardfought” would be the only story that Greg would publish in *Asimov’s*. Alas for us, the siren song of novels to be written would call, as it so often does. Still, I always enjoyed seeing him at conventions, and I visited him and Astrid at their beautiful home in 2016.

We published Octavia Butler’s story “Speech Sounds” in our Mid-December 1983 issue. The story is set much, much closer to home than “Hardfought.” The tale opens on a Los Angeles bus. In her article, Ms. George reminds us just how important mass transit was for Octavia. Bus rides gave her access to the library, time to write, and, sometimes, even inspiration. Ms. George says, “It gave her a window into different worlds. On the bus, she might find herself drawn into conversation, or eavesdropping

on an exchange, that would ignite a new idea. . . . Her bus rides also allowed her to make sketches of potential characters.”

The bus ride in “Speech Sounds” is fraught. A mysterious illness has “cut even the living off from one another . . . the illness was stroke-swift in the way it cut people down and strokelike in some of its effects. But it was highly specific. Language was always lost or severely impaired. . . . Often there was also paralysis, intellectual impairment, death.” Once a college history professor, the tale’s protagonist has lost her husband, her children, and her ability to read. The story is short and stunning. Octavia won her first Hugo Award for this tale in 1984. A highlight of my career is that I was sitting beside her in Anaheim, California, when she won. It was an exhilarating night that in some ways feels like it took place only yesterday. Her death in 2006 was a huge blow to all of us, but it is gratifying to see how much her work continues to reach people and be celebrated.

Other significant stories appearing in 1983 issues of *Asimov's* include works by Brian Aldiss, Michael Bishop, Gardner Dozois, James Patrick Kelly, Leigh Kennedy, Tanith Lee, Jack McDevitt, Dan Simmons, and Connie Willis. These stories all contributed to my understanding of the elements of a great science fiction or fantasy tale. Some of these dissimilar stories blow our minds with big ideas, others move us deeply with exquisite character development. Some hold our attention with well thought out plots, and some of these tales do all of the above.

I am fortunate that I got to know almost all of these authors and had the chance to tell them that I appreciated their fiction. It may sound clichéd to say that a writer’s work lives on after they are gone, but in the case of authors like Octavia E. Butler and Greg Bear these words are resoundingly true.