

# Editorial

Sheila Williams

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY, ISAAC ASIMOV!

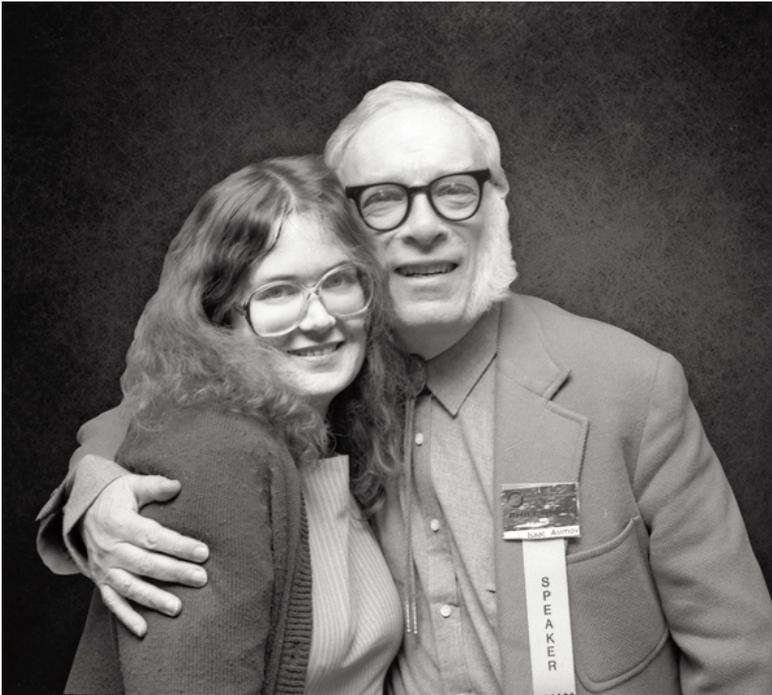
January 2, 2020, will mark Isaac Asimov's centennial birthday. Although his actual birthdate is unknown, it occurred sometime between October 4, 1919, and January 2, 1920, and Isaac chose to celebrate it on January 2. He was born in Petrovichi, a small rural community located about 250 miles southwest of Moscow. In 1923 Isaac and his family emigrated to the United States. As most readers know, he grew up in Brooklyn, where he worked in his father's candy store and dreamed about becoming a science fiction writer.

In addition to his myriad accomplishments both as a fiction and nonfiction author, Isaac cofounded *Asimov's* in 1977. I joined the staff in 1982 and worked with this remarkable man for ten years until his death in April 1992. Isaac's weekly visits to the office were joyous occasions. I saw him many times outside the office as well—at conventions and book fairs, at many of his public speeches, at a party that Ballantine Books hosted in his honor at the Hayden Planetarium, at a couple of parties in the swanky Doubleday apartment above the Doubleday bookstore on Fifth Avenue, and on numerous other occasions. I don't have a distinct memory of all of these events, but I thought I'd reminisce about a couple of festivities that do stand out.

In 1985 Isaac and his wife Janet hosted an "Unretirement" party. Isaac said that over the years his friends and colleagues had thrown many lovely wedding, anniversary, and retirement receptions. He had no intention of ever retiring from writing, but he felt that an Unretirement party would give him a chance to reciprocate. Oddly, while most of my acquaintances had received invitations, I had not. I was feeling despondent, but was afraid that it would be presumptuous to ask Isaac if I could come to the party until I learned that the managing editor of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* was an invitee. When I timidly brought up the question to Isaac he was stunned. Of course I'd been invited! He and Janet had been wondering why I hadn't sent back an RSVP! Clearly my invitation had been lost in the mail.

Then I really did get presumptuous. I asked Isaac if there was an interesting single guy that they could seat me next to? The Asimovs thought that was a fine idea. They'd sit me next to a young doctor of their acquaintance.





Sheila Williams & Isaac Asimov—Philadelphia 1986

From Jay Kay Klein photographs and papers on science fiction fandom (MS 381). Special Collections & University Archives, University of California.

The reception was held at the elegant Shun Lee West in Manhattan. As I was looking for my seat, Isaac and Janet rushed up frantically. The doctor had unexpectedly brought a date! They squeezed me in as the eleventh person at a different table for ten. This table held SF luminaries—Lester and Judy Lynn Del Rey, Donald and Elsie Wollheim, and Ian and Betty Ballantine among them. I was a little overwhelmed. Before I could figure out how to make small talk with these VIPs, it was discovered that there was an empty seat between my friends, the editor Pat LoBrutto and the artist Wayne Barlowe, and I was moved over to their table. The rest of the evening passed in a delicious blur of course after course, though I vividly recall the servers appearing with large platters, each of which contained an entire giant fish dressed up in holiday lights.

The other event was a more somber occasion. In January 1990 Doubleday books released the fortieth anniversary edition of Isaac's first novel, *Pebble in the Sky*. To honor Isaac and the book, a reception was held at Tavern on the Green—the iconic restaurant in Central Park. Isaac was very ill and had been hospitalized. The doctors had agreed that he could leave the hospital to attend the party, but would have to return right afterward.

I had been worried about him, and we exchanged a warm embrace soon after I arrived. A projector ran a continuous display of photos of Isaac and the people in his life. One image was a photo of Isaac and me that is pictured here. An unknown gentleman approached me and said, "Isaac is *so* proud of you." I demurred, thinking that Isaac might be a little proud of me, but not, "*so* proud." The man insisted. "He talks and writes about you all the time!" Suddenly, a beautiful blonde woman ran up to Isaac.

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She warmly called out, “Daddy!” Just as he said, “Robyn!” While the two of them hugged, the stranger did a double take. He looked at me and then quickly walked away. I was bemused to be mistaken for Isaac’s daughter, but I think the man had rightly perceived that Isaac and I had a sincere bond.

At seventy-two, Isaac died much too young. I’ve missed him ever since. Last June, I was invited to attend an Asimov Centennial Meet-up in Brooklyn on January 4, 2020. Our Convention Calendar compositor Erwin Strauss will be a guest as well. As he states in this issue’s Conventional Calendar, more information is available c/o Sheridan, 500 E. 77th St. #3314, New York NY 10162; on the web at [www.tiny.cc/asimov100](http://www.tiny.cc/asimov100); or email [asimov100@pobox.com](mailto:asimov100@pobox.com). I’m looking forward to wishing the Good Doctor a very happy hundredth birthday with like-minded companions. I think this will be a fairly informal event, and I hope to see some *Asimov’s* readers there.