An exploration of the words that have appeared in Asimov’s fiction and poetry titles is possible due to the work of Asimov’s super fan, Piet Nel. Piet was born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1954 and, apart from brief sojourns elsewhere, has lived there ever since. He has been a prosecutor, a senior state advocate (similar to our ADA) and, for more than a decade up to 2015, an acting regional magistrate. Piet tells us, “The latter work was done on a contract basis, but my contract ran out in 2015. I remain available, but no opportunities to return to work have arisen since then. (Translation: semi-retired criminal lawyer.)” With time on his hands, Piet created and regularly updates an index of all the stories and poems published in Asimov’s. In our last issue, Neil Clarke, editor of Clarkesworld and creator of Asimov’s online submission system, provided us with a statistical analyses of fifty thousand poetry and fiction titles submitted through our system since it launched in 2010.

I asked Piet if he could do the same thing for our published work, and he did an analysis based on the 3,338 works of fiction and 1,240 poems that have appeared in Asimov’s through our September/October 2017 issue. Below is a list of our most popu-
lar titles, and a word cloud based on the words that are most commonly found in all our titles appears opposite.

1st (4) “Oracle” (or “The Oracle”; two each)
2nd (3) “First Contact,” “Hero,” “Visitors”

If the poetry publications are removed, second-place “First Contact” and sixteen third-place titles drop off the list. There are no other changes to the numbers. Readers of last month’s editorial may already have noted that “First Contact” was the most used title in the submission system, and “Oracle,” “Hero,” and “Visitors” didn’t place in the top ten categories. In addition to the four uses that vault it into first place, our winner’s plural, “Oracles,” is also used once as a fiction title. Proving yet again that, for better or worse, professional SF authors have a fondness for predicting the future.

Though the titles are different, the most popular words are similar. Just as it dominated the submission list, “Time” is the most popular word among the professionally published titles. With 84 appearances, it actually shows up in close to 2 percent of our titles. We have “Time Travelers” and “Time Machines.” Time gets sliced, stolen, and burned. It goes backward, slips, storms, and goes by. We have Closing Time, Sequoia Time, Prime Time, Twilight Time, Wolf Time, a Time Bride, and Still Time. We also have Time-Warp, Space-Time, Cross-Time, Time-Out, Real Time, Time Passages, Writing Time, and Time Considered. We have All the Time in the World and Time on My Hands, Who Knows Where the Time Goes and, of course, we’re Out of Time.

First-runner up, “Man,” appears in 68 titles. Other well-used terms include “Last” (39), “Wife” (38), “World” (37), “Earth” (36), and “Death” (35). Analytics are fun. They show us unexpected connections among our most compelling interests. Yet, while we now have a list of popular words, this knowledge isn’t a guaranteed recipe for successful story titling. Anything is possible, but it’s rather unlikely that “The Time Wife from Earth Shot the Last Man on Death World” will show up in Asimov’s anytime soon.

* * *

“At the Pet Shop,” “Bridges,” “Destination,” “Dinosaurs,” “Entrada,” “Fireflies,” “Invasion,” “Lethe,” “Limits,” “A Meeting of Minds,” “Monsters,” “Nazca Lines,” “The One that Got Away,” “Solo,” “This Impatient Ape,” and “Time Travelers Never Die” drop off when poetry is removed from the list. Many of these had one-time uses as fiction titles.

** This list excludes the word’s thirteen appearances in the title of Reginald Bretnor’s “Feghoots.”

“From earliest childhood I’ve loved bedtime stories, and ever since then I’ve never wanted to be without a reliable source of gripping fiction—preferably short, because I’m a night owl and do most of my reading very late at night. I started to follow science fiction magazines in the mid-seventies, and since the mid-eighties Asimov’s has been my fiction journal of choice. I can clearly remember exactly where I was when I read some of my favorite classic tales by Robert Silverberg, Ursula K. Le Guin, Kij Johnson, and way too many others to mention. And despite the forward-looking nature of the magazine, I’m old enough to be sentimental and to love the fact that Asimov’s, in its forty-first year, is now old enough to have left behind four decades of unforgettable stories, some of which I’m still discovering or rediscovering in anthologies. May the magazine’s future resemble its past.”

—Piet Nel