

EDITORIAL

Sheila Williams & Michael Swanwick

NEVER SAY “RATHER UNLIKELY” AGAIN

Michael Swanwick can find ideas for stories in surprising and unlikely places. An upcoming issue of *Asimov's* will feature his tale “Eighteen Songs by Debussy,” which came to him during a recital. He once wrote 118 brief stories—one for every element. These appeared online at *Sci Fiction* and were collected into *The Periodic Table of Science Fiction*. Michael's inspirations have included steam trains, dinosaurs, talking cats and dogs, and the quest to make cold iron accessible to fairies.

From Mid-December 1984 until April 2000, we published twenty-nine stories and essays by Michael, as well as two novel serializations. Each time we purchased a new work, I dutifully sent him a form letter asking for updated biographical information for the introductory blurb. Michael's responses became more and more frantic and fantastic as he desperately attempted to provide me with fresh information. In 2001 he sent us “Letters to the Editor,” which had been assembled verbatim from some of this correspondence. For years afterward, I received humble missives from intimidated authors who informed me that their responses to my form letters couldn't possibly compare to Mr. Swanwick's.

Michael has influenced other authors in myriad ways. One impact I can vouch for is his December 1989, “Archaic Planets: Nine Excerpts from the Encyclopedia Galactica,” which he co-wrote with his son Sean. This tale about the planets in our solar system, along with Lucius Shepard's April 1987 novelette “The Sun Spider,” were the inspirations for *Isaac Asimov's Solar System*, an anthology that Gardner Dozois and I co-edited for Ace Books. As we assembled the anthology, we made an alarming discovery. Not one story about Uranus had ever appeared in *Asimov's*. I took the news to Worldcon and in a matter of weeks we had two submissions about this sideways planet. Geoffrey A. Landis and G. David Nordley had both risen to the challenge. We purchased both tales for *Asimov's* and used Geoff's in the anthology (Gerry Nordley was already represented there with a story about Venus). Unfortunately, we couldn't squeeze eleven tales into the book, which meant we had to cut “Archaic Planets,” but Jupiter was covered by Michael's February 1998 story, “The Very Pulse of the Machine.”

Michael recently sent me an extremely short tale. I found it amusing and got his permission to incorporate the story into this editorial:

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(story whose title is only revealed in its last line)

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Sometimes she was an assassin, sent back in time by the Disincarnate Mind-Lord of Earth to prevent the death of someone crucial to the Million Year Plan that would ultimately bring peace to the myriad intelligent races of the galaxy. Other times she was sent to distant planets to kill troublemakers in the future. Of all the women on Earth, she was the most trusted by the Disincarnate—and with good reason.

Deep, deep into virtual space went the assassin, racing through worlds that had not been visited by gamers for centuries, in search of a downloaded thought-criminal who had sworn to destroy not only the Plan but the Disincarnate as well.

She found him, she was pretty sure, on a Hypermassively Multiplayer Murder World. To make certain, she let him buy her a virtual drink in a Neutral Zone bar. Somehow, they wound up in his virtual room having virtual sex. It had been a long time since she had done that with a man.

Afterward, the thought-criminal said, “I know who you are. But listen to what I have to say before you kill me. I'm sure I can convert you to my side.”

“You can try.”

“Ask yourself this: Why has sexual reproduction been replaced by cloning? Why did the Disincarnate have every male human eliminated?”

“The violence inherent in males—”

“Yeah, that’s not it. The Disincarnate wants to put an end to evolution. If the human race becomes smarter, wiser, more spiritual, it won’t be able to manipulate us. The Plan will come to nothing. Now, look at the Plan! A million years of war, followed by universal enslavement to the Disincarnate. Don’t take my word for it—upload it right now and run an analysis against my hypothesis.”

She did as he suggested. The correlations were shocking. She knew now why so few were allowed access to the Plan. She understood why the Disincarnate so wanted this man killed. “It all makes perfect sense,” she admitted.

“Then team up with me. You know the Disincarnate’s secrets. I know how to fight it. Together, we can set the galaxy free.”

The assassin raised her hand and a chaos gun appeared in it. In physical space she was stronger than any human. Here, she was more powerful than the entire virtual world put together. “Do you think I do this for money? Out of loyalty to the system? For a *cause*? No. I do it for love. The Disincarnate is my husband. I married him a thousand years ago, when he still had a body.”

For an instant, she savored the fear on her victim’s face. Then . . .

The Time Wife from Earth Shot the Last Man on Death World.

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Regular readers of this magazine have already figured out that the inspiration for Michael’s latest story comes from my March/April 2018 editorial. In “More Words About Some Words,” I revealed the most often used words in *Asimov’s* titles. In my closing remarks I said, “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.” Naturally, Michael, and at least four other authors, considered the gauntlet thrown. Perhaps the next time I issue a challenge, I’ll choose my words more wisely.