

## SLIDING DOORS

The University of Kansas in Lawrence has always seemed like a slightly mythological place to me. Although I'd traveled the Eastern Seaboard with my family, I reached my late teens without ever having been west of Pennsylvania. When it came time to look for a college or university, my mother had her heart set on two Western Massachusetts schools and my guidance counselor suggested a small liberal arts college hundreds of miles away in Western New York, but I thought I might go to Kansas and study science fiction with the even more mythological entity, James Gunn.

James Gunn had authored *The Listeners*. A book I'd treasured and reread. I'd given it to my (Unitarian) minister to read and shelved it alongside the works of Samuel Delany, Thomas M. Disch, Ursula K. Le Guin, James Tiptree, Jr., and Roger Zelazny—all writers who'd made deep impressions upon my teenage mind. My father had tried to introduce me to Professor Gunn at a Worldcon, but I'd been way too terrified to talk to someone I so much admired.

As it turned out, I batted five hundred with college acceptances. To my relief, I did not get into the local schools. While these rejections broke my mother's heart, they meant that I was free to follow Horace Greeley's advice—at least a little of the way. I was deeply torn between my two choices. As one of the shyest seniors ever to contemplate going off to college, I was warned that I'd be lost at a large university. I was reassured that I would blossom at a small school. Though I was still wavering, the final blow came when someone planted the fear that I might not even get into the SF course at KU.

So I turned my back on the Jayhawks and went to a small liberal arts college in Elmira, New York. Wonderful things happened there. I founded the science fiction

club, just as I had in high school, and got to interview Gene Roddenberry for the school newspaper. I met supportive college teachers and even got to take a course in SF from two science profs. Then, after a series of adventures, I became the editor of this magazine. Still, I've often wondered what path my career would have taken if I'd chosen the other road.

I managed to get to Kansas once or twice, and finally met and even published Jim Gunn, but I'd never found the rube slippers that would take me to the University of Kansas. Then, on June 1 of this year, Jim sent me a personal invitation to the annual Campbell Conference. The John W. Campbell Memorial Award for SF novel and the Theodore Sturgeon Award for short story are bestowed at the conference. A couple of *Asimov's* stories from 2010—Steve Rasnic Tem's "A Letter from the Emperor" and Geoffrey A. Landis's "The Sultan of the Clouds"—were on the Sturgeon Award ballot and Jim thought it would be nice if I could be there for the ceremony.

I was delighted to accept Jim's invitation. Having become reacquainted with the college atmosphere while touring schools with my seventeen-year-old daughter during the past year, I felt at home the moment I set foot on the KU campus. I arrived on Thursday, July 7, and was almost immediately whisked off to Watson Library for a special presentation.

After a lovely reception, Noël Sturgeon, Theodore Sturgeon's daughter and trustee of the Sturgeon Literary Trust collection, announced that the definitive collection of Theodore Sturgeon's books, papers, manuscripts, and correspondence had been bestowed on KU's Kenneth Spencer Research Library. Guests at the reception were allowed to peruse correspondence between Ted Sturgeon and writers like Clifford Simak, Isaac Asimov,

and Ray Bradbury. Ted Sturgeon suffered from long periods of writer's block, and one long letter from Robert Heinlein was filled with wonderful story ideas that he was gifting to his friend.

After the festivities, I revisited my college days as a biker's girlfriend (if my boyfriend's 250cc possibly counted as a motorcycle) by accepting a ride to a local restaurant on the back of Chris McKitterick's scooter. Chris is a writer and the director of KU's Center for the Study of Science Fiction. The center was founded by James Gunn, and it is the nexus for all the amazing SF workshops, classes, and conferences that take place at the university. I'll go into more detail about the SF programs at KU in next month's editorial.

The Campbell Conference is held under the center's aegis and the next evening I attended the conference's award ceremony and banquet. Noël presented the Sturgeon Award to Geoff Landis, who attended the conference with his wife, Mary Turzillo. Writer and scholar Elizabeth Anne Hull presented the Campbell Award to Ian McDonald for his novel *The Dervish House*. Other participants and guests at the conference included Kij Johnson, Robin Wayne Bailey, and Bradley Denton.

While nurturing writers like Kij, Chris, and Brad, as well as John Kessel, Pat Cadigan, and many others, James Gunn established a vibrant home for the study of science fiction. I'd love to go back to Lawrence and spend a lot more time among the collections. In addition to Ted Sturgeon's letters, I could wend my way through the papers of Brian Aldiss, Algis Budrys, Cordwainer Smith, and A.E. Van Vogt. I could spend hours in the center's own SF library and sit in on some of the classes and workshops. It's too bad I don't have nearly enough time to pick up a Ph.D. in science fiction.

In the alternate universe where I slid open the door that led to the University of Kansas when I was seventeen, I'm sure I studied SF with Jim. I had adventures and I blossomed. I'm almost certainly active in the field of science fiction today. Perhaps I'm even the editor of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine. ○