

GUEST EDITORIAL

THINGS CHANGE

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At MidAmeriCon II last summer, I was on a panel devoted to this magazine. Sheila Williams presided over our group, which included Connie Willis, Steve Rasnic Tem, Robert Reed, Mary Robinette Kowal, and me. Sheila introduced each of us, and we read from works that had appeared here. Afterward, we took questions from the audience. When she introduced Bob Reed, Sheila announced that he had contributed more stories to *Asimov's* than any other writer, surpassing Isaac Asimov's record. This did not come as a particular surprise to me, since not only is Bob one of our best writers, he is also one of the most prolific of my generation. But you see, I predicted this changing of the guard fourteen years ago. Back then *Asimov's* hosted an online forum where readers and writers could mingle virtually, and an argument had arisen as to who had appeared in the magazine most often. The discussion gave me an idea for my column "On The Net," and in the July 2003 issue I published "Frequent Filers." With the help of an industrious reader named Jason Hauser, I listed the all-time top contributors. The ranking was: Isaac first, followed by Bob, myself, Nancy Kress, and Michael Swanwick. Of course, the Good Doctor passed away in 1992, while the rest of us are still at it, so his record was bound to be in jeopardy. Alas, I have lost track of Reader Hauser (yo, email me!), and according to Sheila there's no easy way to come up with a comprehensive current ranking. For the record, however, I am still four stories behind Isaac. I suppose I might reasonably expect to stumble into second place someday, that is unless Nancy or Michael or Kristine Katherine Rusch leave me in their literary dust. But no way am I likely to catch my friend Bob!

I was happy to accept Sheila's invitation to write a guest editorial—my first!—because my career as a writer has been inextricably linked with this publication. I've written not only those forty-three stories but also almost a hundred installments of "On The Net." I was not present at the beginning, however. Over the first seven years of this magazine's existence, I earned more than my share of rejection slips. This was in part because I was still learning my craft, but it was also because *Asimov's* was a different magazine back then.

Consider that the title of this publication when it was founded was *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. If you look at some of the earliest issues, you will see the teeny face of the Good Doctor beaming out from the O in *Asimov's*. The magazine was making an implicit promise that if you liked the kind of stories that *Isaac Asimov* wrote, you would like the stories in his magazine. In fact, you'd get plenty of stories by Isaac himself. Also, the stories would be *science fiction*. Move along if you were looking for fantasy, this wasn't your stop. There were no exceptions to this editorial policy, not even for Isaac himself. When he brought his ongoing fantasy series about a tricky, wish-granting demon named Azazel to these pages, he was asked to change his main character from a demon to alien. When he later collected some of the stories into a book, Azazel became supernatural once again.

Shawna McCarthy was the first editor to tinker with the story mix. Her taste tended toward more gritty futures and problematic characters. She welcomed the cyberpunks and championed Lucius Shepard. Lucius could write science fiction, but his talent led him inextricably toward the darker corners of fantasy. But Shawna only stayed with us a couple of years, so it was Gardner Dozois who really pushed *Asimov's* into new territory. While Gardner was willing to take a chance on stories like Lucius's baroque fantasy "The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter" or Connie Willis's "Jack," a WWII historical that reimagines one of horror's classic monsters, or Eileen Gunn's

mordant corporate primer “Stable Strategies For Middle Management” that managed to outkafka Kafka, he would get pushback from readers. I published a story about a man who suffering recurring nightmares about a fire on a speedboat. In the last scene it all comes true. The magazine ran a letters column in its first decade in which Isaac would answer questions or offer comment. A reader wondered what my story was doing in a science fiction magazine, and Isaac replied that, of course, precognitive dreams were within the scope. If it had been me answering, I would have confessed that the story was pure fantasy.

Sheila Williams had been with *Asimov's* under both Shawna and Gardner, so when she took over in 2004, not only was she was its new editor, she was its institutional memory. While still committed to the traditions of the magazine, she has embraced the changes that have occurred in the genre since the turn of the century. The metaphorical tent has become larger and more inclusive since she's taken charge. While there is no longer a letters column, neither is there a need to explain why not all stories aspire to the ideals of 1970s SF. What many writers and readers perceive as one of the premier science fiction markets still makes room for award winners like Kij Johnson's lyrical novella “The Man Who Bridged the Mist” that spans the divide between science fiction and fantasy and Karen Joy Fowler's ghostly meditation on evanescence, “Always.”

The notion that science fiction and fantasy are antithetical and shouldn't coexist within the pages of a single magazine has always puzzled me. I write both and read both and find that they are in conversation with one another in the genre as a whole. While I have followed and helped make—in some small way—the changing history of this magazine, I like what I see happening in its fortieth year of publication. Things are different now, and I'm okay with that.