

RESILIENCE

The story of a person or people who face a dire situation with grace and fortitude can be irresistible. These individuals may capture our imaginations even if they don't survive the peril. We see it in the retelling of historical battles like Thermopylae where seven thousand Greek soldiers held off at least a hundred thousand invading Persian soldiers for seven days. The story of the rear guard that fought to their death has been retold in novels, comics, and movies like *300*.

The legend of Robert the Bruce and the intrepid spider is another story that reverberates. According to folklore this Scottish king decided to engage in one more battle for Scottish independence while watching a spider try and try again to spin its web. Although facing overwhelming odds, the success of the spider is said to have led to the king's resolve to take on and defeat the English at the Battle of Bannockburn.

We see the same grit in biblical stories like "David and Goliath" and fairy tales like "Cinderella" and Hans Christian Anderson's story of "The Wild Swans," where a princess bereft of speech and about to be burned at the stake for witchcraft continues to work tirelessly to save her transformed brothers.

This resilience is an element of many popular science fiction stories. The three survivors of the space wreck "Marooned Off Vesta," in Isaac Asimov's first published story, show the same ingenuity as the real-life Apollo 13 astronauts. Although a first sale, it has been reprinted numerous times and in at least seven languages. Geoffrey A. Landis gives us a similar resourcefulness in his Hugo Award winning story about an astronaut's struggle to survive on the Moon as she takes "A Walk in the Sun" (*Asimov's*, October 1981).

One of my favorite tales of this type is Octavia Butler's Hugo-Award winning "Speech Sounds" (*Asimov's*, Mid-December 1983). In a devastating yet ultimately inspiring slice-of-life tale that takes place in the aftermath of a terrible pandemic, two people attempt to impose some measure of civilization on the surrounding chaos.

These stories are not about resignation. Even when the situation is untenable, it's not that the characters have given up. It's that they are resolved to do their best. Perhaps, like Teddy Roosevelt in Mike Resnick's "Bully!" (*Asimov's*, April 1991), to take the hill or die trying. Or perhaps they will face the situation with quiet perseverance. Although emotionally damaged by the horror of the plague, the characters in Connie Willis's Hugo and Nebula Award winning 1992 novel, *Doomsday Book*, work relentlessly to save their companions, and, when that isn't possible, to give them a dignified death.

These stories stay with the reader long after the final page is turned. Of course they don't represent all works of beloved science fiction. Isaac Asimov's own "Nightfall," where panic and irrationality lead to the cyclic downfall of civilization is representative of different view of humanity. James Tiptree, Jr.'s "Love Is the Plan, the Plan Is Death," shows that well-laid plans may not be able to surmount basic instincts. But luckily for the reader, no one theme or story has to encapsulate all aspects of enjoyable fiction.

While perusing the final layout for this annual slightly spooky issue, I discovered that some of the stories seemed thematically related. They are entirely different from each other, but their characters are resilient. These characters all find themselves in difficult circumstances. Not all will survive their encounters, but they all find the grace and the grit to improve their lives and have a positive effect on other people.