

Until the Dragon Comes

Science fiction fandom and the making of the twenty-first century

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I met Terry Pratchett in a gray and white conference room in the basement of the Hynes Convention Center in Boston, where he was appearing as a Guest of Honor at the 62nd World Science Fiction Convention, or “WorldCon,” held in 2004. WorldCon orbits the globe like a mothership; the attendees at each year’s convention vote on where it’ll touch down three years later. The first Boston-based WorldCon, spanning the Labor Day weekend of 1971, was called Noreascon. The sixty-second WorldCon was Boston’s fourth, so it was known, as it had to be, as Noreascon 4. I was there as a reporter, but I was also there on a secret quest.

Pratchett is one of the most prolific satirists in the English-speaking world. He’s the Garrison Keillor of science fiction and fantasy literature, and his Lake Wobegon—his allegorical laboratory—is DiscWorld, an absurd, magical, flat planet that “travels through space on the backs of four elephants that stand on the back of a giant turtle.” On the floors above Pratchett’s official press conference, thousands of fans were gathered together to celebrate a mutual love of science fiction and fantasy. Down below, seven of us were at a small table with him, waiting for someone else to ask a question. I’ve now read six of his novels, but at the time I hadn’t yet read any of them, and I’d shown up because I assumed there would be better journalists there who’d done enough research to ask smart questions.

Instead, with the exception of a writer for *Wired* who seemed to have read only Pratchett’s children’s books, the reporters were amateurs: two fan zine writers, a zine photographer, a married couple from Atlanta who’d done a bit of freelance work for a suburban daily, and a balding man with a white beard who never spoke and was identifiable as press only by the brown ribbon dangling from his convention ID badge. It became clear that they were able to obtain press credentials because the convention organizers needed bodies

to fill up the press conferences, and also because in fandom—the general term for the science fiction and fantasy community—fans are accorded almost as much honor as the authors. We sat for an uncomfortable minute or two before Pratchett, pitying us, said, “I expect that you’re wondering why I called you here today.” The rest of the hour-long press conference went similarly, with Pratchett rescuing us from silence and graciously ignoring how ill-prepared we were.

I was embarrassed. Pratchett deserved better, not only because he didn’t have to be there—his books have made him a million-aire—but because he seemed to be a decent person. It’s hard not to like someone who wears a floppy leather hat and a T-shirt that reads *ACTUALLY, I AM A ROCKET WIZARD*. The adoring fans were there, of course, and over the long weekend of the convention, hundreds of them lined up for Pratchett’s book signings and crammed into the panels in which he participated. The New England Science Fiction Association, the sponsor of the convention, published *Once More (with footnotes)*, a new collection of his stories and essays. At the masquerade costume competition on Sunday night, perhaps a third of the costumes were homages to Pratchett. And the acceptance speeches at the Hugo Awards—science fiction’s highest honors—were a litany of affectionate references to him.

Pratchett was celebrated, but also exploited and sometimes ignored, which is typical of the covenant that has nourished and stunted the genre of science fiction since its beginnings in the nineteen-twenties: writers, editors, agents, publishers, and fans coexist in one fascinating, frothy, uneasy community whose foundational myth is of a seamless continuum between writer and reader. Every WorldCon now has two professional guests of honor and two fan guests of honor, and Hugos are given to both professionals and fans. The short memoirs in the glossy, 240-page Noreascon 4 program are all, in a sense, devotions to the compact between readers and writers. In it, for instance, Neil Gaiman tells of his first meeting with Terry Pratchett:

So it’s February of 1985, and it’s a Chinese restaurant in London, and it’s the author’s first interview. His publicist had been pleasantly surprised that anyone would want to talk to him (the author has just written a funny fantasy book called *The Colour of Magic*), but she’s set up this lunch with a young journalist anyway.... And the author is Terry Pratchett, and the journalist is me.

In his own memoir, Terry Pratchett writes of being a fan, of first discovering, as a boy, a small stock of science fiction magazines in a soft-core porn shop in England:

I’d found these stories about Space.... Then, in one of the UK mags, there was a mention of the British Science Fiction Association.

Contact. And that led to the cons, and to that general encouragement to write that is part of the atmosphere.... The 1965 Worldcon was my last convention for twenty-one years. I’d been formally in fandom for a mere three years, not counting the apprenticeship in the little shop, and didn’t find my way back until I’d written four novels. It’s nice to be home.

The arc is important, from readers to fans to journalists to published novelists to bestselling novelists who are guests of honor, or Hugo Award winners, at WorldCon but who remain, in their geeky hearts, fans. In Gaiman’s case, the respect he pays is particularly validating. His Sandman graphic novels have earned him enough literary credibility that he could, if he chose, leave the fans behind. He could betray them, as Kurt Vonnegut famously did when he refused to allow publishers to label or shelve his novels as science fiction. Instead, Gaiman continues to write fantasy; he appears at a few conventions a year; and, in proper fan zine fashion, he reports back on the cons on his blog. After Noreascon 4, for instance, there was this:

Tuesday, September 07, 2004

a jumble of con memories

posted by Neil Gaiman 9/7/2004 08:46:54 AM

Let's see. I did lots of cool things in the last few days. I'll forget some of them, I'm sure. But in no particular order, things that I really enjoyed included:

... Briefing Phil Klass—William Tenn—before the Hugos on what he'd be doing. He's slightly deaf, and cheerfully curmudgeonly, and when I told him he would read the nominees for best novel, open the envelope and announce the winner, he said "Denounce the winner? Why would I do that?" and then he said "I will if you want me to, though." And I suspected that he might have done. He wrote some astonishing stories, of which the one that feels more and more relevant these days is one called *The Liberation of Earth*. (I just googled it, but found only a Mumpsimus essay on it by Matthew Cheney, who I met at a hot, sweaty room-party and who was, unsurprisingly given his blog, both smart and nice.)

... Reading the first chapter of *Anansi Boys* to about 500 people, who all laughed in the right places (ie pretty much anywhere) and who seemed to enjoy it. I learned a lot about the text by reading it aloud to a roomful of people (I learned enough that I plan to read a whole lot more of *Anansi Boys* aloud at the Fiddler's Green convention in November.)

The blogs are a twenty-first-century medium, but the impulse is the same one that has animated fandom for eighty years. Something important happened when, in 1926, Hugo Gernsback, founder and editor of *Amazing Stories*, decided to publish the addresses of the men who wrote in to the magazine's letters column week after week to quibble over the science in a story from the last issue, or to argue with another letter writer, or to rant about politics and religion. With the addresses, the fans contacted each other directly and formed clubs. Then the clubs took trips to visit each other, and those trips evolved into conventions. Many fans started to write. New maga-

zines were published to capitalize on Gernsback's success, and they needed more writers, and as their standards weren't high, more fans found it possible to publish. Others became agents, editors, artists, and anthologists, and they brought more of their funny-looking friends along as clients.

"The Futurians...were an odd-looking group," writes SF novelist and critic Damon Knight of his first impressions of the legendary New York-based club:

Wollheim was the oldest and least beautiful (Kornbluth once introduced him as "this gargoyle on my right").... Lowndes was ungainly and flatfooted; he had buck teeth which made him lisp and sputter, and a hectic glare like a cockatoo's. Michel was slender and looked so much more normal than the rest that he seemed handsome by contrast, although he was pockmarked and balding. He had a high voice and stammered painfully. Cyril Kornbluth ... was plump, pale and sullen. He had narrow Tartar eyes and spoke in a rumbling monotone; he looked ten years older than he was. Chester Cohen was about my age, and although he was neurotic and jumpy, a nail-picker (not enough left to bite), he was able to freeze on command and hold a pose indefinitely.

Not all fans became writers. Some remained fans. They ran the conventions, or populated the conventions. They published and exchanged amateur fan zines talking about what happened at the latest convention or reviewing the latest story or novel from their favorite writer. Their convention fees, book purchases, and devotions helped to lubricate the market and buck up literary egos in a genre that remained, for most of its history, a small and embarrassing thing, a ghetto, to use a term that clings to the community to this day. There were never enough hardcore fans to open a movie or get a novel on the bestseller list, but the fans were the generator that kept the genre going when it was young and interest from the mainstream flagged; they were repositories of its history and an important element in the

complex dynamic that shapes a genre and solidifies its literary and cultural traditions.

Now that science fiction and fantasy have become mass phenomena, inescapable constituents of the language and imagery through which Americans understand and delude themselves, the fans are revealed to us as our dreamweavers. What cultural influence they've had! What awesome majesties and piles of pop-cultural dung these geeks have midwived into being: *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Spider Man*, *Superman*, *The Matrix*, *Jurassic Park*, vast swaths of the multi-billion dollar video game industry, anime, *2001*, *X-Files*, Magic: The Gathering, *Blade Runner*, *Men in Black*, *Star Trek*, anthropomorphic robots, sentient computers, the Terminator.

We're no closer to faster-than-light travel, aliens, or androids because of science fiction, but we imagine we know what hyperspace, aliens, and androids look like because of it. We're saturated by the images. Twenty of the twenty-five highest-grossing movies in cinematic history—eight of the top ten—have science fiction and fantasy themes, and with the exception of *Titanic*, the exceptions prove the rule. *Finding Nemo* and *The Lion King* star talking animals. *Forrest Gump* is not exactly an exercise in realism. *The Passion of the Christ* only avoids the fantasy designation because hundreds of millions of people believe that it's based on a true story.

Meanwhile, J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* books continue to sell hundreds of thousands of copies every year. J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books are the publishing phenomenon of the last ten years. At the same time that a novelist like Jonathan Lethem is smuggling science fiction from the genre ghetto into the walled city-state of literary fiction, a giant like Philip Roth is smuggling literary fiction out, heading into the hinterlands of speculative fiction (if Roth's *The Plot Against America* were written by a science fiction writer, it would be dubbed "alternate history" and shelved with science fiction and fantasy at the bookstores). The world of pop music has yet to show a pervasive science fictional influence, but it's beginning to bubble up in the apocalyptic imagery of the Wu-Tang

Clan, in some of the videos of late-stage Britney Spears, and in the general flavor of innovators like Beck, Moby, Björk, Radiohead and Sigur Rós. Heavy metal, itself a mass genre that's misunderstood by the mainstream, is suffused with science fiction and fantasy symbolism and aesthetics.

Whatever exactly science fiction is, it's not what its detractors have always said, and its advocates have always feared, it is: irrelevant. It's a bastard child of the twentieth century, and of America: neurotic, utopian, Manichean, scientific, technological, conditioned by pulp and its fantasies of immortality but also infused with sublimated religiosity and its end-time visions and anxieties of impotence. For better and worse, it's one of the dominant modes of contemporary American culture. We're already dealing with it, and living in it, whether we realize it or not.

The Hynes Convention Center is what a mediocre graduate student would celebrate as a postmodern space: one node, like the airport and the Days Inn, along the concourse of nonspecific man. It's a science fiction space projected forward from the nineteen-fifties, when the future was a warren of intersecting planes of gleaming surfaces, fluorescent lights, stores, restaurants, conference rooms and living cubes. Anonymous humanity circulating through elevators, escalators, and glass doors.

Noreascon 4 was at the Hynes Center because the center offered the right kinds of spaces to house five thousand fans for five days. In the grand auditorium, they gave out the Hugo Awards and admired the elaborate costumes of the masquerade. In the dealer's room they bought and sold junk and books. They turned the corner of a large exhibition space into a papier-mâché, plywood and cardboard replica of the Mended Drum, a medieval dive bar from Terry Pratchett's fantastical city of Ankh-Morpork. In the adjoining hotels they partied, renewed old friendships and copulated. In conference rooms they gathered with scientists to speak of nanotechnology; with fellow fans to chart the ecology of Tolkien's Middle Earth; with

a favorite author to listen to him read.

For many of the people there, it was somewhere between their second and twentieth WorldCon, a social anchor of their year. Yet its trappings were disappointing to me. Not just the sterility of the space, but the inability of the people within it to transform it into a realm visibly apart from the mundane. It looked like any convention, a blend of summer camp, school and bacchanal. There was a woman paying tribute to Anne McCaffery's Pern novels by carrying a stuffed dragon on her arm, a number of men in Cape Canaveral chic—Hawaiian shirts, lambchops, thick plastic glasses—and a lot of people wearing T-shirts from conventions past, but otherwise the convention could have been made up of accountants, dentists, dental technicians.

Outwardly it was nothing much more fantastical than any group of adults on holiday for a few days from work and routine, nothing like the popular image of the science fiction convention, an image that's derived, unsurprisingly, from the stockpile of science fiction imagery of the alien bazaar or nightclub. (The dive bar on Tatooine where Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi meet Han Solo while globular aliens play bulbous instruments in the background is a good example.) In place of aliens, the convention promises fans who will not only dress as aliens, wizards and elves, but who are alien: different, strange, chattering in another language. When fandom isn't fighting against this representation, it's encouraging it. It loves to mythologize itself, and the conventions have become archetypal settings, like castles in a quasi medieval fantasy, in which to set fandom's mythology.

"Bathed in the mysterious, golden light of early dawn lay the fair land of Trufandom," write Bob Shaw and Walt Willis in *The Enchanted Duplicator*, their allegory of a new fan's journey into deep fandom:

Only its hills and spires were picked out by the questing rays of the sun,
for the country was a sunken plateau ringed on all sides by mountains,

so that it formed a secluded world of its own. A more wonderful one Jophan could not have imagined.... On either side of him were numerous parks and gardens, great and small, and of varying types of beauty, and in them walked shining, godlike figures whom he knew to be Trufans.

Shaw and Willis are affectionately exaggerating, but the sentiment is genuine. Fans love to talk about themselves, and to tell stories of legendary fans, writers and convention moments. At Noreascon 4 this fondness for memorializing was at its most narcissistic in the official liveblogging by fans and authors, hosted on the convention website, about what was happening at the convention as the writer wrote. Elsewhere it took more traditional forms. Photo montages studded the exhibition halls, mixing famous authors and famous fans together into one familial jumble. A forty-foot display of author photos and bios ran along the vast, sunlit top-floor corridor of the convention center, with fans twisting in and out of it, perusing fondly like judges at a junior high school science fair.

On the street outside the convention center, I gathered bits and pieces of lore from fellow smokers. One fan, a large, potbelly, bearded man in late middle age, told me of the time that Isaac Asimov "got a bit handsy" with his wife.

"I'd gone to bed early," he said, "and when she came into the room, a few hours later, she said, 'I was just groped by Isaac Asimov.'"

"That's nice, honey," I said, and then rolled over and went back to sleep."

Others told me of their first convention experiences, of the friend or boyfriend or girlfriend who dragged them along to their first convention, and of the surprisingly great time they had drinking, talking and sitting at the feet of their favorite authors as the legends told stories of even more legendary authors, fans and conventions. There was the 1952 Worldcon, at which hundreds collaborated in a rendition of "Glory, How We Hate Ray Bradbury" to the

tune of “John Brown’s Body.” There was an endless supply of stories about “Forry”—Forrest J Ackerman, the greatest fan in the history of fandom—whose name was dropped into conversations like the secret hand signal of the Templar Brotherhood.

I came to WorldCon as a journalist, a type alternatively loathed and courted by the fan community in its endearing and embarrassing dialogue with the non-science fictional world. I also came as a serious consumer of science fiction, someone who’d never participated in the subculture that radiates out from the conventions but who knew some of its reference points. I arrived as press, but hoped to pass.

The archetypal story in fantasy literature is of an adolescent boy cast out from his familiar though often hostile surroundings into the world and onto a quest. He meets companions, vanquishes enemies, discovers the truth of his royal/magical/warrior blood, falls in love and becomes a man. Maybe he returns home again, or maybe he discovers his true home—on the throne, in the land of faerie, as part of a mystical brotherhood—and assumes his rightful place there. It’s a simple coming-of-age story, dragons notwithstanding, about the journey of a young man into maturity. When I imagined going to WorldCon, visions of faerie lands dancing in my head, I imagined being on a quest into deepening knowledge of a world that was familiar to me in its outlines but mysterious in its essence. I would move from room to room, from the recreated bridge of the U.S.S. Enterprise to the mead-soaked halls of filk singing, from comic books to Dungeons & Dragons to live action role plays (LARPs), learning the rules, decrypting the language.

I discovered, however, that the language was not mysterious. The vocabulary was disorienting at first, but the syntax was simple, more like Pig Latin than Esperanto (though fandom is one of the few places where the Esperanto movement clings to life). Once you grasped the equation, the rest was accumulating data: The plural of fan was “fen.” The Brotherhood Without Banners was the fan club

devoted to George R.R. Martin’s Song of Ice and Fire series. The Voodoo Message Board was a way for people to exchange messages once they’d arrived at the convention; it was the invention of Erwin “Filthy Pierre” Straus, a legendary fan.

The people, on the other hand, were quite mysterious. They were funny-looking people, like Filthy Pierre himself, who often appeared to verge on autism but who had managed, over the past seventy-five years, to sustain a community that sustained them.

The stereotype of the geek, arrested in adolescence and an object of mockery, is useful to popular culture as an affirmation of normalcy and a sublimation of the public’s anxiety about eccentricity. The iconic moment of this model is William Shatner on *Saturday Night Live*, yelling at a gathering of *Star Trek* fans to get a life, move out of their parents’ basements, grow up, learn how to kiss a girl, and accept that *Star Trek* is “just a TV show.” The term “geek” is useful to fans as well, who have appropriated it as gays and lesbians have with “queer,” investing it with a sense of exceptionalism. They’re different, but therefore of more value: more intelligent, liberated, iconoclastic, future-oriented. Robert Heinlein captured this bravado in a speech he gave in 1941 at Denvention, Denver’s first WorldCon:

Most human beings, and those who laugh at us for reading science fiction ... make their plans, make their predictions, only within the limits of their immediate personal affairs.... In fact, most people, as compared with science fiction fans, have no conception whatsoever of the fact that the culture they live in does change; that it can change.

Both Shatner and Heinlein have a point. A geek is a geek is a geek, as Gertrude Stein might have said if she’d ever gone to a convention. Over the course of the WorldCon weekend, I couldn’t find more than a few fans whose interactional rhythms fell within the mundane part of the bell curve. I had easy conversations, but they were rare. Jim Crocker, a comic book store owner whom I’d once

written about, sat down with me at a table by the fake fireplaces that decorated the Mended Drum. He critiqued, affectionately, the world of fandom. “To me the whole thing is encapsulated in the fact that they gave a Hugo to a fan,” he said. “It would be as if the Academy gave an Oscar to the guy who’s been stalking Lily Tomlin for twenty years.”

Crocker was at WorldCon primarily to hawk his wares in the dealer’s room, but it was also a chance for him and his wife to catch up with old friends. You can’t understand conventions, he said, if you don’t understand that for many of the fans, the panels, readings and award ceremonies are mostly an excuse to party. “I was at one of the parties once,” he said, “and a friend turned to me and said, ‘This is exactly like a college party.’ I said, ‘Do you know why? Because a lot of the people didn’t go to those parties in college.’”

After Crocker returned to the dealer’s room, I thought I’d try to sit in on one of the Literary Beers that was happening in the corner of the bar. I hadn’t signed up beforehand, but assumed, peering over the cordon to the tables ten feet away, that there was room for me. One of the authors had only two fans at her table; another had just arrived, late, and I could hear the organizers explaining to him that his fans had assumed he wasn’t going to appear and had left. I walked over, but was blocked by a ponytailed man whose assignment, it became apparent, was to hold the line against party-crashers. “You had to sign up beforehand,” he said, “and it’s too late now.”

I could almost see the instructions his convention superiors had given him—*Don’t let in anyone who hasn’t signed up ... sign-ups are at the Convention Suite ... protect the authors*—running through his head like a stock ticker on a financial news channel. I began to protest, but he was so nervous, so visibly afraid of botching his task, that I took pity on him and walked away.

The next afternoon, at the ConSuite, I made it off the waitlist into a Kaffeeklatsch with Simon Green, a curly-haired British novelist in his late forties. I knew of him from his Deathstalker books, space operas set in a far future where Owen Deathstalker, the book-

ish scion of a noble family, is forced out of his comfortable life into a quest that transforms him into a Jesus-meets-Superman savior of the galaxy. The other fans at the table were more familiar—and familiar is an understatement—with his Nightside series, which follows the adventures of John Taylor, a Jesus-meets-Philip Marlowe private detective who walks the streets of the Nightside, a magical London underworld. (“John Taylor is the name. I work the Nightside. Only in that dark heart of London where it’s always three A.M., where human and inhuman can feed their darkest desires, do I feel at home. Because I was born here.”)

Green’s success story, which we lapped up, was dramatic. He was a fan in the nineteen-seventies, dropped out of fandom in the nineteen-eighties, sold a few stories here and there. In 1985 he was laid off from his job as a shop assistant. “I had a B.A.,” he said, and an M.A.

I was thirty years old, living with my parents, on the dole. I was diagnosed with clinical depression at one point. I was too old, and too overqualified to get a decent job, and I realized that this was the time to be serious about my writing. In three and a half years I wrote seven novels. In 1988, I’m working in a bookshop in Bath, and I got a letter from Ace. They’d accepted my first Nightside novel and wanted to sign a six-book deal.

Since then Green had sold millions of books. The release of his latest novel was, quietly, more of a publishing event than the latest from Don DeLillo. The unemployed fan who was literally living in his parents’ basement had been replaced by a witty, charming, leather jacket-wearing novelist. The metamorphosis, however, wasn’t complete. His wit was still too hyperactive; he told the same funny anecdotes at the Kaffeeklatsch that he’d told at a panel I’d attended that morning, and he told them again when we sat down for an interview. And he seemed to know that he hadn’t quite settled in to his new status. “It took fifteen years for me to become an overnight

success,” he said. “I’ve just started getting back into the conventions. I still walk around feeling like a fan. I don’t know most of the pros.”

None of this unease is apparent in his books, which are great fun to read. He’s a smart, fluid writer, though not a deep one. In his novels, the good guys always win, and the *deus ex machina* is almost a character in its own right. He resurrected the only one of his protagonists he’d ever killed off, because he realized that keeping him dead was too much of a downer. This didn’t bother me as a reader. I don’t like downers, and I was excited when Owen Deathstalker was brought back from the other side. It bothered me as a person, though. Why do I love these books so much? Is it all just about escapism? And if so, what does that signify?

I had a friend in college who was fascinated and repulsed by Scientology, the religion spun out of nothingness by science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard. He read about Scientology, posted to internet message boards on the subject, and documented for himself how ridiculous and treacherous the movement was. I once asked him why.

“I’m interested in cults,” he said, “because I’m the guy who cultists will push through a crowd of a thousand people to hand their pamphlet to. They just pick me out. I must look lost.”

He was a classic science-fiction type, someone who walked around in his long dark overcoat at an angle to the rest of the world, skinny and pasty-faced with long oily hair and thick glasses. I was reminded of him over the weekend that I spent at WorldCon. There were so many people there who carried the same bubble of loneliness around with them that I soon felt, after repeated failures to get to know anyone, as if I was the outcast.

It was a strange reversal, a taste of what many fans’ lives are like out in the mundane world. The irony was that in an alternate universe, one in which a few things happened differently, I might be a fan. I began reading comics when I was 9 or 10 years old, and a few years later, when I realized I was more interested in the stories

than in the images, I gave up comics and started reading science fiction and fantasy novels. I’ve since read thousands of them—more wizards, warriors, aliens, starships and shapeshifters than I can count. Not infrequently, I’ll pick up a book at a used bookstore, take it home and realize about halfway through that I’ve read it already, many years before. I’ve also been a devoted fan of four of the five *Star Trek* series, Episodes IV-VI of the *Star Wars* movies, both of the low-budget TV series starring Kevin Sorbo, both TV series starring Scott Bakula, and the third installment of the *Matrix* trilogy.

But I have never been a fan in a technical sense. Only twice in my life have I played a game of Dungeons & Dragons. The first was at a friend’s house with his older brother and his friends. It was a lot of fun, but the older guys were just doing us a favor and didn’t invite us to join their ongoing campaign. The second was with a few of my friends and one of their younger brothers. None of us knew what we were doing, and it wasn’t much fun. Four hours we ragged on my friend’s younger brother, who was the dungeon master, until the game came to an end when, fed up, he shouted out, “Poison arrows fly out from all directions and kill all of you!”

We all gave up on gaming after that (though we’ve kept the poison arrow story alive). I liked the idea of being a gamer, and had plenty of TV-filled afternoons I would have happily foregone, but I was too easily distracted to master the rules. I was also too comfortable in my small group of friends to seek out any D&D players, whom I imagined as older and more sophisticated. By high school, with homework, sports and student government, there was no time. In college, there was time, but though the persona I was constructing was expansive enough to confess my love of *Star Trek* to my roommate—who also, it turned out, loved *Star Trek*—it wasn’t big enough for any more public displays of affection. No conventions, no gaming, no boffing—fighting with foam weapons—and no dressing up. By the time I was in a position to become a fan, my instinct for acceptance kept me from announcing myself, by what I wore or what I did, as a geek.

But I understood. I always shared with the fans a compulsive need to read the stories and watch the shows and movies, to immerse myself in worlds and universes where the laws of physics and history had been bent, expanded, or just dispensed with. Just last year I spent fourteen hours of one day watching all three movies in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, an act of devotion that only seems moderate when compared to the hundreds of hours I've spent re-reading (eight times) the original trilogy.

I understood, too, a big reason why fans enjoy going to conventions. It's such a relief to find other people who understand why, and how, someone can read the same book or trilogies of books over and over again. With the exception of a sad overweight girl in junior high school who was just too weird to be friends with, I didn't have any-one, when I was growing up, with whom to talk about Isaac Asimov's three rules of the positronic robot brain, about what role Lazarus Long played in Robert Heinlein's future history, about how cool it would be to ride on the behemoth sand worms of Frank Herbert's *Dune*.

I wasn't an outcast; my parents were glad I was reading and my friends didn't care what I read as long as I also played sports and video games. It's not hard for me, however, to feel a connection to the fans who've always sensed that their love of science fiction is just one more thing that sets them apart from everyone else. Like them, I know what the book covers—with their lurid colors, raised lettering, and baroque illustrations—say to the man opposite me on the bus, or to the stylish woman at the table next to mine at the coffee shop. I've short-circuited more than one blind date with an ill-timed (though always apt) reference to a *Star Trek* episode. My older brother still gets a glint in his eye whenever he catches me reading a science fiction or fantasy book. He takes it from me, opens to a random page, and reads aloud a paragraph or two, moving deadpan through the strange names and melodramatic prose. He would enjoy this passage:

"Lord Stark," Jon said. It was strange to hear him call Father that, so formal. Bran looked at him with desperate hope. "There are five pups," he told Father. "Three male, two female."

"What of it, Jon?"

"You have five trueborn children," Jon said. "Three sons, two daughters. The direwolf is the sigil of your house. Your children were meant to have these pups, my lord."

Bran saw his father's face change, saw the other men exchange glances. He loved Jon with all his heart at that moment. Even at seven, Bran understood what his brother had done. The count had come right only because Jon had omitted himself. He had included the girls, included even Rickon, the baby, but not the bastard who bore the surname Snow, the name that custom decreed be given to all those in the north unlucky enough to be born with no name of their own.

The passage is from the beginning of *A Game of Thrones*, the first novel in George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* series. Lord Eddard Stark, the patriarch of a noble family from the cold, harsh north of the Seven Kingdoms, is returning to the home castle at Winterfell with a small guard and three of his sons. He has just beheaded a man, a deserter, and is explaining to his seven-year-old son Bran why it was important that he, rather than a paid executioner, wield the sword. "The blood of the First Men still flows in the veins of the Starks," he says, "and we hold to the belief that the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword. If you would take a man's life, you owe it to him to look into his eyes and hear his final words."

Bran is musing on this when they catch up with Robb and Jon, Lord Stark's oldest sons. The boys have found the corpse of a direwolf, a legendarily large and ferocious species that was thought extinct, and with it five infant direwolves, one for each of the Stark children—excluding Jon, who's a bastard. Lord Stark turns to his son.

"You want no pup for yourself, Jon?" he asked softly.

"The direwolf graces the banners of House Stark,"

Jon pointed out. "I am no Stark, Father."

As they're riding away, Jon hears a faint noise and rides back. He discovers another puppy, an albino, a few feet away from where the rest were found. "His fur was white, where the rest of the litter was grey. His eyes were as red as the blood of the ragged man who had died that morning. Bran thought it curious that this pup alone would have opened his eyes while the others were still blind."

It's a classic set piece of fantasy. The noble family in whom the blood of the First Men still runs thick, whose destinies are intertwined with the destiny of the land. The mystical connection between a hero and his familiar (a white direwolf, an outcast, for Jon Snow, the bastard). The elevated prose, in which men explain themselves in the archaic diction of honor and legend.

It's easy to mock, but it's also easy to be seduced, and Martin is awfully seductive, perhaps the best writer of epic fantasy since Tolkien. I'd already read the first three books of *Song of Ice and Fire* when I came to the convention. But it had been a few years, and by the time I sat down for Martin's reading on Saturday afternoon, most of the details were hazy, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to get back into the story.

There were about a hundred and fifty of us, packed like kindergartners into rows of plastic chairs in a small room off of the hallway between the convention center and the hotel where many of the fans were staying. Martin sat behind a folding table at the front. He was wearing a sea captain's cap, and with his tufty beard, gray hair, and round belly, he looked like a vacationing Santa Claus.

"No, I don't know when it'll be finished," he said by way of greeting us, and everyone laughed, every devoted fan deeply aware of the many missed deadlines for *A Feast of Crows*, the fourth novel in the series (it was supposed to be published in 2003). "I'm not blocked," he said, "it just keeps getting longer."

The mood was jovial; Martin obviously had a warm relationship with his fans, and he told everyone to try to make it to the party that

evening being thrown by the Brotherhood Without Banners, his fan club. "It went until about four o'clock last night," he said.

"That's just when you left, George," someone shouted out.

He began reading a chapter from *A Feast of Crows* and the room went silent. It remained that way for forty-five minutes as Martin told of Arya Stark, one of Lord Eddard's daughters, and of her sojourn in the House of Black and White, a Shaolin-like monastery. Arya had fled there to escape the people hunting her, and to escape the memory of the deaths of much of her family: Lord Stark was beheaded, her mother's throat was cut, her brother Robb was betrayed and murdered.

Nothing much happened to Arya in those forty-five minutes. It was the story, a stock one in fantasy novels and martial arts movies, of her submission to the temple's discipline, of the slow extinguishing of ego and desire—most of all the desire for revenge—in preparation for an eventual rebirth and return to the world. But Martin made it captivating. Listening to him, I remembered what it was about science fiction and fantasy that I've always found so compelling: the magic of a place like the House of Black and White, where pilgrims of the Many-Faced God go to kill themselves by sipping from the waters, littering the halls with their corpses. The grotesquerie of the temple's servants, whose job it is to dispose of the bodies in the unseen caverns down below. The wisdom of Arya's master, kind but merciless in his demands of her. The desperate need and courage of Arya herself, a young girl who's already killed adult men, crossed continents, and had to witness her father's murder. The vast landscape of Martin's world—four thousand pages and counting—and its noble families, court intrigues, giants, antlered men, beautiful ghouls, dragons, direwolves, and bastard children who are forced, despite themselves, to bear the burden of their family's honor.

I love science fiction and fantasy because they're a gateway into another land where dragons be, and where human, elven and Klingon lives are redeemed, or punished, by destiny. In those golden

lands, there's justice. At their most pulpy, science fiction and fantasy are just an escape, a place to go to avoid mundane troubles; I love many of those books, though I'm ashamed of it. At their best, however, science fiction and fantasy are an escape from the mundane but not an escape from death, and not an escape at all, for the characters or for the readers, from the consequences of one's actions and the elusiveness of truth and virtue.

For me, the short trip into the realm of Trufandom—the landscape of my quest—wasn't so much about moving forward as it was about retracing my steps back. Back to the adolescent who first started reading the books, the boy with an overdeveloped sense of wonder and justice and an overdeveloped fear of responsibility, sex, commitment, confrontation, failure.

The trip was also about understanding the mysterious Trufans who were both alien and unsettlingly familiar. What did we share? Why didn't I go down the path they went down? How could such a bunch of social misfits have transformed the culture of the most powerful country in the history of the world?

J.G. Ballard once said that science fiction is the mythology of the twentieth century. I suspect that's true, but I'm not yet sure quite how. It has something to do, however, with that dream of justice and order that's inspired every moral leap forward and every holocaust in human history. "There has to be a promise of dawn," as Terry Pratchett said to us lonely souls at his press conference, trying to get at the essence of science fiction. "There is some kind of universal accord that for those who are willing to risk all against insurmountable odds there has to at least be the possibility of success. There's always the feeling that you'll hold back the darkness."