

UNISPHERE

#51

October 2026

**Writers & Illustrators of the Future
Contest Winners**

JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL FANTASY FAN FEDERATION

FAN-PRO COORDINATION BUREAU

Ionisphere #51, October 2026

Edited by Jean-Paul L. Garnier

61871 Twentynine Palms Hwy. Joshua Tree,
CA 92252, USA

email for the editor and magazine
spacecowboybooks@gmail.com

Published for the National Fantasy Fan Federation. To join or renew, use the membership form at <https://n3f.org/48-2/> to provide your name and address. Memberships are \$18 for a full membership and \$6 for an electronic membership. Public (non-voting) memberships are free. Send payments to Kevin Trainor, PO Box 143, Tonopah, Nevada 89049. Pay online at <https://n3f.org/>

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This issue is dedicated to
David C. Kopaska-Merkel
1957-2026

I also spoke at the online convention [Flights of Foundry](#). It's always a wonderful and friendly community event and I had a good time speaking about audio-fiction production, publishing, and gave a reading of my fiction and poetry. And I was at San Diego ComicCon speaking about horror and SF. Whew....

This issue of Ionisphere features winners of 42nd annual [Writers & Illustrators of the Future Contest](#). It's always splendid to see new talent recognized and I'm sure we'll be seeing more of all of them in the pages of magazines and books in the years to come.

If you're an aspiring writer or artist you should enter the Writers of the Future [contest](#), and while you're at it, also enter the [N3F short story contest](#).

Letters of comment welcome!

Jean-Paul L. Garnier
Joshua Tree, CA
October 2026

<https://spacecowboybooks.com/>

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Editorial

So much has happened since the last issue of Ionisphere. Tragically, SFPA Grand Master David C. Kopaska-Merkel passed away recently. He was interviewed in the last issue, which I believe was his last interview. He will be greatly missed. And his work will live on.

I attended WorldCon and had a blast, it was both fun and exhausting and I spoke on several panels about speculative poetry, did an autograph session, as well as a reading. Thanks to all who attended these events. And congratulations to this year's Hugo winners.

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Interview with Michael T. Kuester



Michael T. Kuester

JPG: Writing telepathic characters can be difficult, what challenges came up for you while writing about telepaths?

MTK: Preserving mystery, I would say, is the biggest challenge of writing telepathic characters. Mystery lies at the core of all genre fiction, and it can be hard to maintain when your protagonist can actually know what others are thinking. It became the biggest unexpected narrative challenge while writing “In Living Color.” I overcame this partly by making August a fairly weak telepath: he can catch a stray thought here and there, but the thoughts of others mostly remain a mystery to him.

Now, the antagonist is, in fact, a powerful telepath. And that ended up working in my favor. After all, what’s more daunting than an enemy who knows exactly what you’re thinking? Making the killer a much better telepath than August served to increase tension. After all, the antagonist should always appear stronger than the protagonist. It gives them a significant challenge to overcome.

JPG: In your story, your character has the ability to look, and feel, differently into beauty as well as darkness, can you tell us

about using this form of contrast in your story?

MTK: So, this story began as most of my short fiction pieces do: with a single scene. In this case, it was August taking a stroll through Monet’s garden. But not his *actual* garden, but rather the painting itself. Being immersed in colors and soft lines feels very peaceful, but in fiction there must always be a downside. So I asked myself what the drawbacks to this ability would be? My first thought was, “If someone could actually step into pictures, the police would probably want to talk to them.”

So, I decided August was tasked with analyzing crime scene photographs for the police.

It produced a powerful contrast: the peace and bright colors of impressionist paintings versus the stark, monochrome gore of murder scenes. And when I asked myself what would happen if his two worlds, one of light and one of darkness, intersected, I found the climax of the story.

JPG: What made you decide to enter the contest and how many times did you enter before winning?

MTK: Every Writers of the Future winner has a story, and mine began with a simple Google search. After hearing a published author speak on a podcast about how she got her start winning a contest, I wondered if I could do the same. As a writer, it is incumbent upon you to pursue every possible avenue to success. I searched high and low, and determined that Writers of the Future is the only short fiction contest out there that’s held year round, is limited to unpublished writers of short fiction, is blindly judged, and has *no entry fee*.

I entered the contest four times last year. My first (Quarter 1, 2025) received an honorable

mention. The following quarter a different story received a silver honorable mention. I took first place in the third quarter, and withdrew my fourth quarter story. Because once you win, you're a published author, and can no longer enter.

JPG: How has winning the Writers of the Future contest changed your career?

MTK: Honestly, it's hard to fully encapsulate it. It put me on the map. Perhaps most importantly, however, it gave me a publishing credit: my first. That's the biggest reward any writer receives from this contest: a foot in the door.

JPG: What are some of your main takeaways from the workshop, and what was the experience like for you?

MTK: I actually wrote a post on my Substack (*Martians & Lasers*) on my experiences. In short, there's a reason I called it "Published Author Boot Camp." We were busy every day for the entire week we were in Hollywood, participating in fun (and constructive) writing exercises and hearing from so many successful authors, publishing industry insiders, magazine editors, you name it. We heard from such genre fic luminaries as S. M. Stirling, Kevin J. Anderson, Larry Niven, and Orson Scott Card. Scott Card, in particular, is an incredible speaker. But I believe all of us WOTF 42 winners agreed that our favorite speaker was Nancy Kress. Her presentation was incredibly informative, and since the workshop most of us have read her award-winning novel *Beggars in Spain*.

JPG: What are some of your favorite books that have inspired you to write?

MTK: I grew up reading the works of some of the greats in science fiction. Arthur C. Clarke and Michael Crichton are among my

favorites. But I'd say the one book that made me want to write was *Dune* by Frank Herbert. That book was so haunting, so powerful, so delightfully unsettling. I felt like I had to try writing, just to see if there was any way I could write anything half as compelling.

JPG: What are your plans now after winning the contest?

MTK: The first thing I say to anyone who asks "What's next for you?" is simply this: I am not done. Not by a long shot. Since winning Writers of the Future I've published another short story ("Casual Brutality," out now in the July/August issue of *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*). I have several stories out on submission, and have written about half a dozen more since winning. And I am currently querying what I intend to be my debut novel.

Get used to seeing my name; you'll be seeing a lot more of me.

JPG: What projects are you currently working on?

MKT: I'm currently writing short fiction again, to warm up for the novel I'll be writing this fall. The novel will be the planned sequel to the novel I'm querying. However, I'm also working on several unrelated novel projects. As an aspiring writer, you need to keep your options open. Ever forward.



Interview with Nathan Deiwert



Nathan Deiwert

JPG: What was the experience like working with your author, and how closely did you work together?

ND: Due to the nature of the contest/competition, I did not directly work the author I was paired with, Michael Kuester. That being said, during and after the workshop, I have had the opportunity to meet with Michael on multiple occasions for small signing events in the Cincinnati area. We talk on the regular now, especially since I have been listening through the audiobooks of the Expanse series on his recommendation, and giving him my reactions and analysis of the books. While we haven't truly worked together in a professional sense, I am glad I can call Michael a friend now.

JPG: What is your favorite medium to work in, and why?

ND: At this point, my favorite medium to work in is oil paints. Working in oil gives a great tactile sense and physical response to seeing a painting build up over time. While I am sure I could list any number of reasons why I prefer physically painting to digital, it

is the feel, and the physicality that bring it to the forefront for me.

JPG: What made you decide to enter the contest and how many times did you enter before winning?

ND: During my days as a graduate student working on my MFA, part of my research was looking into competitions for fantasy illustration, and the Illustrators of the Future contest came up. The biggest reason I wanted to enter is that many judges and winners are people I have looked up to for years, from Frank Frazetta and Bob Eggleton to April Solomon and Bruce Brenneise. I ended up entering a total of three quarters before my win.

JPG: How has winning the Illustrators of the Future contest changed your career?

ND: While I believe winning the contest played a factor into my admission into Dragon Con's juried Art Show, where I also took part in a panel going over what it looks like entering the fantasy illustration space in today's market, I'd say that the contest win was more of a parallel than a cause for many of the jobs and recognition I have gotten since then. There is a sort of concept in the contest of pro-ing out, where if you are making a living at, or published in a certain number of projects, you are ineligible to compete. I have a feeling that with much of what I have had leading up to and since the win for the illustration side of the contest, I was and have been on a trajectory of establishing myself as a science fiction and fantasy illustrator in different markets. Namely, I am an active professional in the fantasy tabletop RPG space, where I am currently working on the Pathfinder RPG, and am currently being approached to work on other games and properties as we speak. Putting aside my work in the gaming space, I will certainly say the contest

win allowed me an opportunity to create work in the traditional fantasy publishing space, where I am now making a push towards creating covers for fantasy novels as well.

JPG: What are some of your main takeaways from the workshop, and what was the experience like for you?

ND: The workshop was a great experience that has me calling back to my time working on my master's degree. During that, I got to take part in contact periods where I would travel to different states, and meet prominent illustrators in those locations. I found the workshop to be very similar in nature, but even more busy. I got to meet and talk with many illustrators I have looked at for years, and it was a strong experience that I will look back on fondly.

JPG: What are some of your favorite artists that have inspired you to create?

ND: Growing up, I was a massive fan of superhero comics and Godzilla films. Safe to say, even if I didn't have a name to face, Bob Eggleton's work played an influence in my dreams as an illustrator. This is certainly the case when looking at poster work I have done for a local show in Indianapolis, where I have created two separate Godzilla posters, and one of which is in American Illustration's archive, and this work got me some officially licensed work I cannot fully discuss at this time. That being said, the artists that set me on my path into fantasy illustration were Boris Vallejo and Frank Frazetta. I was introduced to the work of these two artists when I started college and, in a way, my path was set from that point onwards.

JPG: What are your plans now after winning the contest?

ND: Since the win and workshop, I have mostly been keeping my nose to the grindstone and working on various RPG projects. I also have plans to start entering more conventions and tabling.

JPG: What projects are you currently working on?

ND: Currently I am creating work for Pathfinder that is currently under NDA, as well as waiting for final approval on recent Godzilla work and limited private commissions. Outside of these jobs, I also teach as an adjunct professor, where I am currently teaching drawing courses.

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Interview with Mike Strickland



Mike Strickland

JPG: What challenges came with writing a story that takes place inside and outside of corporeal existence?

MS: The premise actually offered me a multitude of opportunities, not challenges. The core idea was relatively simple: what would happen if a person's physical body died while their consciousness was uploaded to a digital environment? As I fleshed out the premise

and outlined a plot, I discovered more and more story threads to explore. If this happened to a corporate employee, what would the liability implications be? Would a person who exists solely as a digital consciousness be considered a legal person? What level of agency (if any) would such a “person” have to interact with the real world and make their own decisions? The premise is rife with ethical quandaries, which I suppose is what makes it a fertile trope in the cyberpunk sub-genre.

This story flowed out of me—6,000 words in just over a day—in a fit of fevered inspiration that is atypical for me. If I’m pressed to find any challenge in the experience, it was to avoid bloating the story with too many subplots. Oh, and I suppose the biggest challenge of all was finishing and submitting the story by the Writers of the Future Contest deadline, since I started writing the day before the contest closed for that quarter.

JPG: Your introduction mentions that your story was inspired by a dream, can you tell us about this dream?

MS: At the end of March 2025, I’d resigned myself to giving the Writers of the Future Contest a pass for that quarter, since I hadn’t come up with any story ideas, and only a few days remained before the deadline. Then, I awoke from a dream with vivid images still swirling in my mind.

At this point, many months removed, I don’t remember the details or impressions of the dream itself. But I do have the contemporaneous notes I typed out shortly after waking—more than a full, single-spaced page’s worth. Here are the first few lines:

What if there was a technology where we upload our minds somewhere during the workday while our bodies perform labor, so we don’t have to suffer the drudgery.

This guy has a crush on a girl and fellow coworker. What happens when her body is killed and her mind is left without a body? What does he do?

This story-inspired-by-vivid-dream kind of writing experience has happened to me only one other time—and that other dream became my most recent novel, which I’m currently pitching to agents and publishers (more on that later).

JPG: What made you decide to enter the contest and how many times did you enter before winning?

MS: It seems almost comical to be named a Writer of the “Future” at my current age. In my youth, I went to film school and gave it my best shot to break into Hollywood as a screenwriter. But when that didn’t pan out, I turned my focus to the demands of a corporate day job, marriage, and parenthood. It was only two years ago that I finally reconnected with my creative writing—“better late than never,” as I said in my Writers of the Future award acceptance speech.

One of the first things I did to reignite this passion—even before going back to school to earn a master’s degree in creative writing—was to put myself through the free, 13-part Writers of the Future online writing workshop. Through that program, I learned about the Contest, and I entered four times before being selected as a winner.

JPG: How has winning the Writers of the Future contest changed your career?

MS: I found out I’d won the contest a full nine months before the workshop week and book release. With that long runway and not knowing what to expect, I did everything I could think of to position myself for success when the spotlight shone my way. I wrote a novel, listened to countless podcasts,

networked with other professionals, and solidified my author platform (website, social media, etc.).

Galaxy Press and Author Services (administrators of the contest) treated us winners like celebrities, and the black-tie gala awards ceremony certainly reinforced that impression. During the workshop week, we worked closely with superstar authors in the science fiction and fantasy field and did multiple book signings. It was easy to imagine that this was all a rocket ship to success as a new author.

When the gleam wore off, however, the reality turned out to be a bit more prosaic. It's been exciting to find my published work on the shelves of national chain bookstores, and I've had the opportunity to speak as an author on several conference panels. But at the end of the day, I'm still doing all the grind work of any emerging or aspiring author: sitting at the keyboard every day, querying agents, submitting short stories, and gathering my share of rejection slips.

But while this experience hasn't been a shortcut to stardom, I've viewed it as valuable "practice" for what an established author's life will be like: book releases, signing events, book fairs, podcast interviews, and the like—all in a low-stress kind of way, being just one of 15 authors in the anthology. I don't know how else I'd have been able to get such valuable experience before I go out there with my own published novel (hopefully sooner rather than later!).

JPG: What are some of your main takeaways from the workshop, and what was the experience like for you?

MS: The workshop week is so jam-packed that it's impossible to summarize it in any concise kind of way, though I did so (at greater length) in [my newsletter](#). The hectic pace is real: starting around 8 AM every morning and continuing well into the evening

every day, followed (for many) by late-night meetups in the lobby (Barcon, aka Lobbycon). For me, the biggest impact was meeting and getting to know my fellow writer winners, which was more like reuniting with old friends than meeting new people.

The whole experience gave me much more than many published authors ever get, so if the workshop (including the book release and awards ceremony) ends up being the pinnacle of my publishing success, then I'm completely OK with that. From that perspective, I can already say that "I've made it."

JPG: What are some of your favorite books that have inspired you to write?

MS: When it comes to science fiction and fantasy novels, I have too many favorites to name. I recently reorganized my home bookshelves, and in the process, I discovered that Iain M. Banks and Roger Zelazny are tied for the most representation in my personal stacks.

I can directly trace my love of genre fiction to the sixth grade, when I discovered *The Chronicles of Narnia* in the school library. *The Lord of the Rings* soon followed, which in turn led me to the mind-blowing discovery of *Dungeons & Dragons* and all manner of fantasy and sci-fi. My fate was sealed.

As for craft books that inspire me, I still keep Damon Knight's *Creating Short Fiction* at the top of the list, though the book is more than 40 years old. And I'll never forget that I was reading Stephen King's *On Writing* at the very moment when Joni Labaqui from Author Services called to tell me I'd won the Writers of the Future Contest.

JPG: What are your plans now after winning the contest?

MS: Since before the April 2026 workshop week, I've been deep in the "query trenches," trying to land a literary agent to represent my

novel *THE END OF THE WORLD CLUB*. Pitched as “if Matt Dinniman had written *The Fault in Our Stars*,” the book follows Harley, a fatalistic young man with cancer who discovers a found family—and a reason to live—through a Dungeons & Dragons campaign (with a parallel D&D storyline that mirrors the stakes of his illness).

JPG: What projects are you currently working on?

MS: I’m in the planning stages of my next novel, *MISSING PERSON*, an *Alice in Wonderland*-like tale of a woman searching for her missing husband who is helped and hindered by other missing persons like Amelia Earhart, D.B. Cooper, and Jimmy Hoffa. My hope is to have started writing the draft by the time your readers read this interview.

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Interview with Karah Richardson



Karah Richardson

JPG: What was the experience like working with your author, and how closely did you work together?

KR: It was amazing! We met only after we’d finished the shared competition piece, but Mike was incredibly kind and

(unsurprisingly) very good with words! We got to see each other a handful of times throughout the week from our separate workshops and he was an absolute delight.

JPG: What is your favorite medium to work in, and why?

KR: That is a hard one for me to answer! I use different mediums all the time. I love pencil art because it is easily transportable and fun. I love acrylic because I can work with the colors and textures in so many interesting ways. I love digital because I can explore so much without using costly materials—I don’t think I could pick a favorite!

JPG: What made you decide to enter the contest and how many times did you enter before winning?

KR: I entered because my art teacher and aunt both managed to recommend me to the same competition within a span of a week, despite never meeting. It felt like a fun twist of fate and I decided I had nothing to lose. Turns out, I had one year to lose, because I got it on my second try!

JPG: How has winning the Illustrators of the Future contest changed your career?

KR: It gave me a lot more confidence in art. A lot of my life’s goals up until that point boiled down to “Make enough money to live” without much care about pursuing any sort of passion. Going to Hollywood and not just meeting dozens of individuals that have found blooming careers in this field, but other winners like myself making active steps, really inspired me to make it work. I have started saving for college so I can fully invest in an artistic future. Much of the money has come from murals and commissions on top of normal work hours, which is not something I would have ever tried beforehand.

JPG: What are some of your main takeaways from the workshop, and what was the experience like for you?

KR: In the end, I ended up filling dozens of pages of notes. My main takeaway is that I have a lot to do and a lot more to learn! A big one I didn't expect was how to handle the financial portion of art. I'd only freshly left high school to go to Hollywood, so much of what I knew was with normal jobs, not contract or owned-business types of payment. It changed my perspective and made the idea much more approachable. On top of that, I got to see the real-life applications that the artists use every day, and it felt right to me. So much of it was stuff I could already do or was working towards. The biggest takeaway may have simply been the idea that I could do it if I worked hard.

JPG: What are some of your favorite artists that have inspired you to create?

KR: My dad. I never would have picked up a pencil if it weren't for him. When I was younger, he and I would sit and draw for hours, handing papers back and forth to vandalize each other's doodles. As I got better, he and I would do competitions and frequently go to each other to critique our own works. His love for cartoons and comedy in his art gave me a lighthearted and entertaining approach to art that I carry with me in every piece.

JPG: What are your plans now after winning the contest?

KR: I've done a few murals and commissions, but right now I am exploring what career will work best for me in the future. Since I'd never planned for art as a serious job, I have a lot of catching up to do!

JPG: What projects are you currently working on?

KR: The main ones are the current money-makers—murals and paintings. I am working on building my skills and reputation with improved art and relationships. Aside from that, I have been a part of a team developing a board game that we created for a high school competition. It is stalled while some folks take time for college, but we plan to revisit it in the next year or two. Beyond that, I am writing a book and have a lot of budding stories to develop! It's my hope that I can expand on all of these and make a career out of something that I love.

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Interview with S.J. Stevenson



S.J. Stevenson

JPG: Time travel can be tricky to write about, why did you decide to use the deep past as a destination?

SJS: I sometimes think it's a bit like Harry Potter. The wizard doesn't choose the wand, it's the other way around. Stories, I think are similar, only bossier than wands – they barge their way into the head, and keep shrilly insisting you do something with them. So, I

didn't really choose the deep past as a destination, instead the story itself was always all about the dinosaur-smiting asteroid. Or rather, the lack of it.

Of course, I say this, but I never quite know if I believe me. After all, I can remember playing a game with my brother when we were kids, when we'd go back in time and eat a T-Rex leg, barbecued over a smoldering volcano. So maybe, in the end, I chose it because it's somewhere I've always wanted to go!

JPG: Your story contains nods to Bradbury, can you tell us about self-awareness in storytelling, and how you handle such references?

SJS: Ooh, a tough one.

I guess, I love stories where such references exist, as mental side-quests for the readers. I'm a huge Terry Pratchett fan, and I'm always amazed at how much he hid away in his books; references I didn't get first time or second time around, but that just lay there, quietly snickering among the pages until finally, *finally* I got them.

In terms of handling the references, I think the main principle is just that the story has to continue to work without jarring, whether the reader gets the reference or not. I think if the existence of a reference is obvious, so the reader knows there's something they're not getting, it risks jarring them out of the plot – and making them feel the writer's laughing at them. However, when the reference fits seamlessly in with the plot – and the reader shares the background to get the reference – they get to enjoy spotting it and feel like they're laughing with the writer.

I think the fun part though, is that often the idea for the reference comes first, then you

get to have the fun of being a bit sneaky in carving out space to squeeze it in.

JPG: What made you decide to enter the contest and how many times did you enter before winning?

SJS: I look at this as a situation where you weigh up the pros and cons. On the one hand there was getting the flight to Hollywood, the awards ceremony, the chance to meet amazing people (and be taught by amazing writers), getting a story published in a fantastic anthology, along with a full color illustration by a talented artist and ... and getting paid for it. On the other hand, there was getting none of those things. All things considered, I've faced tougher decisions when wondering what socks to wear in the morning!

All that aside, I regret not being more focused on submitting more frequently and being more committed to seeking to get through sooner. In total I submitted six times over about six years, never really believing that I'd submit a winning story. So, the really tough part of the decision was just about making myself trust that my stories were good enough to enter.

JPG: How has winning the Writers of the Future contest changed your career?

SJS: So far? Honestly, not a lot, but to be fair it's early days and I'm still hopeful. I've had the fun of doing some interviews and I've probably written more short stories in the last few months than I managed in the last few years – so it's certainly been inspiring. More broadly, it's been satisfying to have something to include in other submission letters about appearances in other publications.

JPG: What are some of your main takeaways from the workshop, and what was the experience like for you?

SJS: ‘Get the damn thing written’ was probably the most significant and oft-repeated piece of advice. Admittedly, it was typically delivered with more tact and nicer words, though not always by that wide a margin.

The experience itself? Well. I was jet-lagged, zombified with insomnia (zom-somniac?), and my luggage went missing on the flight over. Worst of all, I was facing the darkest nightmare of all Brits abroad, which was that I could not get a decent cup of tea anywhere, and ... and nevertheless, it was absolutely one of the best weeks of my life. I learned so much and I met so many great people, that I just loved every second (maybe except for those extra draggy ones spent staring at a hotel ceiling at four in the morning).

One particular highlight was being given just 24 hours to write a complete story. It was so liberating to be given that permission for writing to unambiguously be the priority for the day, and to be given the opportunity to prove to myself that it was possible to follow the advice of getting the damn thing written.

JPG: What are some of your favorite books that have inspired you to write?

SJS: Oh, I could fill a book with favorite books that inspired me (though admittedly, I suspect it would be very dull to read after a few paragraphs!)

That said, though not really a favorite any more, I read a collection of short stories when I was six called ‘*Stories for You*’ by Enid Blyton and then was immediately hooked on the idea of writing my own.

After that there was C.S Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*, *Matilda* by Roald Dahl, the usual dalliance with Tolkien, a detour through *Waylander* by David Gemmell, and then ending up shoveling page-fulls of Terry Pratchett

through my starving eyeballs. I maintain *Hogfather* is the best book not quite about Christmas ever written.

JPG: What are your plans now after winning the contest?

SJS: Hugo Awards, Nebula Awards, seven figure movie deals and the adoration of millions. Alas, all these are so high up on the ‘to do list’, I suspect I may not quite reach them.

However, for now, I’d also be happy to get a few more short stories published in some popular, well-known markets.

JPG: What projects are you currently working on?

SJS: I’ve some short stories I’m finishing off after sitting on them for a few years. After that, I want to go back to my half-completed sepia-cyberpunk detective novel, about mind-clones, embodibots, and a city where it’s always twilight though no one ever seems to wonder why.

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Interview with Tracy Eire



Tracy Eire

JPG: What was the experience like working with your author, and how closely did you work together?

TE: I'm going to answer in purple font as it is one of my favourite colours, and Halloween is on the way! As an Illustrator of the Future, working with my authors really came in stages through slow introductions. It's all a bit mysterious at first – a bit of a spy movie! You receive these emails where no names are attached to the content you're reviewing. This is your first exposure to the author's work. Now, of course, you're going to sit there formulating all sorts of theories about the person whose work you're about to encapsulate into something worthy of the text. It's wild, and I recommend it to any artist!

In this double-blind, the big reveal only happens in a large room with artworks on easels arranged in a great half-moon. The artists stand in the back, away from their works, on one end, the authors come in on the other. The excitement is palpable in the air because, for the first time, the authors are going to come in and try to find the work that belongs to their story. Only when they are standing in front of the right piece do you go to meet them.

The way this works is actually *incredible*. It is, in itself, *storybook*. For example, I found Dorothy de Kok in tears before my painting of Nomsa – fitting. I cried at the end of her story and it has a very literary, speculative fiction vibe.

It is only after that point that I became closer with Dorothy, who is an amazing talent out of South Africa and whose work is immaculate, and just a perfect purveyor of emotion.

JPG: What is your favorite medium to work in, and why?

TE: I worked in water-soluble oil paints for years (Duo Aquas like the great Camilla d'Errico). My switch to true oils only came when the mediums that are used with them became biodegradable and non-toxic. So now I work with both, seeing as part of the flexibility of water-soluble oils means they can be used with true oils, or acrylics (just not on the same piece, okay aspiring Illustrators of the Future).

Let me describe the physical experience of oils versus acrylics for non-artists. Acrylics dry within the hour, but blend poorly for the same reason – you really need to master them. They are plastics and dry beautifully matte. The physical feeling is a bit like painting with honey. Oils dry more slowly (unless you're using a siccative like CoZiCa or the Gamblin Solvent Free gel medium). They blend beautifully and bounce light through transparent layers for that 'inner glow'. The feeling is more like painting with butter.

I prefer how oils feel, blend, and capture light.

JPG: What made you decide to enter the contest and how many times did you enter before winning?

TE: My Publishing professor at Western Colorado University – whose beautiful campus and wide-open nature is *not* to be missed. This is the finest Publishing faculty in the United States headed up by people who excel in the industry. My professor Kevin Anderson, amid talking to us about editing, contracts, and bringing *Dune* book deals to the silver screen, often recommended Writer of the Future and Illustrators of the Future as a worthy pursuit for his students. As a writer (I have 25+ novels) I bent to the tough and fulfilling task of winning Writers of the Future almost immediately and have had Honourable Mentions on every attempt but my very first. I didn't believe I had anything to offer as an Illustrator – I do a lot of portraiture and fantasy art in oils.

I have entered Writers of the Future four times, and Illustrators thrice. I won Honourable mentions, which you can think of top dozen out of thousands of Writers, and thousands of Illustrators. It shocked me that I had honourable mentions for all my Illustration entries up to the win. I was absolutely *stunned*. If you'd asked me, I was a writer. This really made me reconsider my skillsets in a healthy way.

I can't say enough about Kevin to begin with. He is an angel and I'm sure he'd hate me saying that.

JPG: How has winning the Illustrators of the Future contest changed your career?

TE: More than ever before, I know I am an artist. This may sound self-evident and kinda goofy, but, while I had been publishing professionally since before I got my Master's degree from Western Colorado University ... let's just say there are high barriers to entry to be able to *use* the word *artist*. In my first foray into the art world – this is through online art shows – many people made it very

clear I did not qualify. I cleaned my brushes a final time and walked away. It might have stayed that way before I met the Milan Art Institute. They have a Mastery Programme that takes you through everything you'd ever need to know to make it as an artist – Chef's Kiss! Coming out of that, I was more capable. I was *ready* for Illustrators of the Future.

Post Illustrators, I have a very new attitude. I've published work in a Bestselling book. I've received a reward. I've done media interviews – and I still do! I have met friends from around the world, and, I am more committed than ever to my own enterprise, Studio Eclipse (eclipseartauctions.com), which I co-founded with Master painter Lioba Brückner, and writer Heidi Moone. We work for 17 international artists in monthly art sales and growing their businesses. It's just a whole new world for me.

JPG: What are some of your main takeaways from the workshop, and what was the experience like for you?

TE: It's a whirlwind, let me tell you! You'll be in there with your notebooks taking notes on the real world of art business from Echo Chernik and Brittany Jackson, and then break away to go to 'the club' which is what I still call the art studio Rob Prior runs for – I can't say this enough – the most amazing painting session where you actually paint on one of Rob's works with him while music just blasts your consciousness out of your head. (I will never forget that experience.) Then you'll snap back to a session with the illustrator behind Eyes of Wakanda. I'm a huge fan of that Illustrated Disney+ series, and I got to actually tell the creator about what I love about its innovative illustrative style.

Talking with international artists like Ciruelo and finding out he closely ties his famous dragons to women may just invert everything

you think about these powerful creatures. It will also teach you that the cover of #42 of Writers of the Future, is no accident. I loved his talk!

There's a lot of magic going on behind the scenes to make these meetings fantastic and you can really feel that effort in the experiences. Let me sum up what this feels like for a winner. The staff at Author Services kindly let me eat my lunch in a quiet room away from the bustle. There was an elegant woman there having tea and she looked really interesting. I struck up a conversation with her – she's funny too – and only found out after that she was Katherine Kurtz.

You could have knocked me over with a feather.

The whole week is like that.

Sometimes I still can't believe this happened.

JPG: What are some of your favorite artists that have inspired you to create?

TE: Oh, hands down, Lioba Brückner. Syd Bee – who literally told me in her gentle way, that my work wasn't rubbish. Kseniia Boko and Esther Franchuk, artists with massively different styles who both live and work in Ukraine at this very minute. Maria Abagnale, who once wouldn't join an Art Collective unless I was also included. There are so many women artists (just visit Studio Eclipse to meet them) who have inspired me to keep going. Probably my favourite historical creator is Evelyn De Morgan. But there are women Masters, readers. They are just undersung,

JPG: What are your plans now after winning the contest?

TE: I'm currently considering a Kickstarter for a new book series I'm writing – very

exciting things there, as I have also been writing songs for one of the characters and getting them produced! As for art, Studio Eclipse is heading into Halloween – Spooky Season! And we'll be having a collector's club exclusive show this month! Our last auction will be in November and will deal with Mythology and Fairytales! Since I have a whole collection of paintings based on mythology and fairies (called Mythos), this is very much my thing!

JPG: What projects are you currently working on?

TE: Right now, I have a Hercules-inspired painting of Megara on my easel, awaiting final touches. I've been painting in limited palette over carmine red backdrops. I'm writing a new series. I'm considering updates on my Folded Earth and Cardinal Machines series. And I'm back in school for my second postgrad.

I'm working on loosening up my style a little so that I can learn to use that stylistically when it's called. Easier said than done, I know. But I don't lack grit.

∞

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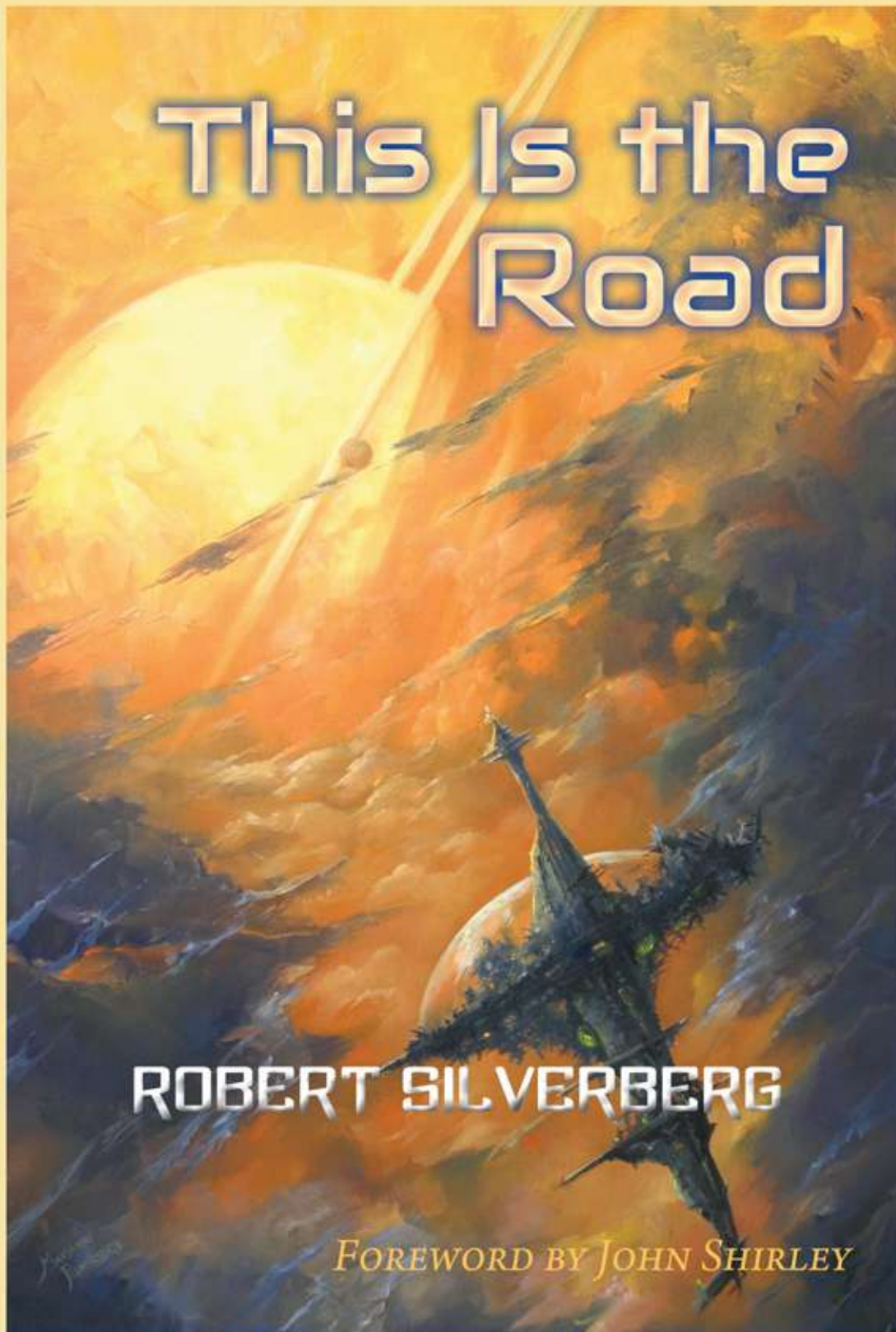
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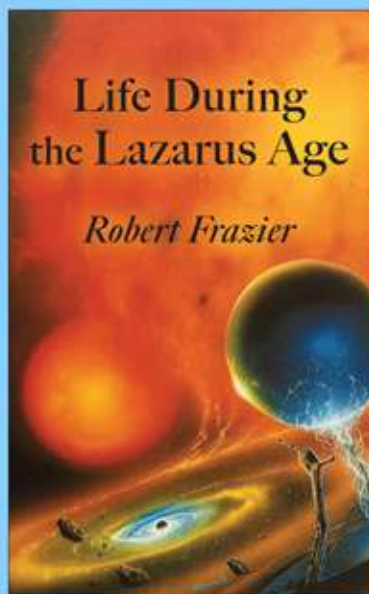
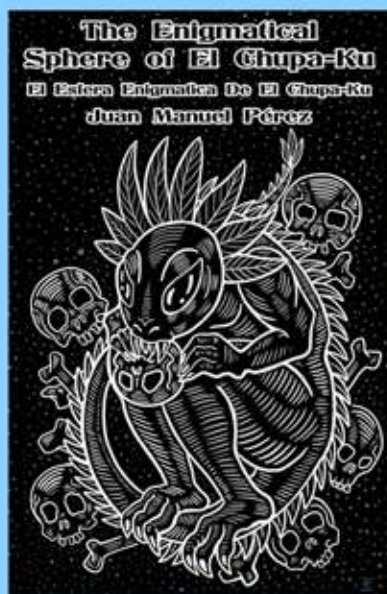
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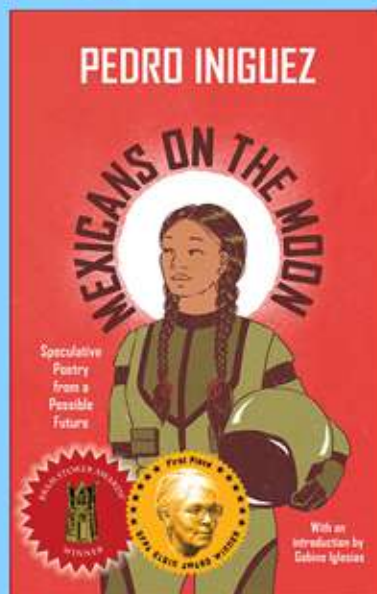
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