

NEBULA AWARDS
SHOWCASE

2012

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2012

Edited by

JAMES PATRICK KELLY
& JOHN KESSEL



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Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr
59 John Glenn Drive
Amherst, New York 14228–2119

VOICE: 716–691–0133

FAX: 716–691–0137

WWW.PYRSF.COM

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F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

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George Scithers

William Tenn, pen name of Phillip Klass

EC Tubb

Sharon Webb

and our agent

Ralph Vicinanza

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Introduction

IN WHICH YOUR EDITORS CONSIDER THE NEBULA AWARDS OF YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW

James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel

Jim: When you compare the very first Nebula ballot to our 2011 ballot, you see a lot of differences. One is that the 1966 ballot was much, much longer—there was no preliminary winnowing back then. For example, Nebula voters had to choose a winner from thirty-one nominees in the short story category alone! This year there are just twenty-six nominees in the four fiction categories combined. Another difference was that there were just four awards given, Novel, Novella, Novelette, and Short Story. No Ray Bradbury Award for Outstanding Dramatic Presentation or Andre Norton Award for Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy. The Bradbury was started in 1992, but then went dormant until it was rebooted in 1999. The Norton was first given in 2006. Another difference was that there was just one woman nominated in any category: Jane Beauclerk, a pseudonym for M. J. Engh. Yikes! Note that the 2011 ballot has more women than men. And all five winners in 1966 were science fiction stories, as were the vast majority of the nominees. For the record, the winner for best novel was Frank Herbert's *Dune*, the tied winners for novella were "The Saliva Tree" by Brian W. Aldiss and "He Who Shapes" by Roger Zelazny, the novelette category was won by Zelazny's "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth," and the short story award went to Harlan Ellison's "Repent, Harlequin! Said the Ticktockman." In the four plus decades since, we have seen a proliferation of subgenres in our little corner of literature, but clearly we have nominated more fantasy than science fiction this year.

Of course, in 1966 there wasn't nearly as much fantasy as science fiction being published. So you would expect the Nebulas to track a publishing trend that reflects changes in popular tastes. And the two of us have certainly written plenty of fantasy, even though we're primarily known as science fiction writers. So has the rise of fantasy been at the expense of science fiction?

John: "At the expense of . . ." is a loaded phrase; after all, this is now the Science Fiction *and Fantasy* Writers of America. But even then I think the answer is not simple. The geography of our genre(s) has changed drastically over the last forty-five years, and the consequences are evident everywhere. Consider, as a minor example but a reflection of the larger movement, the term "speculative fiction." In both 1966 and 2011 the term was in widespread use, but its meaning has changed drastically. In 1966 it was already in its second incarnation. Originally the term was coined by Robert Heinlein (in 1947) to describe a subset of science fiction extrapolating from known science and technology; what he meant by it is what we today essentially mean by science fiction. By 1966 the term was being hijacked by New Wave writers and editors—notably by Judith Merril—to indicate SF that de-emphasized the science and focused on sociological extrapolation and stylistic experimentation. Today "spec fic" has lost almost all rigor and is used as an umbrella term to describe any fiction, SF or fantasy or horror or slipstream, that is not mimetic fiction. So Vernor Vinge and N. K. Jemisin and Kelly Link and Paolo Bacigalupi and Holly Black and China Miéville are all "speculative fiction" writers in one big happy family.

Or is the family such a happy one? As many commentators have noted, there is no longer an easily identifiable center that can be used to, say, identify all the stories nominated for the Nebula Award in any year. Hard science stories compete with liminal fantasies, which compete with horror fictions, which compete with sociological extrapolations, which compete with nostalgic exercises in pulp adventure. Many SF writers bemoan the very fact you note, that fantasy is overwhelming science fiction in sales and popularity, and that the things that are called science fiction today would not have passed muster as SF in John W. Campbell's *Astounding*. But perhaps it's only the dinosaurs who have even heard of John W. Campbell. Is the field losing all coherence, or are these changes just the natural effects of time passing and the world changing? Is any of this something that Nebula voters and readers

should worry about? Does the reader who picks up this volume have any reason to know what she is going to get when she reads its contents?

Jim: It's a good question. The boundaries of "speculative fiction"—or as the critic John Clute calls it, *fantastika*—have expanded to include a lot of literary territory. But to mix metaphors, I actually like the "Big Tent" we've set up for our readers here. It fits with my own writerly sensibilities, and yours as well, I'll bet. Sure, fantasy and its many subgenres have captured some readers who might once have been exclusively science fiction fans, but I like to think that many fantasy readers retain a lively interest in what's happening in SF—and vice versa. Certainly there are editors who publish short fiction in print and online who still welcome a variety of genres to their table of contents. Many of the short fiction nominees first appeared in magazines featuring stories that are as likely to explore Venus as they are to visit Faerie. I wonder if speculative fiction's many awards, but the Hugo and Nebula especially, are not the center of our sprawling genre, at least at this point in history. Were the science fiction novels of Connie Willis and Paolo Bacigalupi awarded Nebulas in 2010 and 2009 respectively? Well, Ursula Le Guin's fantasy and Michael Chabon's alternate history took the novel Nebs in 2008 and 2007. So if we're keeping score, which genre is ahead? Fantasy or science fiction?

My answer is *yes*.

John: When the Nebulas were founded there were two reasons for their founding, and I think the difference between those reasons is illuminating and still relevant. Science Fiction Writers of America was a fledgling organization, dedicated to improving the situation of SF writers, but it had no money. Lloyd Biggle, the SFWA secretary-treasurer, suggested that SFWA sell an annual anthology to publishers with the proceeds going to support the organization. This rapidly became a plan to create a new SF award, voted on by writers, and thus the Nebulas were born. But the other reason, according to Damon Knight, was to improve the breed, to "show the quality of modern science fiction, its range, and . . . its growing depth and maturity." Knight was a critic and teacher as well as an editor and writer, and I believe he saw the Nebulas not simply as a way to honor the best work in the field, but to encourage writers to set their sights higher.

In the event, the trophies cost more than the amount raised by the anthology. But what of Knight's other purpose? Have the awards spurred us on to write better SF and fantasy? Have they been good for the reputation of the genre?

I think it's demonstrable that some of the best work written in the last forty years has been recognized by the Nebulas. And the awards have gone to grizzled old pros and to newcomers, to Ursula Le Guin's *Powers*, published in the forty-eighth year of her career, and to Ted Chiang's "Tower of Babylon," the first story he ever published. To classics like *Dune*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *Neuromancer*, "Aye, and Gomorrah," "When it Changed," "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" "Beggars in Spain," "Bears Discover Fire," "Fire Watch," "Behold the Man," "R&R," and "Magic for Beginners." To names who could not be more famous (Isaac Asimov) and to those who could (Jack Cady). I find it reassuring that the race does not always go to the best-known competitor; that every year there are new names on the final ballot.

I don't suppose there's anyone who would maintain that the winners have been without question the best stories of the year. Just as the Oscars go to films chosen for reasons that, in retrospect, seem inexplicable, sometimes factors other than literary merit influence the outcome of the voting. Or people's judgment just changes over time. Or there just isn't room to give awards to all the worthy stories. At the 2011 Academy Awards Stephen Spielberg acknowledged these realities when he presented the best picture award, saying, "In a moment one of these ten movies will join a list that includes *On the Waterfront*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *The Godfather*, and *The Deer Hunter*. The other nine will join a list that includes *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Citizen Kane*, *The Graduate*, and *Raging Bull*."

Past Nebula nominee Andy Duncan recently made a provocative point about awards:

Over the years, I have decided the primary purpose of an award is not to celebrate individuals, but to celebrate the field those individuals work in. We squirm when this is made overt, as in the sanctimonious aren't-we-great speeches about the universal appeal of motion pictures at the Oscars every year, or that endless Grammys tribute this year to the music charities supported by the recording industry. Yet it's true anyway; it's less important who wins, say, the Hugos in any given year than the fact that, once again,

the Hugos are given out, generating another opportunity to see one another, and applaud one another, and talk to one another about our field and how it's doing—and, yes, to kvetch about who got robbed and who's overrated and who the real winner is.

Jim: We don't have to go to the history books for reassurance that the race does not always go to the best-known competitor: it seems to me that the takeaway from this year's list of nominees is that fresh voices will be heard. With wins in novella and novelette, new writers Rachel Swirsky and Eric James Stone have posted their names on the marquee just a few years into their careers. Reminds me of 1982 when a couple of tyros named Connie Willis and John Kessel swooped out of nowhere and won all three short fiction Nebulas. And first time nominees like Vylar Kaftan, Amal El-Mohtar, Felicity Shoulders, Aliette de Bodard, Shweta Narayan, Christopher Kastensmidt, Caroline M. Yoachim, J. Kathleen Cheney, M. K. Hobson, N. K. Jemisin, Mary Robinette Kowal, and Nnedi Okorafor represent almost half of the ballot. It's the largest such group in the history of the award.

Speaking from personal experience, the impact of a nomination on a new writer can be profound. It's hard for any writer to know exactly how she is doing, once she starts selling regularly. Income doesn't necessarily tell the story. Reviews are a crapshoot—are bad reviews worse than no reviews? Readers may or may not check in. And there are no promotions. Nobody gets to be Vice President of Slipstream or Project Manager for Space Opera or Director of the Zombie Division. Yes, we have to believe in ourselves and know in our hearts that what we have to say is worth saying, but it helps when our colleagues offer some validation. Best-of-the-year editors certainly have this power, but they are individuals whose sensibilities are theirs alone. But when an organization of your colleagues proclaims to the world that you have written an elite story, you have to believe them. I think that helps the next time your curl your fingers over a keyboard.

And that's precisely why there is so much kvetching about the Nebulas. *They matter.* If we get it wrong, if the process of nominating stories and anointing one of the nominees does not spur the collective effort to write better SF and fantasy, then we've lost our way. My mentor Damon Knight would not be pleased.

I don't think this is the case, obviously. But the problem is that there is

no consensus about how to write better SF and fantasy. Do we honor stories that are in dialogue with stories from our past, as has been our tradition, or is all that stuff old-fashioned now? Should we seek to break down the walls between the genres, or between genre and the literary mainstream, or is that turning our backs on our mission? And just what is our mission? Do we even have one? The discussions and, yes, *controversies* that sometimes swirl around the Nebulas are as important a part of our continuing self-evaluation as the awards themselves.

John: If the impact of a nomination on a young writer can be profound, I can say from similar personal experience that winning a Nebula can be a test of character. When I wrote “Another Orphan,” which won me a Nebula on my first nomination, I paid less attention to marketability, and more to my own obsessive interests than I had for any story I had written up to that point. After I won, I spent a year spinning my wheels trying to figure out what winning meant I should write next. What did people expect to see from me? What was I *supposed* to write? It took me some time to find myself again after that experience.

The attention of your peers is powerful, for good or ill. As E. B. White reminds us when Wilbur the pig wins an award at the country fair in *Charlotte’s Web*, “It is deeply satisfying to win a prize in front of a lot of people.” The stress of winning causes poor Wilbur to faint dead away, for “he is modest and can’t stand praise.” Fortunately, winning a prize does not mean that Wilbur must be slaughtered and eaten; instead, he goes back to his barn at the end and lives pretty much as he did before. Let us choose Wilbur as our role model.

Jim: There are many paths to greatness. (Uh-oh, I’m starting to sound like a fortune cookie!) And we would be foolish to say that being nominated for a Nebula or even winning one was the only honor that counted in this or any other year. It is instructive to note that two of the awards given at the Nebula ceremony, the Bradbury and the Norton, are named for great writers who, while celebrated as SFWA Grandmasters, have never made the short list for the award, let alone won. That’s right: Ray Bradbury and Andre Norton have never appeared on the final ballot. Ever. And in their distinguished company

are some of the most talented writers ever to grace our genre. For example: Iain Banks, Elizabeth Bear, Jonathan Carroll, Greg Egan, M. John Harrison, Alexander Jablokov, Jay Lake, Kit Reed, Rudy Rucker, and Sherri Tepper—to name but ten.

What does this tell us? Only that proximity to the stories of any given year distorts our vision. In our opinion, these are *some* of the very best stories of 2011, but it is up to future generations of readers to decide—fifty or a hundred years from now—which ones speak to the ages.

Until then, we are very proud to present this year's *Nebula Awards Showcase*.