

# Corner Bar Magazine

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Mr. Roche is a writer, illustrator, bass player, and astral traveler from Raleigh, NC. He enjoys spoiling his darling wife and their two beautiful children. He adores art, dogs, *The Who*, bourbon, *Rush*, and Mark Twain. He can be found most weekdays inside classroom 2113, teaching English to delightful students from many different galaxies.

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# AN EXCERPT FROM **ASTRAL TRAVELERS**

by **MICHAEL ROCHE**

## **Episode One: Icy Peril on the Planet Tun-Drá**

In the far reaches of space, on the icy southern pole of the remote planet Tun-Drá, our hero, Gabriel, fast approaches his doom. His ship, The Rocinante, prowls in orbit over a desolate world.

"Did you pick anything up on the scanners, Lee?" The voice of Gabriel fills the earphones of the pilot, his friend Cygnus Lee.

"There's naught on the onboard scanners. I don't see any cave down here large enough for yer beastie, Gabriel."

"Agreed. Keep me posted."

"Aye. Now, you'll wish to be wary of the Aranette, Gabriel! It hunts with the instincts of a wolf and kills with the precision of a machine!"

Gabriel shudders with dread at the

thought. The prey he seeks today, the Aranette, is a formidable opponent. It was nothing less than a biomechanical nightmare of servo-motors, steel, flesh, muscle, and weaponry.

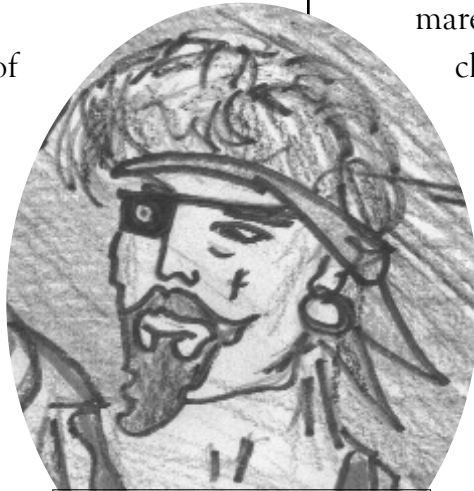
Gabriel barks, "No need to remind me, Lee!"

"I wish you didn't have to parachute down... Isn't there a way I can skim the surface and drop you off properly?"

"No, Lee. The icy winds on the

southern poles of Tun-Drá would buffet this ship terribly, I'm afraid. Try that and we'd be nothing but space kindling! The chute's not fancy but it's the only way, I'm afraid." Gabriel straps into his parachute and adjusts his mask and goggles.

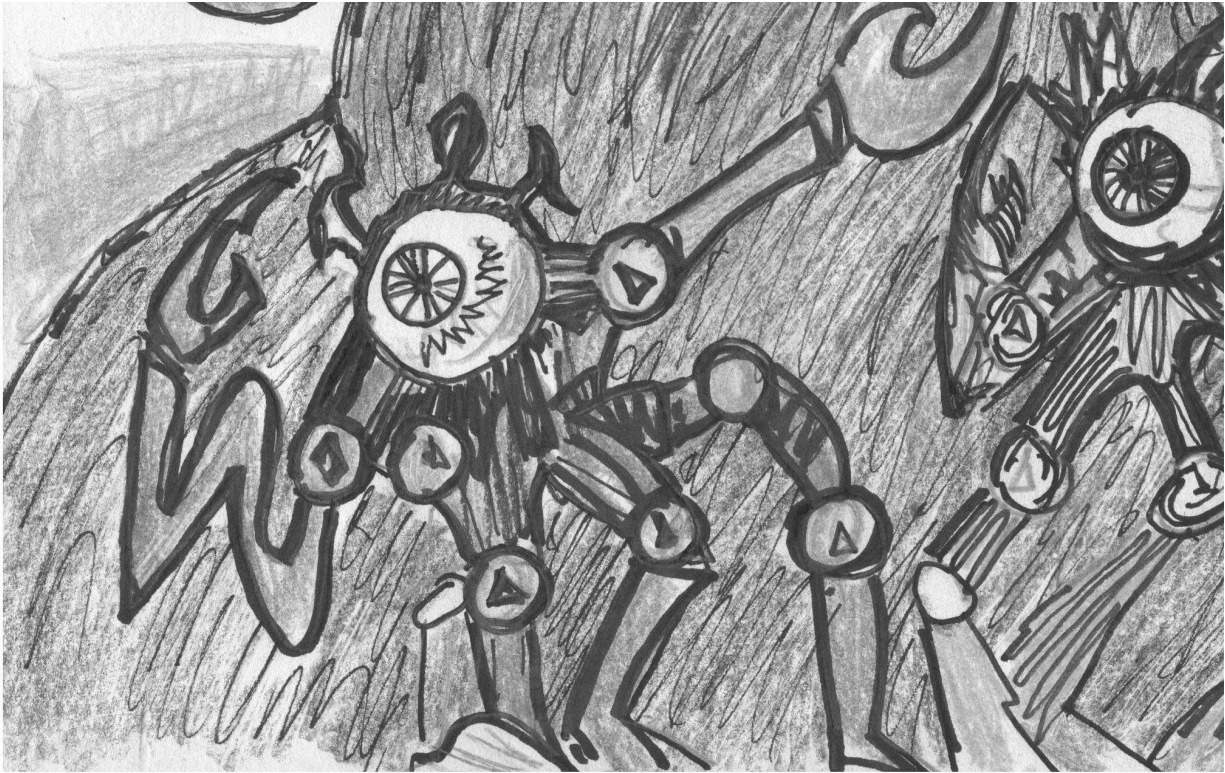
"Ye must be wary o' that Aranette!



Our Hero,  
Gabriel the Adventurer



His trusted friend,  
flying ace Cygnus Lee



Marry, 'tis feared by the sons and daughters of a dozen worlds."

Gabriel checks his breathing tubes and tries to ignore Lee. But he cannot ignore the video monitor! "Lee, look, star-board side!"

"The scanner confirms it, that cave is plenty big for your beastie! Aye, but heed my warning, Gabriel. The cave is covered by what appears to be a dome of solid ice. There's no telling how thick it'll be. Aye, whatever you do, try to steer clear of landing on it."

Lee banks the ship and races the engines. "Aye, there 'tis! Brace yourself, my Gabriel, for I'm executing Reversal

Maneuver YYZ."

"Roger, Cygnus!" Gabriel adjusts the straps on his chute and peers toward the escape hatch door. The ship banks and swings around closer to the desolate caves of the Aranette.

The intercom crackles: "Have you checked your parachute, sir?"

"Roger, Cygnus."

"So remind me again of why you're risking your life, and mine, to capture this bee's stinger?"

"Lee, as you well know, my treasure today will be none other than the Aranette's

stinger! As you know, when the Aranette stings, a deadly toxin passes through the stinger. The broken-off stingers solidify, and that poison transforms the stinger into a rare and wondrous jewel. A jewel for my love, the princess. To get this treasure, of course, you just have to be brave enough to face the Aranette."

"Nay, there's not too many souls brave enough to face that evil beastie out yonder. Ah, Gabriel, we're entering Red

Sector A. Prepare for ejection door opening."

"Confirm opening. Ready for launch."

" May the Son of Life protect yer hide, Gabriel, and your soul!"

"The Son of Life may or may not help me. " Gabriel replies, "I'm going to rely on physics - not faith - to guide me safely."



The metal door groans open. Gabriel braces himself against the frozen winds. Suddenly, he leaps! The air is bracingly cold against his skin. Freefall!

Gabriel is a bird in reverse; rather than rising on thermals, he sinks in freefall toward the perilous unknown!

## Episode 2: A Captain Dies!

In the far reaches of space, The Corvine, a small and elegant passenger ship, roars out of Kham-Sharri station. At the helm, Captain Rickenbacker addresses the passengers over the intercom: "Welcome aboard The Corvine. Now you can relax and let your cares slip away. By nightfall we'll be arriving at Silver World Casinos. Sit back and dream about how you'll spend all that money you're fixin' to win! Captain out."

The Corvine, a sleek and tidy ship, carries two comely passengers, the famed Princess Mona Loa, and a young lady named Tessa who is seeking work on Silver World. The remainder of the vessel has been reserved for the princess's enormous assortment of luggage. The princess travels with no retinue today, however; that is to

say her servants are purely mechanical, unless of course they're your standard holographic type.

On the other side of the princess's changing screens sits Tessa, a petite and pretty brunette. With a wistful look in her deep brown eyes, Tessa follows the captain's advice. She relaxes, tunes in a mellow guitar station on her listening device, and returns to composing a letter to her dear friend Pammi back home on Barchetta Rouge: "Oh, Patti, such a lucky day for me! I'm off to Silver World to seek my fortunes in the

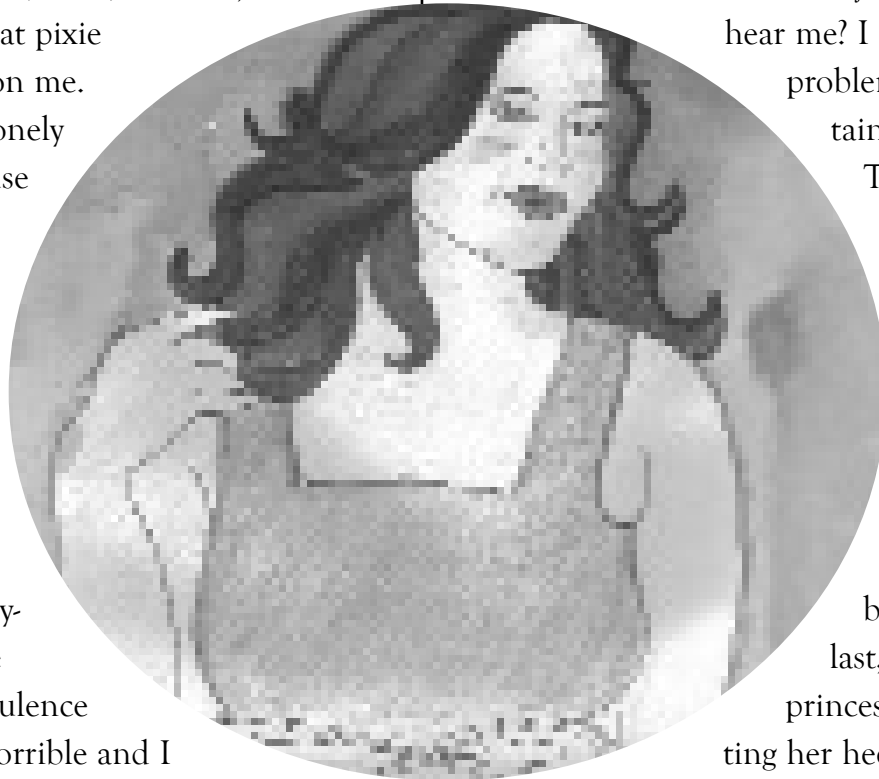
casinos. I figure I'll start off serving cocktails and maybe work some of the tables for this year, and then start moving up, up, up! And would you believe my brush with fame? I told you there was only one other passenger with me on the voyage. What I didn't know until just now is that the other passenger is the Astral Princess herself, Mona Loa. How gorgeous she is, with her silky dresses and perfectly teased hair. You've heard

the stories about how her tresses look like spun gold and how her eyes are the color of the morning sky and I want to tell you that everything you've heard about her is true. She seems to float rather than walk. I read that even the shape of her mouth has sent men mad with desire. Not to mention the scores of space pirates out there risking their lives to capture her fabu-



lous treasures. Well, until today I wouldn't have believed any of that was real, but now I do. Why, just as we were ready to board the spacecraft a few loonies were tossing her homemade kron r'bars. Do you know what those are used for? (Blush) Ah well, maybe some of that pixie dust will rub off on me. I'm feeling a bit lonely lately and could use a few space pirates fighting and doting over me. Can you imagine what it would be like to have men fawning and pledging their fealty? I'm trying to drink some wine but the turbulence on this flight is horrible and I keep spilling on my data pad. Sorry. I hope to see you again soon, Pammi. Come visit me on Silver World! Love, Tessa"

Once again, The Corvine dips and spins in her course. Tessa pages the captain on the intercom: "Captain, is everything ok?" No answer follows. Tessa gets nervous. The Corvine suddenly banks hard and drops into a tailspin. The ladies don't realize that Captain Rickenbacker is dying at the helm. An aneurism overtakes him, the result of the powerful solar flares. His passengers are as yet unaware of his approaching demise and their own impending doom. The ship spirals out of control as the cap-



tain falls to a lonely slump at the helm. For Tessa, the spiraling becomes impossible to reconcile. She rushes to the edge of the princess's changing screen.

"Your majesty? Can you hear me? I fear there's a problem with the captain. Princess!" Tessa feels helpless and uncertain. Suddenly, the screens part and the drapes are pulled back. And there, before her at last, is the lovely princess, busily getting her heels buffed.

"I won't walk on these floors for at least an hour after I buff the royal tootsies. So you'll have to go and check on the captain yourself. There. I decree it." The princess made a dismissive hand gesture without actually looking at Tessa, who stood, humiliated and alone. Mona Loa returns to her catalog of Mixolidian velvet slippers. "You've probably got less than a minute before we crash."

Tessa's first reaction is to freeze, but she forces herself move. She dashes toward the helm, but her way is made ever-more perilous by the swaying ship. She gets

stopped abruptly by a wild maintenance cart, which slams into her. But a scraped knee and a barked shin are the least of her concerns now. She stumbles to the helm at last and calls, "Captain Rickenbacker, are you ok? Captain!"

A low voice croaks a response. Tessa rushes to the captain's side to aide him, but she soon realizes the low voice isn't coming from the captain; it's coming from his radio. Tessa reaches over and cranks up the volume knob. The captain's pink tentacles spill out across Tessa's lap. She reaches behind his knee to check for a pulse but finds nothing there but the typical scaly tops of the captain's tarsal fins. Meanwhile, Admiral Steinberger's voice crackles over the speakers on the silvery console: "Captain Rickenbacker, this is base, do you copy?"

Tessa, fumbling wildly with the radio controls, cries out, "Admiral, can you hear me? The captain is dying! I can't save him."

"Captain? Are you there?"

"Why can't you hear me? Where's the control for voice activation?" Tessa feels panic

rising in her stomach.

The voice of the admiral booms over the static: "Captain, we're losing signal. You're veering into hostile skies, turn back! Your course is very erratic! Do you wish us to switch over to automatic controls?" The admiral's voice gradually dies out in a wash of static.

"Yes! Automatic controls! Yes!" Tessa cries.



"Captain? Do you copy? I fear we've lost him. Admiral Steinberger signing off."

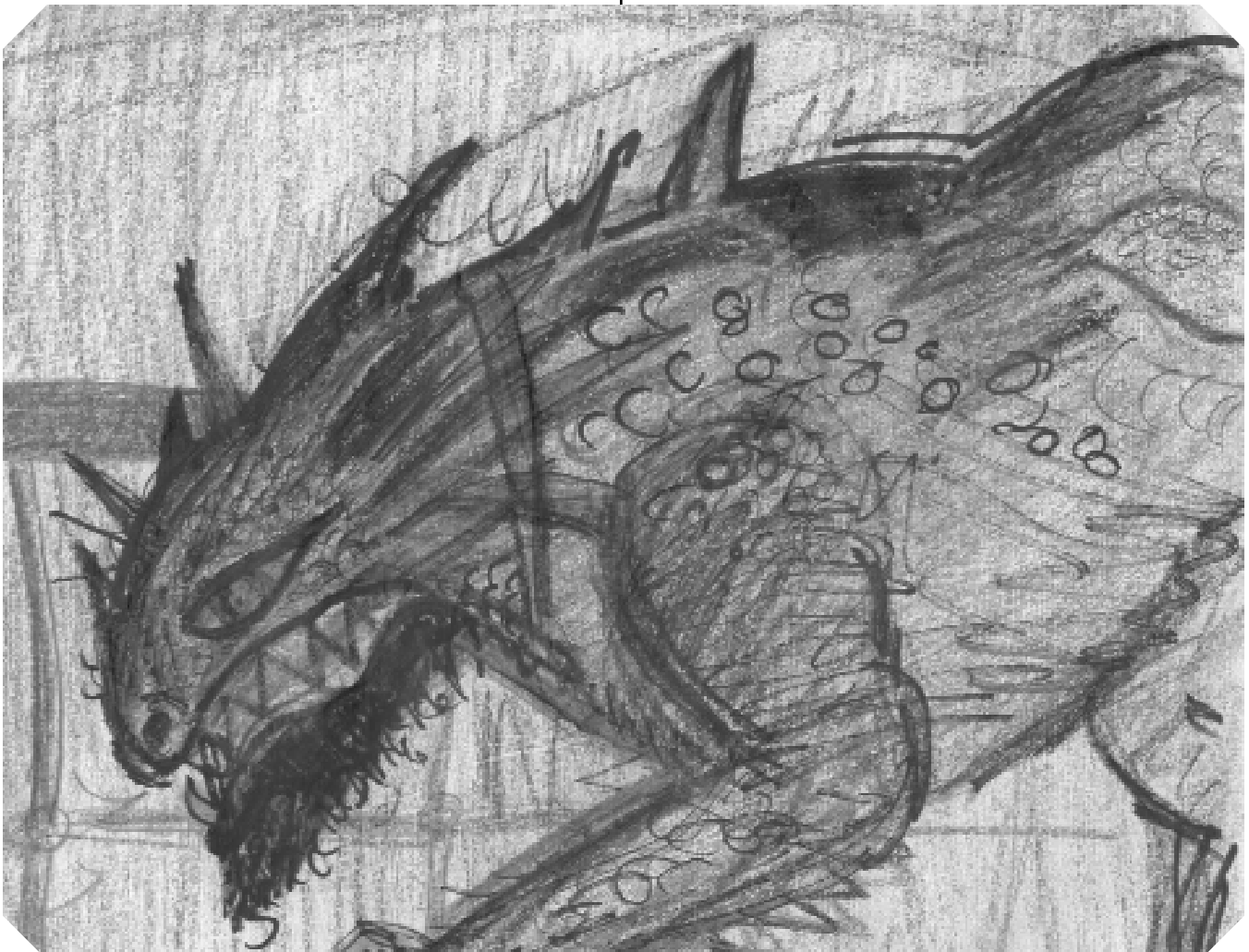
Tears streaming down her cheeks, Tessa tenderly lifts the body of the captain into a seated position, whereupon she slides him over into the empty co-pilot's chair.

"How hard can it be to fly a starship? Not too different from cruising around in my Jett-Skoot, right?" Tessa clutches the controllers and boots up the navigation computers. "Ha!" Tessa starts cracking herself up, talking to the captain's corpse, "It's not the flying I'm worried about, kiddo, it's the

landing! Oh well, I might be going crazy, but at least I'm going down swinging! Oh Pammi if you could only see me now. What a day, I meet a princess, a captain, and an admiral. And I get to crash land a spaceship." As the ship rocks and bucks beneath her, Tessa takes the helm bravely, and braces herself for certain death!

### **Episode 3: Peril on the Peaks of Mount Nkpg-nthom**

In the far reaches of space, on the icy southern pole of the remote planet Tun-Drá, frost clings to our hero Gabriel's beard as he plummets downward, ever downward!





The howling winds are whipping him far off his course. With growing horror, he draws nearer to the craggy peaks of Mount Nkpg-nth?m! The peaks will surely tear his flesh from his bones if he should crash into them. Thoughts of death will do him absolutely no good now! So Gabriel shakes his head, blowing out great gusts of breath in order to clear his mind. Next, our hero curls into a ball, bracing for an impact that is sure to tear him asunder. He knows that deploying his parachute would be foolish given his present altitude and the nearness to the mountains. So, with his right hand he readies his grappling hook instead. Then he shoots out a line of hope into the rocks. He watches in horror as it fails to hit the target! Shot after shot he fires with the hook, and each time he misses. And each time he reels his hook in, he feels his chances of survival diminishing. Another part of his mind calculates his possible aerodynamic drag force, and its effect on preventing potential weightlessness. His mind races for new plans as he falls ever downward to certain doom. His bones ache and the cold is tearing at his exposed skin.

With what seems the last of his strength, he hurls the grappling hook out once more. Relying more on chance than on physics, if truth be told, he comes up lucky this time; his hook sinks into a stony peak. His grappling hook pops open, revealing a shock absorbing spring-system that begins coiling outward, helping him to control the speed of his fall. Within moments he comes to a full stop. Although he's

ceased falling, he isn't yet out of danger. The howling winds buffet his body and the bloodcurdling howls of the bearded g'narth lizards of Mount Nkpg-nth?m fill his skull.

With every muscle straining, Gabriel clings to that rope for dear life, and rappels downward towards the snowy plains of Nkpg-nth?m. He spots a small outcropping where he can rest a moment and call back to the ship. "Lee, can you hear me?"

"Aye! By the very Tobes of Hades! You survived the fall! You son of a sea-cook! 'Tis nothing short of incredible!"

"Let's just say my landing wasn't ideal. The winds blew me off course. They blew me right into the peaks of the mountains. I'm hanging by a thread to a peak of Mount Nkpg-nth?m."

"I'll bank around and try to pick you up."

"No, no, stop, man! The winds will smash your ship to bits. There's a gas in the exosphere, similar to formaldehyde, that is corrosive to the metals on the hull of the ship.

"Aye, all those molecules giving up electrons and positively charging their ions, it's enough to chill yer blood and tear yer ship to pieces! Don't worry, man, I'll not stray from this orbit. Try to stay alive. Aye, there's something strange on the scanner. I think I've drawn some unwanted attention. Two Confederate ships on my tail! They're hailing me now. They look hot and ready to open fire on me, Gabriel! I'll circle back to get you when I can."

Gabriel cuts off his com-link and thinks of ways to avoid shredding himself to bits on the ragged cliffs and peaks of Mount Nkpg-nth?m. He hopes Lee can stay alive long enough to figure out how to save him. Bracing himself against the winds, he continues rappelling downward until that dreaded moment when he runs out of rope. Trying desperately to avoid impaling himself on the craggy rocks, he leaps away into the unknown. The winds favor him and blow him away from the jagged peaks of rock. Freefall! Frost glazes across his goggles, blurring what little sight he has.

Below him, he sees his target, the dome of ice. He wonders if his luck will hold out. He's already avoided death once. But now he had to avoid being smashed to pieces when he collided with the dome of ice. Just how thick did he think it was, after all? Suddenly, moving on a combination of calculation and instinct, he reaches to the D-ring on his pack. The ebony chute chuffs and huffs open as it deploys. The hemp chute flutters out around him like a billowing cloud. The winds are much less intense at this altitude and he falls blissfully downward. If he can ease his fall enough, maybe instead of crashing through the icy dome, he could land on top of it. Then he could cut his way into the ice and enter a bit less hastily. Crashing through a wall of ice just isn't an option as far as he is concerned. Suddenly his left side jerks up abruptly. His eyes peer around, searching for the problem. Then he sees that the straps that connect his harness to the parachute have been

severed! His right arm whips loose of the harness altogether. He watches, helplessly, as the harness and the parachute fly away from him!

His lifeline now severed, he plummets toward a dome of solid ice! Every muscle braces for impact. His hands flounder blindly before him as the dome gets ever closer and closer. At last, with a shattering explosion of sound, he smashes into the mysterious dome! Shards of ice blind him as our hero plummets to his icy death. ❖

# OUR QUESTIONS FOR THE EDITOR OF *THE ANNOTATED ALICE* ON THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE PUBLICATION OF *ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND*

All hail the scholar who takes ownership of annotating a classic. Why? Because what they do is hard work. It's not thankless, but we often lack the skill to know what a task they've given themselves. Is it everything ever known about the subject? No, that's a "Compleat...". Is it everything we need to know? Yep, or at least, we hope so. We'll never know unless we dive in, and it has to be an attractive volume (it is!) and we need time and patience and good coffee and sandwiches from *Dean and DeLuca* and the kids have to go outside to play until, say, February.

And then we do dive in. Why? Because if we can't be scholars, we can be fans. We peruse, one of those absurd words in English that means what it does and exactly the opposite of what it does (how that must have pleased Lewis Carroll) and we talk about it with our friends and promise to lend the book to them when we are done, but we are never done. They'll have to get their own copy, or wait for an important birthday, like their own or Carroll's or

maybe the Queen's.

Mark Burstein is the president emeritus of the Lewis Carroll Society of North America and was gracious enough to answer some questions for us, which demonstrated rather succinctly that we are not serious reviewers but still like good things when we see them, especially in print, and we also like big roundish numbers like 150. Mr. Burstein was fun to type to, and to receive typing from.

Note: I am nowhere near clever enough to have put these questions together on my own. My younger sister, who has loved *Alice* since she was little (probably around the age of the young Miss Liddell) posed some of them for me, and I bounced a couple of ideas off my good friend, aka Sir *John In Florida*.

Editor: We'd like to pick your brain - as the "SME" (subject matter expert) of all things *Alice*. We have a perception - it seems a modern one - that there are "levels" of reading intended for us as we grow from young-

sters to teens to adults. *Alice* is (or is it not?) a child's fairy tale, but also arguably fantasy/science fiction, intended for older readers. How do you characterize it and why?

Mark Burstein: I like to point out that the average age of the people in the boat that famous day the tale was first told was close to eighteen, all of whom needed to be amused. Alice herself was ten at that time, but Carroll set her avatar in the book as exactly seven (her birthday, in fact). It was never intended for young children; Carroll wrote an abridged version called *The Nursery Alice* in 1890 for them.

I would avoid the term "science fiction," but "fantasy" is fine. The books and their author were ghettoized for a century as belonging exclusively to children, and it was Martin Gardner's *Annotated Alice* that turned the tide in 1960. From not even being listed in the first two editions of *Victorian Fiction: A Guide to Research*, it has become an academic industry, eclipsing many of the most revered Victorian authors, and constantly generating a cornucopia of interpretations, elucidations, and theories.

Yes, it can be read (and reread) on so many levels. It's the most quoted novel in existence, on a par with only Shakespeare and the Bible. Philosophers, political commentators, students, professors, and just about anyone can find something profoundly true (and often simultaneously very funny) in its pages.

Ed: What was it about the *Alice* stories that first grabbed your attention? How old were you? Which of the Carroll characters is your favorite and why?

M.B.: Their depth, humor, and how fine of a description of the actual world we live in they are. We're taught in school that if you are intelligent, work hard, are dedicated to selfless public service, you might grow up to be president. Take a good look at the present crop of candidates; I ask you: does this conform to what we were told in school, or have we fallen down a rabbit-hole?

I probably got my first "hit" of what they mean when *The Annotated* came out in 1960. I was ten, and my father, an Alice fanatic as well, brought home one of the first copies. It's always been a bit of a bible to Carrollians. Another huge influence was the Cyril Ritchard complete recordings. It's wonderful to have them read aloud, and when I was at U. C. Santa Cruz in the late Sixties studying, shall we say, amateur psychopharmacology, they made perfect companions on one's travels. 'Nuf said? From there I wrote several papers on it (particularly in relation to Zen Buddhism), and integrated it into my senior thesis. Collecting came just a bit later.

I have always identified with the White Rabbit. He's the Hermes figure, the one who initiates her and introduces her to Wonderland. He also serves as the "Herald" at the Trial. He gets a bit of a bad rap; everyone thinks he's late, but in fact he was just *worried* about being on time, and the only

character we know was late was the Duchess.

Ed.: We also think - we hope we are not alone in this - that certain iconic literature must be introduced to readers of a particular age (ahem.. the age of the reader, not the age the reader dwells within, as in *Bronze or Space*) and in a particular order, and that one should - must - read the book before seeing any of the films/cartoons made from that work. Our feeling is that if one waits too long to read *Moby Dick*, or *The Catcher in the Rye*, one loses the directed point of the author and the story's effect is spoiled somewhat. Certainly one must read *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* before high school (and certainly before seeing the movies!) What thinkest thou? Agree? Disagree? And what about attending to classics before modern pieces? For example, shouldn't young people know about *Alice* and *Gulliver's Travels* before Harry Potter and (Neil) Gaiman's *Coraline*? Or is this just wishful thinking on the part of an old editor?

M.B.: I just went through this with deciding when to read *Wonderland* to my daughter, Sonja. It's certainly ideal to have it read to you around eight or nine, but on the other hand, my friend Adriana Peliano, who founded the Lewis Carroll Society of Brazil and has done several books about Alice, first found her through that Hanna-Barbera abomination made in 1966.

I wouldn't say one needs to read the canon in chronological order. Master Potter does

just fine with *Pooh* or *The Hitchhiker's Guide* in whatever order they happen to be read (mostly to do with the age of the reader or read-to-ee). And we have a rule in our family: the book must be read before the movie is seen. Where possible.

Ed.: What is your opinion about the *Alice* movies which have been produced over the years? Which is your favorite/least favorite and why? How about one sentence on your thoughts on Johnny Depp's "Mad Hatter?"

M.B.: *The Annotated* lists 14 feature films beginning in 1903 and 42 other adaptations (animations, made for TV movies, mini-series, direct to DVD, etc.). Many have a redeeming quality or two, but the only ones I find watchable are Jonathan Miller's 1966 BBC teleplay with Sir John Gielgud, Peter Sellers, Peter Cook, etc., and Dennis Potter's *Dreamchild*, which is not actually an adaptation. I could give you some choice words for that godawful hairball coughed up by Tim Burton, with its execrable screenplay and scenery-chewing performances. And the chutzpah of calling it *Alice in Wonderland* rather than *Alice Returns to Underland* baffles me.

Ed.: Illustrations: Your thoughts on the Disney-izing of the characters in our cultural mind's eye. Do you prefer the Tenniel or Rackham illustrations, or a different artist altogether? How about Walt Kelly's Pogo "satire" of the *Alice* story in "Who Stole The Tarts" from Stepmother Goose?

M. B.: "Tenniel or Rackham?" We know of

over a thousand book illustrators, from Ralph Steadman (a favorite) to Salvador Dali (the first trade edition of which I produced). Others high on my list would be Barry Moser, Anne Bachelier, Oleg Lipchenko, Harry Furniss, Pat Andrea, Willy Pogany, and Harry Rountree. It is one of literature's most delicious ironies that a book whose original illustrations are among the most iconic in Western Civilization has gone on to be the most widely illustrated novel in existence.

Pogo is another favorite of mine, but I'd call "Who Stole the Tarts" an illustrated sequence, not really a satire, even though he used comic-strip characters. Would that Kelly had undertaken to do the whole of *Alice*! There are many other examples of Kelly's Carrollian work, including renditions of "Jabberwocky" and Humpty Dumpty's poem that serve as teases for what could have been.

Ed.: Is *Alice* more than an absurd look at Dodgson's historical period? Is it the *Saturday Night Live* of Victoriana? Is such stuff inevitable in the life of a culture - we develop to the point of having a leisure class, then look inward for answers, then almost immediately dismiss those answers as silly/madness?

M. B.: I don't believe that the *Alice* books would have survived through time, been translated into more than 170 languages, and be adopted by people of all ages all over the globe, if it were solely a study of Victorian England. The books that have

come along in the after-time attempting to prove that all of the characters were Oxford personalities or it was a gloss on some of the academic or religious controversies of the time have been utter failures. Face it, she's universal.

Ed.: Carroll's poetry was probably his first "skill" - something he began to hone early and often as a young man. Which of Carroll's poems is your favorite and why? What do you think about the potential for Carroll (and "substance abuse"?) to achieve the heady level of absurdity, or is his brilliant doggerel a standardly clever product of witty times?

M. B.: Nothing comes near "The Hunting of the Snark" (counting "Jabberwocky" as part of *Looking-glass* and therefore ineligible). It shows all of Carroll's sublime wit. Most of his juvenilia is just that, his serious poems are way too maudlin, and a few others just have bits and pieces of brilliance. "Hiawatha's Photographing" and "The Three Voices" should also be mentioned as laugh-out-loud funny.

Carroll got a bad rap in the Sixties; he never touched anything stronger than sherry. I don't see Victorian times as distinctively witty; there are always great nonsense verse writers - Edward Lear, Ogden Nash, Dr. Seuss, John Lennon, and one of my favorites, the aforementioned Walt Kelly....

Ed.: *Alice*, Dickens, Gilbert and Sullivan: which is the more scathing indictment of the British culture? Just kidding - how does

*Alice* fit in with the other classics of 19th Century English art? Does Carroll owe anyone props? Byron? Mary Shelley?

M. B.: “You might just as well try to influence a Bandersnatch.” Carroll was a game-changer, genre-definer, tipping point, whatever you want to call it. Closest we’d come is George MacDonald, whose *Phantastes* and “The Light Princess” were around and who was the very man, in fact, who encouraged Carroll to expand his manuscript, get a better illustrator, and publish it. But no, he was *sui generis*.

Ed.: Finally - in your opinion, if one does not play chess does that fact diminish the appreciation of *Through the Looking-glass*?

M. B.: I don’t think so. It might even be better, as a chess-player would notice things like the moves being out of order and that when the White and Red Knights were

fighting over her, neither was actually in a position to do anything about it such as capture or defend her. I suppose a basic knowledge would be good, that pawns can advance to being a Queen and the like.

Final note - we had fun with this. We hope we didn’t break any HIPAA rules finding out about Mr. Burstein’s connection to Grace Slick’s writing of “White Rabbit” with Jefferson Airplane, and how cool is it that he has a piece of (ahem, unprepped) sixties blotter acid paper with the *Alice* art?

Mark Burstein is the editor of W.W. Norton and Company’s volume *The Annotated Alice, the Deluxe 150th Anniversary Edition*. This article was published simultaneously in the February 2016 issue of *The Blotter Magazine* ([www.blotterrag.com](http://www.blotterrag.com)). ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**