

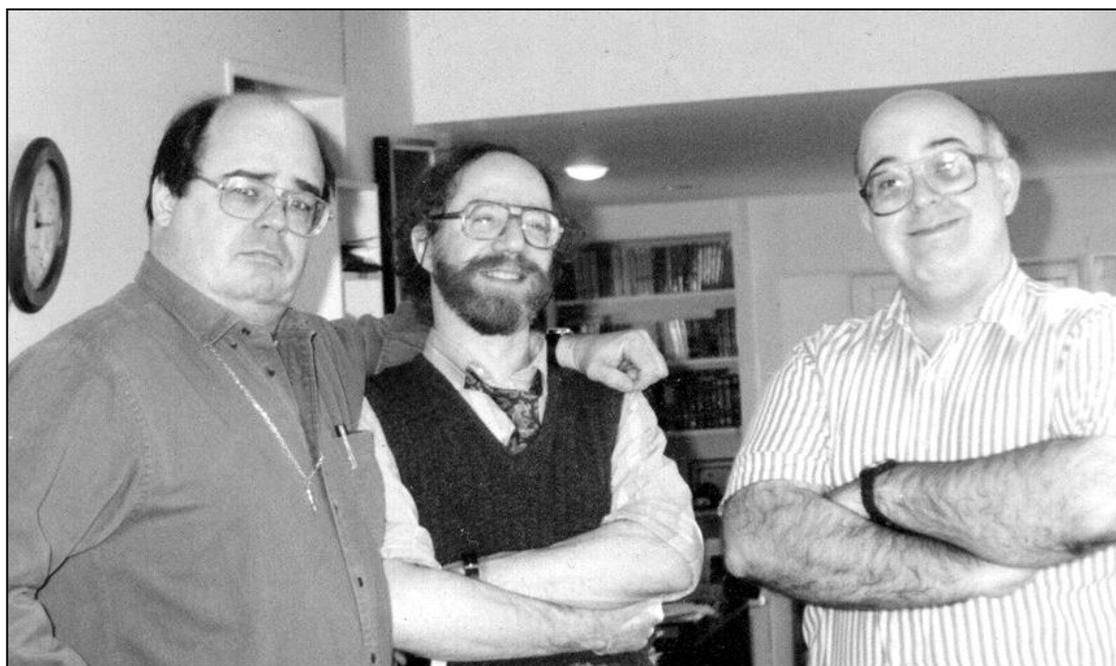
SPARTACUS 30

a zine by

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December 2018 / January 2019



Guy Lillian

GARY TESSER

Hank Davis

Moshe Feder: We are here today because the inimitable **Gary Charles Tesser** concluded his too short time on this planet on Saturday night. He was only 66.

As Lise Eisenberg has said, Gary was like a fictional character brought to life. I would add that no single author's imagination could have encompassed his reality. But maybe a collaboration of Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Franz Kafka, and Sholom Aleichem could have approached it. Colorful cognomens like "Captain Doom" and "the Plucky Red Ace" were coined for him, but they can only hint at his special qualities.

Time spent with him was always entertaining and you usually found yourself viewing the world from previously unknown angles only he had access to. As our generation of New York fandom aged and met less often, I didn't see him in person as much, but I still had the special pleasure of his phone calls, which could last an hour or two and leave me breathless from so much laughing.

He was a gentle eccentric, a performer of good deeds who never boasted of them, a lover of classical music, Science Fiction, the Sunday Times, and the Goon Show. He was also, as we say in the esoteric realms of fannish fandom, a trufan. For me, he was a unique and dear friend for over 45 years.

The world will be a duller, drabber place without Gary. When something brings him to mind, it will always be with a smile.

Hank Davis: *Gary Tesser: In Memoriam and Ineffable, Too . . .*

Gary was one of a kind. Really.

That cliché is often trotted out to describe people—much too often. Okay, so we're all unique beings. Take a handful of pennies—you know, the coins so trivial in value that they're useless as currency nowadays—all minted the same year, and turn an electron microscope on 'em, and each will have differences in their crystal structures. Big deal.

The comparison between Gary and pennies has limits, of course, but electron microscopes would be useless in this case, and besides if he were a coin, it would be of an amount and issue unknown to any coin collector. One of a kind. And hanging out with Gary might be like trying to pay for something with that unknown coin, possibly not even from this planet, or this universe, leading to truly bizarre complications. But, any complications caused by Gary were often humorous, though you might have to calm down for a time before seeing it that way.

One of a kind. Believe it.

If Gary were present here, if this were a Gary Tesser Roast instead of a remembrance service (which would have been a great idea—too late, dammit), he would dispute my claim. In fact, he would insist he was just dull ol' normal, not weird at all. It's the rest of you who are weird. The rest of you are out of step, while I'm marching along to the beat, to the band.

He would say to me, "Oh, Bap, you're so weird," or "You nutty Bap" (I'll explain "Bap" in a moment, bear with me.) At the time I figured this was, pardon the psychobabble, using a defense mechanism. If everybody else was weird (which Gary pronounced without benefit of the "r" sound), then obviously, he wasn't the one who was weird. But later on, I suspected that he really, truly saw nothing odd about his approach to solving the riddle that we call life (I'm not sure what Gary called it), and all the rest of us are out of step. What's the matter with all of you, can't you hear the band? Can't you hear the beat. (Wow, is that Ringo strokin' the skins?)

Before I get hopelessly tangled up in my own unruly metaphors (Gary has that effect, even posthumously), let me return to "Bap" and explicate, to use one of Gary's favorite verbs. (Gary is the only person I know who read his copy of Webster's Collegiate for entertainment, sometimes switching to the massive unabridged volume when he really wanted to tie one on.) When Gary got to know me back in (aieee!) 1972, I was one of the few people he knew who had sold science fiction stories, though only a measly five of them (and one sold to Harlan Ellison, but let's not go there, either), and I was living in a basement apartment in Brooklyn on Bedford Avenue (in walking distance of his once and future and final address, too), so he tagged me the Bedford Avenue Pro, or B.A.P., or "Bap." Hence, "Oh, Bap, you're so weird." (No "r," in "weird" at all, remember, let alone rolled.)

And that shows Gary's gift for weirdness, pardon me, for coming up with memorable phrases. He also would use unoriginal phrases, such as "What a bunch of dopes!" but with those, he told them well, and inserted them just so as to pump up an otherwise docile sentence.

Just wait a bit, and another, more Tesseresequely bizarre phrase would soon be coming along. For a while, he kept saying, “You sperm-swallowing space pirate,” and was in danger of using it until the, ah, luster had worn off. But then he used it in the presence of Lise Eisenberg, who immediately chanted, “Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of--”, and stopped there, being a well-bred fem-fan. After that, Gary retired the phrase, saving the luster. (Perhaps, I should mention that this was a few decades back, before the advent of the current PC goose-steppers, both in fandom and in the allegedly real world.)

Remember, Gary read the dictionary for fun, which may have led to a period of his calling me “the ineffable Bap.” If you cut vocab class the day they covered that word, it means “indescribable,” and some throw in “incomprehensible” as a distant relative. But the most unusual thing about me was that I was one of the few Republicans in fandom (and that’s somewhat “incomprehensible” to my liberal friends; and to Gary, who insisted he was a radical, not a liberal, if you were wondering), and that scarcely qualified me as ineffable, while Gary was overqualified for the job.

At one point, seeking enlightenment, or maybe hoping to meet girls (if there’s a difference), Gary took Est. Apparently, you don’t “study” Est, or “look into” Est, you “take” it. (I might quibble about just who is getting taken here, but, yet again, let’s not go there.) Gary felt that it had greatly changed his personality, but a friend of his, whose name I regrettably cannot now recall, commented that, “Gary was behaving differently from any way I had seen him behave before. But that was true of every other time that I had seen him.”

That was Gary, all right. The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle made flesh, you might say. Ineffable with a capital “F.” One of a kind.

Believe it.

Me: There are some guys that you just love, and Gary Tesser was one. He had an enchanting, irresistible goofiness and sweetness to his soul that could be baffling, might be off-putting, but became infectious and enriching. He looked at life askance (the favor was returned) but always behaved with a deep and genuine kindness that made his company warm and hilarious and life-affirming. Oh yeah, he had a strong streak of nuttiness, but it was a creative and gentle craziness that added to others’ lives. There was no meanness to him. There was no trace of cynicism in the man. People loved him for being himself. Me too.

For I found in Gary not a foil for jokes but a type of courage I’ve needed myself. For a long time I wondered how I could articulate this quality, and finally, the thought formed itself into a straightforward truism: The way *I* looked on Tesser, the world looks on *me*. And the bravery and humor and love he showed by *just being himself* were qualities that I – really, any of us – need to embrace.

Which is why thoughts of Gary lead off this *Spartacus*. Because this wonderful, goofy guy had the courage and the grace to *be himself*, to be vulnerable in a world that exalts bullies, to be kind in a time that values sarcasm, to be a steadfast friend when friendship is quickly and effortlessly sacrificed for a moment’s social advantage. Gary was a saint. He was a warrior for kindness. Who is Spartacus? Chain up, world. Gary Tesser was.



If you haven’t done so already, I suggest that my readers bring up *File 770 / Greg Benford oyster* or *oyster* (really!) on their server and read Mike Glycer’s posts on the incident that occurred at **Loscon 45**. It’s a story of fandom gone completely insane.

What happened, apparently, was that during a panel, Greg called N.K. Jemisen “honey” while discussing her Hugo-winning trilogy (she wasn’t there). He later joked that a Hispanic name had “too many vowels” since he was having trouble spelling it. Isabel Schechter, a concom member, objected loudly and, from reports, at length, and Greg took his leave from the panel. Isabel – whom I don’t know – got two members of the concom to eject Benford from the convention based on her personal offense. During an autograph session, hotel security was enlisted to convey Benford out of the Loscon area.

I want to point out that Greg Benford, research physicist, hobnobber with names like Stephen Hawking, Paul Dirac and Edward Teller, is a lifelong member of the science fiction community, with a pivotal fanzine to his and his brother’s credit, and also a science fiction writer of repute, the most recent winner of the Robert A. Heinlein Award for his fiction, a Worldcon Guest of Honor with two Nebula Awards (including one for *Timescape*, a recognized classic). On a personal level, Greg gave the presentation at the first meeting of the Little Men I ever attended. He’s a great friend to Rosy and me, generous with his time and humor, enlivening and heartening any event he attends. I can’t understand the disgraceful treatment he received at Loscon’s hands, except to see it as ravaging PC mixed with a single person’s uncontrolled and myopic obsession.

Eventually, I understand, the concom as a whole apologized to Benford, who, from all reports, bears Loscon no ill will. This denouement is good, since if no apology had been made and publicized, I would have suggested that Greg consult a civil attorney and of course, boycott Loscon in the future. I love L.A. and more than love L.A. fans, but such treatment – especially when unsanctioned by the con committee’s stated rule – is intolerable, be the victim the lowliest neo or a Nebula-winning SF author.

Greg has sent me his account of the incident, asking that it might be published in the next *Challenger*. It will be – but since that next *Chall* is months in the future, I’m taking the liberty of running it here, as well.

Big lesson. If SFdom is dedicated to the future, then we have a choice about our *social* future. Will our gatherings be based on fragile touchiness and arbitrary power or on tolerance, humor, and that huge old word, *freedom*? Will we work out our disagreements in a friendly manner, based on our mutual community? Will we give each other the simple benefit of the doubt?

MY EJECTION FROM LOSCON, 2018

Gregory Benford

On Saturday Nov. 24 11 AM at Loscon, I was on a panel about “Today’s Masters of sf.” It went normally, I thought.

After 50 minutes questions began and a woman stood in the front row to list improper words used by the panelists. This arose from Isabel Schechter. (The con said this was later verified by Alvaro Zinos-Amaro, who was on the panel.) After four minutes of rant I noticed people leaving at the back of a room with about 30 people in it. Then other women stood and told Isabel Schechter to stop ranting and sit down; others wanted to talk. She wouldn’t stop.

I left the room, not wanting to continue. The panel’s hour had run out and I had a book signing soon. Apparently this shouting went on for a while.

I went to the huckster room and lingered, whereupon Christian McGuire, the chair and his co-chair took me outside the building and said someone unnamed had complained about my conduct.

What conduct? Well, words I had used. "You think you can regulate speech as conduct?" The co-chair reminded me that the Constitution only prohibited speech regulation by the government. Cons could do so. I questioned the right of a mere con to regulate speech. "Conduct includes speech?" No coherent answer. "Aren't you supposed to conduct an investigation?" A shrug.

My offenses, they explained, were, when asked to name "masters of sf" and didn't mention N. K. Jemisin, I said the books had geology badly wrong and used the cliché of psi powers, not a science at all. Plus, though I'd gotten partway through all three Hugo winning novels, I thought them at best a B level of storytelling. I made this a general point about how to fail at sf: "If you write sf, honey, gotta get the science right." "Honey is an insult," the woman co-chair said solemnly.

They went further: I had said a name had too many vowels in it. "Right, when Brad Lau said it, I couldn't spell it, so asked him to spell it out: 5 vowels, 2 consonants." Offensive!

I brushed them off and went back to my book signing.

Partway in, Christian McGuire and the hotel "marshal" came in. I said, "Where's your badge, marshal?" I said. He was in standard Marriott uniform and just blinked. "Now," McGuire said. "We're ejecting you from the con."

I went with them, smiling. I knew they had overplayed whatever hand they thought they had. This created a furor they couldn't shrug off, people saying, "Hey, I have books I brought, want signed!" to no avail. Out we went, ignoring the line of people with bags of books.

When I got upstairs, Niven and Steve Barnes & Turtledove were in the sports bar. I related events. They were stunned, then angry. Me, I went for a swim.

That evening had dinner with Niven and his Doheney relatives, who had great stories of family history. Then the party floor, since I was only banned from the ground, con floor. People were upset by the way the chairs acted. Many later came up to me to say they were disturbed over it. They were more upset than I was.

I gather Loscon lost money big time under Christian McGuire, with a huge membership drop, no masquerade, no costume dealers in huckster room, etc. Not surprised; he seems a tad slow.

Plainly they over reacted. I got a call from the head of Loscon Operations. Turned out, the co-chairs did not conduct an investigation, just went from Isabel Schechter's complaint. Within two days the chair apologized to me and I accepted it gratefully. He and his co-chair were probably trying to do the right thing in these over-heated times. We all are, I trust. But they broke their own rules.

I have been attending Loscon since it began, and my first LASFS meeting was in 1963. I helped put on the first cons in Germany (1957) and Texas (1958). I respect these con traditions enormously. I gather Isabel Schechter will not be returning.

I got home by noon Sunday, and by evening got calls from east coast, emails from UK, Facebook stuff...till I went for another swim. Geez, I thought. What an age we live in.

Things are fine with me now. I'm not upset. And I hope people will keep cooler heads in the future.

I want to especially thank Craig Miller, John Hertz, Matthew Tepper, Harry Turtledove, Larry Niven, Steve Barnes, John DeChancie, Gordon van Gelder and Michelle Pincus for their help in dealing with this.

At risk of being too professorial, I recommend reading

https://quillette.com/2018/05/17/understanding-victimhood-culture-interview-bradley-campbell-jason-manning/?fbclid=IwAR0hPL1hJRW_ERe6hhokHE6QJL784V4qSojSR5zwLNLwMUcnoHzK08Lwkpg

As David Brooks commented Nov. 27 in the *New York Times*, “In the age of social media, virtue is not defined by how compassionately you act. Virtue is defined by how vehemently you *react* to that which you find offensive. Virtue involves the self-display of a certain indignant sensibility, and anybody who doesn’t display that sensibility is morally suspect.”

Best of luck to Loscon...

+++++

[Barbara Landsman](#) quickly commented on Facebook: “I was at that panel and I was horrified. I actually stood up and told her that I did not want to hear her political agenda and that she should just stop. Gregory Benford caught my eye and I just made the cut it off sign to him and he just shrugged. He finally got so pissed off that he stormed out. I again made a comment to try to stop her from continuing on with her rant and she just wouldn’t give it up. So I left. If anyone wants my testimony I’ll be very happy to speak on this. She came into this panel with a notebook and made notes and took down names and she definitely had an agenda. She wanted to fight.”

Later, I got an email from a friend:

I have taken the liberty of composing a “response” by you to Isabel Schechter; full HazMat suit recommended from the exploding heads:

“My apologies to Isabel Schechter and those who may have been adversely affected by my opinions at the Loscon panel in question. As a recent ninth wave feminist convert and even more recent Woke Ye Olde White Guy, I shall embark on the following corrective measures:

We now know with 100% metaphysical certitude that—despite those darn XX and XY genotype markers—gender is fluid. From now on, whenever I participate on an SF panel, I shall fluid myself into a female. As a physicist who has studied quantum mechanics, I know this admixture of observable states (like the K meson) is completely allowable within the rules of science.

Further, as championed by warriors of ethnic identity and pride such as Ward Churchill, Rachel Dolezal, Elizabeth Warren, and (by virtue of the “one drop” rule) pretty much everyone in the antebellum or postbellum American South, I now declare that I self-identify as being of African lineage. All homo sapiens did derive from Africa after all, so this declaration should be met with universal agreement and affirmation.

And finally, as per the lawsuit brought by Emile Ratelband in the Netherlands, and with the certain knowledge that age, like race, ethnicity, or gender is but a social construct, I now declare I am 24 years old.

In short, from now on whenever I am a panelist in any SF venue, I shall self-identify as a 24 year old black woman. Diversity is thus achieved, and my opinions therefore become that much more valuable to the SF community. Oh yes, by virtue of my marriages to two self-identified women, I am also a lesbian.

As a demonstration of her principles, I would think Isabel Schechter would have no problem, in the spirit of Arthur C. Clarke’s “Death and the Senator,” to eschew the use of any work product or invention by the aforementioned Ye Olde White Guys. List appended below for her convenience.

Yours truly, Gregory (but sometimes ‘Georgina’) Benford”

#

Since then, I've gotten hundreds of messages about the ejection; isn't going away. Oddly, few note the core issue is the co-chairs taking the position that they could eject anyone against whom an "I was offended" pitch gets made. They really thought so, though it's not in the Code of Conduct they violated (by not turning the case over to Ops).

Others tell me several cons operate this way: Readercon, Wiscon, others. Worldcon Kansas City ejected Truesdale for such, too. (That's why I paid his way to this year's San Jose one.)

Is this the way the future will roll out?

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David Brooks wrote a recent satirical piece on the attitude behind such posturings:

You want to feel indignant all the time. Back in the old days morality was about loving and serving others. But now it's about displaying indignation about things that other people are doing wrong.

When you are indignant, or woke, you are showing that you have a superior moral awareness. You don't have to actually do anything. Your indignation is itself a sign of your own goodness, and if you can be indignant quicker than the people around you, that just shows how much more good you are!

Second, you want to make yourself heard. You want to put up a lawn sign that says, "Hate is not welcome here" or wear a T-shirt that says, "Stop the Violence." By putting up a lawn sign that everybody else in your neighborhood already has, or wearing that T-shirt that all of your friends already wear, you are taking a stand and displaying who you are. You're showing the people who are trying to silence you that you are not going to stay silent! You are going to wear your fashion item whether they like it or not!

An ancient pro sent this to me:

I used to think of conventions as family reunions. I have no real family, after all, but I have sustained friendships with colleagues over many decades — with you two guys for fifty years or so — and they provide a family surrogate for me.

But now — these self-righteous idiots hurling epithets around, and even ejecting a former Worldcon GoH from their piddling little regional con because some woman had a hissy fit over something he said — this is a hostile environment, and I will be steering clear of it. The Worldcon, yes, because the next two will be overseas and most of these trolls will not be there. But no regional cons, and no chat sites except for Fictionmags, where I am now very cautious about what I say. I have had my career and I am not vulnerable to career damage at this point, and I can survive very nicely even if all of them boycott my work. To hell with them.

From a seasoned pro in the UK:

And Dublin, I feel I ought to go as it's relatively close, but yes I have been steadily growing weary, and wary, of the culture wars, as well as the usual chaos and confusion that surround most cons! I was amazed to find that even applied to Terry at the Discworld cons. I did read about your experience at Loscon (I think it was?). I don't believe everything I read, but even so, much sympathy over that, could have happened to any of us. And I think I will skip Dublin. Still, bookshop events with actual readers still go reassuringly well, when none of the ninnies are in the way!

Another prominent writer reacted thus:

I quit going to most cons years ago unless I knew that particular friends would be there -- signings or a reading only --, which is difficult, because many panels are purposefully politicized when they don't need to be; and I don't volunteer to be on panels at all unless I'm GOH, in which case I'm obligated. Even then I turn down any panel that might conceivably go off the rails. (I do something like that at school, also. I can be a master of silence in meetings.) Still and all, how does one evade people who (as you point out) simply want to rant in order to promote themselves. Haven't signed up for World Fantasy yet for similar reasons.

Such is the state of our fandom, awash in tides of political fashion.



Back to GHLIII and changing topics ...

Setting aside Trump's petulant closure of the American government in an attempt to bully Democrats into financing his Wall, and with effort, ignoring his teargassing and imprisoning refugee children, and the fact that that to tolerate such behavior is to abandon any claim to morality or decency, what else goes on in the sewer of American politics? The latest rank foolishnesses seem to deal with *language* and the even more ancient communication of *dance*.

An incoming congressman, in all other respects a lady, was caught on camera stating that she intended to "impeach the motherfucker" when she came into office. The motherfucker in question, Donald Trump, opined that she had disgraced her family and insulted the country. Recalling the squalor in which the aforesaid Trump has conducted his existence to date, mockery and cries of hypocrisy rebound upon the orange-haired horror.

I agree with those who believe that the congressman spoke unwisely and crudely. Dirty words feel good when you say them but sound ugly and look cheap. It is far more effective politically to label Trump with other terms: hypocritical (indeed!) ... incompetent ... megalomaniacal ... spastic in his decision-making ... inhumane ... unAmerican ... *racist*. The young lady at issue in the following paragraph did just that, and she was right-on. Tell it like it is. Trump doesn't believe in or recognize truth. We who believe in truth should whap the reprobate with it, constantly, and have faith that truth *will prevail*.

In this other matter, Republicans attacked new House member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez with an old video showing her, as a college kid, mimicking a dance from *The Breakfast Club* with some buddies. The young congressman is quite outspoken in her scorn for go-along-with-Trump policies, and the sour old fools who do so thought the images would embarrass her. As if! A beautiful college girl dancing for the sheer joy of it, making every guy within a hundred miles fall in love with her? That's not scandalous. That's *wonderful*. A political figure who makes you glad to be alive? I'll take it!



Thinking I wouldn't be teaching in the spring semester, I clogged my **Christmas** please-list with books, and they came pouring in: Stan Robinson's *Red Moon*, a reference work on Marie Laveau for a story I've been working on since 1972, a volume of Bill Warren's *Keep Watching the Skies*, and the new Michael Connelly. On my own, and to guide my writing, I've stocked up on Ramsey Campbell novels and Shirley Jackson short stories – as Stephen King said, Jackson never had to raise her voice. I've also been replenishing my collection of novels, stories, and poems by Fred Chappell, my MFA mentor. I want a literary undertone in my writing, and Fred – a onetime SF fan and twice winner of the World Fantasy Award – was once Poet Laureate of North Carolina. His work will inspire.

No sooner did I have this “scholar’s mistress” of literature stacked by my hand than lo, a class came open at the state college where Rosy and I adjunct. I have part-time work this springtime. The kids? Ridiculously young. Most *born since 2000*. I may run screaming into the woods. But! They strike me as eager to get into it, interested in the world, and the course shouldn’t gobble up *all* my time, so to teaching *and reading and writing* I go.



To read, eyesight is required, so in December I submitted to having *death rays* shot into my eyes – **laser capsulotomies**, that is, 30-second procedures to burn film off of the backs of my corneas. Rather neat: fiery red starbursts that, indeed, left it a little less tiring to read. The eye-doc says I have a condition called **Fuch’s Atrophy**, a gradual loss of cells inside my corneas which convey nutrient thereto, and might therefore need a partial corneal transplant in 10-15 years. I’ll be pushing 80 – or pulling it. Or adrift in a million bits of ash in the whirlpool below Niagara Falls ...

Anyway, whether any of this helps my writing, we’ll have to see. “See,” get it?



The New Orleans Saints were cheated in the National Football Conference Championships. They were denied the chance to run out the clock, and thereby ascend to the Super Bowl, by the worst non-call of the most obvious foul I’ve ever seen: a pass interference with 1:45 to go, admitted after the fact by the winning Rams, the NFL, commentators, even the referees themselves. It was a burn, a robbery, a cheat, a disgrace to the integrity of the game.

What I call the Curse of the Saints goes on. For years – decades – the team labored under its burden of atrocious play, its ability to *find a way to lose*, which led to the mockery of its fans (remember the grocery bags?) and the contempt of the rest of the National Football League. Drew Brees and Sean Payton brought the team out of the wilderness and into the light of pride – but what will be denied their legitimate chance to shine do their team confidence, their spirit, and worse, to the spirit of New Orleans, inextricably tied to the success of the Saints? Will they have to rebuild yet again?

I have a suggestion. Extend the right of challenge to missed fouls. Let screw-ups like that horror be reviewed upon demand. Don’t submit honest teams to incompetent officiating. The NFL has busted its hump trying to make football safer. How about making football more fair?

Gratifyingly, the officiating mess and the injustice it caused in the NFC Championships has not died down. The Saints owner is petitioning the NFL for a rule change similar to what I said above. Some sportsbooks are refunding bets. There’s a fairly ridiculous petition circulating to replay the whole game – impossible, of course, but I signed it anyway. The muck-up has even made *Meet the Press*.

At least we got to see a magnificent lunar eclipse that night, high in the zenith. Couldn’t *quite* spot the meteorite strike, though.



From the invaluable Andy Porter: “The **Down Under Fan Fund**, currently administered by Paul Weimer and Marlee Jane Ward, announce that there will be No 2019 delegate.

“2019 is an awkward year for a Down Under Fan Fund race from the US to Australasia given that 2020 is slated to be Worldcon in New Zealand, and a 2020 race from Australasia to North America is not likely to have the time and energy given that Worldcon. As a result, there will be no race in 2019.

“However, there will be a race for 2020, with the expectation that the 2020 DUFF delegate will travel from North America to attend Worldcon in Wellington, New Zealand, and other fannish events and meetings as possible in the spirit and mission of the Down Under Fan Fund.”

From me: I back this decision as eminently sensible. DUFF and TAFF should alternate their trips to North America anyway. *Run for DUFF 2020!* Aussie and New Zealand fans are the friendliest we have ever known and the Worldcon in NZ is bound to be magnificent. If Rosy and I hadn't already been DUFF delegates, in 2003, *we'd* run!



On January 22, the **Oscar nominations** appear. I have a lot of movies to see.

I've already seen a slew, and can make some predictions: Christian Bale is a lock for Best Actor in *Vice*, even though, like Gary Oldman's Churchill before him, half of his performance is makeup. I liked the movie a great deal, so no real complaints. Good to see Willem Dafoe nominated for a minor film about van Gogh that nobody saw; I've always admired that actor. Glenn Close's splendid speech at the Golden Globes will probably win her the Oscar she's long sought, for *The Wife*; she's wallowed in Meryl Streep's shadow long enough. Her major competition will be Olivia Colman in the raunchy, hilarious *The Favourite* and Lady Gaga in the latest *A Star is Born*, and now it's time for a bitter-old-man rant.

A Star is Born is one of those stories made to showcase a raw newcomer who can sing and not vomit when asked to recite dialogue. It's been made several times, by, and for, one great actress, Janet Gaynor, one great performer, Judy Garland, one great ego, Barbra Streisand, and now, Lady Gaga, whatever she is. I have seen none of them, although I wouldn't mind seeing Gaynor's and want to see Garland's once it's reassembled (the studio cut the movie to pieces). I'm not a Streisand fan (could you tell?) and frankly, feel like an old fart when considering Lady Gaga – I was *offended* when the Stones let her join in "Gimme Shelter". How could *she* know what that song is about? *grumble* (Rosy says Gaga was fine in the movie, by the way, and she'll certainly win for composing the Best Song.)

As for the big award, critics are near-unanimous: *Roma*, available on Netflix. It's an amazingly personal film, beautifully made and performed, accessible and identifiable, small and touching. Ten nominations – including two for its unknown Mexican stars. BS and FX rule in Hollywood, but art survives. I agree with the critics.

The Academy Awards are February 24.

Now, a couple of movies shut out of the Oscars ...

One of the joys of viewing a mega-movie with acres of special effects is reading the credits that follow the film. So it was with *Aquaman*, a glorious mess of a movie with FX spread from sea to shining sea – some of which were credited to our friend and fellow DUFF delegate **Norman Cates**. When his name appeared, I did as I always do, and began a chant: "Nor-man! Nor-man!" For once, my demonstration did not arouse the curiosity or ire of my fellow viewers. I saw the movie near the end of its run, and the two others watching it with me had already left. Anyway, the film was indeed a glorious mess, over-crowded and effects-driven, but WTF, I had a jolly time. Gawd, Nicole Kidman looks good.

On the Basis of Sex also provided me a jolly good time – it made me want to cheer and to weep. It also made me cringe in shame for letting one of my life's ambitions escape me. It's a bio flick about Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and her early efforts to overcome gender discrimination, both in her personal career and in American law. Felicity Jones is excellent, Armie Hammer is effective, the supporting cast is good, and the Notorious RBG is depicted as the toughest mother in the valley, a Social Justice Warrior who does not regulate but liberate, who does not deny our fundamentals as a society but clarifies, translates and champions them. A hack public defender until driven out of the profession by budgets – and just when I felt I was getting good at it – I look on such people and such careers and want to cry. I thank God Ruth Bader Ginsburg has been there. You should as well. Who is Spartacus? *She is*.

