

*Asimov's Science Fiction* September 2009

Reviewed by Charlie Harmon

Editor: Sheila Williams

October 2014

Web Address: asimovs.com

What they publish: short stories, novelettes, and novellas (up to 20,000 words), as well as poetry.

Submission Guidelines: They're looking for character-driven science fiction and light fantasy (no sword and sorcery, please). No sex, violence, or dark stories. They have an online submissions system, though they will also accept submissions via standard mail. Manuscripts should be formatted according to William Shunn's guide and you should include a cover letter that lists your publishing history and any relevant information.

Description of Publication: *Asimov's* is a monthly science fiction magazine published in print and online. They favor stories that are more character or idea driven, and I'd describe the general rating as PG. They seem to focus primarily on big name authors, and the issue I read featured stories by winners of the Hugo and Nebula Awards, the World Fantasy Award, and yes, the National Book Award. The print version is nice-looking enough, although it's digest-sized and swimming in ads.

Prose per issue: They print somewhere between five and ten short stories, one or two novelettes or novellas (depending upon available space), a few poems, and some non-fiction features like book reviews and writing guides (by solicitation only).

Prose Reviews:

"Away From Here," by Lisa Goldstein, is a plain spoken contemporary fantasy story set in a family-run hotel past its prime. The subjective first person narrator, Liz, a fifteen-year-old girl, works for her parents cleaning the hotel, silently wishing she was eighteen so she could get away to college like her brother. One day, a troupe of strange, anachronistic characters show up, led by a man named Ebenezer Monologue (who has a talking mouse in his pocket). Ebenezer and his colleagues flounce around the hotel, doing vaguely magical circus acts at random, and Liz's mother reveals that they've come before and, despite the fact that the hotel's hurting for money, they stay for free. Eventually, Liz asks the weirdoes to take her away with them and Ebenezer reveals that her mother has made the same request multiple times, including ten years earlier when Liz was five. Liz realizes that Ebenezer and his people have trapped them there, willing to do anything, wait any length of time, for the chance to see them again.

This is the story by the National Book Award winner, and it isn't very good. Take, for example, the opening line: "I'm cleaning one of the vacant rooms when the bell over the front door rings"--not exactly an attention grabber. Liz's mother calls for her to answer the door, but Liz wants to finish fluffing the pillows and vacuuming. Her mother gets mad: "Remember those people who left because you weren't quick enough?" which is so non-specific that it reads like placeholder dialogue the author put in and then forgot about. Unfortunately, most of the story reads that way. During another argument with her mother: "I get so frustrated I don't care." What does she do with that frustration? She says "hell." Twice. Liz is so enchanted with the troupe that she wants to run away with them, and eventually realizes that she's addicted to their patented brand of shenanigans. What does she see them do? Ride unicycles while juggling shards of light. Sit on chairs that aren't actually there (that's right--mime-craft!). Incredible, right? That must be why her mother says, "Don't you understand by now? I keep the hotel going for them. In case they come back. And it's been worth it, waiting all these years, just to see them again." Really? It's like being told, "I would've done anything for another taste of that white lightning," and when you say, "White lightning?" they say, "Sugar-free lemonade." The allure of these magic people is never made clear/credible, there isn't much in the way of stakes until the very end (and the stakes aren't credible either), and the narration is really flat. A disappointment.

"Camera Obscured," by Ferrett Steinmetz, is a plain spoken, humorous piece in a near-future sci-fi setting. Victor "Yo-Yo" Pino, the subjective third person protagonist, lives in a world where everyone is vlogging all the time and as a result almost any activity a person might engage in is ranked. Victor wants to be the best at something, anything, and after years of abortive attempts, he figures out a loophole through which he can become the world's greatest lover (technically). As his first conquest, he selects Rosalie Atkinson, the weirdest girl at his school (she doesn't even vlog!) and though she's not the shrinking violet he imagined, she takes pity and agrees to spend time with him. They drive outside of town to a secluded area between some power lines, and Rosalie reveals that there's absolutely *no* cellular service, therefore no vlogging. They can just be people, without an audience. She gets Victor to show her some of the things he learned while he was trying to climb the leaderboards--close-up magic, juggling, etc.--and although he never achieved a rank higher than the three-millions, Rosalie is delighted by his skills. They part as friends (after a lot of hinting, Victor realizes Rosalie is gay) and Victor goes home, where, after some deliberation, he turns off the leaderboards.

Let's contrast this opening line with the one from the first story: "It had been a week since Victor 'Yo-Yo' Pino had been stung by a hundred and seventy-four bees." Much more of a hook, and tonally, at least, it tells you everything you need to know. The story is light and funny without ever becoming too silly, most of that tonal weight

carried by the breezy narrative voice. Victor is a likeable loser, and while his quest to become the world's greatest lover could be skeezy, Rosalie assumes the dominant position in their relationship so immediately and he confesses to his scheme so quickly that it never comes across that way. The science fiction element--everyone vlogs and gets ranked at everything they do--is both interesting and rife with potential for social commentary, and while there is commentary to be had, the message never gets heavy-handed. I liked this story quite a bit, and Ferrett Steinmetz, though I'd heard of him before, is enough of an unknown that he doesn't have a Wikipedia page.

Rating: 3. They're open to submissions from anyone, they do publish the occasional emerging writer, and they pay a professional rate. On the other hand, they seem to focus on established brands and big names, and their overarching aesthetic skews older and safer. My first impression, upon finishing the issue, was, "*Asimov's* is the *Reader's Digest* of science fiction journals."