

THE WISCON CHRONICLES 4

The WisCon Chronicles

VOLUME 4

WisCon Voices

Edited by
Sylvia Kelso



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The WisCon Chronicles, Volume 4
WisCon Voices

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INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Kelso

To be invited to edit the fourth volume of the WisCon Chronicles, back in November of 2008, was a somewhat daunting if flattering challenge. On the one side, redoubtable women had edited the previous three issues, starting with Timmi Duchamp herself, going on to Eileen Gunn and Liz Henry. On the other loomed WisCon proper — a kaleidoscope of activities, interactions, luminaries, notables, and Amazing Annual Events, such as the Tiptree Auction, to name only the most obvious. I was not an annual attendee. I didn't know that many people. Supposing I missed out events, conversations, people that Really Mattered in the final view of WisCon 33?

Gratefully, my pragmatic internal writing team then asserted themselves. So you're not going to see more than a quarter of WisCon personally? Well, neither is anybody else. In fact, WisCon, like most cons and conferences, will be, for most people, whether they realize it or not, largely a virtual event. Even one of those simultaneous matter transfer machines so dear to our sf hearts is not going to get any one person to every event, conversation, panel, reading, paper, party at one and the same time.

OK, I said. Nobody got everything real time, but everyone did experience *A* WisCon. Their own personal WisCon, running over the same four days as everyone else's. Let's gather the records of as many such Cons as we can, and assemble them. There will be places where someone's WisCon fills the hole in someone else's; there will be differing perspectives on the Con as a whole; there may hopefully be differing perspectives on the same event(s). And where other Chronicles have collected the thoughts of notables, along with the papers and panel reports, this time, let's try to find as many reports as possible from "ordinary" attendees — so far as any WisCon attendee is ordinary, that is.

A large number of such extra-ordinary ordinary people answered my call. I had originally intended to sub-title the entire volume “My WisCon,” with an ironic side glance at the “My Space,” “My Account,” “My Documents” usage, and most of the personal WisCon reports are titled “My WisCon,” because this is precisely what they are — one person’s version of the Con.

And as I hoped, they are widely diverse, not only in what events the writer attended, what he or she saw and felt, but in the writers themselves. There are first-timers and long-termers, there are women and men, there are POC and Whites: there are reports in prose and reports in verse, reports from people who went to panels and reports from those who ran parties, including Elise Matthesen’s long term Earring Haiku party, complete with a bouquet of haikus from past events. There’s a report set up as an alphabet from Julie Andrews. There are reports that rhapsodize about WisCon 33, and reports that critique it, or indicate that it is not always a coming-home and recognizing-the-tribe experience.

In the volume proper, these personal records appear among what are now traditional Chronicle elements: papers from the academic track, and, of course, panel reports. This year we have two party reports among them, from Elise and from Brittany Flokstra, who ran the Doctor Horrible party. We also have academic meditations on WisCon, as a site of community discourse, in Meg Turville-Heitz’ demography, and as a site of feminist practice, in MJ Hardman’s paper.

We have somewhat fewer panel transcripts than previously, not least because, in the wake of the Troll incident at WisCon 32, people were much charier of recording panels either in sound or pix. Nor do we have as many overlapping views of the same panel or event as I hoped. We do have a strong representation for POC, from Nisi Shawl’s reprise of the Cultural Appropriation Workshop, early on Friday, to the transcript of a post-WisCon net discussion from Julia. We are further privileged to have an exchange of letters between Nisi and her mother June, a first-timer but definitely luminary of WisCon 33.

We also have some fiction, from people who read at WisCon, and in one case, a short story inspired by an actual panel, Bev Friend’s very witty and strongly feminist “The Pause that Refreshes.” Matching that we have Jennifer Pelland’s excerpt from her story “Ghosts of New York” and the “tail,” which describes the process of writing the story.

Two notable continuities emerged for me from this mosaic of WisCon 33. First, the strong presence in this volume of POC: as some of the My WisCons make clear, WisCon is still not the optimal rhapsodic experience for POC. But the volume opens and closes with reports from first-timers who are POC, LaShawn Wanak's Friday-only report, and Robin Small-McCarthy's retrospective poem "Before We Remember," which at once returns us to the mundane world and leaves behind a brief, shining shiny vision of what WisCon 33 could be.

The second interesting aspect was the prevalence of media rather than print topics on the academic front. Of the six people who responded to my requests for papers and/or presentations actually given at WisCon, Andrea Hairston, Allison Morris, Zach Welhouse, and Valerie Guyant and Kate Freund all chose film or TV topics. Only Erin Ranft's paper dealt with a printed author. I consider this a significant straw in the wind for the future of both sf and fantasy both, and possibly a signal to Con organizers, that "media fans" as they are often called, or even media cons, are not merely a sub-section of the overall sf community, but may become its future majority.

After considering various thematic constellations, I decided to lay out the volume on a chronological basis, not least because a sequential, chronological frame is how we all do experience WisCon. Hence the volume runs roughly Friday to Monday, with some clusters, such as Nisi and June's letters and Nisi's workshop report, or the cluster of material from the Witches and Wizards' panel, and the cluster by topic around JoSelle Vanderhooft's essay on being (dis)abled, and Sandy Olson's panel report on "Disabling Metaphor." Panel reports, interspersed among My WisCons and papers, also run from Friday to Monday overall. I hope that as we read through this volume, now or later, the various elements will come together to present a shifting, variant, fill-in-the-holes viewpoint, that preserves something we can all recognize as WisCon 33.

Sylvia Kelso lives in North Queensland, works part-time at James Cook University, and has been writing or telling stories for as long as she remembers. She is a contributing editor for *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres* and recently guest edited a special volume of *Paradoxa* on Ursula K. Le Guin. Her first fantasy novel, *Everran's Bane*, appeared in 2005, and two of her novels have been shortlisted in the Australian Aurealis genre fiction awards.

A Slice of WisCon (or how to do a con in one day)

My WisCon #1

LaShawn M. Wanak

I had never been to a science fiction convention.

It's not like I didn't know they existed. I knew about WindyCon and Duckon and Anime Central, but I didn't go to them because they looked...weird. People walking around in costumes. People who jumped on you if you mentioned you actually liked *Enterprise*. And those were just the cons in Chicago. I vaguely knew about the convention that met in Madison, but that one was full of...well, feminists. I didn't think that it was for me.

Then my family moved to Madison, and WisCon33 was all I heard about from my new friends, who turned out to be (gasp!) feminists. They talked about it so much, and it sounded like so much fun, I thought, well, maybe I should check out. There was one slight problem: I had scheduled vacation in Michigan around WisCon weekend. There was no way I could get out of it. Not by tantrums. Not by sulking. Not by bribing. If I was to go to WisCon, I could only go on one day — that Friday.

So how can someone who has never experienced WisCon do so in one day?

1. Book readings

I decided to jump-start the festivities for me by attending the Geoff Ryman and Ellen Klages readings at Room of One's Own bookstore Thursday night. I had read some of Ryman's works before, but I only knew Klages from her story "In the House of the Seven Librarians." Listening to the both of them was a real treat, and I got to chat with them afterwards. What stuck with me was when Klages told me to feel free to pull her aside and we could talk more about writing over a beer. Sadly, I never got that chance, because, well, I had only one day to attend WisCon.

2. Fangirl squeeing

I got a chance to meet Nisi Shawl after picking up my registration materials for WisCon. Having never met her before, but having read her work, I could only do one thing: go absolute apeshit fangirlish on her. I can't remember what exactly I said, but I'm pretty sure, "I looooooooooove your stories!" and, "U are teh best writer EVAH!!1!" are in there. And the absolute worst thing was that I was doing it in front of her *mother*. Luckily for me, Nisi took it all in stride. In fact, it may have worked in my favor on the following day, but I'll get to that in a bit.

3. Writer's Workshop

This alone was worth paying the full attendance fee. I've been to writer's workshops before, but none where I got a chance to bring my work before a pro writer. Alaya Dawn Johnson was an excellent moderator of our group, leading it Clarion style. I got some valuable criticism on the book I'm currently editing, and the comments I got let me know that I'm going along the right track. Plus, another black fantasy writer. Squee!!

4. Author Networking

And it didn't stop there. I also got to meet N.K. Jemisin and K. Tempest Bradford. In fact, this was the first time where I got to not only meet several black writers, but several black women who wrote fantasy/science fiction. In other words, this was the first time I was truly among peers. I got a chance to listen to Johnson and Jemisin as they gave readings, and they were *good*. It gave me something to aspire to.

5. Shapenote Singing

Because the world does not have enough shapenote singing!

6. Quiet Room

At some point, all the rushing around and the trying to meet as many people as I could really began to drag me down. So I was very appreciative of the "quiet room" they had. Would've been nice to have actual cots, since it's not easy to curl up in a hotel chair, but I was still able to get a quick nap.

7. Dinner with authors

The highlight of WisCon for me was getting a chance to go out to dinner with Nisi Shawl and N.K. Jemisin, along with a bunch of other people. This is the heart of WisCon, not so much the panels or the events, but meeting and talking with people. I learned so much more about the writing business in those couple of hours than I would have in a writing class, or even at the workshop.

8. Opening Ceremonies

Um, actually, I didn't really go to the ceremonies — I only got to see the end. But I did get to see Klages with the tiara, and that was pretty nice.

9. Babies

That's what I really liked about WisCon. Lots of women walking around with babies in slings. At some point, I saw a woman walking *and* nursing her baby at the same time. That's when I thought to myself: these are *my* kind of people.

So that's what I got out of WisCon33. It was only a slice, a tiny slice, but I was surprised at all that I experienced. In fact, I'm going to go out on a limb and say I probably experienced more WisCon than any other attendee did.

Aw, who am I kidding? No, I didn't. Just think of all the parties I missed. All the panels. And that beer with Ellen Klages. I missed it all!

That's okay. I currently have WisCon34 circled in red on next year's calendar. I have beat it into my family that I will not be attending any family function around Memorial Day, because I am going to WisCon. **All** of WisCon, dammit! In fact, I'm going to participate. I'm going to get on panels. I'm going to volunteer. I am going to throw myself headfirst into WisCon. And I plan on having that beer with Klages, even though I pretty much hate the taste of beer. But I bet next year, it's going to taste so sweet.

LaShawn M. Wanak is a Chicago transplant to Madison, WI. She's written speculative fiction for many short story markets, including *Ideomancer* and *The Town Drunk*. Currently, she's editing her first fantasy novel. You can find more about her at <http://tbonecafe.wordpress.com>.

Glossophilia: Report on the Cultural Appropriation Workshop

Nisi Shawl

On Location

At WisCon 33 I was on one panel that wasn't going to be a panel. *Cultural Appropriation 101* was supposed to be a workshop. At least, that's what the Programming Committee had asked for. But then we only had your normal panel-length time slot of 75 minutes to do it in.

"We" in this case consisted of myself and Victor J. Raymond of the Carl Brandon Society's Steering Committee, plus Cabell Gathman of the University of Wisconsin. We met briefly on Friday for lunch in a restaurant on State Street to discuss our expectations and compare various strategies we'd used individually in the past. We decided to try a little of everything.

At 3:30, in the Assembly Room, the three of us took our seats at a low table under a low ceiling and faced a crowd of chairs. Full chairs. The convention hadn't even officially started, but people wanted to do this thing. They wanted to talk about cultural appropriation and race and the genre, and they wanted to do it right. Geoff Ryman, one of the GoHs, sat with pen poised expectantly — was he waiting to take notes? While Cabell madly scissored through magazines in search of photos for the writing exercise I planned to end the session with, Victor and I made opening remarks and took some questions from workshop participants. One or two people attempted to repurpose the workshop so that it was all and exclusively about *them*. We had been expecting these attempts, and dealt with them using salt, brevity, and reminders that we were here to do something constructive

and practical with our time. The project: putting together a glossary of words and phrases useful in talking about cultural diversity.

I used an oversized pad of paper and a green Sharpie to note down audience questions, concerns, comments, and consensus. This gave the project focus; it made our progress manifest while acknowledging the existence of points we had no intention of addressing in depth given our time constraints.

Here are some of the terms we talked about, with definitions:

RACISM: A system of advantage based on race. Unfortunately, *racism* is not dead.

HONORARY WHITENESS: I first heard of this term from linguistic anthropologist and Carl Brandon Society co-founder MJ Hardman. If a white person likes a person of color and thinks that person of color is righteous and good, and therefore like themselves, they may accord that person of color *honorary whiteness*. This is usually done unconsciously.

PAWS: A playful term based on the way paws are given out in the course of the children's show "Blue's Clues." Somebody who's extraordinarily clueful about cultural and racial issues has four *paws*.

COOKIE: A very public reward for behaving commendably in regards to racial or cultural issues. Often, seeking said *cookie* is the secret motivation for such behavior. (Note: *cookies* are the imaginary, self-bestowed, and parodic equivalent of *paws*.)

CLUEFULNESS: Of a certain level of empathy and understanding when it comes to the situations of those of a non-dominant cultural background, race, etc. Applied to those of the correspondingly dominant background. Many of my white friends exhibit a high degree of *cluefulness*.

POSEE: An acronym of my invention, standing for Person of Southern European Extraction. Some *POSEEs* argue that they are not white, and historically many have had to struggle to be accepted as white.

PONEE: My companion acronym, standing for Person of Northern European Extraction. The whitest of the white; John Aegard is my little **PONEE**

THE UNMARKED STATE: Possessing characteristics seen as “normal,” and thus not worth being mentioned. In this society, at this time, this includes being white, male, heterosexual, cisgendered, affluent, and with certain physical abilities. Just about everyone deviates from **the unmarked state** in one way or another, though some ways are deemed important and others are not.

After all of everyone’s talking, we wound up with only seventeen minutes to do the final exercise. I explained it while Cabell and Victor distributed pairs of photographs, each featuring a single human being. Despite Cabell’s best efforts, we were short on materials. So everyone had to share. Which was fine.

The first part of the exercise was to write about differences between the two humans pictured in the photos participants received. The second part was to write about the ways they were the same. As when my co-author Cynthia Ward and I teach this exercise during the Writing the Other workshop, questions arose about the “right” way to do this. I deflected the questions as best I could, aiming participants away from answers, toward the process and the revelations it provoked in them. There wasn’t time to share what any of us had written, but I know from past experience that most people have more difficulty picking out similarities than differences. A few tried to turn their results in to me, but I told them those were theirs to keep.

At 4:45 we weren’t finished, but we were done. It was time to move on. The chairs emptied fairly quickly, though some people stayed around long enough to buy copies of *Writing the Other* that the Carl Brandon Society was selling as a fundraiser. Among these CBS supporters was Patricia C. Wrede, who had sat in the first row knitting silently throughout the workshop. Wrede was at the center of 2009’s second iteration of “Race Fail,” aka “Mammoth Fail.” Both Fails were online controversies concerned with the fantastic genres’ representations of race and culture — or the lack thereof. Wrede told me as I autographed her copy of the book that she’d come to listen rather than speak, that though she objected to some of the ways her

work had been characterized, she thought it was more important to hear what others wanted to say than to continually try to restate her own point.

I would love to get additional feedback about Cultural Appropriation 101 and the exercise from anyone who took part.

Offsite

What begins at WisCon doesn't necessarily end there. The truncated workshop that Cabell, Victor, and I put together was intended to provide rhetorical tools for the rest of the weekend. The effort to choose and refine these tools has continued long afterwards.

In June, not quite a month after WisCon 33, K. Tempest Bradford invited me to guest blog for The Angry Black Woman. My post titled "Glossophilia" began with a condensed version of the account above, then asked my readers to keep the glossary project going. I ended that post with:

"Here are a few terms that could use definitions. Try to be smart and nice.

PEOPLE OF COLOR

MAGICAL NEGRO

EXOTICIZING

ESSENTIALISM

And I'm sure there must be others."

I received forty-one comments. I thought that was pretty good. I'm reproducing some of them here.

ESSENTIALISM

Only a couple of comments addressed essentialism. **Momsomniac** described it as "The erroneous but socially accepted belief that one's sex or skin color pre-determines behavior." Elegantly brief.

MAGICAL NEGRO

In contrast to essentialism, the Magical Negro led to a longish discussion, with many examples given. For instance, **Jonquil** concentrated on the transfer of values and knowledge inexplicably absent from characters representing the dominant cultural paradigm,

defining the Magical Negro as “the walking embodiment of human values that the (usually) white protagonist seems to lack until they get to know [them].” Her examples were “Bagger Vance” and “The Green Mile.”

Vitamin A's definition stuck most closely to my sense of the term: “A trope in literature and popular cultural that stereotypes a secondary black character as unrealistically ‘good,’ often possessing supernatural or mystical qualities, whose existence inevitably serves the interests of white protagonists.” Tying the idea to stories and stressing its connection with the “supernatural or mystical” reflected my own run-ins with it in the fantastic genre.

I then offered my own definition: “A magically powerful yet completely subservient character who dies in the service of a protagonist of the unmarked state,” and pointed to Nnedi Okorafor’s story “The Magical Negro” in *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones*. I copped to having tried a few times to write a “Magical Honky” story, coming closest with my (at this time unpublished) novella “Something More.”

Angie added another important point: the Magical Negro has “no significant goals or interests of his own, but rather prioritizes the goals and interests of the white protagonist.”

EXOTICIZING

Though the word exoticizing didn’t trigger many more comments than the Magical Negro, attempts at defining it as a term became convoluted. **Jonquil** wrote that it consisted of: “taking a trait of another race or culture and fantasizing about it, then substituting your fantasy (often sexual) for the experienced reality of that trait. The classic example is the Western conception of the harem, which has very little to do with the harem....”

Loligo noted that exoticizing is “rooted in ambivalence,” involving the dominant culture’s idealization of an element from a non-dominant culture, “depicting it as beautiful, or charming, or exciting, while simultaneously Othering it by denying its place in normal human experience.”

Bindicated thought it important to include “something about how it strips the humanity from the exoticized POC, boiling his/her entire individual nature down to a particular characteristic that the entire race or ethnic group is supposed to share.”

Thejudge wrote about exoticizing using the second person voice/viewpoint, which gave her definition a personal and anecdotal feel: “Usually occurs as a result of being miraculously visible in a white world. Suddenly, you are stared at by multiple onlookers wherever you go, and you have to be mixed if they find you attractive. People must touch your skin to see if it is hard. They must touch your hair, or they are shocked that you can grow hair. They wonder if you have bleached your skin, had collagen injections, or cheekbone implants. All because they are now forced to look at someone different.”

PEOPLE OF COLOR

This term proved the most difficult to define of the four I asked for help with. One of the first comments on it came with a footnote. **Diatryma** saw a person of color as “someone who identifies* as a member of a group which is not privileged in society for reasons correlated to ancestry....”

*The footnote for “identifies” explained that though she was willing to define the term, she didn’t perceive herself as having permission to decide who it applied to.

Momsomniac further undercut the readiness with which a definition of POC might be applied when questioning whether or not she would so self-define, in light of others’ perceptions: “While I am technically of mixed white/indigenous ancestry, it has ONLY occasionally affected how people see me.... Most of the time I am perceived as white.” When this isn’t the case, “the assumption is almost ALWAYS (inaccurately) that I am Hispanic.” While acknowledging that there are “undercover” or “covert” POC (a la Walter White, former head of the NAACP, who posed as a white reporter when covering lynch riots in 1919 Arkansas) and noting that a history of poverty weakened her position of privilege, she thought that because she wasn’t subject to the disadvantages most POC face, she might not be justified in saying she was one.

Thejudge conflated the phrases “people of color” and “colored people,” writing that POC were those “of partial or mixed African ancestry who reject the term ‘black’ and absolutely hate to hear the term African American.” Several commenters thought they ought to set her straight; **Godheval** called her definition “too exclusive” and opined that other people of non-European ancestry could “find

common ground and ideological unity under the banner ‘people of color.’” But **Thejudge** rejected this correction. She wrote back that “people with an identifiable ethnicity such as Asians or Latinos are referred to as such,” making people of color a euphemistic description for blacks.

During discussions on the Carl Brandon Society list serve I had discovered that “person of color” is a primarily USian term, or at least one used primarily in the Western Hemisphere. As a phrase it was more or less meaningless to European subscribers, so I wasn’t surprised that it provoked disagreement.

Original Lee’s succinct definition of POC came closest to the way I’m accustomed to using it: “Anyone who is, to the casual observer, not white. Often used in the plural to indicate that one is talking about a group of people not privileged by skin color.”

The definitions posted by **Zahra**, a self-described “person of pal-lor,” may have been the wittiest, though the first was certainly the longest: “An umbrella term raised in the face of the rain of colonialism and discrimination. A self-claimed identity that brings together people from the many cultures tired of being spat on by clouds in the shape of European and American hegemonic power. (Said rain may be historic, direct, economic, ongoing, and/or unpredictable.) There are places that claim to sell it, but it can most likely be found in the home you grew up in with other protective gear. Like many umbrellas, it might not be big enough or the right shape, but it requires standing together to use it well.” She also included a much shorter companion definition meant just for white people: “Someone who knows more than you do about racism.”

Amendments

In addition to coming up with definitions for the four terms I’d asked for help with, some Angry Black Woman readers commented on, challenged, and corrected terms I had presented as defined.

COOKIE

Betty wrote: “I tend to use COOKIE to be the reward not for behaving commendably...but rather...the reward for failing to be a huge asshole: ‘I never followed you around the store to see if you stole stuff, where’s my cookie!?’ COOKIE is...the reward for doing literally

the least you could do.” That’s closer, I think, to majority usage than the definition I originally offered.

HONORARY WHITENESS

I was surprised that this term proved contentious. Not only had I provided a clear definition, I had cited an authority when I did so. Yet commenters sought to apply the term to people and situations I had never before considered pertinent: so-called “model minorities” such as Asians, who are often associated with academic achievement; ante- and post-bellum “house niggers,” who conform to white society’s expectations of them in as unthreatening a manner as possible; POSEES, Jews, and other ethnic groups denied whiteness in historic times. They also questioned whether it was possible to accord, even temporarily, the privilege inherent in whiteness to a person of color. **Godheval** introduced the idea of “honorary neutrality,” a situation in which “race is temporarily not seen by the white person in question —” a highly unstable situation. But as MJ pointed out when I brought this exchange to her attention, neutrality is not an option: “...in our system there IS no ‘neutral.’ Belonging to a ‘race’ is obligatory, just as belonging to a ‘sex’ is, among other things. ‘Honorary’ is neither permanent nor everywhere; it may be temporary and local.”

Thejudge’s definition of an “Honorary White” began, “The object of the words, ‘When I look at you, I don’t see a black person, I see a human being.’” This accorded both with **Godheval’s** concept of neutrality and what MJ meant by the original term. Because whiteness is deemed this society’s norm, its bestowal is seen as the bestowal of unmarkedness, hence neutrality. As she says, “From the white person it is always believed to be a compliment. It is, of course, racist, profoundly, denying even the possibility of the ‘other’ having good qualities.”

POSEE

One commenter appeared disturbed by my new-minted acronyms. In the original version, my definition of a Person of Southern European Extraction lacked the last clause in the final sentence. **Posee Bitch** reminded us that “race is a cultural construct,” with whiteness seen as the norm; anyone denied whiteness by the dominant culture, she wrote, has been “othered” and classified as “not white.” “So, the fact that I am asked DAILY what my ethnicity is,”

she continued, demonstrated her classification as outside the white “norm.” Her experience was the converse of **Momsomniac’s**, and she seemed to view my definition of POSEE as alternately devaluing and describing it, with corresponding changes in the tone of her post: “... alas, I am according to you, a POSEE. I guess I should just throw out my t-shirt that says, ‘of questionable ethnicity’ and replace it with one that says, ‘POSEE’ and therefore answers the question before it’s asked, in the way a ‘black’ woman tells me is OK. Fuck my ancestors and how much closer their island was to Africa than to Europe. Fuck what I actually look like, ‘cause this post has identified me. Thank you soooo much. Really. Thanks; I hope this catches on: :)”

Bindicated identified herself as another POSEE and wrote that she could sympathize with “members of the black community who feel suspicious of POSEEs who don’t self-identify as white,” because in the U.S. “most of them have fought hard to be counted as ‘white’ and do not embrace any connection to Africa, and have benefitted societally from doing so.” After further discussion, I added the final sentence’s final clause describing the POSEE’s historic struggle for whiteness.

And So On....

The project of creating a glossary supportive of discussions of race and cultural appropriation began at WisCon 33. It hasn’t ended yet. This essay continues it. My original post on this subject appeared on the Angry Black Woman blog on June 12, 2009. Comments on these terms continued through July 25, 2009. They may resume at any time. Now, if you like.

Nisi Shawl’s collection *Filter House* won the 2008 Tiptree Award. She received two World Fantasy Award nominations in 2009, for *Filter House* and her novella “Good Boy.” Shawl is co-author of *Writing the Other* and a founding member of the Carl Brandon Society. She serves on the Board of Directors of the Clarion West Writers Workshop, which she attended in 1992.

My WisCon #2

Dear Nisi:

Subject: WisCon Experience

I am writing you to let you know how much I appreciate you inviting me to attend **WisCon**. I thoroughly enjoyed sharing the hotel suite and the entire experience with you. I realized that it has been a long time since just you and I have spent time together, and I consider that a wonderful gift. Let me tell you about how I experienced my first WisCon.

I loved it all. But it is difficult for me to say which part of the convention was the best. There was so much more going on than I ever could have guessed: workshops, panel discussions, vendors, entertainers, games, food et al. The sheer number, about 1,000 people who came from across the USA and other countries, was overwhelming. Everyone I met knew you, respected your work, and treated you as royalty. The beautiful crown you were given to wear during the convention was an additional honor. I, therefore, became "Mother of Princess Nisi," a role I soon adapted to for the remainder of the weekend.

But seriously, I gained the most insight from the panel discussions where writers discussed their creative processes and also read from their work. I had the most fun in the session where we made our own party hats for the celebration. Undoubtedly, the auction during the general session was the highlight of the events, except of course the Awards Banquet when you were recognized for your book of short stories, *Filter House*, and given the James Tiptree Jr. Award. I will never forget your acknowledgment of me for the role you felt I played in your success.

All this was pretty heady stuff for a first time attendee, but I think that this will just be the beginning. I hope to attend WisCon 34, 35, 36, and many more, with you.

Love,

Mom

June Cotton began her working life in 1950 at the age of fourteen when, an early graduate of Bloomingdale High School, she was hired by Michigan Bell Telephone as a long distance telephone operator. In 1967 she embarked on a career with the Michigan Employment Security Commission, retiring from the position of Deputy Director for 100 branch offices in 1995. While working she attended Western Michigan, Wayne State, and Michigan State Universities, also raising her three daughters (Gina, Julie, and Denise — aka Nisi) practically single-handed. In retirement she is a supporter of the Democratic Party and a frequent volunteer in political campaigns. June also volunteers as Chairperson of the NAACP's Kalamazoo branch of their Labor and Industry Committee. She lives in Kalamazoo, MI, with her youngest daughter, Gina, and three of her four grandchildren. This is her first publication.

Dear Mom:

Re: WisCon Experience

Thank you for writing me about your first WisCon experience. And thank you even more for having it—for attending WisCon 33 with me and being there when I received the Tiptree.

You were the first person I told about being one of this year's two Tiptree Award winners, of course. It was a secret! But I told you. You deserved to know. And, okay, I told a few others. Among them was Jim Frenkel, the Tor editor reading my YA manuscript "Verde," who said, "It doesn't get any better than this. The first award is always the high point." He had no way of knowing how true that was for me. Because he didn't know you, and he didn't know how wonderful you are and how much my writing owes to you, and he certainly didn't know (at the time I told him about the award, neither did I) that you were coming to the convention with me to be present at the ceremony.

You have always been a marvelous, magical person. I've seen pictures of you as a teenager: gawky and adorable, your face shining like the Rose that is your middle name. I remember hiding under your skirts in one of your rare housewifely moments in the kitchen on Park Street, when I was just a toddler. Mostly you were at work, of course. At fourteen you'd lied about your age and hired on as a switchboard operator at Michigan Bell, and you worked there most of my childhood. After the divorce you worked two full-time jobs and went to school. By the time you retired you ran the whole state's unemployment office.

When you weren't working or studying or taking care of me and Julie and Gina, you were picketing drugstores because of their racist hiring policies or going door-to-door to elect liberal politicians. All my friends in school envied me my strong, beautiful mother, a feminist and a forward-thinker who taught me how to look out for myself, then trusted me to use what I had learned. One piece of advice you gave me that I've felt grateful for on numerous occasions: "No white powders."

The extent of your influence on my writing may have come as a surprise to both of us. I was named for my father, and it's his avowed dream I've fulfilled by becoming a professional writer. As I found out last year, you yourself are afraid to write. Still you managed to inspire me. My first and firmest ideal of the feminine is you. You are my mirror, as I am yours. The power of our connection, the psychic link we've always shared, draws me again and again to examine how women relate to one another. That attraction, that conception, that theme — those things are what brought *Filter House* to the attention of the Tiptree Award Jury. In a letter you sent earlier this summer, you said that having read my interview at *Fantasy Magazine*, you finally understood that my stories were a gift to you. I hope this means you realize now the crucial part you play in my work. If you ever need that reinforced, just read my "Statement of Intent" — I've appended it to this letter to make sure you've got a copy.

Gina thought of having you attend WisCon with me. She knew it would be a treat for both of us, and that adding the rest of the household — her and her kids — would have been too much.

Road trip with June! I had to get in an argument with you to be allowed to spend the money the Tiptree Motherboard had allotted me for travel expenses. But that was just a little fight set in a big, broad swathe of wide-open roads, rolling prairies, and contented companionship. Then we were in Madison, and then we were in the lobby of the Concourse Hotel, and then we were in WisConLand. I got to introduce you to everyone there: "This is my mom!" I let them all know they were lucky to be meeting you.

Mom, I was so proud! Your first foray into fandom, but I knew you would take it by storm. A lifetime of code-switching paid off, and you seemed equally at ease with academics and artisans, luminaries and librarians, journalists and jewelers and award jurors, because you were. You carried your comfort with you, and you wore it the way people say I wore my tiara: naturally, as to the manner born.

My favorite parts of WisCon 33 involved you. The Motherboard put us up on one of the Concourse's luxury-type floors, with free finger foods and a bar where I was shocked and delighted to watch you fending off the advances of a man my age — oh, you didn't think I was

going to miss mentioning him, did you? No, I will never let you forget that you're sweet honey to the flies, because I hope to have the same reputation when I am 72 myself. And I *loved* that you loved the Tiptree auction, with its boobshake challenge and its chocolate vulvas, though you admitted ruefully you would never be able to explain it to anyone back home in Kalamazoo.

And then came the Tiptree Award Ceremony. We sat at the same table, enjoying scrumptious desserts. Before I knew it I was up on stage, receiving mighty mounds of swag: a pie, a shirt, a pin, a duck, a plaque, a song, a check for \$1000. I had to make a speech; I'd expected I'd have to all along, and knew it should be short from prior experience as part of the audience. I think I thanked everyone I needed to, making many references to my list of acknowledgements in the front of *Filter House*, which list I idiotically advised people to read even if they didn't buy the book. And then I asked you to stand. And you did.

I told the hundreds of people in that ballroom "If there is any sweetness in what I've done, here is the source." They clapped for me. They clapped for you. They clapped for us, for a mother and daughter sharing knowledge and sweetness and accomplishment and acclaim. For the infinite series of reflections that arise when two mirrors face one another, when two women see themselves in each other. For the way they could see in us their mothers, their daughters, their sisters, their wives, their darlings, united in mutual admiration and mutual respect. For the power of women loving each other and honoring that love.

You sat back down, and so did I, and life continued on. It keeps doing that.

Thank you for giving me this life, and that sweetness, and for being with me during one of life's sweetest moments so far.

Love,

Nisi

Statement of Intent

Mother, I want to make something so beautiful, it would break a mean man's heart.

You have already made this thing. You call it the world.

But Mother, I want to make a little world like the big world you have made. Because the big world is too big. It's so big, mean men don't see it for what it is, even though the world is all around them. It doesn't break their hearts, or if it does, somehow they get this idea into their heads that because the world has broken their little hearts, then they ought to be able to break the big world.

If I can make a beautiful little world, then I can shove it under their noses. I can put this little world on a doily, put the doily on a plate and say see? See? You *do* see, you *do*, don't you?

Perhaps they will try to eat my world. Perhaps the beauty will break their teeth instead of their hearts. How ridiculous that would be.

Well, my world must not be so large small minds can miss it; yet it must not be mistaken for something to be swallowed whole, with impunity. It must be just the right size for having adventures in. The boundaries should be visible, but not so close that one is constantly bumping into them by accident.

It must be dear and sweet, and costly to approach, and well worth that cost. And it must be known even by those who never approach this world as a place that they have missed to their everlasting and eternal regret. Even its absence must affect.

Those who shun my world from fear will grow stronger and braver because of this lack. At last they will be able to face my world, and enter freely. Those who ridicule it will doubt their own wit, and will be ready to reverse their harsh sarcasms at the slightest hint of another chance, a reprieve, a renewed invitation to my world.

But most will come most willingly, drawn home to a strange familiar landscape, to a secret no one has told them, yet one they know quite well.

And Mother, they will call my world for you.

Bird Day

Nisi Shawl

We sat in a circle on the side of the street. Some of us had lawn chairs, or folding chairs we'd brought out from our houses. Step-stools, even. We had a bunch of different kinds of seats we were sitting in.

This was the day to commune with birds. It was a beautiful, cool, early spring morning. The pavement smelled clean and damp.

I was wearing a warm, comfortable caftan, embroidered with silver and dark colors. There were a lot of interesting-looking birds flying around low and purposefully, looking for the person they had a message for. It wouldn't do any good to get someone else's message, or to worry too much whether or not one was ever coming. We relaxed and watched the birds, and talked with neighbors who stopped by our circle. There were a few empty chairs. Eventually, someone might sit in them.

Suddenly, a bird approached me. It was a sort of bird I'd never seen before, a large duck with a sheeny, blue back, the blue of a clear sky just before dawn. I'd never seen a bird like this before, but I knew it was mine. It hovered awkwardly in front of me and gripped my index fingers with its webbed feet, pulling me. My heart lifted and I stood up.

The duck flew backwards, its feet still wrapped around my fingers. I went with it. It let go and turned to fly forward, and I followed it out of the city.

I wasn't about to let it get away from me. This was definitely my bird.

I saw a Great Auk from the corner of my eye, huge, black-and-white, with a broad, brightly-colored bill. It flew down a side road, but I stayed focused on my bird.

The paved road had turned into well-graded brown dirt, dark and wet. I saw houses that people were building: open, pleasing

structures. I lost sight of my bird, but went on in the direction it had taken, out of the city. I stayed focused on it, even when I couldn't see it anymore.

I heard the soft beating of its wings and knew it flew on before me.

A stream joined me, running alongside the road. Daffodils joined the stream. Together, we left the houses behind.

I kept walking. I couldn't see my bird anywhere. I closed my eyes. The stream murmured to itself. The only beating I heard was my heart.

How could I catch up? Without wings, how could I fly?

I opened my eyes again and looked around. Where was I? Maybe this was where my bird had been bringing me. Maybe it had left me where I was supposed to be.

Tall trees with their leaves just beginning arched over the road. It was really more a wide path than a road, now. It moved among the tall trees slowly, one way, then another, quite casually. As if it knew where it was going, but felt no rush to get there.

This didn't seem like a place to stop at, an end.

Maybe my bird had left me because I would be able to figure out everything on my own from here.

I saw sky through the trees. I went at the path's pace till I came to their edge.

It was quite an edge. Only clouds beyond. Very beautiful clouds, with popcorn-colored crests and sunken rifts full of shadows like grey milk.

It was evening already. I could tell by the light. I had been following my bird all day. How had that happened? I had lost track of the time.

That didn't matter, though.

My bird did matter. And its message for me.

It had to be around here somewhere.

The clouds' lighter parts changed and became the color of the insides of unripe peaches. Against them rose black flecks, the flocks of birds flying away from us. Away once more, until next year.

Silence stirred the hairs on the nape of my neck. Silence and a small wind fanned them so they extended upward. And outward. Up and out. Above my head, my bird flew forward, over the edge.

I went with it.