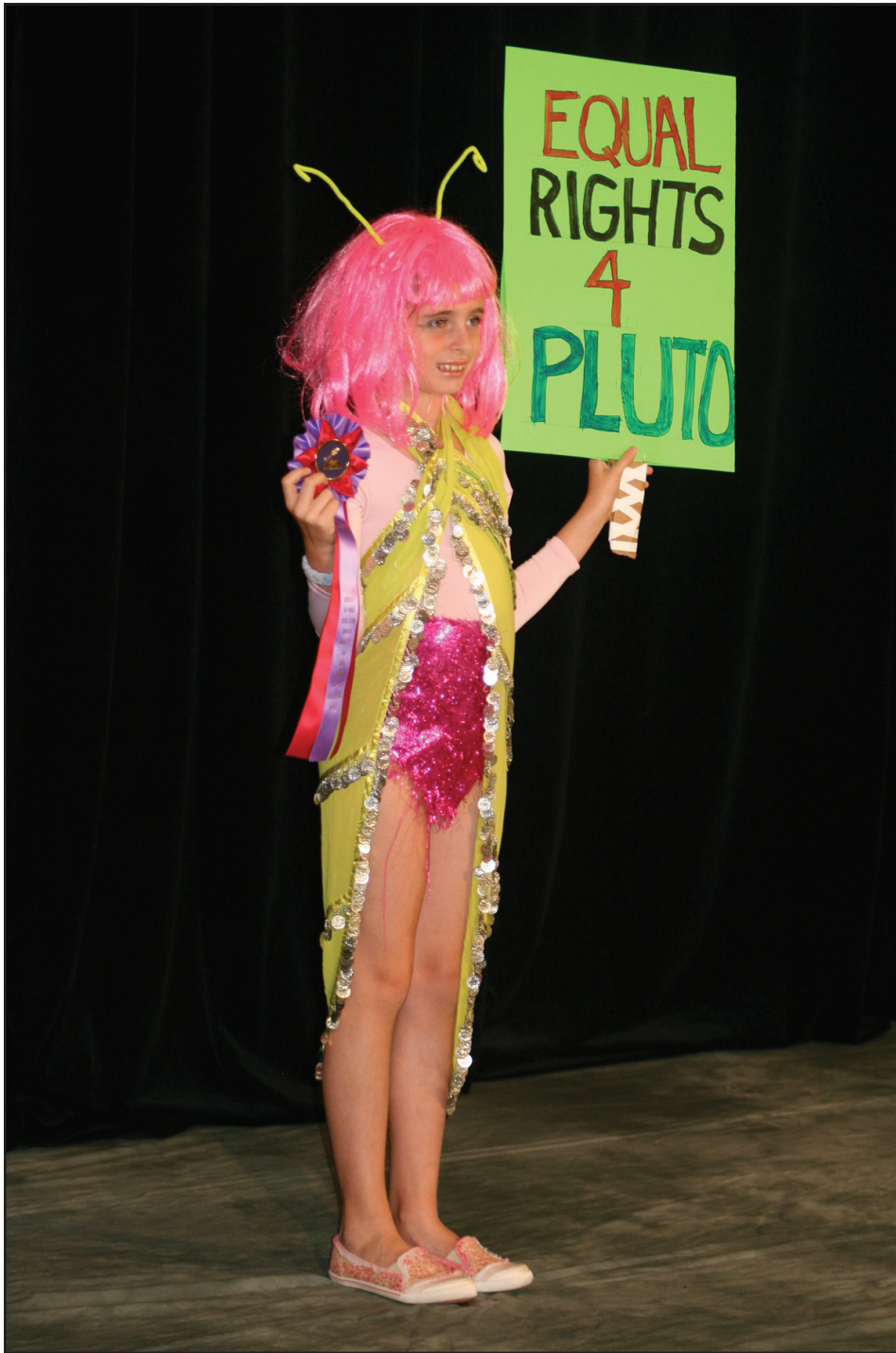


# Crashing the convention

## 66th World Science Fiction Convention hits Denver



A young fan advocates for Pluto at the 66th World Science Fiction Convention.

Story and photos by Jen Reeder

Most people with a pulse are passionate about something, whether it's gardening or sports or chocolate. One of my nephews is into dinosaurs, while another is obsessed with Legos. All three of my nieces love princesses. My husband is passionate about golf and fly-fishing. I'm partial to camping, red wine, "The Simpsons," travel, and as readers of "Reeder's Digest" know, books.

So my interest was peaked when I learned that the 66th World Science Fiction Convention was coming to Denver from Aug. 6-10. Though I'm a fan of "Star Wars," and was pretty obsessed with the Ender series by Orson Scott Card, I was less intrigued by the topic than the fact that the Hugo Awards would take place at the convention Saturday night. The Hugo is to science fiction – including books – as the Oscar is to Hollywood films, or the Grammy is to music. As a bookworm, this was very exciting.

It took some cajoling to convince my editor that I really needed to cover the convention, but I finally got the green light. I was so excited that I called a girlfriend, who was less impressed. "Don't forget to wear your Spock ears," she said.

As I was reading the press section of the convention's website, there was a note to members of the media to be considerate of conventioners, that they have been the subject of ridicule in the past. To me, this meant that there must be some reason for the ridicule. Would everyone be dressed as Martians or something?

But on the morning of Aug. 6, when I went to the Denver Convention Center to pick up my press credentials, I was slightly disappointed that the attendees looked like normal, well-dressed people – I even saw several men in suits. I'd hoped that at least I wouldn't feel self-conscious in my glasses for once, but the stereotypical four-eyed geek pre-conception flew out the window,

as well.

I found the room where I was supposed to pick up my pass, and got a giant laminated PRESS badge on a lanyard. "People are going to run away from me if I'm branded like this," I said to the lady who signed me in.

"Some of them might run after you," she replied.

I didn't know if she meant they'd run after me in a quest for publicity, or if they'd be angrily chasing me with pointy sticks. I decided not to press the issue.

Unfortunately, covering the Denvention, as it was called, was not my only assignment for the week, so I didn't make it back until Friday night (my husband was out of town – why not?). So I missed all kinds of seminars with interesting titles, like Aliens – Writing About What you Don't Know; Why Didn't Science Fiction Predict the Internet?; and Food as a Basis for World Building. My biggest disappointment was missing the Colorado beer panel. I wonder if they had free tastings.

When I first arrived at the Convention Center, I walked past a packed room listening to a panel. I asked a man leaving the discussion, "What's going on in there?"

"Time travel," he said in a bored tone.

I nodded as though this was to be expected.

I pressed on, trying to get the lay of the land. I wandered over to a bulletin board with all sorts of posts – the "Parties" board was particularly packed – with events ranging from a Mensa dinner to a Harry Potter parody. I was looking at the schedule and feeling overwhelmed, so I decided to grab a beer in the Fanzine Lounge, hoping to get the inside scoop from a veteran. Soon I was befriended by Pat, a conventioneer from Detroit who'd been coming to conventions since

1974. Jackpot.

Pat gave me the lowdown on all kinds of stuff. First and foremost, there were events happening not just at the Convention Center, but nearby at the Hyatt and Sheraton. In fact, the 24th floor of the Sheraton, which could only be accessed by an elevator with a key card for a room on that floor, was booked by conventioners.

"We take over the whole floor, but they don't seem to mind," she said.

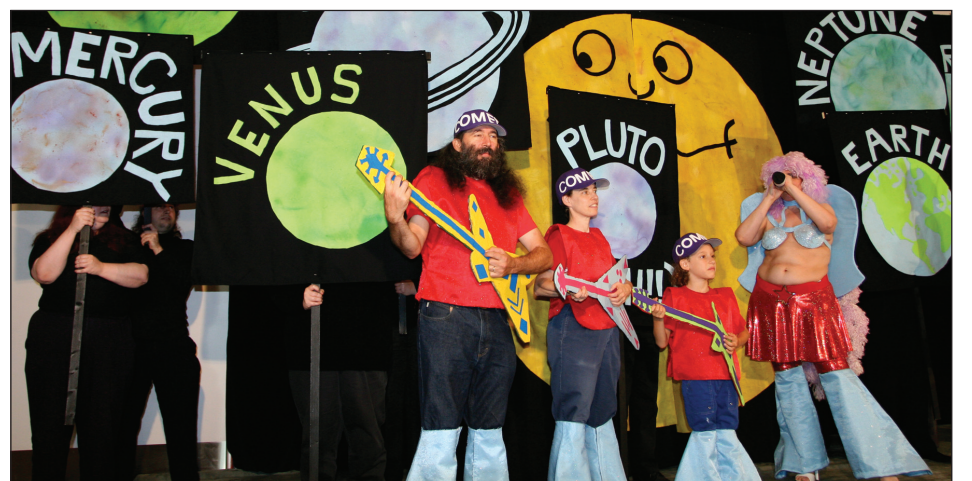
She told me that "filk" is like folk music, but rewritten with the singers' favorite fantasy or science-fiction characters, and that "bid parties" are for cities lobbying to be elected to host future conventions. Pat missed last year's convention in Japan, but she's been to Scotland twice for conventions.

Denver had hosted the convention twice before, in 1941 and 1981. She said that over the years, the convention events have gotten much tamer; there used to be wet T-shirt contests, and exotic dancers at the half-time portion of the Masquerade Ball.

She mentioned that the ball was happening in about 15 minutes, and that it was a costume contest. I quickly finished my drink and headed over to an area with elaborate lights set near a stage – the photographers' area. All of the chairs were filled, so I stood on the side near a woman who glanced at my tag and said, "That's the first actual press pass I've seen."

As it turned out, the seats were filled with amateur but ardent photographers. I've never had such technical discussions about photography in my life; they wanted to compare histograms, ask if I was shooting RAW, discuss the f-stop possibilities of various lenses. One man sidled

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Seventeen people work together for "Schoolhouse Rock Presents: A Reconsideration of the Astronomical Status of Dwarf Planet Pluto" at the Denvention.



# 66th World Science Fiction Convention

(Convention, from page 19)

up to me, saw that I use a Canon Rebel XT, and said, "A Canon? Well, I guess we can coexist."

"Do you have a Nikon?" I asked

"I do now, but I used to be known as 'Mr. Olympus,'" He replied.

After performing inside for the real audience, where cameras were not permitted, the costumed folks would come to our area and pose for pictures. Some were serious, but most were playful: an elderly woman with a sash that read Miss Global Warming portrayed "Sea Goddess Rising", and a "Star Trek" fan with the face of a Borg channeled Frank Sinatra in "Chairman of the Borg." As a fan of "Monty Python and the Holy Grail," I loved the people who portrayed the cartoon monster with many eyes chasing the Knights of the Round Table in "The Legendary Black Beast of Arrrghhh."

While waiting for performers to arrive, I'd chat with the other photographers. They told me about all of the fan newsletters reminding people of the 5-2-1 Rule – five hours of sleep, two meals and one shower a day. "The sad thing is they have to remind us of that," a man from California lamented. Later, he invited us to a post-Hugo party at the Sheraton, giving us his name to get past the bouncer, who would be dressed as a fire-breathing dragon.

The day was done, and I walked with the crowd toward the parking garage. A custodian push-

ing a trash can near a group of women dressed as witches said, "You all look beautiful. Enjoy Denver."

The reply she got: "You have a beautiful night."

I was starting to really like these people!

After a stint in the Carbon Valley Herald booth at the Dacono Centennial Aug. 9, I was back at the science fiction convention. I watched part of a bookbinding workshop, then hung out in the kids' room, where they were learning how to make liquid nitrogen ice cream (the science portion of science fiction is well-represented). Nearby, hundreds of people were in a large ballroom watching a screening of "Battlestar Galactica: Razor," one of the Hugo nominated films this year.

I popped into the art auction just and heard "Our next item is 'Violence in the Snow,' a signed dagger." It eventually went for \$50.

There were author signings in a separate hall called the Dealers' Room. On my way there, I stood on the escalator behind a guy dressed like the Grim Reaper. But instead of holding a scythe, there was some kind of a gaming control panel (they used to be joysticks – what do you call them now?) where the blade should be. He handed me a slip of paper marked, "Speed." What did it mean? His answer: "I am the Game Reaper."

Hoping that wouldn't slow me down, I walked briskly to the Dealers' Room, which was



Daren Boat and Marian O'Brien compete in the Masquerade as "The Legendary Black Beast of Arrrghhh."

a misnomer – the "room" was a giant hall crammed with exhibits as well as tons of booths where dealers were selling all things sci-fi: jewelry with planets and dragons, funky clothes and accessories like wings and witch hats, vintage comic books and a galaxy of science fiction books.

I walked past a woman dressed like Xena to a booth with cat magnets, where I met a Canadian publisher. She introduced me to one of their authors, an Australian who had written a novel entitled "Time Machines: Repaired While-U-Wait." Of course, I had to buy a copy.

There was a display of professional science fiction art, particularly related to movies. After I looked at a storyboard for "Blade 3," I laughed out loud when I saw the name Nikita Knatz – he's the father of my best friend from high school. I called her to tell her that his poster for the Ernest Borgnine film "The Devil's Rain" was on display, and she asked me to take a picture with my cell phone and send it to her.

I'm something of a Luddite, so I had to ask some 11-year-old girls for help. In exchange, they asked me if I'd seen any "Star Trek" Klingons, since they were on a treasure hunt. I hadn't, but I didn't want to disappoint them. I asked some nearby men, "Excuse me gentlemen, have you seen any Klingons?"

One griped, "Klingons are few and far between this year."

I told the girls what to look for, and raced off to a panel called Worth a Thousand Words: Authors Describe and Artists Sketch. The moderator had more than 100 people howling with laughter as he came up with preposterous scenarios, such as Heidi's grandfather (from the Swiss novel) being on a spaceship near the North Pole, where he needs to reprogram nanomachines by getting close enough to yodel to his wife. He was flanked by two artists sketching wildly on easels as he amused the crowd.

It was finally time for the main event: The Hugo Awards. I found

the press section in the Wells Fargo Theater, which was far from full. About 750 people grew quiet as the master of ceremonies, Wil McCarthy, welcomed everyone and said, "It is absurd to start with a mathematical impossibility: Good luck to all the nominees."

Hugos were given not just to professional writers, editors and filmmakers, but to fans, which was a nice touch. Many of the winners were not present to accept their awards, but NASA sent a representative to accept a Special Committee Award for 50 years of "making our dreams our reality."

This year's Hugo Award was designed by a Colorado artist, Lee Kuruganti. It had the trademark metal rocket, but Kuruganti enhanced the base with a mountain, constellation, and the words, "We're a mile closer to the stars tonight." After she unveiled her design, a fan behind me said, "That's one of the most impressive ones I've ever seen – it's gonna look great on somebody's shelf."

The night's big award – the Hugo for best novel – went to the author of the only nominated book I'd read. Michael Chabon won for "The Yiddish Policemen's Union," which imagines an alternate world in which Israel collapsed in 1948. He was yet another no show, but the audience didn't seem to mind. They laughed hard and easily throughout the ceremony, as they had at panels I'd observed.

It struck me that these science fiction lovers had completely demolished my preconceived notions – they weren't a bunch of weirdos who took themselves too seriously, but intelligent people who look forward to gathering to learn and celebrate their shared passion. I'm grateful to them for being so welcoming to me when I crashed their party. May they live long and prosper.

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Mark Cantrell portrays the Chairman of the Borg at the Denvention.