


Looking Glass

WINTER 2010



MECCA
and
TERRY GILLIAM
JONATHAN
AMES
ISLAMIC PUNK
CAMEL WRESTLING

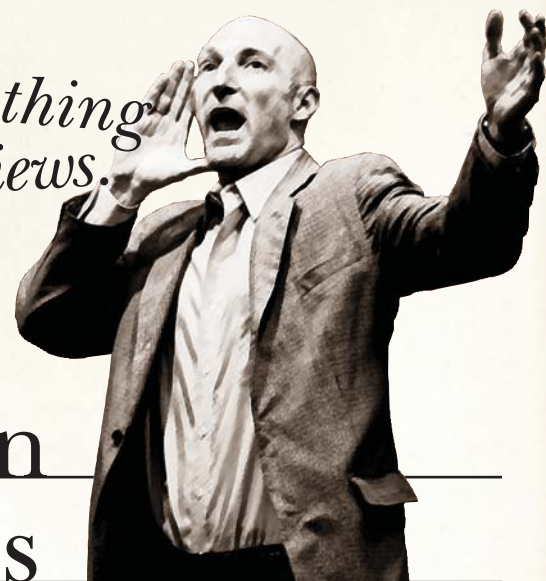
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*Don't believe anything
I've said in other interviews.*



by JoYin Shih (*Dominatrix Yin*)

The Interrogation of Jonathan Ames

I chose Jonathan Ames because I figured he was a pervert. He was my professor. From the menage of both radical and meaningfully mundane sexual exploits detailed in his collections of autobiographical works, *What's Not to Love?* and *I Love You More than You Know*, as an aspiring writer in graduate school, I ascertained that he would be an open reader of my own stories of fringe sexuality. The first day of class, I slid into a desk chair in the front row and waited expectantly for the show to begin, the Johnathan Ames show, the dry, comedic wit found on stage at New York City's Moth readings. Professor Ames sat behind a long, steel desk and looked over the students with an expressionless face – a lean man, almost gaunt, with pale eyes and a reddish brown, closely sheared beard. He wore a tweed cap and my father's square shouldered jacket with brown suede patches at the elbows, a muted gold University ring stamped close to his hard knuckles. His voice was controlled at low volume and sounded as if it were being emitted into the air through an old transistor radio. The author who bared it all in writing sat in front of us like a man hiding a cache of panties... He's a true pervert, I thought, the secret kind.

Now Jonathan Ames has a pseudo-indie-cult show on HBO, called "Bored to Death," starring Jason Schwartzman and that guy from "Cheers." He is about to launch a movie based on his novel, *The Extra Man*. He's leapt from homegrown, cabaret writer to big lights, big screen, and the boast of Brooklyn.

To be honest, I don't get the show. I will admit that I may be the wrong critic: I'm not an avid television viewer, I'm not a stoner, and I'm a Manhattanite who visits Brooklyn only a handful of times a year, with BAM tickets as my passport. I've sat through several episodes waiting to catch on, but the plots have never gripped as detective narratives should.

So I contacted my ex-professor and asked him for an

interview... conducted my way, in my S&M studio. An interrogation.

And that's how Jonathan Ames landed himself in this predicament: flogged and whipped, tied to a bondage chair with a black, leather hood laced over his head, deprived of sight, with a leather gag buckled firmly into his mouth. After a while, I peeled away the blindfold and unleashed his mouth. I had positioned Ames so that he was tied, facing a large mirror. He had to gaze on his own image, as I sat to the periphery. I wanted to steer the conversation so that it was as if he were talking to himself and it definitely resulted in stream-of-consciousness introspection that delved into dark and honest corners.

You denied being a pervert in the New York Times. I want to know why.

*Don't believe anything I may have said in another interview... you know what I mean? I don't know, these labels are so annoying. Whenever we have these celebrity scandals, we only realize how human everyone is. The only true perverts, if one assigns a negative connotation to the word, would be the people who are really hurtful to others in some dark, horrible way. Everyone else is just human and confused. so I'm no more perverted than the next person and probably less than others and more than some. Other people might be more vanilla than me and I've experienced things in my own way. I often think of Rutger Hauer in *Bladerunner*, in the scene when he's dying, sitting on the fire escape and he says to Harrison Ford, "The things I've seen." I think of my own erotic explorations – I feel the same way, there are things I've never told anyone... about but it's all trying to be more at peace. I have a belief that Oedipus was the first detective in literature. He tried to solve a mystery to find out who he was. I guess we all try to find out who we are... I don't know why we don't know... maybe we never know... maybe we really never know any body else really... It's a strange thing of... as you said, "getting into your skin." We walk around in these cases of skin so confused. But all the religions and spiritual practices*

seem to be about maybe being less confused and more at peace and one of the things that I've experienced in doing this with you now is that when I walk out these doors, I'll probably have the feeling I get after exercise or massage, a certain calm. It addresses the whole mind-body problem, communicating to the mind through the body. I feel like I am being honest, but I don't really believe anything anyone says... language is so distorting.

There is a multiplicity of Jonathan Ames characters out there (in fiction, non-fiction, comic book, and television.) I want to know which one is real.

I must seem like an enormous ego creating all these characters of me. Maybe it seems like all sorts of manifestations of ego, but I don't know if I see it that way. All of it feels like a fractured mirror. I don't see myself at all and in being in the hood, I feel familiar because I've tormented myself so much of my life, not more than anyone else really, trying to get through dark periods when you do things to yourself and you sort of hang on in darkness. So I could just hang on in that hood... looking at myself now...I don't really see myself.

What do you see?

I'm sort of bothered by my baldness, even after all these years... That's why I like to wear a hat. And in this lighting I feel particularly baaalld. I'm tied up in an interesting way with ropes criss crossing my body. I don't exercise but I feel like I look strong. I've boxed twice as an experimentation... I'm not really consistent with anything... writing I guess, but even then I don't feel very consistent. I don't write every day. I write in very concentrated spurts because I have to. My only consistency is trying to make things and be attentive to the people in my life, although I could be more attentive...and I don't really like how my head looks so I don't look at it too much, but I accept it. I know that other people are more kindly towards me than I am to myself. It doesn't really matter... it's ephemeral. It doesn't matter what one looks like.

On writing novels versus scripts:

Writing wise – whatever is being called upon me is what I'll do. So the show is the need right now. I would some day like to write a novel again but it's a tough economic world, it's so hard to make it as a writer. You can't help be drawn when you can write a script in a week and have this much financial security and it equals two years of writing a novel. You know you can't really survive just writing stories or writing long novels, but I change...I do whatever is called upon me in the moment and right now it's scripts and this blog. The production part of the process is really fun. It feels athletic to be on the set every day, wake early, be there, deal with actors and be patient. It's a different artistic endeavor than just being alone in your apartment, sitting all day and then writing for an hour, which is my usual writing process. I like it all though. When I was doing production every day, I did miss the act of writing. Now I get to write

again and try to write dialogue that is both human and interesting... I'm getting a second chance and maybe I'll find another chance and then I'll find another way to survive if I'm lucky.

On his upcoming movie:

Based on my novel, the *Extra Man* – I like to think of it as my best book, though I don't know why. It's the one I put the most effort into and the one in which I had to prove myself. I've often done well at things at the start and then sort of fall apart, so it's a huge psychological accomplishment to show that I could write a second novel. So I collaborated on a screen play with the directors and they filmed it. I was working on the t.v. set during the day, but the movie shot a lot at night and I loved watching Kevin Kline acting the part I had based on my life and some of his intonations were based on my audio book recording. Hopefully we can get it to Sundance and find a distributor and it'll be out there doing its thing.

On the writer as detective:

I think that writers are always the detective, which is why writers are drawn to writing detective stories. There's similar qualities in trying to observe people and understand motives and figure out what's going on. The detective narrative is so classic in its story form. There's a dilemma, there's a situation... there needs to be a solution. Being tied up makes me think of more desperate places one could be in life and I'm lucky to have lived always on the fringe of the American middle class even if I didn't have the money of the middle class, I've always had the privileges of the middle class.

On the surge of success into mass media:

The television show is definitely mass... a million viewers watch the show. I don't know how I got all this sudden attention. I guess I just hung on long enough, but it was really after I had given up caring for fame that it came to me. I was writing and performing for a long while without that much attention and then I was just doing it for fun... but who knows if the success will keep going. I may be punished as a failure in the end, perhaps that is my fate... or if my destiny is to be an artist who does really well for a long time until he dies. Or maybe my destiny is to do well and then stumble and learn humility. Maybe there's a middle path.

Around this time, Ames began to shiver and my nurturing side overrode my sadistic side, so I untied him and we continued our conversation in the kitchen. We talked about torture (he was addressing a PEN gathering on the topic of torture the next day), about relationships, and on subjects that people only seem to confess to a dominatrix, but completely off-the-record. And there is a credo in my profession that is higher than all else: Honor thy fellow pervert. So, out of respect to my former Professor, the rest of the secrets are sealed. 🙄

Editor's note: The above "interrogation" was conducted with the full understanding and consent of all participants.

No writers were harmed in the execution of the interview.

The Ultimate Booty Bag

Some people call it a toy chest. To others, it's a booty bag. And some people don't call it anything-- they just stuff it under their bed and hope their roommates don't find it when waking up on the floor after a bender. Whatever you call it, it's your tool kit for the manufacture of pleasure. And yes, you will be judged by its contents. What you've got in there is an exhibition of your predilections; a declaration of scintillation.

Once upon a time, a couple of condoms and a tube of KY in your bedside table was enough to make you a player. Times have changed; and if you're a decadent deviant who wouldn't be caught dead in last season's clothes or without the latest iPod tethered to your lobes, your sex life needs an upgrade. Fortunately for you, we've done all the dirty work, scouring dozens of sex shops, countless websites, and a few filthy alleys along the way to bring you a list of must-have gadgets, gizmos, and truly twisted treats that's sure to get you back on top (or bottom, if you prefer) of your game. So whatever you call that secret drawer, case, or if you're a true kink connoisseur, duffle bag, here's what needs to be in it... and, with any luck, in your next partner as well.

Safety First

With less than a millimeter of latex between you and your bedmate, you can do just about anything without fear of microbial reprisal. After all, the last thing you need from a night of debauchery is some horrible disease or screaming baby punishing you for the rest of your natural life. Forget that crusty, dried-up prophylactic that's been in your wallet since puberty. When it comes to rubbers, the world is your oyster. There are enough varieties, shapes, sizes, colors and even flavors to turn you into the Imelda Marcos of contraception.

Our pick this season? An obscure and often overlooked bumsen-barrier known in the UK as the Femmydom. Sure, it's not the most slightly thing in the world, but when it comes to maximizing sensation, these little baggies are just the trick for all your tricks. We've gone to the trouble of rigorously testing these two-ringed miracles and we're happy to report no matter which gender or orifice you fancy, they're fantastic. Because they stay put in the receiving partner, they provide spectacular, rough-riding friction that keeps the boys begging for it. A word the wise: keep plenty of lube handy and practice getting them in place. Otherwise you'll look like a kinked-out klutz trying to get the damn thing in.

Slick Tricks

Toss that hospital grade tube-of-lube and trade up. Innovation knows no bounds, and that includes the stuff that makes you slick. When it comes to ultimate sensation along with condom-compatibility we grab a tube of the silicon-based stuff. However, our favorite wet wonder this year is a special concoction designed to make things a little easier while you're making them a little sleazier. Let's say, for example, you're knocking on the back door but your partner's a little skittish about letting you in. Bottoms up!, we say, thanks to the mystical powers of anal(gesic) lubrication. There are plenty of brands out there (our favorite: Analease), but they're usually mislabeled as performance-enhancing lube. In other words: it numbs while it greases. A few fingers worth of this good goop in the receiving department and you'll be welcomed with open...arms. Just remember to keep it on the outside of your condom or you'll have to beat off with fistful of gravel for a week to feel anything.



by Alexander Horwitz

Good Vibrations



Let's say that one night you're tucked snugly in your bed. The lights are low, the music's on, and you're thumbing through the latest issue of *Looking Glass*. Without warning, hunger strikes and you'd give up sex for a week just for a snack. You could get out of bed and forage through the fridge. You could yell for your sex slave; but he's busy cleaning the toilet with his toothbrush a good 10 meters away. No need to interrupt your relaxation nor strain your voice. Just grab the wicked little remote under your pillow and send a few vibrations his way. Compliments of the long-range radio-controlled vibrating butt plug you bought him for his birthday. Available in a fearful array of sizes and operating distances, you'll never be in want again as long as you remember to change out his batteries every so often. Our personal best is a jet black 7-speed egg-shaped plug with a 14m range available from Jt's Stockroom. www.stockroom.com

Wham Bam Glam

When your perversity calls for panache, any old vibrator simply won't do. Style rules fashion, music, art...so why not sex? There's a hot new trend of luxurious grown-up toys out there and at its peak are sleek, stylish accoutrements that go bump in the night. Case in point: the delicious designers at JimmyJane who have elevated dildo making to new levels of art and science. Their vibrators are slim, shiny, and powerful. But most of all, they're chic. You can get them in every finish, from jewel tones to platinum. JimmyJane's collection even features a commemorative set of laser-etched designs with six earth-rattling mini vibes for a painfully fashionable \$2,000. While anything both sexy and glamorous is sure to catch our eye, the best part of these posh vibes deep, dark depths; built to be popped into the freezer or a warm bath before use; and an easily-replaced motor in case you wear the little bugger out. www.jimmyjane.com



Master Piece



How many times have you faced this age-old Saturday night quandary: a night out dancing or a night in with a strap-on? If you're anything like us, it's a weekly debate. When one of our oldest and most famous friends-- New York's legendary dominatrix Patsy Fabyulous-- asked herself the same question, she had an answer: Why not do both? So she phoned up her favorite artist, world-renowned sculptor Douglas Holtquist, and promptly commissioned the fiercest, most fabulous, most deviant strap-on we've ever seen. She calls it her disco cock: we call it haute kinkteur. Besides being a massive 23 cm long and 18 around, the exquisitely detailed anatomy of her member is covered from head to sack in a mosaic of mirrors. While we're not sure if she's ever actually used the thing; we wouldn't put it past her. When prête-à-porter S&M just isn't cutting it anymore, commission your very own and be the first in your hemisphere with the ultimate dance floor accessory.



NOBLE MAN



CITIZ. WIFE



COUNTRY MAN



TURKES WOMAN

Inside Lonely Planet: Iran

By Pat Yale

It was in Mashad that my Iranian meltdown happened.

Mashad, in the north-east of Iran, is the site of a shrine to Emam Reza, the eighth of the country's twelve most revered spiritual leaders. As such, it's a hugely popular pilgrimage destination, constantly heaving with visitors. I had come to Iran to update the Lonely Planet guidebook to the country, but my superiors in Melbourne, Australia, had opted to send me there in August when the temperature soared above 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Wherever I went in the country the law obliged me to wear a headscarf, and to dress as for a wintry day in New York, but, Mashad being so especially holy, here I was also expected to don a chador, the all-enveloping shroud worn by more traditional Iranian women, on top of already excessive layers of clothing. As the crowds milled around in the confined space of the complex, my capacity to stand the heat finally ran out. Sweat was cascading down my back and dripping off my forehead, and I could find no way to write my notes while simultaneously keeping my chador chastely closed around me.

In the Visitor Center they were showing a film about an incident that had occurred in Mashad in 1994. A bomb had exploded inside the shrine, killing 27 people, and volunteers were shown picking small pieces of flesh off the railings around the burial site. Strangely, the suspected perpetrator of this atrocity had been the same Remzi Yusuf who had attempted to blow up the World Trade Center for the first time in 1993. Not that the custodian of the Visitor Center had wanted me to watch the film. "We don't normally show it to non-Muslims," he said. "They think it's gross."

Iran was always going to be a tough call for a guidebook-writing assignment, and several other potential contributors had already turned down the offer before I agreed to take it on. To be honest, I too had had my reservations. It's hard enough revising any guidebook properly within the limited time scale permitted by publishing schedules, but this time I couldn't even be sure that I would be granted a visa for long enough to get around the parts of the country assigned to me. Most tourists were being given grudging 10-day transit visas. My solution was to sign up for a tour organized by an Iranian company so that it would have a vested interest in sorting out the paperwork for me.

"Take me to the Visitor Center," I instructed my bemused Iranian guide in his cool short-sleeved shirt and open-toed sandals. "I don't care how wonderful the museum is. I'm too hot and irritated to look at it."

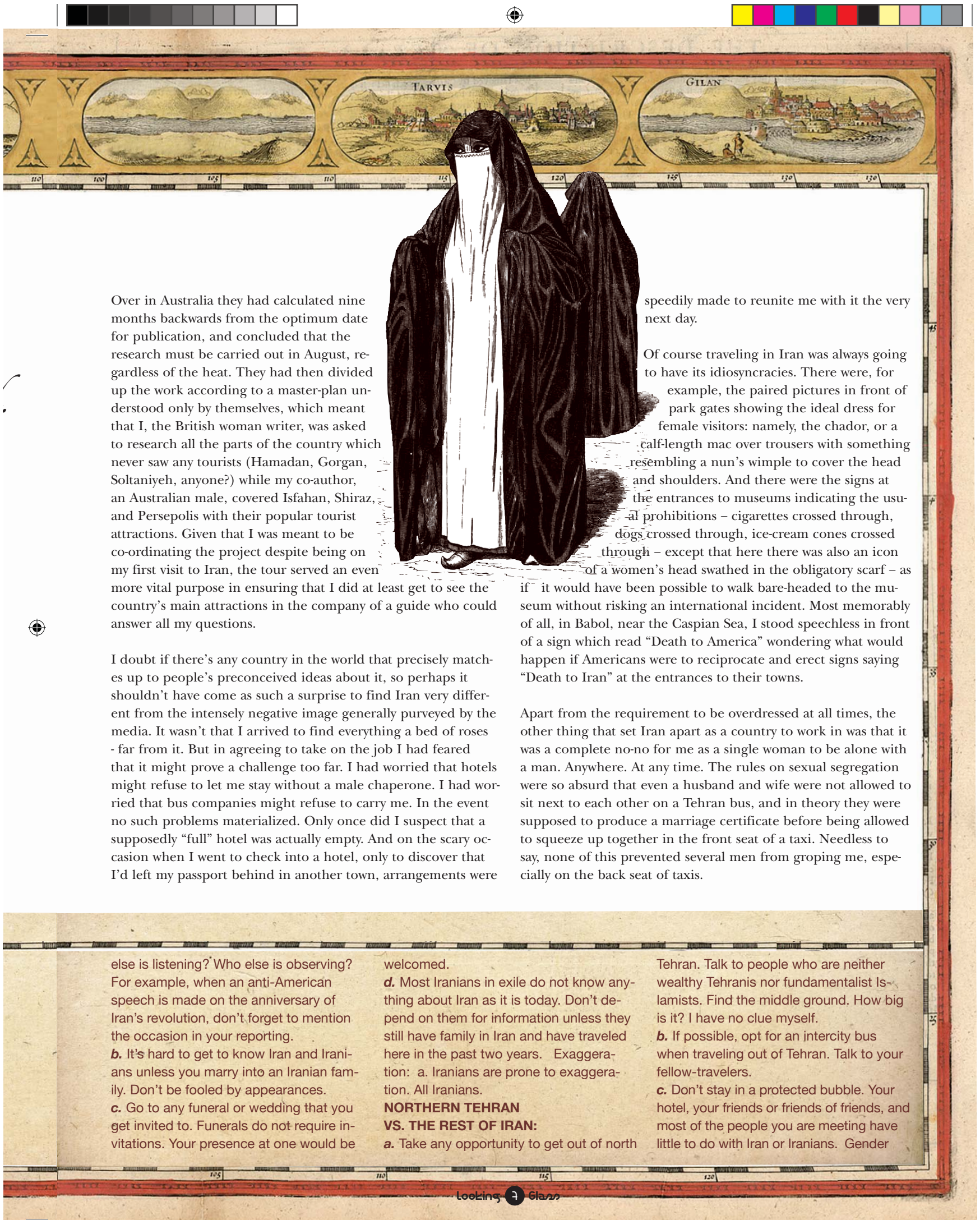
TIPS FOR JOURNALISTS VISITING IRAN

From Kamran and Tori's blog, viewfromiran.blogspot.com

TAROF:
Tarof is a complicated system of manners that can make it extremely difficult for a visiting journalist to get a straight answer.
a. Iranians would rather agree to do something than to admit that they cannot help you.
b. An initial "no" or "yes" should not be taken seriously. If permission is not granted initially, keep asking. It

pays to be persistent.
c. Most Iranians you meet will invite you to their homes. If you agree to go, please understand that your visit may cost them a lot of money. They might not really want you to come. It might be too expensive for them.
d. If an Iranian invites you to a party where alcohol is served, you might want to remember just how expensive that alcohol is. They may love to

see you, but resent the amount that you drink. Try to show some restraint. A case of beer costs 70,000 tuman. Cheap, brand name whiskey costs 50,000 tuman. This is not cheap even for a westerner. Imagine what it means to an Iranian.
OUTSIDE/INSIDE:
a. Take everything presented to you with a shaker of salt. Take context into consideration. Ask yourself, who



Over in Australia they had calculated nine months backwards from the optimum date for publication, and concluded that the research must be carried out in August, regardless of the heat. They had then divided up the work according to a master-plan understood only by themselves, which meant that I, the British woman writer, was asked to research all the parts of the country which never saw any tourists (Hamadan, Gorgan, Soltaniyeh, anyone?) while my co-author, an Australian male, covered Isfahan, Shiraz, and Persepolis with their popular tourist attractions. Given that I was meant to be co-ordinating the project despite being on my first visit to Iran, the tour served an even more vital purpose in ensuring that I did at least get to see the country's main attractions in the company of a guide who could answer all my questions.

I doubt if there's any country in the world that precisely matches up to people's preconceived ideas about it, so perhaps it shouldn't have come as such a surprise to find Iran very different from the intensely negative image generally purveyed by the media. It wasn't that I arrived to find everything a bed of roses - far from it. But in agreeing to take on the job I had feared that it might prove a challenge too far. I had worried that hotels might refuse to let me stay without a male chaperone. I had worried that bus companies might refuse to carry me. In the event no such problems materialized. Only once did I suspect that a supposedly "full" hotel was actually empty. And on the scary occasion when I went to check into a hotel, only to discover that I'd left my passport behind in another town, arrangements were



speedily made to reunite me with it the very next day.

Of course traveling in Iran was always going to have its idiosyncracies. There were, for example, the paired pictures in front of park gates showing the ideal dress for female visitors: namely, the chador, or a calf-length mac over trousers with something resembling a nun's wimple to cover the head and shoulders. And there were the signs at the entrances to museums indicating the usual prohibitions - cigarettes crossed through, dogs crossed through, ice-cream cones crossed through - except that here there was also an icon of a women's head swathed in the obligatory scarf - as if it would have been possible to walk bare-headed to the museum without risking an international incident. Most memorably of all, in Babol, near the Caspian Sea, I stood speechless in front of a sign which read "Death to America" wondering what would happen if Americans were to reciprocate and erect signs saying "Death to Iran" at the entrances to their towns.

Apart from the requirement to be overdressed at all times, the other thing that set Iran apart as a country to work in was that it was a complete no-no for me as a single woman to be alone with a man. Anywhere. At any time. The rules on sexual segregation were so absurd that even a husband and wife were not allowed to sit next to each other on a Tehran bus, and in theory they were supposed to produce a marriage certificate before being allowed to squeeze up together in the front seat of a taxi. Needless to say, none of this prevented several men from groping me, especially on the back seat of taxis.

else is listening? Who else is observing? For example, when an anti-American speech is made on the anniversary of Iran's revolution, don't forget to mention the occasion in your reporting.
b. It's hard to get to know Iran and Iranians unless you marry into an Iranian family. Don't be fooled by appearances.
c. Go to any funeral or wedding that you get invited to. Funerals do not require invitations. Your presence at one would be

welcomed.
d. Most Iranians in exile do not know anything about Iran as it is today. Don't depend on them for information unless they still have family in Iran and have traveled here in the past two years. Exaggeration: a. Iranians are prone to exaggeration. All Iranians.
NORTHERN TEHRAN VS. THE REST OF IRAN:
a. Take any opportunity to get out of north

Tehran. Talk to people who are neither wealthy Tehranis nor fundamentalist Islamists. Find the middle ground. How big is it? I have no clue myself.
b. If possible, opt for an intercity bus when traveling out of Tehran. Talk to your fellow-travelers.
c. Don't stay in a protected bubble. Your hotel, your friends or friends of friends, and most of the people you are meeting have little to do with Iran or Iranians. Gender



NOB. MANS WIFE



A CITIZEN




CONT. WOMAN



TURKES MAN

Why did it matter that I couldn't be alone with men? Well, despite the rather glamorous image of guidebook writing as a profession, the reality is that much of the work comes down to a relentless round of hotel visits. To jazz this up a bit I have always depended on what I could get out of conversations with local people – and very often that means with local men since they're the ones who tend to be able to speak English. In Iran, however, I was stuck. I could smoke a nargile (water-pipe) with my guide, but I couldn't sit down in a tea-house and chat with a man without them risking a visit from the Vice Squad. Only once did I stray from the straight and narrow, and that was in Ramsar on the Caspian Sea, a place where women had apparently paraded the streets in bikinis in the Shah's day. Now of course the beach was strictly segregated, but an English teacher begged me to bend the rules so that he could practise his conversational skills. It probably helped that his friend was one of the most gorgeous men I had ever laid eyes upon, his eyes black pools of promise that in Iran could lead nowhere but marriage. Together we drove up to a little wooden kiosk on the mountainside where we drank tea, smoked a nargile and exchanged notes on our different lifestyles. It was an evening of the sort of easy, memorable camaraderie that makes the ceaseless checking of hotels bearable.

For two months I explored an Iran where the orientalist fantasy of turquoise-domed mosques and exquisite water gardens rubbed shoulders with grim concrete-jungle architecture, untamed traffic and never-ending litter. Unable to read Farsi, I existed in a half-world where the graffiti on the walls could have been declaring love, exhorting a favored football team to greatness, or issuing further blood-curdling threats against America. And all the time I felt that mild uneasiness that must be familiar to young black men in Western cities: a wariness on stepping out into the streets lest someone take it into their head to stop them merely for being black, or, in my case, for being a female who was dressed within the letter of the law, but only just.

Crossing into Turkey at the end of my assignment, I couldn't wait to bin my hated headscarf. It had been an extraordinary two months in which I had felt strangely stripped of my own identity by the requirement to walk around in what felt like fancy dress. But when I came to write up my notes, my most abiding memory of Iran was of people literally running down the streets of Ardabil in the remote north-west to greet me, so excited were they to see a rare foreign female on her own. The warmth of that welcome would live on in my memory long after the details of the endless hotels had blurred into one. 

TIPS FOR JOURNALISTS VISITING IRAN From Kamran and Tori's blog, viewfromiran.blogspot.com

Roles: There is no one more privileged in Iran than a western woman. If you are a woman, don't pass up the opportunity to come here. For women: **a.** Do not be offended if a man does not shake your hand or look you in the eyes. Don't let it make you feel anything at all. **b.** Shake hands with anyone who offers his/her hand. (For men as well) **c.** Don't over dress. Iranian women expect you to push the boundaries of hijab regulations. **d.** Style is key. Don't let the Islamic dress code make you look unstylish. Practice wearing a scarf before you get here. Buy a fashionable jacket that covers your ass. Look good. **e.** Go to as many all-women events as you can. Try to talk to women

without any men around. **FOR MEN:** **a.** Shake hands with all of your female colleagues and all women who offer their hands. **b.** Don't be fooled by women who are demure in front of men. Tolerance: More than once, I have seen reporters refer to the supposed religious tolerance of reformist clerics. When a cleric expresses his tolerant views, please ask him these questions: **a.** Does this tolerance refer only to the "people of the book" or does it extend to the Bahai, Hindus, and Buddhists (to name just a few?) **b.** Does tolerance refer to Muslims who convert to other religions? **c.** What about atheists? **Hi-jab:** Many Iranian women struggle to

assert their own personality through their hijab. Style is a form of protest, but it is also a function of class. Wealthier women can afford to flaunt dress codes because they can afford to pay any fines that they might be saddled with as a result. Poorer women are more subtle because the fines would be impossible to pay and because their families commonly exert more pressure on them to conform to Islamic dress standards. Chadors are the big black capes that women wear over their heads. Manteaus are the jackets women wear. Please keep the two separate. Government employees are required to wear chadors. Not all of these women would choose this form of dress for themselves.

Our favorite book of the year has to be Michael Muhammad Knight's *Journey to the End of Islam*. An American-born white convert, Knight received his Muslim education in Pakistan, returned to the United States, and, feeling he had to say goodbye to his adoptive religion, wrote the iconoclastic underground manifesto *The Taqwacores* about a fictional Muslim punk movement in Buffalo. As Rabeya, one its protagonists, said: "There is a Cool Islam out there... you just have to find it," and this sentiment has driven his non-fiction efforts over the past decade.

In the new book, Knight gives us a spectacular journal of his pilgrimage to Mecca. This deliriously heterodox journey through New York City, Pakistan, Africa, and finally the Holy City shows us the Cool Islam. Most narratives of this kind are painfully earnest and dramatically inert, and the bookstores are already too full of apologists (whose mode of attention derives from Edward Said by way of David Lean; they obscure more than they reveal.) His book steers clear, too, of Vice magazine "fuckyouism"; Michael Knight is as much an explorer as a believer. We learn some of the Supreme Mathematics discovered in Harlem; we meet mystics, holy addicts, Saudi royalty, and even catch a glimpse of the immortal, extra-Orthodox figure from pagan Islam, Khibir. *Journey to the End of Islam* is one of the great works of gonzo anthropology.



When we talked with Knight, we first asked about the iconoclasm of his writing and how it affected his journey to Mecca, and he said:

The Five Percenters taught me about building and destroying. It's one thing to destroy negative things, but you also have to build positive things. The two go together. With the novel, I was destroying everything that hurt me in my previous religious life, but that gave me the space to start rebuilding for myself. I had characters blaspheming the Prophet, desecrating the Qur'an, and rejecting just about everything that I had ever believed about Islam... but six years later, I made the pilgrimage to Mecca. First destroy, then build.

Were you afraid to go to Mecca, given the nature of your work up to this point?

I wasn't afraid of being known in Saudi Arabia, but I did wonder what would happen if my notebooks fell into the wrong hands. I think that my religion matured in Mecca. Hajj is very hard. It's hard because you have all of these different people with their own cultures and values and you're all crowded together doing these shared rituals, and they're your brothers and sisters. It's not always a pleasant experience, but you have to be patient. That's where the real value of hajj comes in; you're supposed to be on your best behavior, the best possible version of yourself that you can be, and you're forced to deal with every jerk in the universe,

but then your reactions to them reveal that you're a jerk too. So you're constantly getting this mirror of yourself and you see what you're putting out into the world. Every time you get frustrated or raise your voice at someone, you're forced to take note of it.

I was in Mecca and Medina for two weeks before hajj, and by the time Arafat came around—when we spend a whole day reflecting on our sins—I recognized that I really am not a good person, and that I need to do better with the little time that I have. That's my religion now. It's not rituals or doctrines, it's not dietary restrictions or claiming that Islam has all the answers. I'm just trying to become human, and that's what Islam means for me.

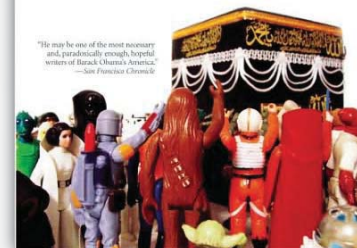
In your travels throughout the Muslim world, what are some varieties of Islam you think would surprise us in the West, with our CNN / Fox Islamic stereotypes?

Mainly the folk Islam, the shrines to Sufi saints where you can have music and dancing and people loving Allah without making it a stiff legalistic thing. They used to have shrines in Saudi Arabia, but the Wahhabs took it over and destroyed them all. But in Pakistan, Syria, and Ethiopia, the shrines have an important place in the spiritual lives of the communities. I love the idea that Islam wasn't just a big world religion manifesting in the same way everywhere, that it can become something local.

People have been creative with the Qur'an in scattered moments throughout history, like Fadlallah reading the Arabic words with Persian sounds to create new meanings, or Five Percenters breaking down "Allah" as "Arm Leg Arm Head," signifying their own divine

JOURNEY TO THE END OF ISLAM

Michael Muhammad Knight



selves. If people want to be creative with the Qur'an, I'm all for it, because it's supposed to be this infinite treasury of meaning and there's so much in it that we haven't read yet.

Did you feel, when you were writing *The Taqwacores*, like the book was being revealed to you?

*Not in the sense that it was coming from outside myself, no. But we do keep secrets from ourselves, and sometimes creative exercises will help bring out those secrets. I saw a lot of that coming out in *The Taqwacores*. Even now, with all of my books, I learn about myself from them. Writing a book freezes you in a certain time and place, so I can open *The Taqwacores* and see myself in Buffalo in 2002. I don't like everything that I see, the image of myself that I offer, but it's still personally valuable for me.*

Where do you hope Islam will be in 100 years?

Religion isn't separate from history; as much as it influences societies and world events, it is also directed by them. So even if I study religion all day long, I can't tell you where Islam is going, because I'm not an economist, political analyst, or scientist. I don't know if the kingdom of Saudi Arabia will exist in 100 years, or what could exist in its place.

That said, I'm hopeful for the future of Islam in America. We've already seen the attempt of a real gender-progressive Islam here, and it kind of fell flat, but the seeds have been planted. A century from now, there will be feminist mosques in the United States, with woman imams leading men and women together in prayer. It won't be universally accepted, but it will be normalized to the point that conservatives have to at least recognize its existence. 🙏



“I don’t think we can say we’re prisoners of language, but every language offers a new way of breaking up reality,” said professor Paul Frommer of USC.

That’s what science fiction is all about, and Frommer’s Na’vi language, used in the new James Cameron film, *Avatar*, is a work of art within a work of art. But will it be the next Klingon? **Looking Glass Magazine** interviews the professor.



How did you get into the business of imaginary languages?

In the summer of 2005, James Cameron’s people sent an email to me. At the time it was called “Project 80.” I jumped on it because I really wanted to do it. I got the call saying why don’t you come in for a talk, and I talked to Cameron for about 90 minutes and got the job.

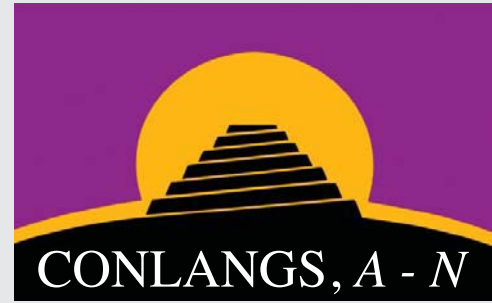
What was the biggest challenge in creating Na’vi?

There were a number of challenges, one was to make it interesting and challenging but also accessible. I was kind of thinking ahead – I would love it to take on Klingon status, that’s a language that’s really taken off. I wanted it to be something that I could actually speak, and perhaps master.

In terms of the sound system, I tried to find interesting and hopefully unique combinations of sounds. According to the story, human beings have in fact learned this language, so it can’t be so foreign that a human could never learn it.

Do you have a favorite constructed language?

Klingon, which is sort of the gold standard of alien languages. To my knowledge



A - Atlantean

Marc Okrand, who developed Klingon, not only created the Atlantean language for Disney’s Atlantis, but served as the model for its hero, Milo Thatch, voiced by Michael J. Fox. He wanted the language to resemble Indo-European, but with its own grammar.

make a name for ourselves and are not scattered over the face of the entire land.

C - Ceqli

Mandarin-influenced Ceqli is Rex May’s auxlang (auxiliary language, intended to serve as a secondary language for people with differing primary languages.)

Go bu fo biru! Go tro grobeli. Pani kai pisi biq bon.

I don’t need beer! I’m too fat. Water with a little ice would be good.

D - Dritok

is a language of human-sized chipmunk people. It consists mainly of clicks and respirations. Along with vocalizations, the language employs an inventory of gestures which provide syntax.

E - Esperanto -

As in “oh puh-lease,” Esperanto’s admirable mission of a universal human tongue seems to go against the grain of language development itself: tribes and nations strive, with language, for uniqueness from each other, not unification.

Developed by L. L. Zamenhof in 1887, it is primarily constructed of Romance languages, with a Slavic phonemic inventory, and is the most widely used constructed language.

F - Feorran -

A language of the Tolte people of Antarctica, this (re?)constructed language, developed / re-discovered by Brad Coon, is interesting for the light it casts of the theology of these under-researched people. Their one god, Gauku, lives in a disc of ice at the

In the 29-letter boustrophedon alphabet, the direction of letters changes with each line, first from right to left, then from left to right, and so on. Okrand said: “It’s a back-and-forth movement like water, so that worked.”

Atlantis was set in the mother of all cultures, the Ur-Nation of Atlantis, and its linguist-hero had discovered the language ancestral to Indo-European and all its troubling off-shoot cousins, making the story, in theory, relevant to everyone. Of course, the film appealed to no one, so you’ve probably never heard Atlantean spoken. If you want a head start, *tig* means “Yes” and *kwam* means “No,” while “Hello” is *supak*.

B - Brithenig

Brithenig is an alternate history language: it’s what we’d have if Latin had displaced Old Celtic in Britain, and had then undergone the P-Celtic (Welsh) sound changes, whence our English. It is designed by Andrew Smith.

Gwath, gwan a eddiffigar yn giwdad per nu, cun yn tyr ke dang a llo chel, ke nu ffagen yn nŏn per nu e sun ysparied rhen syrs feig lla der inteir.

Come, let us build a city for ourselves, with a tower that touches the heavens, that we



center of the world, and is malevolent, having created the animals of the world with just enough heat to prolong their painful survival in his frozen waste of creation. The sun, Meorre, and the moon, Lolkin, roam the world as his secret police, making sure humans and animals would never cease to praise him.

"As *Old Hyksos* is used by mages, the lexicon is graded. There are fifteen degrees, ranging from the third pupil who knows a handful of words to the first archmage who knows all and can build permanent pentangles, the *Old Hyksos* equivalent of poetry. The appropriate level is indicated in the - alphabetic - lexicon."

G - General Semantics -

Alfred Korzybski's work culminated in the founding of a discipline that he called general semantics. As Korzybski explicitly said, GS should not be confused with semantics, a different subject. The basic principles of general semantics, which include "time-binding," are outlined in *Science and Sanity*, published in 1933. Many fanciful sci-fi applications of linguistics derive from the inspired madness of this linguist. He was opposed, on almost theological grounds, to any use of the verb "to be," as it encouraged thinking abstractly about matters which were not abstract. It should not be used, he argued, to equate people with states of being, i. e. "Joe is a fool."

H - Hyksos (Old Hyksos)

A dragon-tongue, derived from the Earthsea books of Ursula K. LeGuin. Boudwejin Rempt, who expanded it conceptually, explains:

"*Old Hyksos* is the native language of the dragon population of Lamutria, Heraldinia and the Mist Countries. It is also the language used by mages to build their spells. The language has a small vocabulary, a mere twenty-four words. There are three suffixes that change the meaning of those twenty-four words. In addition, negation of a word often produces a distinct meaning. For instance, while *cepra* means 'animal', *ne cepra* means 'plant.'

I - Ilish -

The Il, a species of deep-sea-dwelling, omniverous electric eel, communicates in complex pronouns distinguishing between the speaker's attitude (helpful, neutral, or threatening,) location, and context. The tongue is pronounced by delivering electric shocks. They do count, in base three, though numbers are always adjectives or adverbs. (This conlang was developed by Jeffrey Henning.)

J - Jaibi.

A standard and forgettable, out-of-the-box conlang, which is actually the ideal among enthusiasts. This gimmick free language by Christopher Bates is free from consonant clusters, seeks only to describe a fictional tribe, and has no pretensions to eventual universality.

K - Klingon,

Marc Okrand's phenomenally popular battle-tongue of the (originally) antagonistic Star Trek alien race.

L - Lingua Ignota,

the "Unknown Language" of the mystic abbess Hildegard of Bingen. It is held by many to be the first constructed language. Her purpose in creating it is unknown.

M - Moon Speak -

Refers to the conlang developed in 1638, but is also an obsolete abusive epithet for any language that does not use standard European characters.

N - Na'vi



The Atlantean language, which was designed to look like the origin of all languages.

its the best developed. It was put together by a linguist who really knew what he was doing, it's a complex and interesting language. And very complex, and hard to learn.

Was there something in Klingon that you really admired, and tried to top?

It was more about trying to go in a different direction.

The assumption was that you're dealing with humanoids who have a particular physiology, particularly with vocal apparatus. Jim Cameron did not want to do any electronic manipulation with voices so it had to be something that people could reproduce. If you let your imagination run wild and imagine creatures with different vocal apparatus, there are lots of possibilities. It could be that there are four or more different sound producing mechanisms in the same creature, which means you could have sounds produced simultaneously, maybe of different pitches with different meanings; so we cant produce two different sounds at the asme time, but what if there were a creature who could produce three different sounds at the same time, like an orchestra?

With a species capable of orchestral pronunciation, do you think their civilization would be different than ours?

You're really asking "Is there a connection between the sturcture of a language and the culture of a people." Typically linguists have not been able to find those connections. It's pretty well-recognized that knowing a language's grammatical system doesn't tell you about the culture. There are simple neolithic cultures that have extra-ordinarily complex languages, and some of the most complex lngs on earth are spoken by non-technological people. There's no real connection between language and society. Where there is a connection is the kinds of words people have for things – if a concept is important to a civilization, then they'll have a simple, efficient way to refer to that concept. The vocabulary reflects the culture, but the structure of the language doesnt.

To Muslims the Arabic language is thought to exist outside of time, because before there was anything at all on earth, there was the Qur'an in Heaven. And of course they have that present tens... is there a connection between verb tenses and the tendency to think about time in that way?

There's something called the Sapir Wharf hypothesis, which says that we're prisoners of our language. So if our language does certain things with time or doesn't do certain things with time, that affects our perception of reality. That hypothesis was very intriguing to people when it was first produced, but I'd say that most linguists today don't subscribe to that. I think that people are a lot more similar in terms of the way they see the world than you might suspect.

In Islam there's no question that Arabic has a unique status. Orthodox Jews have a similar feeling about Hebrew and to a certain extent Aramaic, that these languages are somehow above others. God spoke to us in that language, therefore that language has a status above all others. Christians, to my knwoeldge, don't have that feeling, that the original languages have that theological aspect to them.

Is there a Holy Grail in linguistics?

There's the idea that knowing a language gives you the key to a culture or the key to the person's mind, in a way. And there's the idea that there's a universal underlying structure to all language, which is what linguists are trying to pursue. That underlying structure is our Holy Grail. 🙄

See our next issue for sections O-Z...



SAID THE SCORPION MAN TO HIS WIFE

New fiction by Alia Bishara

~ 1 ~

In the darkness Abraham roused Isaac and the boy followed his father past vain protesting Sarah to the top of the mountain where Abraham tied him to a bundle of sticks and cut his throat with the edge of a dull knife. The child's coughed screams were muffled, and Abraham despaired, but the gift of horror overwhelmed his senses (this has been called the Doctrine of the Gift of Horror) and Abraham obeyed God and stabbed the inside of Isaac's throat to stop the noise. He lit the holocaust and sat against the brush at the top of Mt. Moriah and waited. As the sun rose, Abraham grew accustomed to the smell of his son's burning. He looked up at it from time to time, hoping not to recognize the body but it still looked like his child. Some time after sunrise, he heard the bleating of a ram. He looked. The ram had caught its horns in the thicket. Abraham freed the ram's horns and the ram ran off. Then Abraham sat in silence for a long time.

~ 2 ~

Near the beginning of the world, Rahab, Prince of the Sea saw a light in the sky. He looked to his brother, the Great Serpent, who rested on scaled haunches near the beach. From a nearby dune, fire burned without smoke, and from it stared a shapeless thing.

The light from the sky fell into the sea, which rose from the impact and crashed into the forests and deserts with tremendous force, though Rahab, an enormous being, stood his ground against it until another figure, his equal in size, came trudging through the waves. That other was Yahweh, and as he approached Rahab, Leviathan came rushing from the pitch black deep to bite him. Leviathan's jaws

snapped at Yahweh, as the sea dragon wanted to protect his master Rahab. But he only caught Yahweh's arm. Yahweh lifted his arm and Leviathan's great body, as long as a country, whipped at the sun. In the same moment, Yahweh kicked Rahab, Prince of the Sea, in the head. The Prince's skull was crushed and he died. Rahab fell and the waters rose again even more tremendously than before.

Yahweh did not hunt and kill Leviathan, but let him slither back into the black and seamless ocean. The sun set, and Yahweh reposed on the shore, glancing but once at the enormous red and violet bird whose wings shimmered like jewels and who sat in the branches of a great tree.

Once in a day (which is about a thousand human years) Yahweh will drop into the waters to gambol with Leviathan, for few creatures remind the Mountain God of those first days, when everything was grandeur.

~ 3 ~

Alia sat alone in her home, the empty pill bottle in her hand. She remembered, as she slipped into what she hoped would be her final sleep, that her husband had never beat her with anything larger than a toothbrush, and that she had failed to avoid telephones, pornography, or narcotics. Indulgence in just one of these sins had been enough to lay her low: the narcotics and pornography had belonged to her son, whom she had betrayed. She had told her husband what she'd found in his room. For what happened to her son after that, she would never forgive herself, though it was not her judgement, nor her place to question anything. So first she felt her body go to sleep, and then she demanded of her

muscles to jolt her awake but they didn't. All she could feel was the impossible strain of her will against her body, which was as heavy as solid marble.

"Allah, I was wrong," she tried to pray, but her brain was too thick, it was only meat, and rotting meat at that.

~ 4 ~

Iblis the Genie had seen Rahab fall, at a great distance, and he came to watch the sleeping God on the banks of the Tehom.

In a garden some way off, which had been Rahab's, Yahweh made from earth one human, Adam. The "man" was much smaller than Yahweh, and from the pavillions in the sky there came a horde of angels. Iblis the Genie did not understand what the angels were and that they were of Yahweh, and thought to himself, "They will destroy us all, Yahweh too." But they didn't. Rather they fell in front of the tiny man and praised him. Iblis was confused. Then he saw something in the sky.

Yahweh said, "I am king of all the world, and all must bow to this I have made, called Adam."

Iblis nodded to Yahweh and said "You made yourself King of the Earth but seem to have neglected the sky."

Iblis pointed to the sky, where a great chariot made of wheels within wheels hovered. Yahweh could squintingly perceive more wheels within it, and eyes burned onto the metal of which it was made.

~ 5 ~

Alia chewed and chewed on something, and felt grateful to have food even if she





was encased in blackness and unable to move. There was a disgust inside her kicking against her stomach, and she began to remember. She could hear her husband screaming at her son and her son screaming back at him, but she shut this memory out of her and kept gnawing at her food, whatever it was, in her long black box.

Centuries passed in this manner. Sometimes a year was like an hour, sometimes an hour was like a year, but one night the lid from her coffin was removed and an angel stood before her. She rose and faced the angel, who demanded she give account of her sins. She opened her mouth to plead her case, but she had eaten out her own tongue. Blood poured onto her chest. The angel screamed and turned away, disgusted. Alia ran.

~ 6 ~

Yahweh rose into the air to see the great machine while Iblis watched from the ground. Behind Iblis, other Djinn had gathered. Some were made of desert air, and some were made of smokeless fire.

Then the angels fell on Earth in great waves and slaughtered the Djinn. Iblis and 665 others survived. Yahweh lept into the air to slam his fist into the great machine, which was the Motherplane, but lightning shot from it and Yahweh's wits were altered.

He fell to Earth unconscious, and night fell. The Djinns kept watch over his body.

~ 7 ~

At night, all through the world in all the ages of the Universe, things were drawn together, planets to suns and proteins cleaved to one another, moss grew on dead human skin and on the barks of trees, bellies grew big with children, some miscarried in puddles of blood which then bore human faces, some were born screaming and grew into handsome human creatures, and their stories were many but nothing other than that which was just described has ever occurred anywhere in the Universe.

~ 8 ~

The next day, over the unconscious body of Yahweh, the Ziz, a great bird with red

and violet wings like jewels, called a conference of birds. He spoke to them, and at his words many of them rose into the air to investigate the discs within discs that whirled in the sky. Some accepted the machine in the sky as God, and some pecked at it and died. The Ziz finally rose to confront it himself. Remember, the machine was called The Motherplane. He hated the machine and squaked that it was this machine which had brought Yahweh into the world and brought ruin to the happy Earth, but when he saw the plane's turning wheels within wheels he saw through the ages of time and he truly understood the Great Disaster from which the machine had come, and swooped down to destroy the sleeping Yahweh.

Yahweh was weak and the King of Birds would have sunk its talons into his throat and ripped it out, but for Ishtar, who had travelled there, to where the Tehom met the Jordan, and lifted her fist against the Ziz. They battled for nine hours and in the night the grand, exhausted bird took flight again to seek another Earth, which he never found.

Ishtar knelt by Yahweh, and from a phial she had about her she let healing water fall into his mouth. She left before he woke, and some believe she was the one known as Al-Lat (The Goddess.)

Though he did not remember her, she left a stain upon his mind, and when he created Adam's helpmeet Eve, Yahweh marveled at the "first woman," and felt, for the first time, as though he were beyond even his own understanding.

~ 9 ~

Alia, now dead, had wandered deep into the afterworld. The place was cold and very dim. Soon she came to a stone gate, and knew it was the gate whence the Sun rolled out in the morning. Soon, she knew, the Sun would come barreling through. She felt if there was any hope, it lay in the great cities she beheld in her son's forbidden films, the science fiction cities of lightning, crime, and sin whose unhappy prisoners he envied. Perhaps her son was there, and that place, she knew, was through the gate.

Now at the dark sungate, two great scorpions guarded the doorway, and she was afraid. They scuttled slowly toward her, and their black armor glistened. The waves of terror which choked her blood in her heart were as close to pleasure as she was ever likely to feel again, she knew, and in a way she could not resist it and kept her eyes wide open. She could not bear to blink, as in that instant she imagined their great tails whipping across her. When she did blink, no sooner did her eyes open again than the tail of a scorpion touched her wounded mouth and healed her tongue so she could speak.

Without knowing why, she said "I am here to outrun the sun. It will be coming soon, and I must find my new home in the ruined city."

The scorpion man looked to his wife and said, "She thinks the sun still comes through this gate. That was long ago, Alia."

Then the scorpion woman said, "There is only darkness here. There is no light at all. And you cannot pass by us, and if you try, we will cut you to pieces but you will not die, only lay painfully under our feet forever."

Alia closed her eyes and murmured an ancient spell. She didn't know how she remembered such a spell. Then the scorpion man and his wife were astonished to hear the great roar of the sun coming near the tunnel, and it was they who were afraid. Alia braced herself and ran, until she felt the muscles in her legs splitting open, whereupon she closed her eyes and ran harder.

The scorpion man and his wife dashed after her. One ran along the ceiling, one chased her on the ground, but the sun came through the tunnel just as she threw herself beneath it, and she was alive and at the base of the city she recognized from her son's forbidden books and films.

~ 10 ~

In the city, where the people moved in silence, isolation, and pain, the brave woman traveller (whose legs had grown long, and whose face had tightened

around her skull in youth, and whose hair had thickened) walked into a shining edifice and took the elevator to the top floor. When she arrived, she saw a man sitting at a desk, and could barely perceive his features. He stared at her.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked.

A fire raged across this city, but did not burn it away or give off smoke. She saw this in the window behind the stranger’s head. Alia wondered if she could feel pain. She knew if she felt pain that her body was not dead. She cocked her head to one side. Even as the stranger stared at her, he wrote with his other hand, and in the great window behind him where fire danced over a city without burning it away, she saw what she supposed was the matter of his writing.

“Ishtar, together, we...” he began. “But I need you to help me. Be my helpmeet, my sorceress consort, and we will rewrite all of time, and make a world where there is no Allah to confound the sweet and happy dreams of man. No more violence between families in the name of God, for God will not exist, nor will humankind ever imagine him.” He wrote on a page without looking down at it. He looked only at her. In the glass behind him she could see what he was writing. Strange stories about the beginning of time. She saw herself in some of them. She looked back at him. Then his smile curled and he said, “Say my name.” She looked up from him again to the pane behind his head.

In the glass now she saw her grown son, married, and she saw herself and her husband smiling and laughing in celebration of their new family. Then she saw him disappear and saw her husband storm out in a rage and she heard screaming coming from behind her home and felt as though her worst fears had been exceeded, and something bad was happening that no eternity of time could ever erase from her. Then her senses became confused. She shut her eyes, opened them again. “This is the source of all lies,” she thought to herself.

“If I am Ishtar,” she began, “I have the

power to summon the sun and moon. I don’t have this power.”

“You can summon the moon and bring on a Night of Power of our own. I can help to write a new Qur’an, better than the first. And I will stay with you here where it is neither East nor West, for God has wronged me, too. You are either this Goddess or a damned soul, please let me know which.”

She knew that this stranger would never let her wake from this bad dream... but she wondered if there was some hope. If perhaps the bottle of pills she’d swallowed had sent her to a dismal dream, and not yet into death. She tried to throw herself from her chair into the window, but she could not move. She felt pain would wake her from this if only she could feel it.

~ 11 ~

Adam and Eve had children: Seth, Abel, Cain. Cain slew Abel, and was cursed to wander forevermore. Cain had a son named Enoch, this was long into the history of men, who by this time had built many cities.

Enoch’s house was a house of wisdom. Though Cain was cursed, his vast mind wrought the system of weights and measures, which ended man’s simplicity and were a blight to the world. Enoch surpassed him in knowledge. The house of Enoch created the Motherplane, and discovered the secret source of the river Tehom (which is actually the river of time) which not even Yahweh had ever found. Enoch built a great machine that could travel through time. He made a plan to take it to the very dawn of the world.

How did he find the source of the Tehom? The source of the Tehom is the moon. At the end of the world, it is the moon whose tidal forces will tear the world apart.

~ 12 ~

Alia looked into the stranger’s face and said, “I do not believe you are the great Iblis, for he was a Prince among Djinn and could summon fire to do his bidding. You are nothing, a worm, not even an idol. You are not fit to lick the shit from the rectum

of the devil!”

Then the stranger laughed and fire broke through the great window behind him and licked across her face, scorching her terribly. She knew she was alive because she felt pain.

In the throes of her agony she praised Allah, she felt her mortal body in her kitchen start awake, and in that brief, involuntary fit, she praised Allah again. She felt herself waking more completely now, but she was still, too, with the stranger in the city. In the window, she saw the moon hove so close its tidal forces were tearing the false world apart.

Then the moon shook for an instant, and with the sound of tearing, as a page makes being torn out of a book, it ripped in half.

13. Alia’s body jerked forward. She was in her own house now, in her kitchen. Her mind was heavy with the drugs, but she felt strength coming to her from beyond. With great effort she forced her hand into her throat and vomited. Then she put her face near the stink of her own vomit and threw up again, then drank water and put her face back into her sick so that the smell caused her to bring up even more. Soon she felt sure the poison was out of her body, and she fell into prayer.

She went into the back of her house and took a shovel and dug. She kept digging, wiping sweat from her brow and ignoring the pain in her hands as they blistered, and the blisters broke, or she bled. She screamed her son’s name at the ground where she dug. She found the coffin in which her son was laid, and she prayed for strength to lift it. Lift it she did. And she opened it. Inside the coffin it stank of shit and urine, but her son blinked against the light. As it was midday, he must have been under the ground for one night and the next morning.

She clutched his body, which was badly bruised, to her, and she thanked God.

But what would her husband say when he got home? She did not care. 🙄



KHAT

DRUGBOX



by Anonymous

Catha edulis, called Khat, is a flowering shrub native to northeast Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. It is traditionally ground into paste, or it just gets chewed in all its leafy goodness. If you're stateside, I recommend brewing it into a tea. It is frequently associated with North African Islam, and particularly Harar, Ethiopia, which proclaims itself Islam's 4th holiest city.

Active ingredient: Cathonine, which offers effects resembling those of mescaline--it's a combination of speed and a very mild LSD with no visual disruptions. After about two days, though, cathonine degrades to a weaker substance, cathine, which explains the preference for fresh leaves. It's a cerebral experience.

How long's the trip? 24 hours or more, if you take it on a more or less empty stomach. Khat is very powerful if combined with fasting. You'll notice a drop off 90 minutes after you peak. The big drop comes three hours after.

Have you done it, Anonymous? Yup. Pretty cool, but it's not much of a party drug. It can either be used as a passport for spiritual tourism – for example, reading the books of a new religion from the perspective of a believer instead of an armchair anthropologist. Why not pick a new religion and take it for a spin? But the khat daemon really does seem best suited to an experience of scholarship and focused contemplation (this can be done with study-buddies.) Don't be afraid to laugh, though.

Can I drink alcohol with it? No. Why would you want to? Respect its daemon, man. (Also, it's not safe. You run the risk of, at the very least, acting like a total dick as your impaired judgement and suppressed agro emotions couple with your new ability to do stupid stuff faster and with more confidence.)

What do I use it for? Intense focus of creative or spiritual effort is traditional, though it's not bad for confident chatting. Very little risk of paranoia. It's related to amphetamine, but it's less intense than cocaine. It's also a controlled substance, and classified as a narcotic. Illegal.



BY TRICIA LEONARD

GILLIAM IN ZURICH




Looking Glass Magazine attended the Zurich screening of Terry Gilliam's *The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus*, which features the last performance of Heath Ledger. At the Q&A after the screening, Gilliam said the film was meant to be his *Fanny and Alexander*. It was the first of several tellingly odd comparisons he made between himself and other filmmakers with whom he had nothing in common.

On Ledger: "Heath was absolutely extraordinary, not just as an actor but as a person. When we began this project he was very sensual, we did a lot of playing, changing. Every day when we were shooting, he was a constant surprise and a delight. When he died, basically I said we have to stop the film, we can't finish it. Everyone around me said 'No, we must finish it,' and luckily Johnny Depp, Colin Farrel and Jude Law came to the rescue. Luckily we had a story which involved a magical mirror, and that mirror saved the film." (Depp, Farrel and Ledger all play the same character.)

"The strange thing is once we recovered from Heath's death, I was under a lot of pressure... not from money people, they just wanted their money back. My daughter, who was the producer, and my cinematographer Nicola Pecorini were just beating me up, and telling me we've got to finish the film. I called Johnny and we were comisserating and Johnny said whatever you need I'll be there."

His feelings about Switzerland were unclear, and he made no comment on the Polanski scandal. That said, he's never been shy about admitting his preference for certain other European countries to England. When this film screened in Italy he said, "[Italy's] a very humanist country. I mean, you all hate each other, but you've learned to be civilized, and deal with it. England believes in the rule of law that we created, in Parliament. People think the law is the most important thing. Italy doesn't believe that. I like that sense of anarchy."

In Zurich, when asked about the influence of CGI on his work, and how receptive he was to its recent prevalence, he said it made filmmaking more like painting, and that it could achieve something like what Peter Greenaway achieved in his Rembrandt film, *Rembrandt's JAccuse*. Again, the comparison is off, as Greenaway's obsession is with archaic visual modes, and his enemy is visual illiteracy. Digital effects in Greenaway serve the opposite end that they do in Gilliam. Gilliam's film is leveling a more parochial assault on the loss of creative faculties in moviegoers. Parnassus is, at times, heavy handed in its almost Pentecostal fervor for what we'd have to call "Imaginationism." Gilliam is so adamant that the imagination is good for us, it's as if he thought we were somehow not in favor of it when we came to the theater. His film tells the story of the gradual degradation of storytelling, as seen through an immortal storyteller named Dr. Parnassus, played by Christopher Plummer. The art of telling stories starts as religion, devolves into circus, then into a puppet show (in the final image, Christopher Plummer with his puppets looks suspiciously like Carl Jung with his archetypes.) Tom Waits is predictably adequate, as Satan. It's a wonderful work of art by a familiar presence, but not a masterpiece. Audience response was positive, but the film was regarded in Zurich as a pleasant diversion from the critique of cinema, not an exercise in same. The event felt like a half-time show. 

In his final comments, Gilliam confirmed that his next film will be Don Quixote. Parnassus is on release in the United States on Christmas Day.



Reviews of Reviews, by Suzie Cummings

MORE BLACK. LESS GREEN

★★ *The Princess and the Frog*

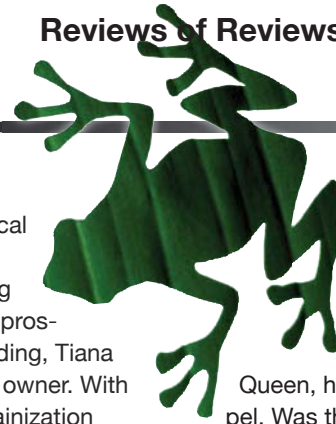
First, the music. Nobody liked it. The New York Times called it forgettable, and even Ebert, who likes everything, said "...the songs by Randy Newman are – I dunno, do you think he's getting sort of Randy Newmaned out?" Randy Newman must be removed. This is critical. Disney should be searching for the next Menken and Ashman to be gatekeepers of Disney's musical future. That's what Walt would have wanted.

The rest of Ebert's review is obese with sentimentality ("This is what classic Disney animation is all about!") He is a lazy critic. Maybe he liked it because frogs are edible?

"The way [Tiana] resists the fantasy formula is admirable, but ultimately (and disappointingly) futile," says Wesley Morris of the Boston Globe. He's right, but the same objection could be lodged against fairy tales in general, and he seems unhappy with the archetypal structure rather than the shallowness of the character. And actually, *The Princess and the Frog* reverses the morals of most of the prior Disney features. The gnosticism of Cinderella, who is almost mystically confined to a fallen state though her true heritage is wealthy, is re-

placed by a more Evangelical vision of toil as the natural state and hard work leading to a reasonable amount of prosperity – in *Frog's* happy ending, Tiana becomes a small business owner. With this comes also the de-villainization of the stepsister archetype. Charlotte, a white and wealthy friend to the black heroine, is not a rival, and though the earlier formula would have served the story better, it's refreshing to see a healthy friendship sold to the little girls in the audience.

Tiana has, predictably, one dead parent. The father is so admirable in the opening set-up, we know he's doomed. I only wish the film could have opened with the catchy first number sung at his funeral, as is typical of New Orleans processions. As it is, it's sung by a narrator, highlighting the naivete of thinking Randy Newman has any appeal at all. He doesn't, but in context his generic music makes some sense. The protagonists, though black, are ultimately as colorless as *Cosby*, and actual scenes of Louisiana life are authentic in a forced, checklist-scratching way. Yes, we hear half-hearted zydeco in the swamp, but the jazz sounds... well, white.



A word about voodoo: we have some cause to object to the Christianization of Mama Odie; although she holds the title of Voodoo

Queen, her only song is Christian gospel. Was there some fear, perhaps, of filming the good qualities of her stigmatized religion?

Another inaccuracy of the film: voodoo loa (spirits) are properly divided, not into good and evil, but into hot and cold. Fast money, the satisfaction of lust, these are hot spirits. There are priests who specialize in either or both. Also, the villain's bargaining chip with the shadow-meanies, a promise to give them the souls of the residents of New Orleans, is impossible in the context of real voodoo. And it's not particularly imaginative either. What do voodoo spirits actually want? Food. Just like us. It's a religion of pure economics. You cook for them, they eat the spirit inside the food, then you can eat the actual food after the ceremony, after which the spirits are likely to grant you a boon.

Interestingly, the veves (etched sigils of the loa) which swirl around Dr. Facilier in the film are real but harmless – they actually signify the love spirit Ezili, and carry no dark power. We applaud the film for staying authentic without inviting dangerous forces. And no, no other critics cared about any of that.

SMACK DOWN OF THE YEAR

Mo'Nique vs. Mariah Carey

Precious. Love it or roll your eyes at it, nothing can prepare you for the confrontation at its climax. Who knew they could act? My God, they can. As Carey's cold, cutting, and completely true evisceration of Mo'Nique's trash-headed "mothering" meets the comedienne's desperate attempts to play the victim and destroy the credibility of the white race, moviegoers will have to pick sides, and they could argue over who was right for years, which is staggering in context, as Mo'Nique's character is truly despicable for most of the film. It makes the Streep vs. Hoffman act-off in *Doubt* look like a second scuffle at an old folks home.



INTERESTING FAILURE OF THE MONTH

★★★ *Red Cliff*

We're almost alone in denying the masterpiece status of *Red Cliff*. Do see it. The resistance to the bigness of the story reads as artistic rigor, and *Mission Impossible II's* John Woo deserves a reputation as a director of unusual directness and power. On the downside, it's a little boring, and not just because we're stupid Americans. He's incapacitated by history's huge scale. See it to see CGI bigness used to its appropriate, correct, and good effect, even though it doesn't actually work.



Looking Glass





BY
MICHAEL
MERRIAM

THE DEATH OF MARVEL

When Disney bought Marvel earlier this year, we feared the worst. Geekpadshow.com wrote this synopsis of an inevitable upcoming special: “When Dr. Doom has to remove a tree from his castle property, a couple of rascally chipmunks [Chip N’ Dale] make his life unbearable. Unable to kill them because they keep crawling into his armor, Doom is eventually forced to escape the rodents by using his time machine. Unfortunately, he ends up stranded in a prehistoric world where chipmunks rule and are 20’ tall!”

Insiders were optimistic, though. Warren Ellis tweeted “So I got this phone call from Joe Quesada and it was just the sound of him rubbing himself with money and now I am confused” on the first morning after Disney’s buyout of Marvel. Everyone has been optimistic, and few have mentioned the threat of Disney’s version of sharia law. Disney, a pragmatic but conservative company, has pledged to remain laissez-faire about the characters, who appeal directly to Disney’s weakest market: 8-18 year old boys. The above satire, called “Epic Misney” and created by T Campbell and John Waltrip, emphasizes the obvious incompatibility of the two cosmologies. While most compare this buyout with Disney’s earlier buyout of Pixar, where the creative departments were unchanged except in being more financially stable, Pixar’s worldview and Disney’s are very close, meaning that actually a Disney buyout of an edgier catalog has not yet been observed. Pixar is, in the end, just a better-written form of Disney animation. How long will it be before Mephisto and Ghost Rider end up on the table of a board meeting with some executive saying, “We just don’t see any need for images of this severity, and we know it’s not what our audience wants to see either”?

Most doubt such developments, but in light of Disney’s record, it seems inevitable. Disney not only has a history of gelding stories, it has built its empire on the practice. Cinderella is actually defined by its omission of chopped-off feet, birds plucking out eyes, and the revenant of the heroine’s biological mother.

The original counterbalance was Walt’s intuitive sense of villain archetypes. Maleficent’s moral complexity, for example: she dresses grandly but lives in squalor, and betrays her pettiness by wilting flowers when she has the might to become a dragon. She embodies actual ideas about evil, rather than merely serving the plot. And there is no villain in animation more heartbreaking and terrifying than the abstracted “Man” as he appears in Bambi. Disney has remembered its childishness, but lost its sense of cosmic balance. Ursula is the personification only of the mechanical usefulness of an antagonist, and Scar, though based on Shakespeare’s King Claudius, has no capacity for doubt, no burdens of rulership, and Jeremy Irons’ accent serves in place of his personality. It’s not Disney’s fault. Something else is happening to those characters.

As Disney profits more and more from licensing the characters and from Wolverine endorsing sitcoms on ABC, the writers guidelines at Marvel will begin to reflect the characters’ relevance to the original Disney demographics: small children and the elderly. There is no way to prevent this, even if Disney is trying to hit the 8-18s.

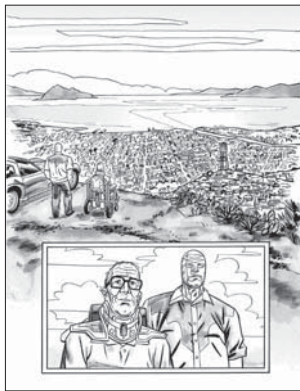
So the image above, though ostensibly satire, can be read like a chart showing Cro-Magnon becoming Homo Sapiens. The Dr. Stranges of the world become bloated comedian-genies. Superheroes, like fairy tale characters and like Krazy Kat, evolve this way. They grow plump and amiable. Their menace fades, their wit goes dull. Ignatz becomes Jerry.

Like the final stand-off between anime and Disney at the end of Kingdom Hearts II, when Xenahort confronts Mickey Mouse with “You deny that which is dark,” and Mickey squeaks back “We don’t deny it. We just think it’s a little scary,” Disney, as an entity, is not willfully ruining the stories it subsumes. The natural laws already had their hooks in Marvel’s characters. And when we object to the Disnification of good stories, we’re objecting to Nature, and our real problem is with Death. ☹



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IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

Strongman, by Charles Soule, stars Tigre, a fallen luchador. Once upon a time, Tigre fought a vibrant rogues gallery in the ring and on the streets but now, thirty years later, he's obese, drunk, and occupied only with stinking up New York City. It's more character study than story, which is unfortunate, but the concept is an important one, and lucha libre, with its prevalent aerial maneuvers and already-deconstructed ideas about good and evil, is a perfect theme for a post-postmodern comic book. In case you missed it, check it out.



AH, BUT:

Long ago, Neil Gaiman's Ramadan mentioned, and then side-stepped Islam, which is exactly what the Arabian Nights had done centuries before.

Naif al-Mutawa's The 99, a comic book series in which the 99 attributes of Allah are personified (The girl at the far right, Noor, whose name means light, has the super-power of sensing if someone is telling the truth) deals with Islamic themes, and most religions have comic book versions of their beliefs. Still, the 99, though it supports values which to many of us might seem reactionary in the extreme, was still considered far too outlandish, nor is any graphic depiction of the principles of the Qur'an really encouraged, and it barely escaped the censors when it appeared in Kuwait in 2006.

We're secular humanists around these parts, and the co-opting of comics by any religion startles us. This year, the 99 Village Theme Park opened in Kuwait, and early next year it will become an animated series. Al-Mutawa told his writers, "only when Jewish kids think that The 99 characters are Jewish, and Christian kids think they're Christian, and Muslim kids think they're Muslim, and Hindu kids think they're Hindu, that I will consider my vision as having been fully executed." And that's pretty cool.

HOLY ... WHA?

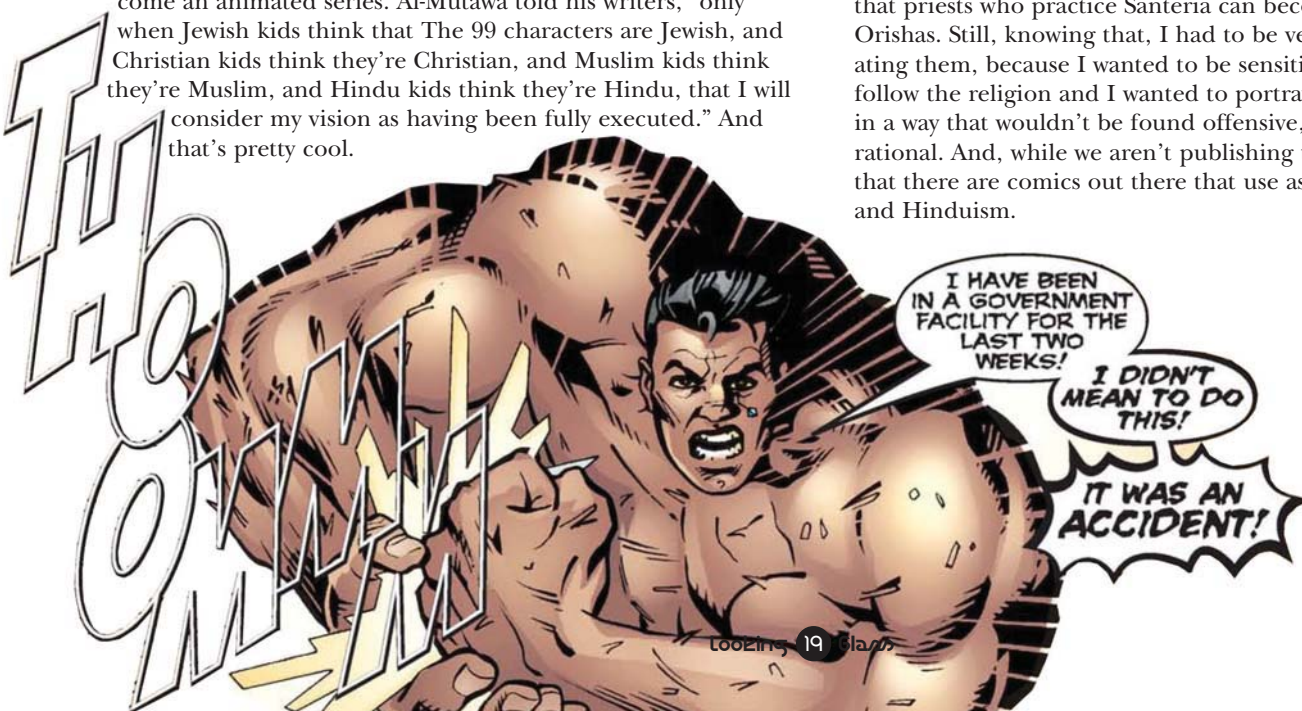
Since this issue is devoted to religion, and this section is all about the intersection of comics and politics, we wanted to refer you to an interview with Marvel EIC **Joe Quesada**. A fan wrote to comicbookresources.com about the representation of religions in Marvel. The fan's name was **Mad_Man_Moon**:

I'm interminably curious about this subject and how it's addressed at Marvel...Gods, and Christianity, Muslim, Judaism (etc, etc) in particular. The many different pantheons and beliefs are played out multiple times, and yet the Christian God and Devil are never seen (unless I'm mistaken) in modern times. It seems odd that we acknowledge many gods and see depictions of them (more often than not), but the Christian, Muslim, Jewish (etc, etc) gods never come in to play. Why is this?*

Quesada: I think there are probably multiple layers to this, Mad_Man_Moon. First of all, the gods of mythology lend themselves more to the superhero genre. They're much more colorful, they are imperfect and their exploits were really more akin to the exploits we've seen done by heroes like those within the Marvel U. All the classic heroes

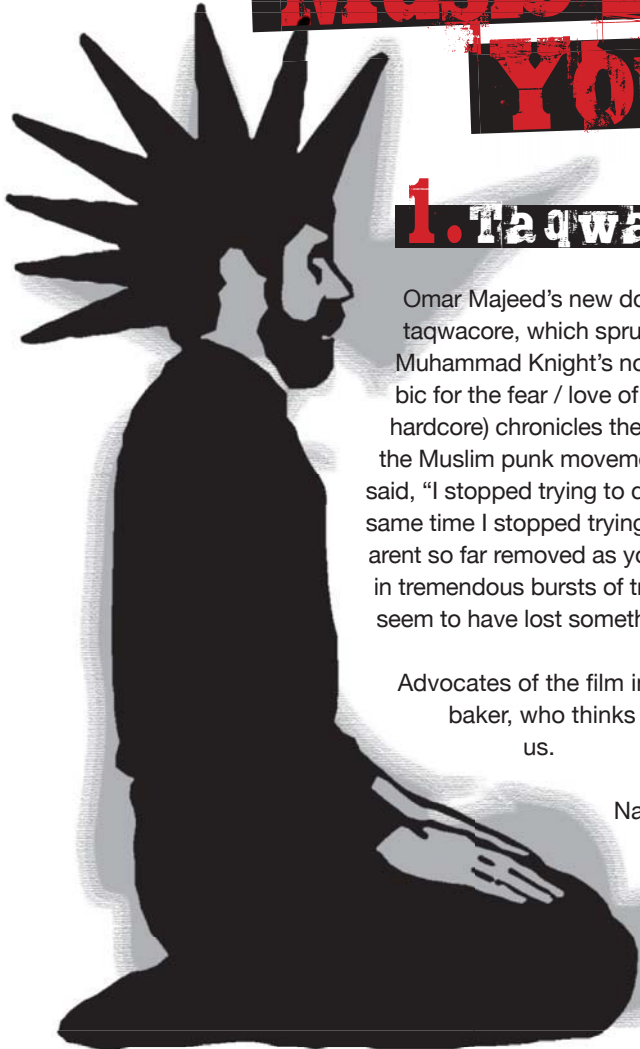
we see in many ways share many traits with the gods of mythology, so it's an easier transition. Also, in most monotheistic religions, you're dealing with an all powerful and infallible deity, which, from a dramatic storytelling point of view, really handcuffs you because of their perfection and ability to solve problems as they desire.

And there is the sensitivity issue. These are religions that are practiced by the majority of the planet, regardless of where you fall, whereas the gods of mythology are not. I think it's a sensitive issue, but more than anything, it's just that the construct of the mythological gods makes for better dramatic storytelling within the pages of a comic book. That said, from time to time, some aspects of today's modern religions do find themselves into modern comics. I created the Santerians which are characters based upon the Orisha from the religion of Santeria. The Orisha lend themselves beautifully to the comic genre, as does the idea that priests who practice Santeria can become possessed by Orishas. Still, knowing that, I had to be very careful in creating them, because I wanted to be sensitive to those who follow the religion and I wanted to portray the characters in a way that wouldn't be found offensive, but more aspirational. And, while we aren't publishing them, I do know that there are comics out there that use aspects of Islam and Hinduism.





Seven Impossibly Relevant Music Events of 09 You Probably Missed



1. Taqwacore: The Movie

Omar Majeed's new documentary about taqwacore, which sprung up around Michael Muhammad Knight's novel (taqwa, from Arabic for the fear / love of god, and core as in hardcore) chronicles the birth and early life of the Muslim punk movement. As Michael Knight said, "I stopped trying to define punk around the same time I stopped trying to define Islam. They aren't so far removed as you'd think. Both began in tremendous bursts of truth and vitality but seem to have lost something along the way."

Advocates of the film include D. A. Pennebaker, who thinks it's brilliant, and and us.

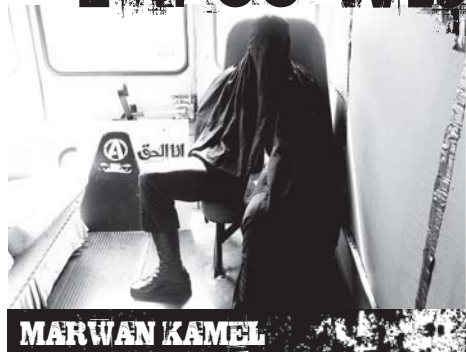
Naturally, threats have been made, but, unlike with the Dutch anti-Islam short film Fitna, no serious threat has been posed to its

release. Who knew that you could be a Muslim and still love loud music, gay people, and getting shit-faced? But there's a lot more to the iconoclasm of these loud young mystics. This is one of the most important film or music events of the decade.

When we asked Omar if he had any fear of violent reprisals, he told us "Yes, I have some fear from time to time. I'm human. But I put them easily aside because I believe this film is about the beauty of Islam and is positive. Some stuff is said that could be deemed blasphemous, or certainly provocative. It is not done with the intention to hurt Muslims, but to stir up dialogue between Muslim and Non-Muslims.... Most traditional conservative Muslims probably won't bother attending, and those with open minds might give."

Boston born Pakistani best friend duo Basim Usmani and Shahjehan Khan started the first Taqwacore band, The Kominas, and their first album, Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay, made the Boston Globe critic's top 10 list in 2008. Here are three more carrying the message. 👁

Three Wise Men of Muslim Punk?



MARWAN KAMEL
Project: Al-Thawra ("The Revolution")
Gift: Doom-crust Middle Eastern punk music and the first ever Taqwacore compilation.



SENA HUSSAIN
Project: Secret Trial Five (an all-girl Taqwacore band)
Also Known For: Touring with the Kominas in 2007.
Gift: This drag king from Vancouver has unrepentant self-respect in her identity as a gay Muslim.



OMAR WAGAR
Project: Sarmust.
Also Known For: The Washington DC punk-influenced group Diacritical.
Gift: The fusion of punk with Indian and South Asian music.





2. The Anderssons release "Tomorrow, in a Year," the opera based on Darwin's Origin of Species.

Olof and Karin Dreijer Andersson's opera, based on Darwin's Origin of Species, is not the inscrutable Robert Wilson-esque iconoclasm we may well have expected from this pairing of concept and band. But we mark this at place two because goth is returning, and, odd as it may sound, The Knife ushered it in. Natasha Khan, Anja Plaschg, and Katie Stelmanis are probably the most stand-out examples of a new, less-affected goth movement in music. You will find, here, a searing investigation of nature, sex, and where our power stops and nature's begins. You won't find predictable pseudo-feminism or ball-bashing; The Lilith Fair is over.



3. Felix Mendelssohn - Reanimated and Unleashed

Wagner's revoltingly anti-semitic essay "Judaism and Music" caused some paranoia about the influence of Jews on German composition, resulting in almost 300 Mendelssohn pieces being locked away and scattered during World War II. In February of 2009, Mendelssohn turned 200 (or he would have... as it turns out, he's dead.) Stephen Somary, director of the Mendelssohn project, unveiled 13 never-before-heard scores at the Museum of Jewish Heritage. These included choral pieces, operas, concertos and symphonies. 13 down, 287 to go!

4. "Never Seen" - Lightning Dust

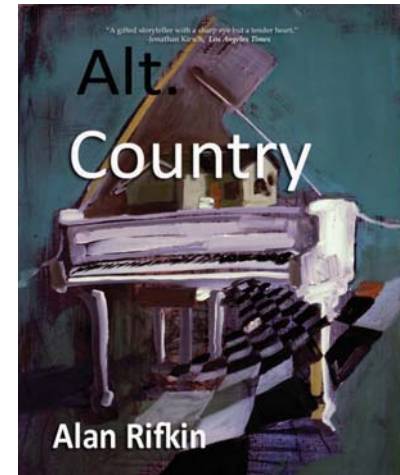
The first half of "Never Seen" sounds too good to be true, and indeed, the song falls flat right in the middle.

The same could be said of the album, from Black Mountain duo Amber Webber and Joshua Wells. Webber's voice sounds accustomed to agony--it's always breaking, but never shattered. First dreamlike, then narcoleptic, then revelatory. Gus Gus with a soul.



5. Alt. Country - Release Concert

"It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a musician to forgive Christian rock," says Alan Rifkin in his tres vanguard fusion of music criticism and fiction, Alt. Country. The novel's packed Long Beach reading featured live performances by the legendary pre-psychedelic folk band "We Five"'s Jerry and Debbie Burgan, as well as Stanley Wycoff and David Stadalnikas. The novel can be read online with the accompanying soundtrack, a form which might become the norm, as taste becomes compartmentalized and music increasingly requires a manifesto. It is unlikely that this important book, which is the New Journalism on steroids applied to music, will be understood or equalled any time soon.



6. Ramsey Lewis - Songs From the Heart: Ramsey Plays Ramsey

His career, spanning five decades, is a mine-field of pop. I mean jazz. Sorry, no, pop, though with some generously spirited gospel, and classical music. In this three disc set out from Concord Jazz, he offers something remarkable: a redemptive re-interpretation of much of his older work. That which aged well is kept the same, and that which did not is reinvented here. Jazz lovers could hardly ask for more, and this is our pick for top jazz album of the year.

7. Reigning Sound - "Love and Curses" (In The Red - Sympathy - Norton Records)

To Nashville from Asheville, there's no stopping Reigning Sound, whose last album, "Too Much Guitar," was retro, dirty, and real. Then came a string of live recordings and a rarities compilation that could not answer any questions about where the band was heading. Last summer, we finally got "Love and Curses." On the one hand, it's just well-produced country / folk, but still unlike any you've heard before. We could say it's instrumentally baroque like the Decemberists, with a dash of the mangy magical-realism of Tom Waits, but ultimately the record doesn't bear comparisons. We're especially into the hooky-as-hell "Banker and a Liar."





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by ala ebtekar



With the exhibition title 1388, Ebtakar refers to both the medieval period on the Gregorian calendar and the present year on the Persian calendar, making manifest the journey that links the past to today, framing a narrative as fluid as the fabric of the women's clothing and the brushstrokes of his own hand.

- Kevin B. Chen

Looking  Glass





Ala Ebtekar
 From the series: 1388
 Acrylic and ink on digital pigment prints
 45" x 30" uf, 53" x 36"
 2009





Marduk – the god of light

موندن مەسكۆنە شەخسە

Now that Saddam is gone, artists are more free to create and sell their work – there are 5,000 members of the artists guild in Baghdad, Reuters reports. But a new threat looms, that of Shi'a fundamentalism, which would make being an artist even more dangerous than it was under Hussein. **Tricia Leonard** looks at today's Iraqi art through the lens of anthropology.

In the 13th century BC, Assyrians worried terribly when the Babylonians stole their idols. To behold the bare ground where a God once stood – for statues of gods were gods themselves – brought primordial panic. So one day, in a campaign against Babylon, the Assyrians took the cult statue of the Babylonian god Marduk. Though Marduk was not an Assyrian god, Assyrians believed in him. When it came time to return the statue, the king had to take the god aside and ask him, along with the Assyrian sun god Samas, if his going home was really a good idea. A transcript (the god spoke through animal livers and an oracle) survives:

Is it pleasing to your great divinity and to the great lord Marduk? Is it acceptable to your great divinity and to the great lord Marduk? Is the going of the statue to Babylon decreed and confirmed... by the command of your great divinity, Samas, great lord? I ask you, Samas, great lord, whether, on the [unknown ordinal number] of Iyyar, the statue of the great lord Marduk should be loaded on a boat and go to Babylon?

These statues went to and fro for hundreds of years. In the 12th century BC the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar waged war against Elam to get the statue back. And, after getting it back, its reinstallation in Babylon marked the beginning of a golden period of arts and letters. Epics and tales formed around Marduk's "decision" to travel to Assyria (the armies of men were but his car service. See Ivan Starr's *Queries to the Sungod: Divination and Politics in Sargonid Assyria* for more on how to talk to statues of Babylonian gods.) The statue of a thing or a god, or even a king, is regarded as the thing itself.

Americans are like that, too. No one associated Abraham Lincoln with conventional values, normative Christianity, or simple domestic policies until Walt Disney made a statue of Lincoln talk. Prior to that, we saw Lincoln as a vast-minded figure of enigmatic power, a warrior President of ineffable competence. Now, he's more like a famous uncle.

Dieaa Al Kuzaiey
Childish Minded



Mohammed Msyir
OldCities





Steve Mumford
Night Checkpoint in Baghdad



Steve Mumford

All this is by way of explaining the advent of abstract art in Iraq, which is but distantly related to its European cousin.

The foremost abstract artist in Baghdad, Qasim Sabti, recently observed that his pieces can go for over \$2,000 in New York, but he considers himself very lucky to receive \$500 in his home country. But his, too, is an obsession with empty space born of a nostalgia for the removed statue, the period between regimes when the will of the theocratic powers could still be determined.

Let me tell you what does not, and will never, characterize Middle Eastern art: women in chador's with ammunition garters, condoms, twisted coat hangers or anything else *haram*. It's true, white people love this kind of thing. Commodified, easy dissent glues liberals to gallery floors on both coasts.


Makan Emadi
Virgin No. 53



This image, from an Iranian painter, typifies the hackneyed trend with which American exhibitions of Middle Eastern art are plagued.

When Iranian art dissents, it has trended, in recent decades, toward a remembrance of Persian polytheism. Unfortunately, traces of Pre-Zoroastrian gods (Mithra, et. al.) lay only in the Rig Vedas, and scarcely there, but when it comes to work about their homeland, Iranian artists have an option Iraqi artists lack: There is a sense that Iran can escape, as Europe did during its Renaissance, to a classical golden period. But in Iraq, this is not possible, as the propaganda machine of Saddam Hussein relied too heavily on Assyrian hark-backism: pictures of him, robed, on a chariot shooting arrows at enemy helicopters were just too common. There is no possibility of a Renaissance based on retreat to either of Baghdad's golden ages, for Saddam has placed garrisons there.

The Western sense of what Iraq has to offer the art world is changing for the better – it was somewhat famously curated, in the popular mind at least, by the transplanted artist Steve Mumford whose work is, on its own, forgettable. But as found art, it is something more important: Orientalist and naive, it is *exactly* what the best art of the Iraqis is not. The best Iraqi art longs for the clean canvas, the new start, a fresh kingdom.

Contrasts between the real and the insincere are everywhere in Baghdad's art scene, and they define its market. Dieaa Al-Kuzaiey brings a little joy, with a Kandinsky-obsessed distraction that only solidifies the more truthful 2002 portrait from Saad Al-Qassab. But it is possible that neither of these artists will age as well as Mohammed Msyir. On the surface, Msyir looks Klimt-and-Rothko derived, but only the comparison to Rothko is apt; indeed these works are a study or erasure, of a compromise between amnesia, which is desired but impossible, and a blurred geometricization of memory. But where Western abstraction came from Picasso and Matisse, and was sometimes linked to a political Utopia through absurdity, Mohammed Msyir's "Old Cities" and "Sun" have their roots in the smashed faces of gods during the above-mentioned Babylonian campaigns. Here, we have Iraqi Abstractionism in its purest form. Yes, it owes much to its European counterpart, but its ideal is different. It is the vision of the broken ground with the god removed, and it is a dream of seeing Ozymandias finally covered in sand. 





There Can Be Only One, Sort Of

by Nick Anderman

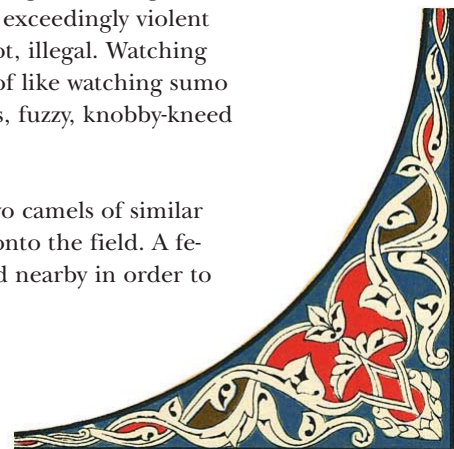
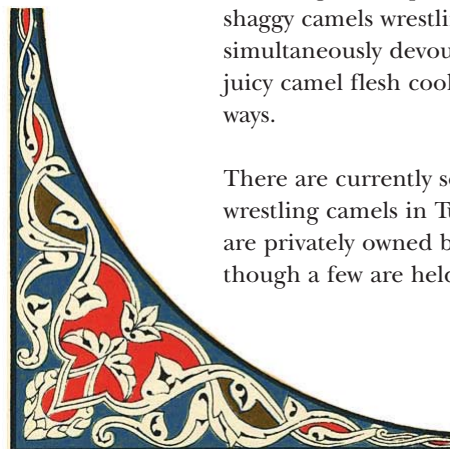
Turkish camel wrestling, at its most basic level, involves two shaggy, male camels locking necks and attempting to knock each other over. The sport is centered in the Aegean region of Turkey, where it was invented and has been a staple of the winter months in many towns for hundreds of years. Every weekend from December to March, regional townships in the southeast of the country take turns hosting camel wrestling festivals. The events, which generally attract anywhere from 50 to 120 camels and their handlers, also draw thousands of people for a day of music, raki (a traditional Turkish anise-flavored apéritif), family and camel sausage. That's right: it is possible to watch two giant shaggy camels wrestling each other while simultaneously devouring tender hunks of juicy camel flesh cooked a variety of delicious ways.

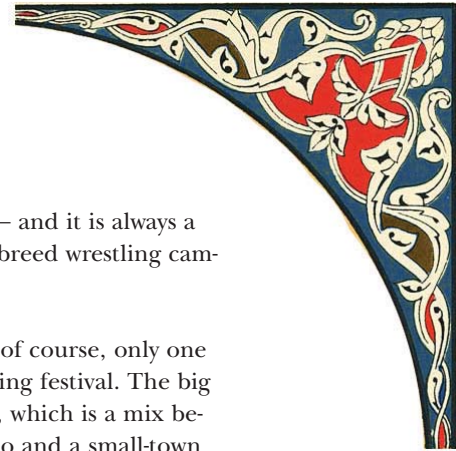
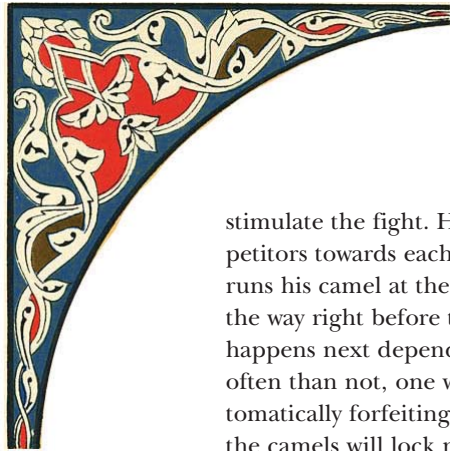
There are currently some 1200 specially bred wrestling camels in Turkey, most of which are privately owned by farmers and ranchers, though a few are held by businesses for use

as promotional tools. Most of the animals are Tülu camels, which are the result of cross-breeding Middle Eastern and North African dromedaries with eastern Bactrians, found in China and Mongolia. Tülu, which can swell to 2200 lbs and 8 feet high at the shoulder, are larger and, in general, friendlier, than most other breeds, making them ideal for wrestling.

Male Tülu camels are not inherently violent animals. They rarely fight in nature, and when they do it is mostly to impress females. Consequently, camel wrestling is fairly cuddly when compared to other animal vs. animal sports (such as dog fighting or cock fighting), many of which are exceedingly violent and, more often than not, illegal. Watching camel wrestling is kind of like watching sumo wrestling with enormous, fuzzy, knobby-kneed teddy bears.

A match begins when two camels of similar size and weight are led onto the field. A female camel in heat is led nearby in order to





stimulate the fight. Handlers turn the competitors towards each other, and one handler runs his camel at the other, moving out of the way right before the beasts collide. What happens next depends on the camels. More often than not, one will run away, thereby automatically forfeiting the match. Sometimes the camels will lock necks and shove at each other for a few minutes until one of them gets bored and wanders away in defeat. Occasionally, the camels will actually wrestle. Wrestling camels are trained by their owners to perform a variety of moves, which include standard shoving with the neck (tekçi), fancy tripping techniques (çengelci) and a move wherein one camel uses its chest to trap its opponent's head and then sits down (bağcı), thereby pinning its victim. Especially successful camels have been known to lift their opponents entirely off the ground with their neck alone. A camel wins a match if its opponent runs away, screams (a terrible thing to behold) or falls, though many matches also end when one of the camel's owners forfeits

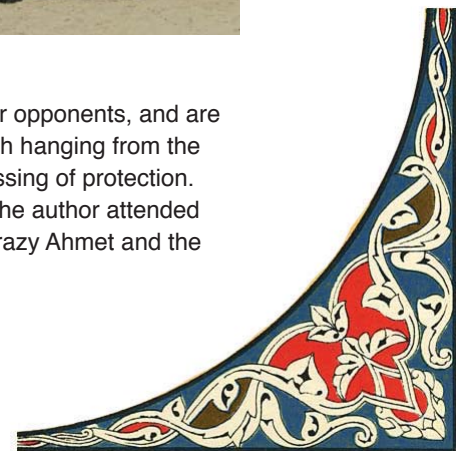
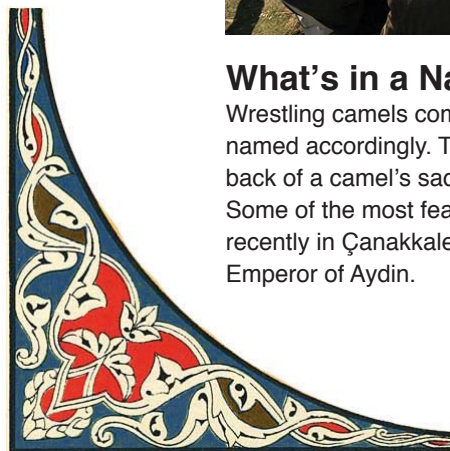
for fear of injury to his – and it is always a “he”, as women do not breed wrestling camels – animal.

The actual wrestling is, of course, only one aspect of a camel wrestling festival. The big draw is the atmosphere, which is a mix between a carnival, a rodeo and a small-town county fair. Thousands of people sit and stand on truckbeds and trailers surrounding the field, many of them barbecuing tasty slabs of meat and placing bets on the action. Roving bands of musicians play music for a fee and groups of children huddle under the bleachers, talking and laughing. The camels themselves show up to the event in brightly colored halters and intricately designed saddles and tassels, foaming at the mouth in excitement. The strong aroma of spicy camel meat mingles with the more familiar smells of Efes, Turkey's national beer, and raki, both of which flow freely. Camel wrestling festivals are like a raucous and jovial community picnic. 👁



What's in a Name?

Wrestling camels come to festivals dressed to impress and intimidate their opponents, and are named accordingly. These names are displayed on a colorful piece of cloth hanging from the back of a camel's saddle, and are generally followed by “Maşallah”, a blessing of protection. Some of the most fearsome camel names at the camel wrestling festival the author attended recently in Çanakkale, Turkey were: Kobra, Dozer, Rambo, Conqueror, Crazy Ahmet and the Emperor of Aydin.





THE SUPREME MATHEMATICS:

Start learning the Supreme Mathematics of the Five Percenters
(an Islamic fraternity related to the Nation of Islam)
with this mind-bending quiz.

1. KNOWLEDGE

Who is the only character to appear in both the Grimms' Fairy Tales and the Arabian Nights?

2. WISDOM Minister Farrakhan has often referred to a great machine in the sky, called the Motherplane. Which prophet's vision does this seem to confirm?

3. UNDERSTANDING What was Aladin's nationality?

4. CULTURE (FREEDOM, if the number is 40) Is it permissible, in Islam, to believe in Genies?

5. POWER What, in the Arabian Nights, is the name of the benevolent wise man in the court of Harun Al-Rashid?

6. EQUALITY Today, violence is forbidden during both these holidays, but historically Ramadan is to Woodstock what Ashura is to _____.

7. GOD Who are Allat, al-'Uzza and Manat?

8. BUILD or DESTROY To the Five Percenters, Original Blackman is another name for God. Who is Original Blackwoman?

9. BIRTH What reward did some believe awaited a reader who read the Arabian Nights in their entirety?

0. CIPHER

Of the highly doctored tales in Richard Burton's translation of the Nights, many of which were imported from Persian or Indian sources to fill out the book, only one seems to be a completely original invention of his, which he passed off as Arab. Which?

1. The Virgin Mary, in "The Virgin Mary's Child" in Grimm and "The Tale of Sympathy the Learned" in the Nights 2. Ezekiel 3. Chinese 4. It is required, as they are mentioned in the Qur'an 5. Jafar 6. Al-tamim 7. The three Meccan goddesses at the heart of the "Satanic Verses" of Muhammad's tampered-with recitation. Rushdie's novel was named after these verses, long since removed. 8. The Earth 9. He died 0. How Abu Hasan Hasani Ali Nadwi



Design



ji•sign |dʒi'zīn| – struggle for design

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