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The Changing Face of Publishing by Bret Funk

The publishing world, or at least the trade sites and publications I read, are all abuzz with a single word: ebook. They talk about formats. They talk about standards. They talk about pricing *ad nauseum*. They talk about protecting the traditional methods, preserving the rich heritage of publishing, and preventing new formats from leaching the majesty out of our great industry. Somehow that often leads them back to pricing.

In some ways, and certainly in some genres, the age of the e-book is upon us. For nonfiction, particularly for textbooks, manuals and regularly updated trade books, I can't understand why ebooks didn't become the standard years ago. Ebook formats allow for the easy update of revisions and corrections, can help reduce prices on those low volume titles, and it's much easier to carry around a Kindle or an Ipad than a half dozen 600 page schoolbooks. Colleges and universities should be demanding ebook versions of the textbooks they use, even if publishers insist on bundling the ebook with a traditional \$200 text.

For fiction reading, and pleasure reading in general, I can understand the slower pace of the market. Until recently, no decent or reasonably-priced ebook reader was available on the market, and it's a lot more difficult to settle back and enjoy reading with an eight pound laptop on your lap, blowing superheated air against your legs. Add to that the relatively few titles that were available in ebook forms (other than standard pdf) until last year, and it made early adoption of the technology a tough sell, even for a technophile like myself.

Despite the explosion in popularity for ebook readers last year, there remains three hurdles the industry needs to jump before this new publishing medium goes fully mainstream: price, standards, and the established hierarchy. Price remains the hot-button topic for the moment, with publishers debating the right pricing model for ebooks, the sweet spot that will earn them millions in new revenue without hurting the profits from traditional sales. Some advocate an as-low-as-you-can-go policy, while others insist that the "limbo" method of pricing will put publishers world-wide out of business. Others suggest a flat fee, like music on iTunes, a \$9.99 come-one-come-all standard that everyone will pay regardless of the length or quality of the content. And gaining rapidly in popularity is the "standard markdown" model, where publishers agree that ebooks are worth exactly x% less than p-books.

Personally, I'm not sure why we need to have this discussion at all, at least not in the context of "finding an industry standard". Pricing for ebooks should be an individual publisher's decision, not a rule handed down by the collective will. Want to increase sales numbers for a stalling series or a new author? Limbo baby! Have a big name people are willing to pay top dollar for? Find your sweet spot and collect the green! Don't know how to price a book? Figure out how much more you have to spend to make a print copy and pass the savings on to the reader who prefers to use E. (Maybe I should find a better term... That one might carry a negative connotation.)

My point is: pricing in an ebook world need not be static. It can ebb and flow with the needs of the publisher and the demands of the reader. I see no need to tie it to a single model nor conform to the profit-driven demands of Big Publisher.

A uniform standard for ebooks is the next biggest hurdle, and in my opinion, the one we need to jump first. EPUB is becoming the *de facto* standard, but even it is only partially supported by most readers and vendors. Reflowable PDF, standard PDF, MOBI, AZW, HTML, TXT, AEH, XML, and about two dozen other ebook formats exist. Many are similar. Some are easily convertible. But each vendor prefers a certain format, and will accept data in specific formats. In very few cases do those formats overlap from vendor to vendor. There are some utilities that handle conversions from one format to another, but my experience is that each conversion then requires tweaking to eliminate the errors that crop up in the process. This makes preparing an ebook for production a tedious process, converting your initial document into a half dozen or more formats and then tweaking each format to conform to the standards of the individual vendor and eliminating the inevitable hiccups that make the converted files look less professional than the original.

I have no issue with a vendor choosing a default format, nor do I really care if the default format is different from vendor to vendor. What would make a publisher's job easier, though, is if there were a format that everyone agreed could be used to upload data and convert it to any given vendor's preferred format. If I could make a single file that could be uploaded and converted anywhere, free or virtually free of conversion errors, it would greatly speed up our adoption of ebook. Based on our first ebook efforts with *A Mage of None Magic*, it takes a good deal of time to get your initial file just right, and the exhilaration of seeing that top-notch ebook disappears fast when you realize you have to go through the process again for every place you want to make the book available. Simplify that process, and ebook availability from publishers big and small will explode.

The third big hurdle for publishers to overcome is the entrenched distribution model and the interests of the established middlemen, the wholesalers and distributors who hold the reins on the print book horse. Even more so than the publishers currently enslaved to them, the big wholesalers see their obsolescence on the horizon, and are fighting tooth and nail to slow the adoption of new technologies, like print-on-demand and ebooks. So too are they fighting to preserve the current pricing model, where publishers are forced to set the retail price for their books—and then get blamed by readers for setting that price so high!—while the distributors reap the bulk of the rewards from their insistence on 50-80% discounts off a

book's list price, or their policy of "we can return your books at any time for any reason for a full refund, regardless of the book's condition".

With the realization that limited shelf space will keep all but the most famous authors from ever seeing the light of a big bookstore, publishers are starting to realize that new technologies make wholesalers and distributors (and in some ways, even the bookstores themselves) unnecessary. POD, which I will tackle more in a later article, could make all titles available at any bookstore in the world, but I don't see why the wholesaler should reap the bulk of the profit when all they basically do is provide a hosting service for the files that publishers make, and then allow bookstores to download those files on demand. With ebooks, the process is simplified even more: it would take only moderate effort to set up a system to allow bookstores or readers to order and download ebooks directly from T-Press. Why do publishers really need wholesalers at all in an ebook world?

In the end, I don't advocate the outright enforced elimination of the middlemen as some publishers do, but I think they need to adjust their methods and their policies to better reflect the changes in the industry. By refusing to adapt, they may force publishers to innovate, and may as a consequence hasten their own demise.

While the rest of the publishing world irons out the details, I will continue to muddle through, training myself as best I can for our digitized future. The *Illuminata* has become my testing ground, and as we switch to a more e-reader friendly publication, I will be making both EPUB and PDF versions available for download. In the meantime, I look forward to adding additional interactivity into the ezine, and hopefully getting more feedback from our readers.

And for those of you who think four times a year isn't nearly enough *Illuminata*, be sure to follow the T-Press blog at tyrannosauruspress.blogspot.com!

Changing Roles of Television's Women In Space by Terry Crotinger/montanasings

Flash Gordon, *Star Trek*, *Buck Rogers of the 25th Century*, and *Battlestar Galactica*, are four series that either retained or redefined the female role in space opera/science fiction. Dale Arden, Lt. Uhura, Colonel Wilma Deering, and various women living on *Galactica* became challenges or perpetuated a woman's place in television media. From the functions they performed in the series to the hairstyles and clothes, television viewers accepted or squirmed in distaste when they were on the screen.

Using these four series, and later bringing print and other media to the mix, I want to examine how these roles changed society's views of women, etching a lugubrious path toward equality for all people. But first, a short history of each television show.

Flash Gordon began as a comic strip in the 30's. There were many writers for the strip, not all of who carried the same emphasis in how Dale was utilized in Flash's life, but her role as his love interest spawned many adventures. Several episodes/strips dealt with Ming the Merciless who attempts to gain her for himself. One other companion, Dr. Hans Zarkov, saw more physical action than Dale, who usually manned communications equipment or minor ship's functions, firing off an occasional defense weapon.

In subsequent television/movie roles, Zarkov was portrayed as evil, buffoon, brilliant inventor and "fidgety". Flash tended to stay handsome and trim in the many versions of *Flash Gordon*, always shown as a healthy, white, tanned and blonde (usually) All-American role model. Dale has seen her character shift from fluffy and helpless, but always a snappy, shapely dresser, to beauty queen status, to someone with enough savvy to use her good looks to get what she wants. She is not stupid, but in some versions, shallow as a tidal pool.

In the 30's, three Buster Crabbe serial films were made. Later, television—in its infancy—aired another *Flash Gordon* feature-length film comprised of elements from one of the Buster Crabbe films. Change channels to 1954 when a live-action series aired. In 2007 Flash again became a live-action series with dubious response from television audiences.

Trivia: In the 30's, radio shows were produced about *Flash Gordon*. As there are no visuals for this, it is mentioned as media information only. Filmation tried their hand with *Flash Gordon* in 1979-80, creating cartoon shows that later incorporated other comic characters. The 1996 (Hearst Entertainment) animation hover boarding duo of Flash and Dale just doesn't count, as it totally lost the meaning of who/what Flash is by changing the premise of the series.

What I learned about women when I was about 8 years old and watching re-runs:

Dress: Women in space are svelte and used the *Vogue* Pattern Catalogue and Magazine to decide how to dress. Apparently, the evil-meanie women used Dale as a fashion role model, but being evil, went over the top with the glitter and flitter and stupid hats.

Function: I learned that women probably could do more, but were smart enough to let the guys do all the hard, dirty work so they didn't have to get their clothes messed up. That meant they were manipulative and cunning. I didn't have much use for those kinds of women. I figured that Barbie could do what they were doing, so it seemed a waste of time to be a woman in space. And, Barbie had more accessories.

Respect: Men ogled (which was stupid—remember, I'm a kid in the early 60's watching re-runs) and told the women to wait in the car, so to speak. The men had more fun and didn't let women have much, because it would mess up their clothes.

The sixties brought many technological advances, including gadgets for espionage, medicine and my favorite, the self-destructing reel-to-reel tape on *Mission Impossible*. *Star Trek* world, set far in the future offered a truly advanced look of how Earth might advance centuries later. This series, like *Buck Rogers* and *Battlestar Galactica* were military-based, so the role of women was more regimented with clear job descriptions most television views could identify with. Re-run options in Houston ran the gamut from Westerns to "spy" shows, *The Avengers*, *Mission Impossible*, *I Spy* and *Get Smart*. All had futuristic toys and at least one female sidekick. The only science fiction show, *Star Trek* was seen in syndication at the time. I had the privilege of seeing *Star Trek* as it originally aired in 1966.

Nichelle Nichol's, Lt. Uhura, as most of the Baby Boomers can tell you, was a groundbreaking addition to television and not without controversy. She was not only female, but also a woman of color. It is often thought she and Captain Kirk shared the first inter-racial kiss on television. More importantly, she was competent and a confidante with the bridge crew of the Enterprise.

So much has been written about her impact in the 60's and beyond that I will go straight to my impressions as a 10 year old:

Dress: Women in space, in *military* space, probably had cold legs. And arms. And chest. Men ogled, but covertly. Men looked at the backside of a woman, but not up her skirt (which surprised me, since they were so short it would've been

easy). Hair was always clean and mostly put up, never allowed to flow down their backs. This is because if men pulled their hair, it would get messed up and they'd get in trouble faster, so they didn't try to pull it unless it was down. One of the blonde coffee/food girls had hers half up and half down. I decided it looked pretty fancy, but couldn't imagine how long it took her to get ready in the morning.

Function: Women could do fun things like be scientists and researchers. Or, they were secretary-types and brought food and coffee and important things for the Captain to sign. They didn't seem to worry about getting dirty. They looked to men to make most of the decisions or else they just never got the chance to boss people around. No girls were allowed in the Engine Room.

Respect: *Star Trek* women seemed to get smiles and pats on the shoulder from Doctor McCoy. No one yelled at them, but they did get scowled at sometimes.

The 1979 movie and television series, *Buck Rogers of the 25th Century*, was actually another attempt to tell the story of the WWI pilot, frozen in space and waking in the 25th. Century. Buck began as two short stories (*Armageddon 2419 A.D.* and *The Airlords of Han*, by Philip Francis Nowlan in 1928-1929). It had a run as a radio show (1932), a novella (1933), in the newspapers as a comic strip (1939), a 1939 movie serial (starring Buster Crabbe) and a 1950-1951 television series. Oh, I forgot to mention it was a comic book, for only one issue in 1964.

In the first episodes (movie) of the show, rescued Buck, with ancient ideas of society, is tutored by various military personnel, including an initially-unhappy-that-she's-been-strapped-with-this-Neanderthal-but-keeping-it-on-the-down-low, Colonel Wilma Deering to help him cope in his new environment. Wilma Deering is a female in Buck's "man's" world. At first, Buck wasn't too happy about being on a leash to a woman, even if she was trying to assist in his acculturation. Anyone familiar with the show knows that eventually they become (wink) "good friends" and save the universe from more evil-meanies. The show's wardrobe people allowed her to sport a more reasonable look, with a smart Naval uniform, on the level with Japanese schoolgirl skirt length, and a pants suit or two. The writers elevated her status from steward and cleric of *Star Trek* days to a full fighting person in command. She could keep up with the best pilot in her sleek Star Fighter. But Buck's Thunder Fighter trumped hers.

My thoughts as a 23 year old, married gal in Dodge City, Kansas:

Dress: OMG! Who told Wilma she looked good in that hat? She looks like a Playboy Bunny candy striper, not an officer. What are the writers thinking? Okay, she must know she looks dumb, but hey, it's a job and she's acting. Okay, getting past the hat... She's got the legs for the skirt length, but is that reasonable for an officer? Hmm. *Star Trek's* gals had short skirts, must be acceptable. At least our troops have knee length skirts. That's more reasonable. Deering, jumping into a Star Fighter in a more appropriate star suit still looks good, functional. Everyone in space must stay fit and very slender.

However, those evil-meanie women who try to get Buck into their clutches... They dress like the 30's again. High collars, lots of jewels dripping from their chests. Did wardrobe watch re-runs of *Flash Gordon* or find old issues of *Vogue*?

Function: Finally a woman who can play with the guys and get dirty (though she seldom gets dirty because she's so good at what she does)! She can fight like a man, when needed. Commands. Shoots, but with compassion, never killing anyone, almost like a regular soldier. What is lacking? I can't decide.

Respect: Other than a few old-fashioned notions from Buck, everyone respects her competence, intelligence, modesty and wit. She's got rank, higher than Lt. Uhura. Yet, there is still an omission or withholding that makes me think the men on the show treat her as slightly less-than.

In my next article, I'll finish with a synopsis and my thoughts on *Battlestar Galactica* and compare these four shows, examining how they shaped American society's view of women in space.

Slave of the Machines

By Joe Vadalma

Back when I started reading science fiction, one of the major themes was the enslavement of human beings by machines. Well folks, the day of the machines has come. Gradually at first but more aggressively in recent times, the machines have taken over. You don't think so? Consider this:

In the United States in 1997 only 18% of American households had a web connected computer. By 2003 55% had at least one (62 million households). According to Wikipedia by June 2008 computers were in one billion households worldwide. According to a recent Neilson poll, 80% of households in the U.S. have home computers (PCs and laptops) of which 92% have Internet access. Many households have more than one. These statistics only include desktops and laptops. It does not include the computers in cell phones, IPODs and IPADs, e-book readers and appliances. Think about all the time that people spend on these devices, sending E-mail messages, playing games, instant messaging, doing actual work, Googling, Twittering, social networking, blogging and numerous other activities (including writing, which I do a lot of).

But that's only part of the story. How often have you made a phone call to some business and had to deal with these automatic telephone services? It used to be that if you called a business, you would get a receptionist who would route your call to correct department. Simple. Nowadays with these automatic systems, you are required to answer a bunch of silly questions by pressing buttons on your phone or talking to an automaton. Sometimes you never reach an actual human being. A recorded message is supposed to answer your question. Sure!

Speaking of recorded messages. Telemarketers calling you at inconvenient times of the day were bad enough, but now they are no longer human beings, but recorded messages. I tolerate one of these calls just about long enough to realize that it's an automaton talking to me before I hang up. Do these advertisers really believe I'm going to buy their product after being annoyed by one of their robots?

Another place where machines have replaced human beings is at the checkout counters of retail stores. Not only do you have to do your own checkout but bag the stuff as well. One thing I've noticed about these machines, however, they are more polite than the human clerks. How I miss the old grocery shops where the grocer would chat with you as he tallied up your bill with a pencil on a scrap of the same paper he wrapped your purchase in.

The most devilish machine ever invented was the automobile. They kill thousands every year in traffic accidents, pollute the atmosphere and our waterways and are a major cause of global warming. And now they are really out to get us with all the gadgets on the dashboard to distract us from our driving. Some have GPS systems which are what we used to call "back-seat drivers." "Turn left at the next corner," they say, and we obey. After all they know where they want us to go; we don't. If all these distraction were not enough to send us careening into another car, many of us bring along our cell phones and text people while driving with our knees.

Computers and the Internet have also introduced into our society many new crimes such as Internet scams, easily available pornography, identity theft, spamming, malware, computer viruses, hoaxes, online bullying and wholesale copyright infringement called e-book piracy, not to mention bad language, flaming, and other bad manners whose perpetrators are hidden by anonymity. How about all the spouses who use the Internet to cheat?

Little by little computers and the Internet are doing away with printed matter. We now read our newspapers, magazine and books on our computers, e-book readers and cell phones. People fall in love with people they have never met in person. Some people are completely taken over by computers, gamers and other people who live virtual lives in virtual worlds.

When I was a little boy, we had to deal with few machines. Our refrigerator was an ice box. Our clothes dryer was a clothesline. Grass was cut with a reel mower. My mother was the dish washer. Yet, somehow we were happy. Can we say the same being slaves to our machines?

Aoife's Kiss, Magazine of SF/F/H

December 2009 issue

Sams Dot Publishing

Cover price: \$7.00/issue

By Rachel V. Olivier

Part of being a scifi/fantasy reader (and writer) is seeking out ways to fulfill your genre addiction. The quarterly 'zine, Aoife's Kiss, is one of those ways I satisfy my own addiction. Put out by Sams Dot Publishing, Aoife's Kiss publishes short stories, poems and some reviews in the science fiction/fantasy/horror – "ew gross" genres. Over the years, I have found there to be a solid standard of enjoyable reading material between the pages (though, in the interest of complete disclosure, I have had some stories published there as well).

The December 2009 issue I just got around to reading has some particularly good reading I would like to recommend. This particular issue had more poetry and reviews than I remember seeing before, but the poem that stuck out the most for me was "Breakup" by Leonora Farrington-Sarrouf. Though the poem begins as a fight between two lovers, the end provides a chilling result for we puny humans in regards the breakup between these two particular lovers. For those who don't get enough of hard science fiction and crave planetary exploration and "real" science talk in your stories, this issue has "Jupiter's Child" by Lawrence R. Dagstine. The explorer's on Europa, one of Jupiter's moons, have one goal and one goal only, to bring bacteria back to Earth for study. It's a far future story and has some interesting results. On the fantasy/fairy tale front, my favorite in this issue was Kristin Noone's "The Glass Castle," based on the tale about the boy with the glass heart. I wasn't sure at first as the precepts and metaphors seemed a bit too thin, too obvious, at the beginning. But by the end the characters had me fully involved in the story and it wasn't as thin as I had at first thought. In the horror genre there were at least a couple of different offerings that caught my eye. There was "There's Something in Autumn Palms Lake" by Ken Goldman, which was more purely horror (not gore, really, more suspense). I'm not sure I "liked" it, but I appreciated it. When it comes to horror, I'm more of a "tongue-in-cheek" kinda gal, which is why I enjoyed "Tom and the Bench Warrant" by Kimberly Colley. Tom has figured out he has a knack for fixing plumbing, but neglected to apply for a plumber's license. This leads to complications, but I should leave it up to Tom to explain why.

I enjoyed the entire issue, but the stories above are what charmed me the most. I believe if you're going to start reading Aoife's Kiss, then this would be a good issue to start with. You can purchase Aoife's Kiss as separate issues or subscribe for one or two years at a time through the Genre Mall. Simple go to <http://www.genremall.com/zinesr.htm> and then scroll down.

Child of Fire
Harry Connolly
Del Rey, 2009
ISBN 978-0-345-50889-8
357 pages
Review by Danielle Parker

I've recently joined "Broad Universe", an organization of female speculative fiction writers. And we just had a discussion on why women focus so much on romance in their writing, even in speculative fiction. Female authors dominate urban fantasy, mostly with a heavy dosing of (guess what!) romance. And I'm talking *romance* as graphic descriptions of birds and bees getting it on, not *Romance* in the sense of the Romantic Age of literature, or in the Three Musketeers grand adventure sense. So is it as simple as *sex sells*? Or something more?

In any case, I'm rather glad to see new male authors take up the sex-soaked urban fantasy genre and send it in a new direction. *Child of Fire* is Harry Connolly's first novel in his "Twenty Palaces" series, and it's refreshingly action-oriented. Sex gets a nod here, but thank goodness it's not the be-all, end-all of the protagonist's existence. I get heartily sick, some days, of those lust-at-first-sight, gorgeous man-sexy-woman, only-bad-boy-for-me clichés.

Ray Lilly's got a real job to focus on, and it's a nasty one. Ray is an ex-con, and a magic user. Magic's not a nice thing in this world. The secretive Twenty Palaces Society pulled Ray's feet out of the fire, and now that's he's out of prison, they own him. The Twenty Palaces Society kills off magical invaders (predators), destroys spell books, and offs any imprudent human who call them into existence on the human plane. But The Twenty Palaces Society doesn't exactly belong with the good guys, either.

Ray's an expendable "wooden man" (decoy) in their brutal war, put out front to draw enemy fire. His boss, Annalise, hates his guts. She'd even answer his questions if she didn't think he was beneath her contempt. She's not worried about collateral damage to bystanders, innocent or not—including Ray. Given the Twenty Palaces Society supplied the lawyers that finessed Ray out of prison, not to mention the fact he now owns no more than the clothes he stands in, he's got little choice but do as told.

Ray and Annalise are sent to investigate a backwoods Pacific Northwest town where children have disappeared. Corrupt police, mysterious killer dogs, the civic-minded local madam (supporting the local economy during tough times), and the local toy factory grandee feature as lively villains.

The action's pretty non-stop and unusually well done. But there's a more serious theme of how war brutalizes all players in this book. Ray the ex-con makes a sympathetic and all-too-human protagonist learning lessons the hard way.

Fans of Jim Butcher's Dresden Files series will enjoy this fast ride. I liked it enough myself I've placed the upcoming second in the series, *Cage of Fire*, on order. Keep them coming, Mr. Connolloy!

Victory of Eagles

Naomi Novik

2009, Del Rey

Mass Market Paperback, \$7.99

ISBN: 978-0-345-512253

By Rachel V. Olivier

Victory of Eagles is the fifth and latest book by Naomi Novik in the Temeraire series. While these books may be read as stand alone—Novik does a good job of catching readers up at the beginning and finishing most of the arc by the end—they are books that are best read as part of the series. If you have a love for 18th century Napoleonic war stories, alternative history and dragons, it's a series you should consider looking into.

At the beginning of this book, our heroes, Temeraire and Will Laurence have been convicted of treason and have been imprisoned separately. Temeraire's good conduct in the breeding grounds buys longer life for Laurence (or so he's been told). And Will Laurence is only being kept alive to insure that Temeraire will not go off and start doing what dragons do best once Laurence is hung. It's kind of like one of those finger traps where the harder you pull on either end, the tighter it gets. Enter Napoleon and his troops, including a vast aerial corps of dragons headed by his own Celestial, the treacherous Lien.

Napoleon has landed on England's shores and the Army, Navy and Aerial Corps are all doing their best to fight him, but are basically in disarray. When the ship that Laurence has been consigned to is sunk, Laurence has the chance to escape, but sticks to his own honorable code and allows himself to be taken into custody after he's helped save as many people from the ship as possible. In everyone's eyes but Temeraire's he's a damned traitor, the worst sort.

But, because he is a condemned man already and because England is short on dragons, the Corps finds he is useful to them after all. Simply put, they can order him to do things that no other person could do. And besides, in the meantime, Temeraire has taken to forming his own troop and Laurence is the only one who can control Temeraire.

I found this fifth entry in the series very enjoyable. A lot goes on. It is, essentially, a war novel, after all. Because of the circumstances surrounding Laurence, he is basically isolated from humans, so many of the characters that we've grown attached to have gone away, while new characters, in the form of generals and dragons, have filled the space. As a result, there is a kind of a sea change in this work, as well as in the main characters. Which isn't bad, but it's different. And there's a bit too much of the, "let's put on a show! We can use the barn!" kind of thing going on where a particularly bright character always seems to come up with a neat trick at the last minute.

Here's the thing, one of the elements I was attracted to in the first three novels was Novik's use of 18th century language. She did it so well. It was rich and full and her complex sentences flowed across the pages and through the chapters. It was glorious. And while she made sure the language was less complex once the books changed to Temeraire's point of view, it was still complex. In this last book, while the story is still good, much of the rich language is lost. (And I think she may have lost a proofreader/copy editor or two as well.) The language is much simplified, closer to 20th century American, which I suppose attracts more readers. But a lot is lost. I miss that richness of language, while I understand it. And, by the end of the novel, it does make sense that the tone of the stories are becoming less "British" and more modern, as it were.

Most others won't miss that element, however, and will simply enjoy the story. So, I highly recommend it, especially if you ever feel like reading Horatio Hornblower stories with dragons.

THE HOTTEST LAPTOP
By Rebecca T. A. Besser

"You should see it," I exclaimed excitedly. "It's the sickest laptop I've ever seen!"

"I'll come look at it in a minute," Vivian called from the bedroom, her voice echoing down the hall. She sounded exasperated.

I growled and shook my head. I didn't let her poor attitude ruin my good fortune. I felt like I was a little kid again and it was Christmas morning. Knowing that something wonderful was waiting for me and all I had to do was go get it.

Clicking the mouse rapidly I prepared to bid on the find of my life. I didn't usually shop online, but a friend told me that a few laptops were up for auction, so I decided to check them out. I'd looked over three or four pages, not finding anything I liked, when I spotted it.

Right there at the bottom of the screen was a beautiful laptop. It had custom casing. Gold and red flames covered the top. According to the description given, the gold was metal plated and the red flames lit up when the laptop was on.

"So," Vivian said from right behind me. "What's so important?"

I jumped when she spoke. I was so engrossed in the computer screen that I hadn't heard her approach. I ignored the sarcasm in her voice and showed her my eye candy.

"Look at this," I exclaimed. "It's a laptop with flames and lights, and it's in my price range. I have about one hour to bid on it. That'll give me enough time to sign up and get a screen name or whatever you have to have!"

"You're going to spend that much on a laptop? Just because it looks cool?"

"Why not?" I replied, my attention was intent on the screen as I typed in the required information. "You spend way more than that each month when you buy clothes. Don't you buy them because of the way they look?"

I realized what I'd said when I felt her hand connect with the back of my head. I looked up to see her stalk back to the bedroom.

"Oh, well," I muttered and rubbed the back of my head. "The truth hurts. Literally!"

I went to work signing up for auction access and setting up a payment method. Three others had already started bidding, but the price was still under my budget. I knew that I had at least three grand in the bank to spend, but the last bid was only at one thousand. I was prepared to bid it all if it meant that the precious gem would be mine. I paused when I realized that there was no information on the operating system of the laptop, what brand it was, or how it ran.

I shrugged and decided that if it didn't work the way I wanted it to I would fix it. I'd have enough money left after buying it to give it whatever it might need.

Vivian came back, looked over my shoulder, and huffed.

"I'm leaving," she declared. "Are you going to get off that thing to tell me bye?"

I rolled my eyes as I stood to give her a hug and a quick kiss. I could tell that she was still aggravated with me and I should have given her a bit more attention. Most men dream of having a fiancé as gorgeous as my Viv. Her long blonde hair, blue-violet eyes, and endless legs could really do things to a man.

After she left I set to work bidding. It was going well, except for 'Hummer_21' undermining me. Every time I would bid he would slip in, out bidding me by fifty to a hundred dollars.

The last twenty minutes of the auction seemed to drag on forever. When I slid in at the last minute with a bid of two grand I prayed I would win.

When the announcement 'Congratulations 'luckySOB321' you have won the auction!' appeared on the screen, I was shocked. I vaguely wondered if all auctions said that or if it was something special the shop selling the laptop had set up to make you feel good after you'd spent so much money.

I was informed that it would take ten to thirteen business days for the laptop to arrive by mail. Apparently whoever had it was pretty far away. I looked again and noticed it had to come all the way from Europe!

I held my head in my hands and groaned.

"Good job, Hank," I berated myself. "You just bought a laptop that could be in a foreign language."

I noticed an e-mail address at the bottom of the screen and decided to e-mail the shop and see what I'd bought.

I sat there for an hour waiting to see if I would get a reply. Finally, it came. The laptop was in English! It had belonged to an American college student who'd been traveling through Europe. The hotel where he'd been staying had sent it to be auctioned off when they found it abandoned in his room. It had been on hold for six months, and since they couldn't contact him, they'd decided to auction it off to pay for the hotel bill. Apparently, he hadn't felt the need to pay it before he disappeared.

I decided it was his loss and my gain.

I waited impatiently for my laptop to arrive. Counting down the days with expectation. Two weeks past and no packages had come. I e-mailed the shop again to find out when they'd shipped it. They said they'd sent it out the same day the auction had ended and assured me that it would be delivered soon.

When I returned home from work the next day, my prize was waiting for me!

I looked at the plain brown packaging with the foreign postage dancing all over it, adding color to the otherwise bland exterior. I felt drawn to it. A burning desire to open it and turn on the laptop overwhelmed me to the point I was shaking. I didn't get scissors or a knife, I tore into the package with my bare hands and teeth. I imagine that I looked like a wild animal attacking its prey and devouring it in a frantic fit of hunger.

The primal action satisfied something in my soul. Must have been all that animal urge stuff that women always accuse men of. They were right. But it didn't really matter. All that mattered was releasing my treasure from the confines of its cardboard prison. The overlapping cardboard flaps created an X to mark the spot for me to tear the box apart. Styrofoam packing peanuts went flying like a white blizzard through our apartment. When I reached inside my hand touched the cool metal it sought.

I extracted the laptop from the shreds of brown that used to be a box. I gloried in my new possession. It was more marvelous than I could have ever imagined. A shiver traveled up, then down, my spine as I slid my laptop out of the protective plastic that some shop worker had lovingly wrapped it in. I sent up a silent prayer that the worker would be blessed for eternity.

Never in my life had I felt so connected to an object. Running my hand over the top I almost felt dirty. It felt sensual and sexy under my touch. I was actually aroused by a piece of machinery! It was crazy.

At the same time that my mind registered I was going crazy over a piece of metal, my hands felt the gold portion of the cover's flame graphics. They felt strange, slightly warm. I noticed the laptop was unusually heavy for being so thin. I examined it more closely and discovered that the metal was real gold!

"Holy cow," I whispered in an awed voice. "I've got a laptop made with gold!"

I ran into the living room grinning like a five-year-old with a gallon of bubbles. I jumped over the back of the couch, landing safely on the soft plush cushions. I hurriedly placed the laptop on the coffee table and flipped it open. The keyboard was custom as well. The keys were maroon, sporting black letters and symbols. The power button was a little gold star. I depressed it and my excitement went up another notch when it came to life. The keyboard lit up, the keys glowed a fiery red. The touch pad appeared as a concealing panel slid out of the way. The pad was in the shape of a demon's head. The mouse buttons were its tongue split in half. I closed it half way and looked at the cover. The reds in the flames were lit as well. Flickering. Moving. Alive. Like a real fire!

"Whoever built you liked fire," I said with a grin.

It booted lightning fast. No sooner had I looked back at the screen than it was ready for use. The desktop was a living thing, or so it seemed. There was a picture of a huge fireplace with flames that actually moved. The flames themselves were a bit disturbing. Every now and again you could see what resembled human faces in agony.

The fire place wasn't brick, but an old marble one with wrought iron and metal artistic molding. It reminded me of something you would imagine in an old or other world setting. The browser and all the graphics were in black with red or gold fonts.

I finally gave into the urge to touch the keys. They felt warm and reminded me of the feel of running my fingers up Viv's legs right after she'd shaved them.

I began to navigate through the laptop, noticing that it had the best of everything. The programs were astounding and fast! Every time I clicked the demon tongue my selection would be loaded instantly.

I looked through the control panel to see if I could find something out about who might have used or designed this piece of computing art. I clicked on 'User Accounts'. An error message appeared and instantly the laptop shut off.

"Must be out of power," I said and pressed the gold star. Nothing happened. "Hmm, wonder if there was a charger in that box."

I hopped over the back of the couch and headed for the hallway. I started throwing scraps of box this way and that, not caring that I was making even more of a mess. Finally, I found the power-cord I needed to charge the laptop. I attached the cord and sighed. I figured it would take hours to charge.

"Guess I'll clean up," I said to the apartment at large. "Wouldn't want Viv to have a fit when she gets home from the mall."

I grabbed a garbage bag from the pantry and cleaned up all the package pieces. I left the apartment, going out back to the dumpster to get rid of the bulky bundle.

When I got back I went into the living room to look at the laptop, to make sure it was real.

"I should be able to run it with the cord plugged in," I said as I looked down at the laptop.

I sat down on the couch and once again opened the laptop. I marveled anew at all the graphics and features it possessed.

I got up again to retrieve the phone cord that I'd purchased in expectation of this moment. I connected one end to my new toy and the other to the phone jack.

I configured the settings to connect to the internet. The setup process went incredibly smooth. It was like the laptop knew what I was going to type before I typed it.

I decided to send an e-mail to Viv's phone to let her know my package had arrived. Even the internet seemed faster! I just clicked, typed, and sent. I didn't have any waiting or lag.

I laughed. "This thing works faster than the computers at work!"

I'd been a computer programmer for a leading software company for years. They claimed that their computer speeds were the best in the world.

"This must be some new system," I said to myself. "Maybe a European company is going to try to get some custom, super-speed computers like this on the market. Maybe I should go work for them, looks like way more fun than what we make!"

"Who are you talking to?" Viv asked from behind me.

I jumped.

"When did you get home?" I asked standing to face her. Her hair was curled and held back in a pony tail, making her look incredibly sexy.

"I just walked in and heard you talking," Viv said. "So, I came to see if we had company or something."

"Nope," I said and slipped my hands into my back pockets. I wished she would leave again so I could be alone with my laptop. "It's just me in here, no guests to talk to. Did you get my e-mail? Did you have a good time shopping?"

I saw her eyes drop to my pants and I knew she was thinking something naughty by the way she smiled and the tilt of her head.

"Yes," she purred. "I got your e-mail. You really are a bad boy today. What's gotten into you?"

I ran my right hand through my hair. I'd no idea what she was talking about.

"I'm glad you liked the e-mail," I said lamely.

"Oh, I liked it," Viv said and circled around the couch. "I thought it was quite. Er . . . interesting."

When she started to undo the buckle of my belt I really got confused.

"What exactly, what exactly, did this e-mail that you got from me say?"

Viv paused and looked up at me. Her eyes were innocent, but her smile was sinful.

"You want to hear me say it, do you?"

She bit her lip and stood on her tip toes to whisper in my ear. What she whispered was adventurous. What she said I would never dream of sending in an e-mail let alone say in person. She said things that I would never have thought to ask her to do.

I thought about telling her that I only sent her a three-sentence e-mail and I didn't know who sent her that one. But I'm a guy, so I went with it and had a great couple of hours.

Viv drifted off to sleep; it's no wonder, she wore me out. I started to fall asleep myself and remembered that the computer was still running and online.

I stumbled down the hall to the livingroom and sat on the couch. I reached over to shut off the laptop. As soon as I touched it I felt energized like I'd just slept for ten hours.

I hadn't really had a chance to explore my purchase as much as I would've liked, so I sat there and went through all the programs and software. The operating system noted was 'LucSat,' and the processor was 'MenyaSol3032.' I'd never heard of either, but they seemed to work well.

I glanced up at the clock above the entertainment center.

"Wow," I muttered. "It's three in the morning. I've been on here for four or five hours."

I still felt energized so I decided to stay up. I had to be at work in a couple hours anyhow.

It was amazing. I felt like a teen again. I hadn't had this much energy in, well, I couldn't remember how long. I didn't even feel hungry. The only thing I craved was my laptop.

When I glanced up at the clock again I had just enough time to turn off the computer, get dressed, give Viv a kiss, and make it to work with one minute to spare.

By the time I reached my office I felt terrible. I didn't have any of the energy that I'd felt an hour before. I couldn't concentrate on anything I tried to work on. Thankfully I didn't have any deadlines looming over my head.

The whole day seemed to drag on and on. I rested my head on my desk and took a nap during my lunch break. I was too tired to care about food. After lunch I still felt exhausted, so I took half of a vacation day and went home.

When I got back to the apartment I headed straight for the bedroom, falling face first and fully dressed onto the bed. I vaguely remember the sound of the shower running, then I was out.

I woke up, what seemed like hours later, but according to the clock was only twenty minutes. I still felt weak, but I was more awake than I'd been all day at work. I sat up and glanced around. There was a note sitting on Viv's pillow saying that she had gone to lunch with one of her friends.

I sighed and leaned my head back against the head board. Every time I would almost drift off to sleep I would think about my laptop and how energized I'd felt when I was using it.

"Maybe some time online will make me feel better," I mumbled and shifted myself off the bed and onto my feet.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the hall mirror as I stumbled toward the living room. I looked terrible. There were dark circles around my eyes as if I'd been ill for weeks. It looked like I'd lost ten pounds since the day before. Hollows had formed in my cheeks and my skin emanated a grayish hue.

I shook my head and continued to the living room.

"Must be getting the flu or something," I mumbled as I sat down and lifted my laptop onto my knees.

I turned it on and decided to send Viv an e-mail letting her know that I was all right and to thank her for letting me rest.

Five minutes after hitting send I was wired again. Energy seemed to pour into me. My fingers flew over the keys, sending e-mails and surfing the net.

I looked up at the clock expecting to see three, maybe, four in the evening. I was shocked to see it was almost seven!

Buzzing like I'd just drunk three liters of caffeine-laced beverage I didn't care about the time. I figured I could call off work the next day. I had vacation days to burn.

Viv came home around eight o'clock. I was still clicking away on the glowing red keyboard.

"Hank! You look terrible," Viv cried when she saw me sitting on the couch. "Are you sick or something?"

She leaned over and gently placed her hand on my forehead as if to take my temperature.

"You don't feel hot," she said and frowned. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah, I feel really good actually. Did you get my e-mail?"

"Yes, I got it. But I don't think you're up to the repeat of yesterday you asked for."

I frowned and stared up at her. I didn't know what she was talking about. I hadn't asked for a repeat of yesterday.

"Maybe you should turn off the computer and take a nice hot bath," Viv cooed. "I can make you some soup and maybe we'll rent a movie."

"Okay," I said and smiled. "In a minute. I want to check my mail again before I log off."

I opened my e-mail and discovered that I had replies from everyone I had e-mailed earlier that day. It was strange because usually no one would get back to me that fast.

I opened the one from my boss first. I wanted to see what he thought of my new project proposal. I got upset when I read what was typed in the short message.

"You're fired. Don't bother coming back for your belongings. We will mail them to you. There is a restraining order being drawn up by our lawyers as I send this, so don't even think about coming within one hundred feet of the office. Because of the threatening nature of your e-mail I have contacted the FBI."

"What the hell?"

I was lamenting my loss of employment and possible imprisonment as I went down the list of e-mails.

One was from my best friend. It said never to contact him again. That no, he and his wife were not interested in partner swapping.

One was from my parents. It said they would not lend me money to open a strip club and that they were ashamed to have a son that would want to do such a thing.

The list went on and on. None of the reply e-mails had anything to do with the messages I'd sent earlier that day. Frantically I started to send replies, trying to figure out what was going on and apologize for things that I'd never even done. They kept coming back saying that the recipient had blocked me.

I placed the laptop on the coffee table and held my head in my hands. My life was falling apart.

I began to wonder if someone had hacked into my e-mail account and sent out bogus messages to ruin my life.

When I looked up I saw that a notification message had popped-up on the screen. It informed me that there was a security upgrade available to protect my e-mail accounts.

I reached forward and guided the cursor to the tab and clicked. I entered my info and without bothering to read the agreement I clicked, 'I accept'. Instantly a screen appeared that said, 'Thank you for enrolling. Please wait while we upload all your information to our system'.

I sat there waiting and began to feel weaker and weaker. It was like all my strength was draining away. I lay back on the couch and watched the screen.

Suddenly a message popped-up that said, 'Thank you for signing over your mind, body, and soul. I will be taking full payment now. You will be a slave to me for eternity and will help me find other souls. You will work as a processor in this laptop. Your number is 3033. ~ Grand Master and Dark Prince of the Underworld, Lucifer'.

I tried to stand, but fell back against the couch. It felt as if someone was holding my arms from behind.

I tried to yell to Viv, but no sound came out of my mouth. My throat was closed off as if strong hands were strangling me.

I couldn't move! I couldn't breathe! I panicked!

My strength was gone. I couldn't fight against my bonds. For a fleeting moment I thought about all the meals I'd skipped wishing now that I'd taken the time to eat.

I looked down at my arms. I couldn't see what was holding onto me, but my skin was indented like two giant hands were gripping my biceps. My skin burned as if hot metal was being pressed against it.

My panic increased as my feet started to transform into a blue-glowing-glob that was sucked into my laptop. It felt like someone was chopping me into pieces with an axe. Tears streamed down my face and still I was unable to make even the slightest of sounds. Gradually my entire body transformed and was consumed by the laptop.

The next thing I knew was being held down by laughing demons as they attached chains to my arms, legs, and neck. Each touch of their paws burnt my skin. Each scrape of their claws left deep gashes. All I could do was scream, causing the demons to laugh louder.

Finally they finished attaching the chains. I was forced to stand and was then drug into a huge throne room. The throne and pillars were made of hot magma. It flowed and moved while retaining the shape of the objects. As if the lava was encased in glass shells.

On the throne sat Lucifer himself, bored and evil. No imagining, no nightmares, could have prepared me to see his face. He was so hideous I threw up right there on the floor. The demon that held my bonds slapped me. My skin sizzled where he struck my face, as I fell into the puddle of my own vomit. Everyone, including Lucifer, laughed and jeered.

"I own you now," Lucifer said, his voice deep and gravely. "You will serve me and do as I say at all times. If you don't you will be whipped."

He paused to look me over before signaling the demons to take me away.

The demons carried me from the throne room and chained me to a giant lava wheel that resembled an old-fashioned grain mill. There were hundreds, maybe even thousands of wheels, with countless men and women chained to them.

I was instructed by the demon to push. When I gripped the rung it burnt my hands with a loud hiss. I screamed, letting go. The demon whipped me, repeating his command to push.

I am held captive here, pushing the mill that runs the processor of the laptop. My face now one of many in the fire of the desktop, withering in agony for all eternity because of my purchase and use of the demonic laptop. If you ever see a laptop with red and gold flames, don't touch it! Run the other way! It is a portal to Hell!