



*Jersey Devil Press*

Issue 92, August 2017

*The Victorian  
Mash-Up Issue*



# **JERSEY DEVIL PRESS**

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## Editor's Note

August has descended on the Swamps of Jersey and the oppressive heat has us pining for a simpler time, over a century ago, when the air quality was possibly even worse. Lucky for us, the JDP Victorian Mash-Up Special Issue has just arrived in its bioluminescent dirigible.

We begin with Julia Patt resurrecting Liz Frankenstein from both literary obscurity and the dead in a wonderful tale that also stars H.G. Wells' anonymous Time Traveler and, well, just about everyone else from the Victorian literary era, plus the occasional dinosaur. Also, Tesla. It's a corker.

Next, Dan Morey takes the obvious route and cross-pollinates *Little Women* and *Moby Dick*. Yeah, we didn't see that one coming either. Really, nobody fucking would, but Morey pulls it off brilliantly. It all starts when Jo March gets a harpoon for Christmas.

Finally, Jen Fawkes concludes the proceedings by mashing up James Moriarty with . . . Love? Infatuation? Obsession? We're still not entirely sure, but we do know Fawkes has crafted a lovely pastiche that just might be about the wonder of pastiche itself.

Mike Sweeney  
Guest Editor

# **In Which Liz Frankenstein Lives, Makes New Friends, Saves Nikola Tesla, and Fixes What She Can**

**Julia K. Patt**

Liz Frankenstein doesn't die.

She's not quite sure how it happens, or rather, doesn't happen. One minute, she's gasping on the floor, her windpipe crushed by the seven-foot, yellow-eyed monstrosity who had been waiting for her in the honeymoon suite. Then she's not. She has a vague memory of Victor and gunfire and shouting, but after that there's nothing. And then there's air, blessed air, and not dying.

Liz Frankenstein doesn't die, because it's bullshit that she dies in the first place, and no one's death should be a plot point, let alone for someone as obviously problematic as Victor Frankenstein.

But mostly Liz Frankenstein doesn't die because of the time traveler.

It's impossible to say whether the time traveler was a woman to begin with, because she has changed so much that no one, even the time traveler herself knows much about who she was originally. Maybe she was always a woman and no one wanted to say so. Or maybe in crossing her own timeline back and forth so often, she became a woman by accident. Or maybe she did it on purpose. It's almost certainly no one's business.

But the time traveler is a woman and she rescued Liz Frankenstein from certain death and literary obscurity. They live together in a quiet flat in Kensington and drink chai in their housecoats together on rainy Sunday mornings, of which there are many because it's still London, however much the time traveler's travels have changed it.

The time traveler is often surprised that Liz sticks around,

because nobody else ever has. But Liz Frankenstein likes the flat in London and she likes the time traveler, whom she calls Annabelle, whether that was her original name or not, it doesn't much matter.

When Annabelle is away, which is often, Liz goes to the library and takes out books on as many subjects as she can. She borrows atlases and plots journeys around the world. She studies the principles of physics, medicine, and biology. It takes her a while to get through Newton, but she does. She reads all of Euclid and then Lobachevsky after Euclid, even though Lobachevsky gives her headaches. And while she knows French and Italian and English, just by virtue of being Liz Frankenstein, she begins learning Arabic, Greek, Chinese, and Persian. Although its French translation is some years off, time travel or no, she reads *One Thousand and One Nights* in the original language and commits it to memory.

Liz is cognizant of all she did not learn while Victor was away at school in Ingolstadt. She thinks of the letters Henry Clerval wrote telling her everything they had studied together, the translations of Eastern poetry and Victor's own facility with chemistry. She thinks of the dark places Victor's quest for knowledge took him, the extent of which she'll never truly know. Her own quest, she decides, will be different.

When Annabelle is home, Liz asks her for lessons in self-defense, which Annabelle, obligingly, teaches her.

Annabelle's travels have changed London, of course, and the rest of the world, because there's no such thing as harmless time travel, as we all know. Mostly now there are more airships and robots and dinosaurs than there were previously in the city. And sometimes the robots take over Buckingham Palace and sometimes the dinosaurs eat the MPs in Parliament and overall the air traffic has



gotten pretty terrible.

But the more Annabelle tries to set things to rights by going back in time and forward in time and occasionally sideways in time, the more she makes a mess of it.

"Maybe," Liz suggests gently one evening, "The problems caused by time travel by definition cannot also be solved—at least solely—by time travel."

"Well, what do you suggest?" Annabelle, who has always solved all of her problems entirely by time travel, asks.

They find Otto and Axel Lidenbrock in a pub in Hamburg, washing away the day's dust and work with beer and telling the story of their journey into the volcanic vents to anyone who will still listen. Annabelle tries to explain their predicament, but she keeps getting the whys and wherefores mixed up, as one does one when one was in Ancient Egypt last week and 3456 Brazil yesterday and 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany this afternoon.

"The pterodactyls keep flying into Big Ben," Liz explains. "And there's an ichthyosaur living in the Thames. All the fishermen are terrified. It's slowed trade down something awful."

Otto strokes his beard and listens carefully. "We will have to come to England and take notes on their behavior," he says. "I have some ideas about how to corral them; nonetheless, I would like to see the individual specimens first. But I daresay we're going to need a lot of rope."

Afterward, they visit Frank Reade and Phileas Fogg to deal with the robots and the air traffic respectively.

Once London seems less in danger of imminent destruction by colliding dirigibles or rampaging T-Rexes, Annabelle agrees to take a break from time traveling and they go to the coast for a few



weeks. People are somewhat fearful, still, of going swimming, because there are rumors that one last megalodon is yet roaming the English Channel, despite the very successful prehistoric animal reclamation initiative and subsequent opening of the Lidenbrock Zoo & Aquarium just outside of Hamburg. (*Do not feed the animals, say all the signs.*)

But, then, it's sort of nice to have the beach to themselves. Liz has brought her books, but will leave them behind for a long walk on the sand or a dip in the water. Annabelle is relieved to see her so happy, and the ring of bruises around her neck has long since faded. For her part, Liz is grateful Annabelle has found it in her to sit still, in one place and time, for more than five minutes. At night, they lie back and admire the stars, both of them pointing out such and such constellation or a meteor shower just off the horizon.

It's a lovely vacation.

At least until a massive, whale-like submarine rises out of the deep and its deranged captain delivers a long monologue about how he will destroy the complacency of modern civilization, death to all mankind, yadda yadda, etc.

Liz invites Captain Nemo to their beach cottage for tea and scones; she has picked up this particular British-ism and likes it. Wild-eyed, Nemo looks around his new surroundings with something like shock. "It has been many years since I set foot inside a *house*," he admits.

"I don't doubt it," Liz says and pats his hand. "You've been too busy exploring the mysteries of the deep." She draws Nemo out by asking about his adventures, the life he's witnessed in the most yawning oceanic trenches, and his visit to Atlantis.

"Why, you should go on the lecture circuit," she tells him. "Who wouldn't be fascinated by such wonders?"

He shakes his head and explains again his deep hatred for

mankind, his horror of civilization, and his firm intention to destroy all of it.

Liz clucks her tongue. "It's no surprise you feel that way, given what's happened to you. But more than anything, you seem like a man ahead of his time. Annabelle, darling, weren't you just telling me about a time you visited when the world's oceans were in some danger and radical change and knowledge was needed to save them?"

Annabelle arches an eyebrow at Liz, but nods.

"I am quite certain the captain here could make a wonderful difference sometime in the future. Sadly, he would, of course, have to leave the *Nautilus* behind for the moment. But we won't let any harm come to it, will we?"

After some discussion and several pointed questions at Annabelle, Nemo concedes.

When she returns from transporting the captain to the future, Annabelle joins Liz in their sitting room, a smug look on her face. "I suppose some problems *are* best solved by time travel," she says.

"Yes, of course, my dear. Did I ever suggest otherwise?" Liz replies without looking up from her book.

When she time travels, Annabelle has a habit of picking up strays. This doesn't bother Liz—especially considering she was one of those strays once, too. She understands Annabelle can't help trying to fix things, even though they both know the price of her meddling. These efforts take her near and far, in space as well as time. Outfitted with wings and propellers and balloons since its first construction, the time machine can travel the entire world now in addition to any era. One afternoon, Annabelle returns from medieval Italy with a young woman, unconscious.

"Careful," Annabelle cautions Liz when she goes to help. She has covered her own mouth and nose with a scarf. "She's toxic."

They put the girl Beatrice in the spare room and open all the windows. Thank goodness it's a warm spring, Liz thinks more than once. Eventually, when Beatrice is well enough to talk, she tells them her story: what her father did and then what her lover did and how it would have killed her. Liz translates for Annabelle, although her voice cracks in places, as she thinks about her own story, incomplete though it may be.

She, after all, doesn't know the role Victor had in her almost-death, but she does suspect.

Annabelle takes Liz's hand and squeezes.

Eventually, Beatrice's deadly perfume dissipates. Liz facilitates this process by filling her room with ordinary plants and flowers. For a while, Beatrice wears a mask around her herbaceous companions, but eventually the oxygen they release replaces whatever compound her father had introduced to her system. She forgoes the mask after that in favor of veils. Just in case, she tells Liz.

Now that they've more or less cured her, Liz and Annabelle fully expect Beatrice to leave. The others always do. But she doesn't. She stays, tending the houseplants, and making pasta sauce on the stove and soon she, too, returns from the libraries with great stacks of books so that she can learn everything there is to know about botany. Liz teaches her English—and French for good measure—and Annabelle starts calling her Bea, and the three of them go on like that for a while, although the flat is a bit cramped, what with three adult women and a time machine.

"I suppose we ought to think about a house," Annabelle says.

It's stately and brick and has a garden-level basement perfect for Beatrice and Liz's experiments and an attic room just the right size to hold a time machine. The courtyard, of course, Beatrice fills with

plants. Liz doesn't ask where Annabelle got the money or the means to buy a house. She imagines this is yet another problem most easily solved by time travel, whatever its repercussions. Anyway, she trusts Annabelle.

From time to time, they go out and fix the damage done by their ever-changing reality, the holes Annabelle inevitably punches in the current timeline filling up with creatures and gadgets from everywhere and every time. They call in the experts when they need them, but more and more they've gotten quite adept at solving these problems on their own. The carnivorous plants that attack the Underground are obviously right up Bea's street, for example.

But then, a few months after they've settled in, something else happens. People start bringing them *other* problems.

There's the case of the unseen burglars, injected with a serum that makes them invisible. Another time, the elderly members of a gentlemen's club drink a potion that returns their youth but brings out their worst impulses. On a third occasion, an anarchist creates an army of man-wolf hybrids that attack the newly constructed Victoria & Albert.

Annabelle installs a discreet bronze plaque next to their front door that reads: *The Frankenstein Agency: For Oddities, Curiosities, and Abnormalities.*

It's a slow afternoon at the agency when Captain Walton shows up. Annabelle is away again and Bea is working downstairs on an aloë vera varietal for mechanical burns. Liz herself is catching up on the filing, which always seems to be out of order between her time-traveling partner and their English-learning ward. When Walton comes in, suntanned and wind-burned as sailors always are, she assumes he's a client and lets him know she'll be with him shortly.

She almost drops the tea tray when he tells her why he's there:

"I knew your husband."

He shows her the letters he wrote his sister Margaret about Victor's story and the creature and their final encounter out there on the ice. He says he doesn't know what happened to Frankenstein's creation, whether he fulfilled his pledge that to destroy himself and Victor's body or if he still roams free. Nonetheless, Walton's certain humanity has nothing left to fear from him; it was clear the fight had gone out of him after his creator's death.

Liz sits and listens. She asks the occasional question and refills Walton's tea. When it's apparent how much the good captain loved Victor and tried to care for him, she takes his hand. Neither of them acknowledges the other's weeping and it's some time before they can continue.

She understands, maybe better than anyone, Walton's admiration for Victor, his mind, and his passion for knowledge. After all, she's been under that spell herself. Liz thanks Walton for coming to see her.

"But how did you find me?" she asks.

"The oddest thing—an article about the Hyde outbreak in the paper. Your agency's name was mentioned as assisting with the containment and quarantine. I thought perhaps—well, Victor mentioned a brother, Ernest, so I thought. But it's you and years later. How is that possible?"

Liz tells him about the night in the inn and Annabelle and everything that's happened since then and how time has gotten a bit wonky in London lately. It's Walton's turn to sit there silently. When she's finished, he expresses his amazement and, taking his hat in his hand, tells her that he's at her service—any time.

She tells him to come back whenever he would like and hopes he'll write her about his explorations.

\* \* \*

Liz doesn't immediately tell Annabelle what's happened, but instead waits and thinks about what she wants to do with the new information, if anything. Annabelle would rush off to try to fix things, either save Victor or prevent him from doing his experiments or the creature from killing William. (This last thought always moves her to tears.) It is the nature of time travelers, Liz knows, to want to change things. And it's what she loves about Annabelle, most days: her desire to make everything better.

In the meantime, there's plenty of work for them to do: automata gone awry due to bad wiring; an elixir that gives the drinker superhuman strength and a ferocious temper; a madman who stole a mastodon from the royal zoo and rode it around the countryside, trampling the spring crops.

And then Walton brings back someone from his travels—he now captains an airship— a fellow tormented by the work of a vivisectionist in the South Pacific. “He just needs a quiet place to rest, is all,” the captain tells her apologetically. “Keeps seeing the faces of animals in people and having fits. I thought perhaps you could help, given your, ah, expertise.”

They look after Ned Prendick for a few months. For much of it, he barely leaves his room and spends much of his time muttering about the Beasts in the People and the People in the Beasts. Eventually, they coax him into assisting Beatrice with her plants. Because she still goes veiled, her face doesn't torment him. And plants are, of course, much safer than animals or people. On this principle alone, the two become friends.

Walton comes to look in on him from time to time and sits with him and brings him books. Liz imagines Prendick, with his twitches and ravings, reminds Walton somewhat of Victor. And, rather like the time traveler, the good captain clearly has a particular affection for strays.

He just pulls his out of the sea instead of all of time and space.

Liz leaves them to it. Perhaps Ned Prendick will have to choose between Walton and Beatrice eventually, but also maybe he won't.

Maybe whether they stay friends or become lovers doesn't have to matter. In any case, Liz tries not to meddle, and the peace seems to continue.

"This little family of yours keeps growing," Annabelle remarks one evening. She and Liz are sitting by the fire, enjoying a quiet moment.

"*Our* little family," Liz corrects her and rests her head on Annabelle's shoulder.

This is the make-up of the agency when Nikola Tesla goes missing. Walton and Annabelle are both home from their travels. Ned and Beatrice have all but taken over the downstairs lab. Liz, only somewhat to her chagrin, has become more of an administrator than a scientist. Luckily, she's good at it. And she still keeps up on all the journals, if only for professional reasons.

Scotland Yard brings them the case, a veritable locked-door mystery. No one can figure out how Tesla, in town for a demonstration, could have been snatched from a closed warehouse. And yet he was.

Annabelle recognizes the scorch marks on the floor immediately. "Someone else has built a time machine," she says. "It looks like it's been damaged, though. See the skid marks? That's a rough landing."

It turns out Tesla himself has been working on the means to manipulate reality in this way, but his own projects are incomplete. "Whoever took him, though," Liz hypothesizes, "either wants something he's developed *or* wants to keep him from creating a better version. As you say, it doesn't look like this was a very good time machine."

It doesn't take them long to identify Tesla's rival, the inventor Thomas Edison, as the likeliest culprit.

They take Walton's airship to Edison's not-so-secret lab, a small



island just off the coast of Maine. Tesla, unfortunately, isn't there. "You'll never find him," Edison informs them, sneering. (They've subdued his lackeys with a soporific perfume of Beatrice's design.) "I've hidden him in a time and place you'll never guess."

Annabelle goes over to Edison's time machine, which is indeed smoking and dented and looks barely functional. She tinkers with the controls, rubs a bit of dust between her fingers, and checks her own watch. "Prehistoric France," she declares. "The caves at Lascaux, perhaps?"

Edison's jaw works for a moment. His eyes bug. Eventually, he recovers. "No matter. You're too late. My machine is malfunctioning too badly for a second trip and Tesla and I are the only ones who know how to fix it. He's trapped. Trapped forever. History will forget him, and I will triumph."

Annabelle smiles. "But my dear, Mr. Edison," she purrs. "There's no such thing as too late when you're a time traveler."

Once they've restored Tesla to his work and headed home, Annabelle pulls Liz aside. "Something has been bothering you, I think. I wish you would tell me what."

Liz tells her the whole story about Walton: how he found Victor on the ice and heard his story, how Liz now knows why she almost died and what happened to her family.

"The problem is," she finishes miserably. "I don't want to go back and fix it. It would change everything and I'm . . . I'm happy. Here with you. Is that selfish?"

Annabelle considers this. There's a lot she would like to say and do now, including grab Liz and never let her go. But she refrains for the moment. "I would have, if you'd asked, I think. But I'm glad you didn't. So if you're selfish, so am I."

Instead, they sit down to dinner with Beatrice and Ned Prendick and Walton and listen to them talk about the day and also

the possibility of life on other planets. And Liz is happy, almost entirely happy, in this moment before the next thing, whether it's flying machines invading from the 20<sup>th</sup> century or aliens or Eastern European vampires with oddly specific real estate concerns.

It's some time, a few months, before she understands what she wants to change about the past.

As asked, Annabelle takes Liz to the remote coast of Scotland to a strip of land with just ten people living on it. Neither the creature nor Victor is in sight, although Liz imagines they're both nearby. There is still the temptation to stop everything, to undo it all, but it's occurred her that there may be no fixing Victor Frankenstein or his creation, as inextricably linked as they are.

And regardless, the Liz she was before, so wrapped up in the Frankensteins, could not have stopped it—that she knows and has come to accept.

So instead, she rescues the little bundle of bones and flesh from the seaside lab. Unfinished, unloved, soon to be destroyed by her creator, he so fearful that she could destroy mankind. Whatever she was meant to be and for whom, she doesn't deserve to end this way, torn apart and burned on the unforgiving coast.

Liz has two choices now, she knows. She could, as she has planned, bury the half-finished woman Victor discarded in Scotland. Put up a marker for her. Give her a name. She deserves a name at least.

Or she could bring the creation back with her, finish her, bring her to life, raise her with love and compassion, and add her to the little group of misfits she and the time traveler have assembled, quite without intending to. It's true she does not know the principles Victor used to give his creations life, but there's much more science to support her research now than there was his then. Plus, she's Liz Frankenstein. If anyone can figure it out, she can.

However she chooses, whatever she does now, she can fix this at least.

**JULIA K. PATT** is a writer and teacher living in Maryland. Her work has recently appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Escape Pod*, and *Luna Station Quarterly*. Follow her on Twitter for more: @chidorme.

# Call Me Little Woman

Dan Morey

"I'm afraid it's going to be a dreary Christmas," said Meg.

"Oh, it will be awful!" said Amy. "Marmee has spent all our money on potatoes for that wretched Hummel family. I doubt I'll even get a lime in my stocking."

"You don't deserve a lime," said Jo, from her favorite place on the hearthrug. "You're too conceited."

"And selfish," added Meg. "Don't you know the Hummels are starving?"

"I was hoping for some new music. Or a kitten," said Beth, with a sigh.

"You shall have both," said Jo. "Aunt March paid me a holiday bonus this year. Meg shall have a new scarf, and Marmee a new bonnet, and Amy shall have nothing because she is already spoiled."

Amy made a horrid face, and stomped out of the room. "I hate you, Josephine March!" she cried.

"Why must you tease her so?" said Meg.

Beth put a log on the fire and said, "What about you, Jo? What will you buy for yourself?"

"Why, my harpoon, of course," said Jo.

On Christmas morning, Meg answered a knock at the door and found Laurie on the step with a steaming bowl of wassail.

"Are you ready to go caroling?" he said.

"Oh, no," said Meg. "We've only just opened our presents. You'll never pull Amy away from her sketchbook. Or Beth from her music. Or Jo from her harpoon."

"Jo from her what?" said Laurie.

"Her harpoon. She's sharpening it now."

Laurie went in to have a look at Jo's harpoon. It had a wooden base and a long iron neck with a frightful barb at the end.

"Whatever will you do with it?" said Laurie, as Jo worked the blade with a whetstone.

"I shall kill whales," she said. "What else?"

"But Jo. You're a girl. Girls don't kill whales."

"I'm not a girl. I'm a tomboy. And I want to get some blood under my fingernails."

"Oh, Jo," laughed Mrs. March.

All winter, Jo practiced throwing her harpoon at the old elm tree in the front yard. Soon she could throw it further and more accurately than Laurie, or even Mr. Brooke, Laurie's tutor.

"That girl has a remarkable arm," Mr. Brooke told Mrs. March. "But she doesn't really think she's going whaling, does she?"

"Oh, no," said Mrs. March. "It's just a flight of fancy. Jo has a wild imagination."

When springtime came, Jo took her harpoon, which she had named Undine, to the pond to try her hand at spearfishing. She walked along the bank until she saw a big catfish, then lifted Undine above her head and hurled it at the fish's broad back. Her heart raced as the harpoon split the water, and she yelped with glee when it hit home. But Jo's celebration was short-lived. Her harpoon had pinned the fish to the bottom of the pond some ten feet from shore.

"How in the world will I retrieve it?" said Jo. "I forgot to attach the rope!"

She thought about running home to get Laurie or Mr. Brooke, but decided against it.

"As soon as I leave, someone will come along and steal my

Undine. I shall just have to get wet."

Jo kicked off her shoes, pulled up her skirt and bloomers, and waded into the pond. She grabbed hold of the harpoon and yanked upward as hard as she could. When it came loose, Jo fell backward, landing with a splash in the shallow water. Her clothes were soaked, but she felt a powerful sense of accomplishment when she raised the harpoon and saw the bloody fish.

"Now I am a fisherman," said Jo.

One afternoon in July, a coach arrived at the March home, and a man with luggage climbed out.

"It's Father!" cried Amy, from her bedroom window.

Meg and Beth and Jo flung open the door and ran out to greet him. He dropped his bags and took all three of them in his arms.

"Did you miss me?" he chuckled.

"How long will you stay?" said Jo. "Is the war over?"

"I'm afraid it's only a short leave."

Everyone, especially Jo, was happy to have Father home. She showed him her harpoon and told him about her fishing expeditions. When it came time for him to leave, she asked her mother if she could go too. "I'd like to visit New York and stay at the boardinghouse with Mrs. Kirke."

"A very good idea," said Mrs. March. "I'll write her you're coming. And I'm sure Aunt March will lend us the money for an extra train ticket."

"The train goes too fast, Marmee. I want to have as much time with Father as possible. Can't we take a coach?"

"I don't see why not, Jo."

On the day of departure, Jo made a tearful goodbye to her sisters, and joined her father in the coach.

"Why is Jo bringing a harpoon to New York?" said Amy.

The coachman drove them into New Bedford the next day, and pulled up outside a dreadful-looking inn.

"We aren't stopping here, are we?" said Mr. March. "The place is surely condemned."

The ramshackle old building shook and rattled in the strong coastal winds. A stale beer scent emanated from within.

"It's what the little woman told me," replied the coachman. "Spouter Inn."

"Where did you hear of such a hostelry?" said Mr. March to Jo.

Jo untied her harpoon from the top of the coach. "I'm not going on to New York," she said. "I'm staying here, until I can find a good whaling ship."

"Oh, Jo," said Mr. March. "I know better than to try and stop you, but please think about what you're doing. The high seas are no place for a young lady."

"I'm a harpooner," said Jo. "The best in New England. And I'm out for blood."

Mr. March shook his head mournfully. "I have seen blood, Jo. Enough blood to fill an ocean. There is nothing heroic about blood or killing."

"Please give my apologies to Mrs. Kirke," said Jo. "Goodbye, Father."

Jo turned away brusquely, hiding a tear, and entered the inn without looking back. She heard the horses clatter away and began to cry.

"There, there," said the landlord, coming out from the dismal bar. "What's the matter?"

"I've just said goodbye to my father," said Jo with a sniffle. "He's going back to the war and may never return."

"Course he will. Johnny Reb's got nothing on our boys." The landlord laid a comforting hand on Jo's shoulder and tousled her



long, chestnut hair.

"I need a room," said Jo, composing herself.

"This is a whaler's house, girl."

"You see my harpoon."

"I do. And figured you was delivering it to some cruddy blubber-chaser or other."

"I am the cruddy blubber-chaser. Now how about that room?"

"Live long enough, and you'll see everything," said he landlord. He limped over to the desk and studied the book, stroking his gray beard as he did. "Nothing," he said. "Unless you wouldn't mind sharing with a couple of men. A-heh-heh."

"I don't mind," said Jo.

"Oh, now look, missus. I have to draw the line somewhere. These men are whalers."

"I'm sure they're perfect gentlemen. Show me the room."

"Lord, almighty. They'll put me in jail for this."

The landlord led Jo up the creaking stairs, down a hall with a warped floor, to a door, which he kicked open. Inside, two men, one white, the other a tattooed Polynesian, were sprawled out on a prodigious bed, under a patchwork counterpane. The Polynesian's arm was thrown over the white man's chest in a parody of marital affection.

"Get up, you two! You've got a new roommate!" shouted the landlord.

The Polynesian leaped out of bed and snatched up a harpoon. He made the most hideous face, and grunted like an angry boar.

Jo smiled enthusiastically and said, "Oh, I love your harpoon! And that counterpane is beautiful. It reminds me of the one my sisters and I made for Aunt March!"

The Polynesian lowered his weapon and cast a puzzled glance at his bedmate. The handsome white man stood, covering himself with the counterpane, and said, "Where are you manners? Can't you see there's a lady present? Please enter, miss. You may call me

Ishmael. And this is my friend, Queequeg."

"Very pleased to meet you," said Jo, shaking their hands. "It looks as if I'm to sleep here tonight."

"And very welcome you'll be. Right, Queequeg?"

"Uh."

"Well, I guess you queer fish will get along just fine," said the landlord.

That night, Ishmael and Queequeg slept on the floor, atop the soft counterpane, leaving the entire bed for Jo. In the morning, she awoke to find Queequeg at the mirror, shaving with his harpoon.

"My goodness!" said Jo. "It must be sharper than mine!"

"Plenty. Kill-ee good," said Queequeg.

Jo got out of bed and stood next to him, admiring the labyrinthine tattoos on his face and chest. "Are you really a cannibal?" she said.

"Eat-ee plenty men," said Queequeg.

"Would you like to see my harpoon?" said Jo.

"Uh."

Jo took her harpoon out from under the bed. "She's called Undine, after the water sprite."

Queequeg hefted the harpoon and made a couple throwing motions. He told Jo it was a good harpoon, and that it would kill many whales, after it was sharpened properly. "Me sharp-ee. You see." He went to work on Undine with his stone, rousing Ishmael, who sat up and yawned.

"Good morning, Ish!" said Jo. "Fair dreams?"

"The fairest. I was at sea. Far from these overpopulated shores."

"I think I shall miss people terribly when I'm away at sea. Don't you like people, Ish?"

"Sometimes I would enjoy nothing more than to knock the hats from their heads."

"Marmee says that all people are good at heart. Even if they don't always show it."

"Uh," said Queequeg.

Ishmael, who had slept in his clothes, got up and splashed some water on his face. Jo, still in her nightshirt, combed her hair.

"If you expect us to get you on a whaling ship, that will have to go," said Ishmael.

"What will have to go?" said Jo.

"The hair. You'll have to pass as a man, at least until we're underway."

"But my sister Amy says my hair is my one beauty!"

"Bring me the harpoon, Queequeg."

And so the trio set out for Nantucket in search of a whaling vessel. Jo, now with considerably less hair, wore Queequeg's tall beaver hat and a pair of Ishmael's trousers. Halfway to the island, the ferry hit rough seas. Ishmael and Queequeg stood on deck, passing a pipe, as Jo clung to the rail, sliding back and forth with every swell. "Christopher Columbus!" she cried. "It must be a hurricane!"

Ishmael and Queequeg laughed.

"Why do you laugh? We're going to die!" said Jo.

"You'll get your sea legs soon enough," said Ishmael. "At least you don't get sick."

No sooner had he said this than Jo leaned over and vomited into the frothy Atlantic.

Only one whaling ship was preparing to sail from Nantucket. She was a three-master called the *Pequod*, and her captain, Ahab, had a strange reputation. He'd lost a leg to a monstrous whale, and had lately turned moody and reclusive. He was, by all accounts, however, a fine seaman, so, lacking any other options, Ishmael, Jo,

and Queequeg boarded the *Pequod* to inquire about shipping on her.

Queequeg demonstrated his skill to the ship's owner by hurling his harpoon from the bow and sticking it in the center of the mainmast. Ishmael had never been whaling (he was a merchantman) and could not throw a harpoon. The owner signed him on as a common sailor, at much less pay. When Jo stepped up to his desk, the salty mariner laughed outright. "And what would I want with a scrawny scrap like you? We've already got a cabin boy."

"I'm the best harpooner you're likely to see," said Jo, lowering her voice to sound mannish.

The owner told the young man to prove it, provided he could lift a harpoon.

Jo gripped Undine, turned casually, and whipped her at the mainmast, where Queequeg's harpoon remained stuck. Undine cut the air like a lightning bolt, struck the wooden butt of the other harpoon, and cleaved it in two.

"Ye Gods!" said the owner. "You'll get the same share as the savage, to be sure. Sign here."

Jo wrote "Joseph March" in the book, and followed her friends to their sleeping quarters in the forecabin.

Jo's first weeks at sea were very trying. She became so sick during a squall at the Grand Banks that she had to stay in her hammock for a whole day. The men teased her, but not too badly, for they had all been greenhorns themselves at one time.

Jo found the food (mostly salt pork and biscuits) tolerable, but the stench of her fellow sailors, who seldom washed, was hard to endure.

"I cannot even speak to the cook, unless I'm a harpoon's length away," she confided to Ishmael.

“Yes,” said Ishmael. “The cook’s breath is very foul. But the second mate’s is worse. Mind you don’t get chewed out by him.”

Captain Ahab was an enigma. He closed himself up in his cabin all day, and walked the deck only after dark. Jo, lying below in her hammock, could hear his whalebone leg thumping slowly from bow to stern.

One night, she crept up the ladder and peeked toward the aft of the ship. A tall figure, wrapped all in shadow, loomed behind the helmsman, who steered with the utmost attention. A flash of dry lightning illuminated the scene, and Jo beheld the scarred visage of Captain Ahab. It was a frightening face, chapped and wrinkled, with cold, possessed eyes.

“You!” thundered Ahab.

The sky went black again. Jo listened intensely.

Clunk. Clunk, clunk. “You there!”

Ahab was coming toward her, but Jo was too terrified to flee. Just as she was about to scream, someone grabbed her from behind and pulled her down the ladder.

“Get back in your hammock,” said Ishmael.

Jo did as she was told, and closed her eyes tightly.

“Who dares spy on me?” boomed the voice from above.

“Tis I,” said Ishmael, climbing through the hatch. “Here to stand watch.”

“Well, be about it, man,” said Ahab. “You’re late.”

Try as she might, Jo didn’t sleep a wink that night.

Jo performed her daily duties with good cheer, but was beginning to wonder if she’d ever see a whale. Then, one day off the coast of Iceland, the lookout shouted what she’d been waiting many weeks to hear: “There she blows!”

A massive sperm whale breached off the *Pequod's* bow, launching a spume of water from its blowhole. Jo had never seen anything so magnificent. She stood on the deck in a trance as the men busily gathered their gear.

"Get your harpoon and get in the boat!" said Starbuck, the first mate.

Jo fetched Undine and hopped into the whaleboat with Starbuck and the oarsmen. Before she could sit down, the deckhands started lowering. Jo tumbled into her seat, nearly dropping Undine over the side.

"Hold on to that iron," said Starbuck. "You're going to need it."

The boat landed on the calm sea, and the oarsmen threw off the ropes. "Stroke!" said Starbuck "Break your backs, men!"

Three other boats were converging on the whale, each with a harpooner in the bow. Queequeg waved at Jo. The whale, rolling languidly in the sun, took no notice of the commotion.

"Get that line attached," said Starbuck.

Jo secured a rope to Undine, but when she looked up, the whale was gone. She saw nothing but miles and miles of empty ocean.

"Hold, now," said Starbuck in a whisper. "He'll be back."

Minutes elapsed without a sign of their quarry. Then Queequeg grunted and pointed his harpoon at a disturbance on the water. Little bubbles were rising up from the depths and bursting on the surface.

"Pull back!" said Starbuck.

As the oarsmen frantically tried to reverse the boats, the ocean erupted, and a mountain of gray-blue flesh vaulted into the air. The whale thrashed its mighty flukes and crashed down lengthwise, releasing an enormous wave that capsized Queequeg's boat. Jo let out a high-pitched squeal as the ridge of water surged beneath her. The boat stayed afloat, but Starbuck shot her a suspicious look.

The whale, furious, turned and swam directly at them. It opened its cavernous mouth, and Jo wondered if the story of Jonah were true, if she could really live in the belly of a whale.

“What are you waiting for?” said Starbuck. “Let fly!”

Jo raised her harpoon and threw it with all the strength she had. The iron struck true, and blood erupted from her enemy’s brow. The whale aborted its attack and dove straight down. Jo watched the rope uncoiling rapidly from the tub at her feet, and feared they would be dragged to the bottom. Fortunately, the whale halted its dive and began to swim in a westerly direction, pulling the little boat with it.

“Nantucket sleigh ride!” said Starbuck.

The whale swam and swam, taking them far away from the *Pequod* and the other pursuit boats. Jo had never felt such exhilaration. The wind rushed over her face, blowing off her hat. When the whale finally stopped and surfaced, she was ready with another harpoon.

“Let him have it!” said Starbuck.

Jo drove the dart into the whale’s side, and Starbuck chucked another, connecting just below the blowhole. The whale bled profusely. Jo never imagined that a single creature could hold so much blood. They rowed closer and Starbuck stabbed it repeatedly with his lance. As the leviathan wallowed in its gore, the crew celebrated with shouts of joy.

“A fine payday, my little woman,” said Starbuck, grinning at Jo.

Back on the *Pequod*, Jo sat nervously in her hammock.

“Why are you hiding down here?” said Ishmael. “You’re the hero of the day.”

“Starbuck knows,” said Jo.

“Knows what?”

“He *knows*.”

“Oh. Well, I wouldn’t worry about that. He isn’t likely to throw his star harpooner overboard for being a girl. You’ve just earned this ship a great deal of money. Now come with me.”



Ishmael led Jo topside, where the crew were cutting up the whale and boiling its blubber to make oil.

"It smells worse than the cook!" said Jo. "And the smoke! My goodness!"

As she bent to study the workings of the furnace, a gang of men grabbed her from behind and lifted her onto their shoulders.

"Here she is, boys!" the ringleader cried. "Three cheers for our little woman!"

All the sailors looked up from their chores and shouted, "Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

"Oh, dear," said Jo to Ishmael, as the men carried her off. "Starbuck's told them all!"

And so he had, even Captain Ahab, who stood on the quarterdeck, observing the proceedings with a gloomy eye.

"For she's a jolly good fellow!" sang the crew.

Jo's bearers stood her atop a barrel, and she took a delighted bow. It reminded her of the theatricals she used to put on with her sisters, except now she was a real-life Roderigo!

"Come here, Starbuck," growled Ahab.

Starbuck's smile faded when he saw the captain's stormy countenance.

"Muster the crew," was his command.

"But sir—"

"Now!"

Starbuck relayed the order, and the men quickly ceased singing. Ishmael helped Jo down from the barrel, and they joined their shipmates at the mainmast, where Ahab was holding aloft a gold doubloon.

"I seek a white whale," said Ahab. "And whoever raises him will have this ounce of Spanish gold. The whale has a creased forehead, a bent jaw, and three rusty harpoons in his side. You cannot mistake him."

"Would that be Moby Dick?" said Starbuck. "The whale that took your leg?"

"The very same. When you see the devil, sing out, and the gold will be yours!"

Everyone cheered, except the cook. "What about this little woman?" he said, pointing at Jo. "Girls on ships are bad luck, as well you know, Captain."

"Bad luck?" said Ahab. "There's your bad luck, bubbling away in the try-pots. If she's bad luck, I'll take a hundred of her."

"I suppose we'll be expected to wash now," said the cook. "What with a lady on board."

"Back to your galley, lout! The rest of you, find me a white whale."

Three days later, the *Pequod* came upon a pod of five blue whales. They were gigantic, some of the largest the men had ever seen. Jo headed for her boat, but Captain Ahab said, "Sail on."

Starbuck was incredulous. "You're letting a fortune swim away, sir!"

"It's the white whale I'm after," said Ahab.

As the months wore on, the captain grew more distant, and the crew more restless. Jo and Queequeg passed the time by carving intricate designs on their harpoons. Ishmael isolated himself in the crow's nest, where he pondered life's mysteries. Starbuck—his round, mutton-chopped face growing increasingly red—seemed on the verge of mutiny.

"The captain's gone mad," he told Jo. "He thinks of nothing but Moby Dick. And meanwhile, we make no money."

"This endless searching for a single whale is wasteful," said Jo. "We must take time by the forelock, or *fetlock*, as my silly sister Amy says, and start filling our pots. I shall have a word with Mr. Ahab myself."

"I'd reconsider that if I were you, missy. Yesterday the captain knocked a man down and nearly kicked him to death with that

whalebone leg of his."

"Why would he do such a thing?"

"The fellow had the audacity to complement the captain's pea coat, and ask him where he might acquire a similar one."

"Outrageous!" said Jo.

She marched straight to Ahab's cabin and pounded on the door.

"Who dares disturb me?" thundered the voice within.

"Jo March. Of Orchard House, Concord."

The door swung open, and Ahab stood there scowling.

"Good day," said Jo, brushing past him into the room. "Oh, what a mess your cabin is! There are plates and mugs everywhere, and it smells like a kennel!"

Ahab swung around on his peg-leg and watched as Jo tidied up his quarters.

"When was the last time you changed these sheets? Marmee would take away your singing privileges for a week if she saw this!"

"I hate singing," said Ahab.

"Nonsense," said Jo, fluffing a pillow. "Everyone likes singing. Would you like to sing with me? The cook taught me a funny little tune called 'The Female Cabin Boy.' I don't think Marmee would approve of all the lyrics, but we can skip the naughty parts if you like."

Ahab distended his nostrils and snarled, "Get out of here before I have you keelhauled!"

Jo smiled brightly. "When my sister Amy is in a foul mood, we give her a lime, and it always cheers her up. Would you like a lime, Captain Ahab?" She took the fruit from her pocket and offered it to him. For a moment it looked as if Ahab would slap it out of her hand, but then his face softened and he grinned a little.

"My wife likes limes," he said. "And so do I. Keeps the scurvy away. I believe I will have one, little woman."

"Good. Now that you're in a better mood, maybe we can get back to killing cetaceans."

"I'll tell you what, Jo," said Ahab, peeling the lime. "The next whale we see, we're going to kill, be it white, blue, or phosphorescent. How does that sound?"

"Capital," said Jo. "I'll tell the crew!"

Though Ahab remained in good spirits, no whales could be found. When the *Pequod* finally crossed the equator into the southern whaling grounds, it was Christmastime. Jo decorated as best she could, painting the capstan green and calling it her little Christmas tree.

"I'm awfully homesick," she said to Ishmael, as they trimmed the tree with bits of net and sail. "Right now Marmee is hanging holly and Beth is playing carols on the piano and Meg and Amy are singing along. On Christmas Day Laurie and his grandfather will visit, and everyone will open presents and have the most wonderful time."

"Sounds like a perfect nightmare," said Ishmael.

"Oh, Ish. Don't you even like Christmas? I suppose you'd be running around knocking people's hats into the punchbowl. You really should try to be more sociable."

"Humbug."

Jo put an angel she'd made from seagull feathers in the center of the capstan-head and stepped back to admire her work. As she did, she noticed something most unusual. The fat cook and three of his sailor friends were coming toward them, wearing banana-leaf skirts.

"Mercy me!" said Jo. "Is this how they celebrate Christmas at sea?"

"It's nothing to do with Christmas," said Ishmael. "We've just passed the equator."

The cook grabbed Jo by the arm, and said, "Come along, pollywog, King Neptune is expecting you."

"Who's King Neptune?" said Jo.

"This is your first line-crossing," said Ishmael. "You must undergo an initiation into Neptune's Kingdom. Then you won't be a pollywog anymore."

"What *will* I be?"

"A shellback, of course!"

The cook and his goons took Jo to the quarterdeck, where Starbuck, in a false beard, was seated on a throne constructed of old salt pork barrels. The second mate sat beside him, dressed as an elegant queen with long seaweed hair. His dress was a tightly-wrapped sheet, and his crown a shiny sawblade, fashioned ingeniously into a round hat.

Soon the deck was filled with drunken sailors costumed as mermaids, nymphs and bathing beauties.

"Everything's topsy-turvy!" said Jo.

"Silence!" said Starbuck, raising his trident. "You have been summoned to the Court of Neptune for being a slimy pollywog. How do you plead?"

"Guilty!" shouted the crew. "Guilty!"

"If guilty means I haven't crossed the equator before, then I admit it," said Jo. "Why, this voyage is the first time I've been south of Walden Pond!"

"You speak too much, wog," said Neptune. "Davy Jones! Bring the fish!"

The crew chanted "The fish! The fish!" and Queequeg appeared with an old sea chest chained round his neck.

"Remove the fish, my queen," said Neptune.

The second mate stepped forward, walking awkwardly in his constricting dress, and opened Queequeg's locker. Inside was a smelly grouper, which he held up for the crew's approval.

"The fish!" they cried. "Give her the fish!"

"Commence!" ordered King Neptune.

The queen swung the fish, slapping Jo on the shoulder.

"Ow!" said Jo. "That hurt!"

"Again!" commanded Neptune.

Jo received a blow on the other shoulder and cried out once more.

"Keep going," said Neptune. "Until she is quiet."

The queen bent low and thumped Jo in the belly with the grouper. She doubled over, but managed to remain silent.

"Now," said Neptune. "How do you plead?"

"Guilty," muttered Jo, holding her stomach.

"Very well. The Court of Neptune hereby convicts you of being a slimy, rebellious pollywog, and sentences you to take the oil bath. Bring forth the spermaceti, Davy Jones."

Queequeg opened his locker and removed a large jar of spermaceti oil, taken from the skull of the sperm whale they'd killed. The crew cheered as he raised the jar and poured its contents over Jo's head. The waxy oil was hot and sticky in the tropic sun. It covered Jo's hair and face and she was afraid to open her eyes.

"More!" ordered Neptune.

The mermaids and nymphs all rushed forth with jars of their own and doused Jo from head to toe. It was thoroughly disgusting, but Jo laughed despite herself.

"And now, my dear, you are officially a shellback," said Neptune. "Davy Jones! Cleanse my new subject!"

Queequeg dumped a barrel of saltwater over Jo. When the oil was all washed off, he took her on a promenade around the deck. Crewman slapped her back and presented her with shell necklaces, seaweed bracelets and other trinkets. Ishmael gave her an ivory whale tooth, on which he'd carved an image of the *Pequod*.

"Oh, thank you, Ish!" said Jo. "I shall cherish it forever, and always remember the day I became a shellback."

"I shall remember it, too, my little woman," said Ishmael, as the merry sailors whisked her away.

\* \* \*

On Christmas Day, four whales were spotted. They swam together, sporting playfully.

"Captain!" said Jo, beating on Ahab's door. "There are right whales off the starboard bow. Shall we kill them?"

Ahab came out looking crazed. "What's that you say? White whales?"

"Right whales, sir."

"I care not for rights, girl! It's the white whale I want. I'll chase him round the cape, and round the horn, and round hell's inferno before I relent!"

"Your troubles are returning," said Jo. "Ish says it's monomania, which isn't at all healthy. Would you like a lime?"

"Blast your limes! I'll have the white whale or nothing."

"But you promised, Captain."

Ahab took out his spyglass and studied the pod of whales. "It's only a mother and three calves. We've got a bigger fish to fry." He stumped back into this cabin and slammed the door.

Jo watched the whales as the *Pequod* drew closer. The little ones frolicked, jumping and diving and nosing into one another. They swam round and under their mother, who floated calmly, spouting great fountains of water for her children to play in. Jo couldn't help but think of Marmee and her sisters, romping in the yard at Orchard House.

She went down to the forecabin, where Ishmael was reading in his hammock.

"Ish," she said. "Do you like whaling?"

"No," said Ishmael, setting his book aside. "I don't think I do."

"Is it the killing you dislike?"

"Yes, Jo."

Jo went to her hammock to think things over. Whaling was very adventuresome, and she did love to throw her harpoon, but it seemed very sad that the whales, who had families and friends just like anyone else, should have to die. She dug her *Pilgrim's Progress* out of her duffle and read the inscription: "To my dearest Josephine

on Christmas. May you always take the right path. Love, Marmee."

Jo knew she had reached a fork in the road. One way led to goodness and happiness, the other to a sort of thrilling but sinful wickedness she didn't fully understand. Perhaps the captain was having these same doubts. She wrapped the little crimson-covered book in paper, with one of her hair ribbons for a bow, and left it outside Ahab's door.

In the week that followed, the captain stayed in his cabin night and day. Starbuck brought him food, but found him taciturn; he wouldn't even discuss his favorite topic, the white whale.

"It's very odd," Starbuck told Jo. "He seems lost. Like he doesn't know where he is or what he's about."

On New Year's Day, the men mixed up a batch of rum punch and went gamboling about the ship. Jo, Ishmael and Queequeg sat around the capstan Christmas tree telling stories and feasting on jerky. When the jolly sailors saw them, they danced over, singing "Here we come a wassailing, among the sails so white." The cook dragged Jo to her feet, and they galloped across the deck in a wild polka. Jo was having so much fun, she didn't even notice his breath.

The merriment was at its peak when the lookout called from aloft: "There she blows!"

The men threw down their drinks and scrambled to their stations.

"There she breaches!" bellowed the lookout. "It's the white whale! Moby Dick!"

The door of Ahab's cabin banged open, and he strode onto the deck. He spoke not a word, but focused his spyglass on the mighty leviathan that cruised ahead of the Pequod, leaving a wake wider than any ship's.

"It's him," said Ahab.



"Should we launch the boats, Captain?" said Starbuck.

"I . . . I don't know."

"Increase sail, then? Pursue him in the *Pequod*?"

"Yes, Starbuck. I suppose."

When Jo saw the confusion on Ahab's face, she knew that he was changed. She did not run to collect her harpoon, but went instead to the bow of the ship to see Moby Dick. The incredible beast plowed ever forward, dividing the crystal waters. But where was he going? Could Moby Dick be the father of the young whales Jo had seen on Christmas Day? Was he coming home to them after some long ordeal? Jo thought of her own father, and wondered if she'd ever see him again.

Ahab thumped over and stood at Jo's side. "Have a lime?" he said.

"I do!" said Jo.

They shared the lime and watched Moby Dick.

"You've been reading my *Pilgrim's Progress*, haven't you?" said Jo.

"I have."

"And now you can forgive Moby Dick for taking your leg, can't you?"

"I was in the Slough of Despond," said Ahab. "But you pulled me out."

"We have both altered our paths," said Jo. "I no longer wish to kill whales."

As they spoke, Moby Dick sounded, and the crew of the *Pequod* never saw him again.

Months later, on the ferry dock at New Bedford, Jo said her goodbyes to Queequeg and Ishmael.

"If you're ever in Concord, you must come to Orchard House," said Jo, embracing Queequeg. "But promise me you'll wear a shirt. Aunt March could be there, and she cannot abide shirtless men."

"Uh," said Queequeg.

"And what about me?" said Ishmael. "May I come to Orchard House if I wear a shirt?"

"Oh, Ish, I do hope you will." Jo took his hand fondly. "If you could only meet Marmee and Meg and Beth and Amy, you'd see how wonderful people really are."

"I know there will be at least one wonderful person there," said Ishmael.

Jo hugged him tight and kissed him on the cheek. She started to walk away, but stopped.

"Queequeg!" she said. "I want you to have my harpoon. I won't be needing it anymore. "

**DAN MOREY** is a freelance writer in Pennsylvania. He's worked as a book critic, nightlife columnist, travel correspondent and outdoor journalist. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Cleaver Magazine*, *Roads & Kingdoms*, and *McSweeney's Quarterly*. Find him at [danmorey.weebly.com](http://danmorey.weebly.com).

## Dynamics

Jen Fawkes

The book you're reading is called *The Dynamics of an Asteroid*. Its germ was implanted, like a seed that houses a *Sequoiadendron giganteum* in its entirety, into my cerebral cortex when I was nine years old. On the day he announced his intent to leave Mother for his research assistant, Akbar, a placid, dusky youth of whom I was quite fond, Father presented me with a text entitled *A Treatise on the Binomial Theorem*. Its contents burst like Lilliputian rockets into my frontal lobes, the area of the brain concerned with planning, decision-making, goal-setting, and relating the present to the future through purposeful behavior. Over time, original notions and ingested data would coalesce around this germ like the accreting layers of nacre that form a pearl, and the thing would blossom. But when I was nine, on the day I last caught sight of Father, I read only three pages of the text he'd given me before collapsing on the polished floor of his study. It seemed that I grasped mathematics in an *a priori* fashion, and as Mother applied cold compresses to my cheeks, I dreamt of my arithmetical future.

I did not, dear reader, allow the frailty of my sex to stand in my way, although I must admit, bringing my dream to fruition has not always been easy. But once Father traipsed with Akbar off to exotic locales like Patagonia and Tanzania and Albuquerque, Mother became overly indulgent. Father still supported us in the manner to which we were accustomed, and I eschewed the frocks and slippers and tea sets and beaded handbags and parasols under which Mother attempted to bury me, insisting instead that she purchase the latest mathematical journals and treatises. If she refused, I would throw myself down in the foul cobbled streets, smashing my fists until I drew blood. I was that rarest of children—an infantile insomniac—and I spent my sleepless nights poring over texts,

including my rumpled, dog-eared copy of *A Treatise on the Binomial Theorem*, a book penned by Professor James Moriarty when he was just twenty-one years old.

Because I was Father's daughter, I was given dispensation to study mathematics at Durham University, where the same Professor Moriarty chaired the department. Although I yearned to dress in trousers and a waistcoat, to paint on a mustache and blend in with my classmates, Mother insisted on arraying me in the latest Parisian fashions, and I bobbed among my fellows like a brightly-plumed, beribboned, whalebone-corseted seabird. In classes they spoke not a word to me; I felt only their withering, sidelong glances. In spite of my natural aptitude, in spite of my love of all things algebraic and geometrical, to them I was no more than a punchline. But I wasn't bothered. I concerned myself only with Professor Moriarty.

And he concerned himself with me, although he was quite skilled at concealing his interest. From the moment our eyes met, I understood that our destinies were inextricably entwined. Of course, we couldn't let on, so in class, he would not call on me—even when I was the only student with a hand raised. He was not slighting me, nor was he offended by the notion of a female mathematician; he was obliged to ignore me. So as not to make the others jealous. So as not to be accused of favoritism. Whenever I visited his office and found the door barred but heard his movements on the other side, I did not allow this to upset me. It was the way things had to be. Our relationship was so very clandestine that we, ourselves, had never discussed it.

When I arrived at Durham, Professor Moriarty had chaired the department for seven years. Thin, unsmiling, and introspective, he had the sort of high, domed forehead that speaks of profound acumen. He was unmarried and known for his infrequent but spectacularly destructive alcoholic binges. Among the faculty, his reputation was one of difficulty and coldness. He was thought by

many to be cruel. But none could deny his brilliance, and his theoretical work was respected by all. He was at work on a new text, one that, it was said, would make *A Treatise on the Binomial Theorem* look as if it had been penned by an untutored child. Speculations that the book would ascend to previously unattainable heights of pure mathematics flew around the department, enticing me, whetting my appetite, stoking my flames. Professor Moriarty rarely drew his curtains, and from the box hedge outside his neat stone cottage, I sighted him night after night, sitting in his shirtsleeves, collar unbuttoned, scribbling in a fevered lather. With the aid of powerful Belgian Porro prism binoculars, a gift from Father and Akbar, who'd finally stopped globe-trotting and settled in Antwerp, I was able to spy the text's title page. *The Dynamics of an Asteroid*. When I read the words, I collapsed on the dusty ground in a fit identical to the collapse I'd suffered in Father's study nine years earlier, only this time, Mother wasn't there to apply compresses. Once I was able to stand, I saw that I'd split my taffeta dress. Holding the fabric together over my frilly Victorian underthings, I made my way back to my well-appointed rooms, where, in a fit of unrivaled astronomical inspiration, I began writing this book.

The pages I tucked into Professor Moriarty's desk drawers and slipped into his overcoat pockets prompted him to approach me at last. "How do you know about this?" he would say. "Are you spying on me?"

He would upbraid me, threaten to report me, but I knew he would never give me away. Professor Moriarty was frightened of his feelings. He was unnerved by the turbulent gulf of emotion upon whose edge we both teetered. He wasn't equipped to deal with what was happening between us. He was a theoretician, comfortable only with suppositions, things fleeting and ephemeral. He had no idea how to contend with a flesh-and-blood relationship like ours, so I forgave him. I always forgave him.

"This is my book," he would say. "You can't write my book."

"But it's not," I would respond. "It's not the same book at all."

And it wasn't. My *Dynamics of an Asteroid* was less a text of pure mathematical theory than an arithmetical story of love. Professor Moriarty's and my love. It cast us in the roles of celestial bodies, and it explicated, in an algorithmic, measurable fashion, the details of our attraction, of the galactic motions that had drawn us together. It was a celebration of romance, albeit in mathematical terms. What can I say? I may be a theoretician, but I am not entirely immune to the stereotypical tendencies of my sex.

"I won't allow my work to be usurped," Professor Moriarty said, stepping forward until his chest was inches from mine, "by an unbalanced female." We stood in his garden, where he'd discovered me at the awkward hour of six a.m., crouched behind a blue hydrangea. Weak, milky light crept over the landscape, and a vaporous mist stood in the atmosphere. My mind barreled down branching neurological pathways, overcome by the proximity of Professor Moriarty. His breath hit me in the face, echoing my own—the stale respiration of the insomniac—and the pupils of his dark eyes vanished in the morning gloom.

"Please," I said, placing a hand on his forearm. I wanted to tell him that my book was not simulacrum but tribute. Homage. That it had been burgeoning ever since *A Treatise on the Binomial Theorem* burst into my frontal lobes when I was nine years old. "Let me help you."

His lips said no, but his eyes said yes, and *The Dynamics of an Asteroid* became a collaborative effort. He never again remarked on the pages I slid into his battered brown satchel or left folded in his postbox. In class, he continued to overlook me, but at night, peeking through the windows of his cottage with my Porro prism binoculars, I spied him consulting my work. Once he'd transformed them, I hardly recognized my own notions, but they pushed his text to mathematical heights that made me dizzy and weak in the knees.

As the academic year drew to a close, I received a letter penned in Akbar's neat, slanted script. It seemed that Father had passed away; apoplexy had struck as he sat at his desk in the dead of night, straining to work out a brand-new formula. *I know he failed you, the tender-hearted Akbar wrote, but I would be remiss if I did not tell you how much he loved you. How often he spoke of you and with what pride. He was a brilliant but difficult man, and I think I am a better person for having loved him. I am sending the manuscript of his last book which, with his dying breath, he bade me give you.*

I'd never been able to blame Father for leaving Mother, but I'd always been miffed by his abandonment of me. He was the person who'd shown me the power of measurable computation, however, the person who'd first set my feet on a path strewn with postulates and logarithms, and although I hadn't seen him since I was nine, the news of his demise undid me. I found myself blindsided by despair. When I opened the box that contained his manuscript, my vision blurred, but I was able to read the title through a veil of tears.

*The Dynamics of an Asteroid.*

*Dearest, read the accompanying note, I sent a copy of this to your mentor Moriarty a year ago but never heard back. It is missing something, something I've become too aged and enfeebled to ascertain. Read it for me, and expound on the theories I have put forth. Say you'll collaborate with your father on this, his final text.*

I longed to crack the pages, to scrutinize every term and numeral, every computation, but I didn't dare. If I shunned Father's manuscript, I wouldn't be faced with undeniable similarities. I wouldn't be forced to reevaluate my position on the man around whom I planned to build my life. My illusions would remain unshattered, my foundations unshaken. I secreted the manuscript under a loose floorboard in my closet. I continued working with Professor Moriarty on his *Dynamics of an Asteroid*. I tried to wipe my father's text from memory; it remained, however, lodged beneath the surface of my consciousness like a nagging,

infinitesimal shard of glass.

We are none of us originals, I told myself, those of us who theorize and suppose. We read. We borrow. There is no helping the cross-pollination of ideas. Although they matter to us, although they set our minds racing and our feet on certain paths, in the grand scheme, texts mean nothing. Within their rigid covers one finds only a plethora of pages—thin, flimsy, easily torn. The assertions put forth do not exist unless one speaks the language in which they are written. What a thing to have built my life around, I thought as I sat long into the night, pulling volume after volume from the shelves in my rooms, poring over them until the phrases and numbers blurred together into one long, meaningless verse.

Once *The Dynamics of an Asteroid* was published, Professor Moriarty's mystique mounted. He did not give me credit for my collaboration, but I forgave him. I always forgave him. When I took my doctorate, I accepted a teaching appointment at Durham in order to remain close to him, but our love continued to be a theoretical affair. In time, innuendo began to gather around Professor Moriarty. Whispers of his involvement in gambling, racketeering, extortion. Of a plot to rid himself of several rival mathematicians speaking at a conference in one fell swoop. Finally, under a cloud of suspicion, he was forced to resign his chair and move to London.

From then on, Professor Moriarty was said to employ his superior intellect in the role of criminal mastermind. Just last year, word came that he'd plunged from a waterfall in the Swiss Alps while grappling with a sleuth of great renown. This seems to me as unlikely, however, as the purported exploits of said sleuth, who is rumored to have written a monograph on the myriad varieties of pipe and cigar ash, and to be able to pronounce whether or not a man has done murder based solely on the condition of the suspect's boots. These conceits strike me as the work of a fiction writer, and not a very inventive one at that.



I like to think, instead, that Professor Moriarty is holed up in a basement room, shunning sleep, diligently working on a new text. Pausing in mid-sentence to gaze through the barred window at the hurrying calves of passersby, he dreams of me. He wonders if I am in good health. He considers what the twenty years that have passed since last we saw one another might have done to my face. To my body. He hopes I understand how much I meant to him. That I understand why he had to leave.

I do understand. It's all right there in his *Dynamics of an Asteroid*. If one knows where to look. If one peers between the formulas and beyond the theorems and beneath the postulates, one can decipher a stirring arithmetical tale of duty, sacrifice, and undying devotion. It's no shock that critics cannot fathom the book—who can squeeze mathematical meaning out of a love story?

Texts are by nature variable. Editions come and go. One mistake in the ordering of typeface gives an entire print-run new meaning. Each of us writes our own *Dynamics of an Asteroid*, and one version is quite interchangeable with another. When I finally opened Father's manuscript, voluminous tears streaked my face. There, represented numerically, was his undying love for Akbar; I even thought I detected a hint of his love for me. As I now sit writing my own *Dynamics*, the version that once blossomed like a *Sequoiadendron giganteum* hovers still in my mind. I can recall the algorithmic love story I abandoned in order to assist Professor Moriarty with his rendition. But the book I now write—the book you now read—is a pastiche. A potpourri. I'm accustomed to collaboration, and I've attempted to embrace all the disparate *Dynamics* that have come before.

And those that will come after.

**JEN FAWKES's** work has appeared in *One Story*, *Crazyhorse*, *The Iowa Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Joyland*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and elsewhere. Her stories have won prizes from *Washington Square*, *Writers @ Work*, *Blue Earth Review*, and *Salamander*. She holds an MFA from Hollins University and a BA from Columbia University.



•On the cover:•

## “The Satanic. Satan Sowing Tares”

**FELICIEN ROPS** (1833-1898) was a Belgian printmaker, and illustrator know for his work illustrating poems. Playing primarily with themes of sexuality, motality, and the darker sides of religion, hizs work eventually inspired artists like Edvard Munch. This lithograph, from his 1882 series *Les Sataniques*, illustrates a Biblical parable, imagining Satan planting evil in a European city.

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