

TABOO OPINIONS #42

By Richard E. Geis

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3-15-05 MY FIFTEEN MINUTES OF PUBLIC NOTICE

Steve Duin, a columnist for The Oregonian, wrote a column about me which was published today in the Metro section.

I'll quote it here for you, and for my ego:

He rarely leaves the house anymore. He was always a recluse --- "Because I was so awkward with people," Richard E. Geis confides, "I didn't seek them out" --- and at 77, he has concluded the species is "mostly a waste of time." So, he stays in his bedroom in Northeast Portland, watching "Everybody Loves Raymond" and playing serious checkers on Yahoo, the miniature rocket on his dresser offering one of the few clues as to who he is and where he's been.

The rocket is a Hugo Award, one of 13 Geis won between 1969 and 1983, when his voice was one of the most influential in science fiction fandom. While science fiction was making the transition from bug-eyed monsters chewing on earthlings to the meaningful social commentary of Ursula Le Guin and Philip K. Dick, Geis had a front row seat. His fanzines, The Alien Critic and Science Fiction Review, were required reading, and his sharp, cynical opinions dominated the Hugo Awards --- named for publisher Hugo Gernsback --- for criticism.

That was far from the sum of Geis' literary output. He also wrote 114 novels, 110 of which were soft-core porn, and one --- "Three Way Apartment" I believe --- that placed Geis smack-dab in the middle of a 1965 federal obscenity trial in, of all places, Sioux City, Iowa.

Hold that thought. We shall return.

Geis was born in North Portland in 1927, born two months

premature into a household where money was too tight for hospitals. He was fresh from the womb, two fragile pounds covered in olive oil, when he slipped from the deliveryman's hands. "He caught me before I reached the floor," Geis said, "but I'm told his grip damaged my spine."

Cerebral palsy and four spinal surgeries took their toll on Geis. They help to explain his awkwardness around people and his trouble walking. Science fiction and writing restored his balance. He discovered the former on the beach at Rockaway in 1937 and decided then and there, curled up with a copy of "Astonishing Stories" and a stunning sense of wonder, that he wanted to write and wanted to write more of the same.

Beginning in 1959, he did, turning out 100 short stories that year alone. Geis was living in the wash house on the roof of an apartment in the Venice Beach area of Los Angeles, his manual Underwood typewriter perched atop a board that covered the sink. He was surrounded, he says, "by drunks, beatniks, gays, old Jewish people ... and an element of motorcycle gang." Story ideas, obviously, weren't a problem.

Geis turned to paperback sex novels, he once said, because he didn't have the confidence to write for the serious science-fiction magazines, an inferiority complex he traces to his cerebral palsy. In the 1960s, he remembers living "in a bubble of manual type, the beach, my fan work, my girl friend and eager editors. Nirvana."

But Geis was evicted from Nirvana and sentenced to four months in Sioux City when U.S. postal inspectors filed suit against nudist magazine publisher Milton Luros and several writers for publishing and distributing pornography.

"Luros paid for everything," Geis said, "hotels, meals, defense attorneys." Those attorneys included legendary Texas attorney Percy Foreman, whose clients included Jack Ruby and James Earl Ray. For all that, Luros and Geis were convicted, and those convictions overturned on appeal. "Justice was served," Geis told one of the defendants. "She was served her head on a

platter.”

He moved back to Portland in 1972 and remained, “a hermit in many ways. He wrote his books and edited and sold his fanzines, never earning more than \$10,000 a year. He kept almost nothing. “I never thought I’d be sitting here talking about my ‘career,’ or I would have kept a file,” he says.

The Hugo rocket, however, is still out, pointed at the universe that first opened up to him 67 years ago on a Rockaway beach. Geis Never lost his fascination with the worlds beyond his reach. He believed science fiction deserved serious criticism, and for several decades he provided it. With clarity and style.

Well, there are a few misleads and factual glitches, but on the whole I’m happy with the column. I don’t expect any earth shaking fallout from this public exposure. But maybe when I die The Oregonian will give my obituary a few extra lines.

END TABOO OPINIONS #42