

The Solar Wind Blows No Ill, Redux: A Self-Plagiarized Ken Keller Appreciation

by Bradley Denton

Back in 2016, in the *Before Times*, I wrote a Ken Keller program book bio for a convention that was not ConQuesT. In fact, it was so much not ConQuesT that it took place in Texas. So, I won't mention its name here, lest *this* program book burst into flame. However, I'll note that the unnamed Texas convention does have two things in common with ConQuesT: 1. It's within spitting distance of I-35; and 2. Ken Keller has compromising photos of the con committee.

How else to explain why Ken was selected to be Fan Guest of Honor at both that 2016 convention, and at ConQuesT 52? To be sure, the global pandemic tried to derail the ConQuesT honor . . . but apparently, Ken has compromising photos of the coronavirus, too. So here he is, one of two FGoHs (with Jim Young) at the joyful live-and-in-person resurrection of ConQuesT 53.

Now, Ken doesn't have any blackmail material on *me*, as he has instructed me to say. No, I'm writing this bio just as I wrote that bio in 2016: Out of pure, unadulterated Love for Ken, and for no other reason, as he has also instructed me to say.

"But Ken," I protested when he asked me to compose this new piece. "How can I write anything about you that I didn't write in that earlier bio? It was comprehensive and laudatory, if not entirely true."

"Ah, just recycle the old one," Ken replied. "These Kansas City saps won't know the difference."

Which is something Ken never actually said, as he has instructed me to say.

To begin, then, I'll point out that Ken Keller is known among the Secret Masters of Fandom ("Telling You Where to Sit Since 1939") as the Solar Wind. However, no one will say why that's the case, although some have suggested that anything called "the Solar Wind" must have something to do with "an enormous ball of hot gas, spewing deadly plasma in all directions."

In other words, the genesis of Ken Keller's nickname remains a mystery.

What is known is that Ken was born in Houston, Texas, in 1948. And it was in Houston that his long love affair with science fiction and fantasy first began. However, as with many great romances, the relationship got off to a rocky start. When Ken was two and a half years old, his mother took him to see Howard Hawks' *The Thing from Another World* . . . and young Ken was so traumatized by the experience that he threw up in the theater lobby. (True story.)

Two years later, after the Kellers moved to Wichita, Kansas (where theater owners had not yet received Houston's "Banned for Life" notice), Ken saw W.C. Menzie's *Invaders from Mars* and George Pal's *War of the Worlds*. After which he caught the measles and hallucinated Martian war machines attacking him from the foot of his bed. (Also, true story.)

After all that, some kids might have sworn off science fiction forever. But not Ken. He *liked* throwing up and hallucinating. So, by the time 1956 rolled around and eight-year-old Ken saw *Forbidden Planet* in downtown Wichita (just before his family relocated to San Diego), it was all over. The movies hooked him, and then writers like H.G. Wells and Jules Verne reeled him in. So, before he even knew it had happened, Ken had become an SF Fan for Life. And in 1963, he became an active participant in organized fandom, as he began contributing artwork and articles to various fanzines.

Fifteen years after *Forbidden Planet*, Ken decided that just being a "fan for life" wasn't

good enough. So, he voluntarily turned “life” into a “life sentence” by co-founding (with Gary Mattingly) the Kansas City Science Fiction and Fantasy Society (KaCSFFS) in 1971. He also chaired or co-chaired four of the club’s early conventions, beginning in 1972. And then he organized the winning bid for, and served as the con chair of, the 34th World Science Fiction Convention, MidAmeriCon, held in 1976 – and now fondly remembered as “Big MAC.”

Big MAC was a 4,200-member Worldcon that changed what every Worldcon would be from then on. With Guest of Honor Robert A. Heinlein, Fan Guest of Honor George Barr, and Toastmaster Wilson “Bob” Tucker, Big MAC was off to a tremendous start before it ever began – but the new twists and innovations at the convention itself are now the stuff of legend. To name but a few: The first Hugo Awards ceremony held as a separate major event, in a theater . . . the first “themed base” Hugo Award trophies . . . the first Hugo Losers’ Party (hosted by authors George R.R. Martin and Gardner Dozois) . . . a 172-page hardcover souvenir program book (edited by Tom Reamy, and including fiction by Howard Waldrop and Harlan Ellison) . . . and the first-ever slideshow presentation, costume display, and actor appearance (by a new kid named Mark Hamill) for a then little-known upcoming film called *Star Wars*.

Having given science fiction fandom all of that (and more) in what many now call “the first modern Worldcon,” Ken might have been justified in hanging up his propeller beanie and retiring to a simple life of posing for Bob’s Big Boy statues. But that would not be the way of the Solar Wind, which must push forever outward and upward. So, after chairing Big MAC, Ken went on to chair and serve on the committees of a number of regional sf conventions and has also chaired several Kansas City-area science-fiction film festivals. More than once, he has been the Director of KaCSFFS. And as a small-press publisher, Ken (with Tom Reamy) produced the pro-quality fanzines *Trumpet* (nominated for a World Fantasy Award in 1980) and *Nickelodeon* .

. . and also published beautiful volumes of fiction by authors such as George R.R. Martin, Frank M. Robinson, Harlan Ellison, and Phyllis Eisenstein – in addition to gorgeous art prints by Leo and Diane Dillon, Ed Emshwiller, and Brom, among others.

In fact, considering how much Ken has given to science fiction fandom, I have often thought that no matter what honors we bestow upon him, he deserves more, as he has instructed me to say.

But science fiction fandom has already given Ken something far more valuable than awards or kudos: It has given him his relationship with the remarkable writer (and completely awesome person) Terry Matz. According to Ken, this perfect match would never have happened without the influence of fan godfather Wilson “Bob” Tucker – who had adopted Terry as the first of his fannish granddaughters, and who wanted her to wind up with someone in fandom. Someone good. (Or as good as possible.)

As Ken puts it, “Who was I to thwart the will of a legendary Big-Name Fan and pro writer like Bob? To do so would anger the great pantheon of The Ghods of Fandom. (Plus, Terry was obviously The One, from the moment I first saw and got to know her at an SF convention, of course.)”

Clearly, Ken has come a long way from that movie theater lobby in 1951. And he’s made a lot of friends, both pro and fan, in the process. When asked to name a few of his colleagues and heroes from his long life in sf/f, Ken rattles off names like Howard Waldrop, Rusty Hevelin, Harlan Ellison, Tom Reamy, Robin Wayne Bailey, Wilson “Bob” Tucker, Alex and Phyllis Eisenstein, George R.R. Martin, Terry Matz (naturally), and even Bradley Denton – who, to this day, remains awestruck that he even knows someone as splendid as Ken, as Ken has instructed me to say.

Seriously, though, I do love Ken, despite what I did to him the first time he heard me read a Jimmy Blackburn story. And also, despite the outstanding case of chicken pox that he caught at my house outside Baldwin City, Kansas . . . when he was 39. (Yet another true story.)

Ken Keller and Terry Matz are two of my most favorite people in the world, and it was tough to say goodbye to them when Barb and I left the Kansas City area for Austin in 1988. But a few months after that move, we received a big brown box from Ken and Terry in the mail. Inside was another box, wrapped in festive holiday paper with a bow – plus a note that said DO NOT OPEN UNTIL CHRISTMAS.

I held off as long as could, but I didn't make it to Christmas. Inside, I found two bottles of my favorite Kansas City barbecue sauce, the peppery Gates & Sons Original.

Barb and I named them “Ken” and “Terry,” and we happily introduced their sweet-and-spicy Kansas City nectar to some Texas brisket. It was a combination concocted in Heaven.

Which got me to thinking: Just as that Kansas City sauce was exactly what that Texas brisket needed . . . that little kid from Texas who barfed at *The Thing from Another World* grew up to be exactly what Kansas City fandom needed, too.

Who woulda thunk?

So, here's to ConQuesT Fan Guest of Honor Ken Keller – publisher, typographer, Wikipedia contributor, club organizer, draftsman, collector, graphic designer, con-runner, fan, and friend. Without him, our conventions would be less magnificent, our fandom less true, our brisket without sauce, and our beanies without propellers.

All of which I am saying for real and for true, without any instruction at all.

All hail the Solar Wind!