

# COMIC-CON HEROES

THE FANS WHO MAKE THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

Joe Wilcox

Bunny Bows Press  
Comic-Con Heroes: The Fans Who Make the Greatest Show on Earth  
Joe Wilcox

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## The Roles We Play



The best books, anime, comics, films, graphic novels and manga all share something in common: Storytelling inspires people to aspire for something better. It's all the story they tell about the roles we play everyday and the people we wish we could be.

[San Diego Comic-Con](#) is an amazing amalgamation of hopes and aspirations—and the grandest storytelling. The first, full three-day event took place from Aug. 1-3, 1970, at the U.S. Grand Hotel, with about 300 attendees and sci-fi luminaries of the day, including [Ray Bradbury](#) and [A.E. van Vogt](#). In 2013, 130,000 attendees stormed the San Diego Convention Center to enter, for four days and a preview night, an alternate reality, where the social rules binding them everyday no longer apply.

From the early days, the convention embraced other arts, including pulp media such as

movies. However, comics' prominence diminishes in the new century. Hollywood is in takeover mode, as it has been since the previous decade. Comic-Con is now a required pilgrimage for actors, filmmakers, producers or screenwriters. That said, the real stars aren't the big-screen actors and [showrunners](#) but the small, bit-players roaming the halls; the attendees. What is the real allure of Hollywood stars? The roles they play, and how many people here want to be like them—the actors, the storytellers *and* the characters they create.

Many attendees come dressed in costumes. For a day, or even a few, they take on another persona. They become someone else—perhaps whom they would rather be, but most certainly not who they *are*. They can be heroes and even stars, for most anyone well-costumed will be repeatedly stopped for photos. Comic-Con lets them be not just someone else but someone *special*.

What are comics but role-playing stories? Superman assumes the role of Clark Kent. Bruce Wayne plays the role of Batman. Tony Stark is Iron Man. The [cosplayers](#) (“costume players”) who take on these roles become someone different than the daily lives they live. These people transform into superheroes when putting on their costumes. I see this change in the faces of Comic-Con's costumed attendees.

We all play roles, and they constantly change. The role of employee or entrepreneur differs from boss and manager or from parent, spouse or child. Peoples' personas change, even if subtly, as they play their everyday roles; they change depending upon the interaction or scenario. But here, at Comic-Con, the changes are *dramatic*, and I wonder why they can't be more *permanent*.

[Mores](#) are one explanation. Society defines roles. The young can have fun in certain ways, but adults are discouraged from engaging in similar activities, like pretending or donning costumes and role-playing—but not at Comic-Con, where dress up is encouraged and *rewarded with adulation!*

That's the other role anyone at Comic-Con assumes: The child having fun, being someone else. Children learn by playing roles, some of which they adopt as grownups. Childsplay is role-playing for adulthood. Comic-Con role-playing helps “[grups](#)” rediscover the inner kid, referring here to the younger, child “[id](#)” or “ego”—k-id—that lives in the moment, seeking instant gratification and receiving joy.

Everyone here has a story to tell, and it is for these stories that I come to Comic-Con. I go to few big-star sessions, instead seeking out the role-players. They're all heroes. If only they could wear the heroic personas every day, perhaps their lives and those they touch could be so much better. There are villains, too, but heroes in disguise because they also represent someone the role player aspires to be—the keyword being “aspiration”.

Here at Comic-Con, I see some of the best qualities of humanity, as people take off their angers, frustrations and hatreds and put on costumes of fun and play. Happiness shouldn't be

something you wear for a day or even four, nor should be the aspiration to be someone better.

All attendees, whether cosplayers or people wearing street clothes, share a common role: They are *fans*. For five years of Cons, I have collected their stories. In 2013, I set out to find 12 to tell—about the fans who make Comic-Con the greatest show on earth. The roles they play reveal something surprising that shouldn't be: The most-entertaining story of all is *you*.

## Arrival



**M**y Comic-Con adventure begins on Day 1, Thursday, where, as I walk, crowds are greatest in San Diego Convention Center's Sections A and B. Here, volunteers gather. In exchange for assisting the disabled, managing waiting lines and performing other tasks, these helpers get free admission.

“Your volunteer commitment is only 3 hours on any day you choose to volunteer, and you will get a free badge for that day”, according to sponsoring organization Comic-Con International. “You choose the day(s) you want to volunteer, we choose the time and the assignment...When you are not on assignment, you are free to enjoy the show with same privileges as a paying attendee”.

Volunteer service is well-rewarded, because badges are so difficult to obtain. A four-day pass sells for \$150, or \$175 with Preview Night, and in 2013 for any, or *all*, days sold out in just over 90 minutes. But the short time period doesn't reflect the *difficulty* obtaining passes; the buying rush comes with [web server time-outs and failed purchases](#)—a gripe I hear often around the Con.

Comic-Con International makes ardent efforts to minimize the load on its web servers and to maximize chances fans can obtain badges. For example, some sales are staggered, while some past attendees place higher in the sales queue. But with so many people desperately seeking a finite number of passes, all at the same time, purchasing problems are unavoidable. Common tactic: Groups gather on different computers to purchase passes—the hope being one person will get through the sales process for them all.

The buying burden is strangely appropriate for an event with rare comics and collectibles. Comic-Con badges are treasures, too, and all the more precious for the hardship obtaining them.

People with the, ah, Golden Tickets, go to Section C, attendee registration, which is another congestion zone. But the crowds disperse faster than the volunteer area. My destination is Section D, where there is exhibitor and press registration.

I obtain my badge and breathe in the atmosphere, which fills my senses with color and conversation. The sights and sounds of happy, hopeful people is an elixir so potent my mouth salivates as if I could sustain life consuming nothing else. Superhero worship draws many fans, but, strangely, their collective energy is itself a superpower.

Already, on the first day, cosplayers are everywhere. But their numbers will be greatest on Saturday, when there is the annual “International Masquerade”—the costume ball. As I walk, cosplayers break up the rush of people, because they are so often stopped for photographs, and groups gather with cameras.

One cosplayer catches my attention, someone dressed as [Bilbo Baggins](#) on a costume horse, which clanks hoof-noises as he passes. He disappears into the crowd, but reappears outside on the sidewalk, where I use my smartphone to shoot and post a [Vine video](#), my first ever. Clips can be no longer than 15 seconds, which is enough time to tell a story—as so many of the videos do.



Back inside the building, I launch the official Comic-Con app on my phone, for planning my basic schedule. The convention is not one event but many overlapping. The exhibit hall is on the main level, where are all the vendors: artists; comic-book dealers; comic, graphic novel and small book publishers; console game developers and manufacturers; Hollywood studios; paraphernalia sellers; and TV networks, among others.

The upper-level rooms and Hall H on the main floor are reserved for the many panels, which range from artist and storytelling how-tos to free Fall season TV show screenings to meet-and-greets with movie or television actors, among other goings on. The Mezzanine provides rooms for board gaming and card trading along with other specialty activities. At the Hilton Hotel, which is adjacent to the convention center, there is a film festival and the “fulfillment room”, where fans redeem freebies that many of the panels offer.

My first big destination of the day is the “[Europa Report](#)” panel in Hall H, which for four Cons has escaped me; I could never get inside before capacity filled the 6,700 seats. The big-draw panels are reserved for Hall H and Ballroom 20 (capacity 5,820), where the lines are often massive, like in the thousands. You hear stories about fans lining up at 2 or 3 in the morning just to get into Hall H. To my surprise, I breeze through a line of only hundreds into a room that isn’t even half full.

I am surprised, because “Europa Report” is amazingly realistic science fiction filmmaking, and sci-fi is core to the Con’s character. But the panel is *boring*. A real snoozer. I [tweet](#): “I wish the #europareport panel was as engaging as the movie”. I consider hanging around 90-minutes for the “[Ender’s Game](#)” movie panel but head out for the exhibit hall.

My first-day goal is more about ambiance, getting a feel for San Diego Comic-Con 2013 and familiarizing myself with the year’s programs and exhibitors. The next three days are for panels and interviews conducted for this book. I will randomly select fans and choose a dozen to profile. While many Conners role-play fictional characters or superheroes, fans of every ilk play the most important role of all. They *are* Comic-Con. But no one tells their stories. I want to change that.

## The Dark Knight



**K**en Camarillo is a big man. He towers so high over me, dressed as The Dark Knight, my neck hurts from careening upward. He is an imposing figure in costume, and I haven't seen him otherwise.

Yet Camarillo's voice is clear, confident and not-the-least threatening—nor is his casual posture. Isn't that how [Batman](#) should be to the everyday citizen?

We meet early Day 2 on the upper level near several rooms where panels are already underway.

I ask Camarillo why he comes to Comic-Con, his fourth year. "It's the pop culture, to stay current. Partially, it's something we love—the characters, just the atmosphere of people dressing up and learning about different things on the horizon, as far as pop culture goes".

Knowledge@Wharton, University of Pennsylvania's online business journal, calls San Diego Comic-Con the "[Super Bowl of pop culture](#)". "It's simply the place to be for anyone interested in comic books, video games, and science fiction movies, television and literature".

Camarillo gives the pat response, what someone is *supposed to say*. But the event means something more to him. Comic-Con is a sentimental journey. A pilgrimage.

"There's a sentimental aspect", he says. "My wife's parents, her dad specifically, dressed up and really got into events and holidays". The man never attended Comic-Con. "But to help her keep going, to keep that spirit alive, we dress up. It's part of our family tradition".

His wife, who attends one of the Con's many panel sessions while we talk, is [Batwoman](#). The couple wore the same costumes last year, but may go "as [Catwoman](#), Indiana Jones or some such character" next time. That's not to say their repertoire is so limited; the Camarillos dress up often. They have been pirates and zombies, among other characters.

"I'm waiting for the graphic novel, where it's Batman the zombie", I tell him. We both agree such scenario is easily plausible, given Batman (aka Bruce Wayne) isn't the superhero imbued with natural powers, but the all-too-human gadget-carrying vigilante. If Batman ever met [The Walking Dead](#), once bitten, he could turn zombie.

Imagine a [Justice League](#) of zombies.

I ask Camarillo why people dress up. I contend that for as many days as they attend, there is opportunity for cosplayers to be who they would prefer to be. "People aspire to core values", he answers. "I think that's part of who they are. There's certain expression of that".

What about real life—his real job? "I'm a sales trainer, and I actually try to help people understand [telematics](#) in vehicles. So I get to push a lot of the technologies in vehicles—like a Batmobile". The irony is rich.

The Camarillos are among just two of the many "Bat people" that I see at Comic-Con. The characters are *everywhere*—from cartoon to television to movie renditions. Batman, Caped Crusader and The Dark Knight are among his many names. His nemeses, principally the [Joker](#),

are nearly as plentiful around the Con.

Comic-book artist [Bob Kane](#) and writer [Bill Finger](#) co-created “The Bat-Man”, who first appeared in [Detective Comics #27](#), May 1939. The character got his own comic book the following year.

His role is unique compared to, say, Superman. “Batman is proof you don’t need superpowers to be a superhero—and the poster boy for what a bad childhood can do to you”, according to his [DC Comics bio](#). By day, he is billionaire businessman playboy Bruce Wayne; by night, he is Gotham City’s winged vigilante avenger.

I wonder if Batman’s broad appeal tugs deep at our personal and social psyches:

- With the right training, anyone could assume the role of The Dark Knight. No superpowers are required.
- A street thug killed Wayne’s parents, which for many fans taps into familial fears about loss and desires for justice.
- Then there is primal fear—of bats, which adult Wayne must overcome and embrace. Who can’t relate to that?

Batman also is the tortured soul; he faces internal conflict that so many heroes with superpowers *don’t*. DC Comics rightly observes that “In his crusade against injustice, two questions always loom: How far will he go to protect the innocent, and will he sacrifice his humanity along the way?” Batman is a very real character, unlike heroes born with special capabilities. He is everyman, and no man. He is *us*.

But Batman’s identifiability is much broader. In 1949 book [The Hero with a Thousand Faces](#), Joseph Campbell proposes the “archetypal quest theory”. He asserts that we all share a collective unconscious that in literature is expressed as the “hero’s journey”, or [Monomyth](#), which is found in stories across cultures and history.

The journey goes through 17 stages, which are simplified as The Departure, The Initiation and The Return. During the first phase, the hero reluctantly begins his journey. The second trains and challenges him. The last puts him on the road home to fulfill his destiny. Homer’s [The Odyssey](#) is classic example of the hero’s journey.

In popular, modern literature and film, [Harry Potter](#) is a good example of the Monomyth. He receives the hero’s “Call to Adventure” but “Refusal of the Call” through the Owl’s letters and the magical removal from his aunt and uncle’s home. The supernatural, or something akin to it, is a crucial element of the Monomyth; magic in this tale. Each part of Harry Potter’s quest reflects the heroic struggles of everyday life—the family (where his cousin is favored), making friends and learning at school; overcoming personal fears (and real monsters); and accomplishing difficult tasks (defeating Lord Voldemort, among them). Harry Potter is an endearing and identifiable character because his struggles are our own.

Bruce Wayne's journey charts similar heroic, although murkier, course. The story told by the movie trilogy directed by [Christopher Nolan](#)—"Batman Begins", "The Dark Knight" and "The Dark Knight Rises"—follows the basic hero's journey. Henri Ducard/[Ra's al Ghul](#) calls Wayne to train with the League of Shadows, which the playboy at first rebuffs then answers by fulfilling a task with a blue flower. He trains, developing supernatural-like capabilities, fulfills tasks and overcomes temptations before returning to fulfill his destiny in Gotham City. The basis of Wayne's childhood fear becomes the symbol for his role. During the first movie, Wayne tells butler [Alfred Pennyworth](#): "Bats frighten me. It's time my enemies shared my dread".

While the hero's journey traces across the trilogy, the third film follows the path on its own, as middle-school teacher and author [C. David Miles aptly explains](#). There's something primal to the Batman Monomyth that tugs us, that appeals to anyone.

The trilogy also is a redemption story, where during the third movie Wayne loses everything only to later triumph; he overcomes physical, emotional and external hardships to reclaim himself as Batman and save Gotham City from nuclear annihilation. Redemption is one of the most common storylines in modern literature and film. The purest redemption story is the fallen hero restored.

## The Fighter



Camarillo and I part ways near San Diego Convention Center's upper terrace that overlooks the bay. I walk outside searching for a food concession. Looking down to the lower mezzanine, I see Medieval knights, dressed in full armor, clashing swords and shields. I certainly hadn't seen any of *them* walking around the main exhibit hall.

What an odd coincidence this is—to go from Batman, the modern Dark Knight, to those from the Middle Ages. I follow several inside and stop a woman, about 1.6 meters (almost 5 foot 5 inches) tall, as she enters a small room where other people in Medieval garb gather. I ask to interview her.

Chaos awaits inside, where past and present collide. I see people wearing T-Shirts and

shorts sitting alongside those with armor fittings or Medieval European attire. One maiden knits from a modern handbag, while another woman dressed in full armor listens to music on her iPhone; the white earbuds can't be missed. Clothes of different vintage and eras are *everywhere*, in piles on tables, chairs and floor corners. Modern meets Medieval, and the ambiance lifts my mood. What a treasure is this tucked-away place.

Strangest of all is the chatter. I could have easily stepped into an ancient English pub for the loud conversation. The talk is festive and ferocious. Kill the fluorescents, light candles and put pints of brew on tables and the atmosphere would be about right for 14th- or 15th-Century Europe—or what I imagine it to be.

The woman I interview, Melanie Smith, brings calm to chaos. Talkative but not loud, she wears maroon-and-white Medieval fighter's uniform, which with armor weighs about 16 kilograms (35 pounds). The helmet alone is 5.5 kilos (12 pounds). We sit and chat, while she eats a contemporary salad. Smith, an accountant, is local, from Escondido, Calif., which is about 48 kilometers north of San Diego.

She belongs to the [Society for Creative Anachronism](#), which is “dedicated to researching and recreating the arts and skills of pre-17th-Century Europe. Our ‘Known World’ consists of 19 kingdoms”, according to the organization.

“We like to represent the best of the Middle Ages, chivalry being the primary goal”, Smith says. “We also do arts, science—pretty much anything they would have done, we try and recreate. We've got scribal arts and illumination, we've got fabric weaving, dyeing—she is doing some handwork right now”, referring to the maiden sitting beside me.

“We're here doing recruitment demos; we're here just about every year”, Smith says in response to my question about why she attends Comic-Con.

Sir Patrick O'Malley of Ulidia, as he is known in the Society, comes up behind us. The Duke's wife, the Duchess Kara the twin of Kelton, organizes the event. I show interest in his chainmail. “That's Titanium-welded chain”, Smith says. The chainmail weighs 4 kilos (9 pounds)—“the benefit of Titanium over actual period metal, which would be...35 pounds [16 kilos] if he wore the standard ring suit”, she explains.

I ask Smith how she got involved in the Society. “My friends took me to a Renaissance fair, and me and my other half thought it was fabulous. We bought clothing. We had such a great time, we came back again”. Then her friends told her “about this ‘other thing we do’. You get to dress up the entire time and go camping essentially for four days in costume, and ‘this is how we live’. So we went, and we really enjoyed it”.

But while experiencing the Medieval, on this first expedition Smith was every bit the modern woman. “Primarily at first, all I did was shopping. I shopped and hung out at camp. Then one day I went to help a friend who was water-bearing for the fighters. I had never seen

the battlefield before. I spent all day giving water to the hot, sweaty fighters”.

Then everything changed. “There was a charge coming down the field coming towards the area I was standing, and my whole body, mindset, everything got down and low and kind of aggressive and went ‘Alright, come on, I can take `em’. That’s where I learned that I love fighting. It was the craziest thing I had ever experienced”.

Smith joined the Society in the early 2000s, and “pretty much dropped everything else that I did—gaming, because I was a paper gamer”. She started training as a fighter, for more than eight-and-a-half years so far. “Everything I do now is training for fighting”.

Her explanation makes me wonder about role-reversals: “When people think of Comic-Con, they think of all these people dressing up as superheroes”, I tell her. “Everyone is assuming a role, assuming an identity. But I presume yours is different, that you’ve *chosen* your identity”. She interrupts, “Yes”. I continue: “How do you”—“*choose*”, she finishes.

“Primarily you start with what interests you and a culture and country you’re interested in, a time-period that you’re interested in”, Smith answers. “Because this is something that you’re going to explore and delve deeper into”. Now, I am the interrupter: “Okay, who is she? Where is she from?”

Smith chose based on her fighter’s regalia. “Where would my armor be placed, because I’m coming from a fighter background. This is what I live in. It’s pretty much 14-Century armor. I looked at names and cultures that would have worn this style of armor”.

In the Society, Smith is the Honorable Lady Feia Ambur, from [Gotland](#), which is part of present-day Sweden. “Gotland is in the middle of a trade route, and all cultures would kind of come by it. Because my warband is a [Varangian Guard](#)-based warband—Viking, Irish and [Rus](#)—it all kind of fit together that way.

“I figure if she was the daughter of a trading merchant on Gotland, these are all the peoples she would have encountered and would have been interested taking off with. You’ve got the Rus in that period. You’ve got the Mongol invasion that was pushing everything towards the coast; St. Petersburg, all of that”. Yes, it was a busy era.

I must be culturally biased from movies and TV shows depicting knights in England, or France. Sweden surprises me, but someone more knowledgeable, particularly about the Vikings, would know better.

During the 9th Century, Vikings invaded parts of Western Russia. “From the name of their state, the Scandinavian incomers were called in the sources Rus or Rhos, a term whose origin is still debated, but Eastern Slavonic and Byzantine sources called these adventurers Varangians”, researcher Raffaele D’Amato explains (*The Varangian Guard 988-1453*, Osprey Publishing, June 2010, p. 3).



The Varangian Guard were elite fighters of their day, and garb and armament reflected mixed cultural influences. “Originally the Guard was drawn primarily from the Rus, but very soon other Scandinavians such as Norwegians, Icelanders and Swedes joined the ranks; these were followed, in the second half of the 11th Century, by Danes and Englishmen, or Britons of Viking descent” (D’Amato, p. 12). The battle axe was the Guard’s signature armament.

Smith has first-hand experience with the risks that Medieval arms pose. During her first engagement, the week-long Estrella War, which the Society’s Kingdom of Atenveldt holds in Arizona, there was an incident. She removes protective gear and shows a scar, “my war wound”, that runs nearly the length of her forearm. “That’s what I brought back”.

I express surprise seeing the scar and ask how long it is. “There used to be a seven-inch plate in there”.

Smith originally trained for tournaments, “which is a different style than war fighting”. Armament differs, too. The sword is shorter and the shield larger. “I’m standing on the frontline thinking—and that’s part of the problem, you can’t think when you’re fighting—all I have to do is block”. She shifted her shorter sword to where it would be during tournament fighting. Down the field, a fighter came swinging a [glaive](#), which essentially is a sword on a pole, against the shields. The change in position exposed her arm rather than shield.

“He broke the ulna”—one of the two bones in the forearm. “I wasn’t even aware. I thought it was a muscle cramp, a charley horse, because that’s what it felt like”. She fell back out of the line, “because technically I wasn’t dead, it wasn’t a kill shot”.

Smith sought medical treatment after pain persisted for several hours. She chose surgery over a cast because of the possibility of a future operation. “Because everything I do is fighting, I said: ‘Let’s get it over with’”.

I wonder about women fighters in the 14th Century. Were they really so common? “There are some known women fighters, like Joan of Arc”, Smith answers. “A lot of Viking women fought. Most women defended the castle while the men were away. But there’s not a huge lot of historical documentation on it”.

Roles varied, depending on culture. Viking women were “viewed as equals. They did fighting as well as the men. Rus women were more towards the property end of things. So I’m a little out of sync there”.

Thirty minutes later, I watch a woman transformed, from Melanie Smith to Feia Ambur, fight in full armor during several bouts on the lower terrace. Her strokes are smooth and use of shield clean, clearly reflexive, as muscle memory does what deliberate thinking can’t: Attack and defend.

Despite smaller stature, something she says proves true in combat: “In my mind I'm bigger than most of the guys”.

## The Collectors



I climb up the stairs, going back to the upper outside terrace, where DaMarlon and LaMyron Carter sit side-by-side, quietly gabbing. The beefy men sport identical close-cropped cuts, tight moustaches and bold, beaming smiles. While casually clothed, T-Shirts and jeans, they cast larger presence that catches my attention.

The Carter twins are seven-year Comic-Con veterans, and they have a relaxed demeanor that reveals the truth. The men, both architects, are from Detroit, where LaMyron still lives. His brother resides in Orange County, Calif. The Con is their meetup, a chance to catch up the way siblings do, but as twins the connection is deeper. It's Day Two, and their time together is halfway spent.

I ask the long-timers how the event has changed. “There’s a lot of focus on movies and television, a lot more than when we first started coming”, LaMyron says. “Of course, the element was there, but now it’s a big draw. It’s bigger than everything else combined”.

In a July 2013 *San Jose Mercury News* story, reporter Karen D’Souza asks but fails to answer: “[Has Comic-Con sold its soul to Hollywood?](#)” That’s a common topic debated around the convention center. I don’t have the perspective of attending as long as LaMyron.

While the Con has changed, the Carters’ main reason for attending is the same as when they started.

“We kind of grew up with comic books, stuff like that, but it morphed more into toys—and that pretty much what has us coming now”, DaMarlon says. The twins come to buy stuff, but not just for themselves. “We’ve got a group of guys, who met online—different toy forums, things like that—about eight of us”.

LaMyron finishes his brother’s sentence and continues: “About eight of us, from Texas all the way up to North Carolina [and] to California. We all trade and help each other find stuff that’s hard to find in the stores. The two of us are coming out here, and we help them get exclusives out here. That’s what brings us out”.

The architects, 39, used to go to [Motor City Comic Con](#) in Detroit. “We went, what three or four years”, LaMyron says, looking to his brother, “before making the big plunge—let’s just go to the big one. We came out here and haven’t stopped since”.

Motor City Comic Con, started in 1989 and occurring in mid-May, is among the many smaller comic-book conventions taking place around the country—meaning nowhere near as large as the San Diego gathering. But attendance is way up, 30,000 in 2013, with more than half the number on Saturday.

“We just never expected 18,000+ people to attend that day, which was the same amount of people we had over the entire three days last year”, Michael Goldman, Motor City Comic Con founder, [says](#). “We were literally hit with a 'Humanity Bomb' and were not prepared for the sheer number of people attending, even with a large increase in our staff”.

The twins travel to attend a Con with four-times the attendees.

I ask how successful is their toy hunt, which already by the middle of the second day is essentially over. The brothers and their compatriots use a spreadsheet to catalog the toys, the collectors and the budget. I ask what software they use. “Just Excel, nothing fancy, but lots of formulas to make sure we keep all the money together”, DaMarlon answers. “We’re old pros”.

The men started with a list of 33 items and budget of \$1,500.

“This year there wasn’t that much we really wanted”, LaMyron says, with a tinge of sadness. “The [Hasbro 6-inch Boba Fett](#), we got that, and the [Batusi Batman](#) Mattel was selling. Other than that, we didn’t have our eyes out for a whole lot”. The budget is “about the lowest we’ve had”, he says, “as far as our own draw”. DaMarlon interrupts saying that \$1,500 is down from \$2,400 in past years.

The problem isn’t the overall economy. The group of eight are hardcore comic-book toy collectors, but they are part of a small market. “The toy industry is moving towards more kid-oriented type stuff, so even here there’s not as much stuff offered this year, which is what we’ve been seeing in the stores”, LaMyron says.

The push away from collectors is a recent trend. DaMarlon interjects: “Retailers want merchandise that sells a little bit faster. They want the licensed products and the brands, but they want it at a lower price point”. LaMyron interrupts: “Which means less articulation and less collector-like items out there on the shelves”. Collectors want “hyper-articulated” toys. “That’s what they’re used to, that’s what they want to see”.

Hyper-articulation refers to the number of points for movement, so that, say, an action-figure can be posed different ways. Generally, collectibles have more than five points of articulation. The twins see increasingly-limited distribution, with fewer offerings and more made available only online. LaMyron sighs, “Even here that’s more limited in the offerings this year”.

Toy reviewer Nathan Newell supports the current trend. “Hyper-articulation undermines playability by making the figure more complicated to manipulate, more prone to loosening joints, and more inclined to breakage”, he [asserts](#).

“A collector digs hyper-articulation because he/she can sculpt a figure into a perfect pose for their display shelf”, Newell explains. “As long as the articulation holds long enough for a few iterations of posing, the collector is happy”. The larger problem: “Give a kid a hyper-articulation figure, and it quickly becomes a rag doll. Or the wrist breaks off. Or the articulated fingers can’t hold a weapon”.

Which is the larger market? Collectors, or kids? The obvious answer infers much about the trend the Carter twins observe.

I’m not surprised that hyper-articulated toys, and the fine attention to movement and detail—heck, *sculpture*—appeals to a pair of architects.

The thought reminds me to ask about their professional achievements. DaMarlon’s claim to fame: Designing banks, in Michigan and California. His brother’s masterpiece, a restaurant, is gone. “It was basically hand-picked, hand-designed and directed by the mayor of Detroit himself, because he wanted this place to be somewhere he could take his VIPs offline. But it’s

no longer there”.

I ask what happened, and the laughter starts. “They decommissioned it, basically”, LaMyron answers. “It was in the convention center, much smaller than this one”. During a renovation adding an atrium space, “that restaurant had to go”.

## The Academic



**R**estaurants are hungry talk. I go to the convention center’s Mezzanine food court looking for burgers but only find over-priced pizza and decide to relax rather than eat. Another attendee and I arrive simultaneously at the same table. He smiles and invites me to sit. With one day’s notice, he got a ticket to the Con, which he visited 30 years earlier as a child and not since. I don’t believe in coincidence—his unexpected attendance and our chance meeting—and casual banter quickly leads me to see we are meant to talk.

“I study the archeology of toys”, Michael Merriam says, “and I live between Los Angeles and New York”.

Say what? *Archeology of toys?*

“I have two ways of looking at the archaeology of toys”, he explains. “One of them is to look at toys in our world today and what they do, how children are actually playing with them and all the documentation around how they’re made and why they look the way they look—without any abstract philosophy about the sexual stuff of plastic, or even social stuff like Barbie is this way to force an idea of femininity on everybody”. In other words, his studies strip away gender-role discussions.

“I try not to do any of that and just look at the sculptural features, as an art historian would look at a sculpture”, Merriam says. “The reason I use archaeology is because I’m using toys from the past [too]. What it really means is it’s a study of how toys work that isn’t distracted by boring questions about commerce or boring questions about women’s roles, men’s roles or anything like that”.

Merriam describes his profession as “disciplined and rigorous, which is what makes it boring to some people”. Hell, I’m fascinated, listening to him.

The stranger question about his field: “‘What does that mean about children? What does that mean about childhood?’ I am starting very broad, and am just starting to hone in. I just did a workshop in San Francisco for the use of toys with traumatized children, because I want to see how children use toys to communicate”.

How did he come to be an archaeologist of toys?

“This happened because I was studying 20th-Century art and anthropology at the same time, and I noticed that when anthropologists talked about toys they really didn’t talk about the art of making the toys—they didn’t talk about them as sculpture”, Merriam explains. “They didn’t have the same respect for a toy as they would for a statue or a vase. They weren’t interested in their sculptural features, they weren’t really interested in the color they were or anything aesthetic like that. They were more interested in other stuff that was more tangential”.

I smile and think: Who says you can’t make a career out of arts and sciences or majors many college counselors would advise against?

“I took a serious interest in toys, and I noticed that in 20th-Century toys, the imagination of children was being nourished”, Merriam says, “and I wondered if that was true in other parts of history, like the Aztecs or Ancient Egypt. My belief is that it is, and when you study the toys of ancient cultures, as much as we can, it’s possible to find dimensions of life that we didn’t know about”.

I ask for an example, and he gives one a San Diegan can appreciate. “The Aztecs didn’t have the wheel—we always say it as archaeologists, they just didn’t have it—except the children had it. We have children’s toys that have wheels on them. What a remarkable thing



that children had this technology, this revolutionary technology, and no one around them was going to take it seriously because it was just in their toys”.

The wheel is a fairly recent invention in human history and often is regarded as a fundamental technological achievement leading to others. However, the wheel’s adoption is rather sporadic from its earliest uses in the 10th Millennium BC. Depictions of wheeled wagons can be dated to around 3500 BC.

More millennia passed before the wheel was widely used for transportation, particularly. Availability of animals to pull wagons or terrain to move them are fundamental reasons. The Roman Empire is example of a civilization that had both. During the 4th Century BC, the Roman Republic constructed the first section of the [Appian Way](#), primarily for military purposes, enabling easy movement of wheeled vehicles. Roads connected much of the future Empire.

While Western Civilization benefited from the wheel’s widespread use, other cultures progressed without it. The Aztecs dominated an area in and around where Mexico City is today. Their principal city, Tenochtitlan, was located on an island in Lake Texcoco. In an area where boats were the most efficient means of transportation, wheeled vehicles weren’t obvious, or even practical, inventions.

“The way their roads were constructed, wheels wouldn’t have been as great as they have been elsewhere”, Merriam says. “So it’s not really fair for me to say that the children caught onto something that silly parents didn’t catch onto”. He smiles.

Surely toys tell *some story* about the Aztecs. I ask out of interest and connection. San Diego State University collegiate sports teams are the Aztecs.

“What it tells me about the Aztecs as a people, it’s such a good question, because the larger question is what does the cultural life of children tell us about the cultural life of adults”, Merriam says. “The disconnect is staggering. The fact that children lead creative and intellectual lives that their parents and other adults probably can’t understand is breathtaking”.

He veers away from the one culture in Mexico to more universal human tendencies. “A lot of times when you’re looking at children’s toys, you’re seeing the point of severance between children’s and the adult’s worlds”, Merriam says. “Comic-Con is a great way to explore that, because the boundary between adulthood and childhood is porous here; it’s very permeable here in a way that it just isn’t anywhere else in the world.

“When you ask about what’s the difference between the culture of kids and the culture of adults, this is probably the best place to look at that, because that boundary is what we’re magnifying—it’s so much more visible here”.

Merriam says part of what makes Comic-Con special is that adults can connect to the feelings they had as children. He talks about toy buying, for example, and “getting back to a kind of pleasure that wasn’t obsessed with achievement, wasn’t obsessed with making anybody happy except myself. Getting the Star Wars toy isn’t my father’s dream, isn’t my mother’s dream, wasn’t anyone’s dream but mine. It was all mine”.

I ask about people dressing up as superheroes. Isn’t that the same? “I don’t think it is. When I was eight or nine years old, it was theoretically possible for me to become a superhero. You read they [superheroes] start training at the age of seven or whatever, martial arts master by 14. I’ve still got time [as a child]. It was still possible, there was no real sadness to the possibility of becoming a real superhero.

“In adulthood, and I can’t speak for the other cosplayers, it would be different. I no longer believe it’s possible for me to have superhuman abilities...It might look like the kids are having the same experience as the adults, and it might be another planet, another solar system”.

I ask him about Orson Scott Card sci-fi novel [Ender’s Game](#), which I read when it published in the mid-1980s. The book comes to mind because the [film adaptation](#) releases a few months after San Diego Comic-Con 2013 ends, and an adult writes about the life of kids. What they think. How they *feel*. Merriam suggests the two worlds are different, so can an adult really capture the child’s perspective?

“That’s a huge question”, he responds. “A lot of gifted children have identified with Ender, because he’s at a place with sensibilities that people around him don’t have—and he must, like most gifted kids, have to defend himself in school. He uses violence very advisedly; he only uses it when it’s absolutely necessary.

“There’s a lot of ways you could read *Ender’s Game* as a novel about obsessive-compulsive disorders. With OCD, there’s always the hope you’ll do the ritual for the last time, and indeed in *Ender’s Game* he’s tricked into playing the game in a way that it’s the last time—and I always found that very moving”.

Merriam starts talking about the psychology of adult toy collectors, which is another point of separation from children. “To be a passionate collector, one of two things has to be going on: It has to be limited in some ways, there has to be some kind of boundary”. One-of-a-kinds is an example. “The second thing, it has to have a missing piece to it...That’s what makes people want to show their collections to people; there’s that one piece they can say ‘I’ve never found this’”. In other words: Rarity matters.

By coincidence I interviewed the Carter twins before Merriam. I explain about their collecting expeditions and how they see toy manufacturers adjusting sales priorities. He interrupts: “Actual children? That’s wonderful news...I’m very encouraged by that. To me, a sculpture is a very beautiful thing, and a toy is a very beautiful thing. But they’re there for

two very different people, and like I said the creative and intellectual world of a child is usually very different from that of an adult”.

He explains: “When you’re selling toys to adult collectors, it’s hard for me to relate to them as an archaeologist of toys, because they’re very recent and not very archaeological; the other reason is...they’re preemptively rare. They’re not there for any interesting reason. They’re not rare because the toy company never believed anyone would buy Wonder Woman because she’s a girl, and action figures are for boys—that made [Wonder Woman](#) rare in 1984. They’re rare because it’s deliberately so”. Toy makers “say ahead of time we’re going to make this a limited-edition figure. There’s something artificial enough about that, it makes it less fun for me to talk about a collection of new toys because I can’t say ‘wonderful news’”.

I ask how he feels returning to Comic-Con as an adult after last being here as a child. Since he talks about the different experiences of children versus grownups, his answer interests me.

“As an archaeologist it’s a little letdown coming back now”, he answers. “This is almost the opposite of archaeology. Everything here is so new, we don’t know what’s going to be treasured and revered 100 hundred years from now—what’s going to be considered indispensable versus what’s going to be dust”.

Merriam surprises me: “I don’t know that I’m the intended audience for Comic-Con”. I interrupt: “But in a way you *are* because you’re the scientist, the anthropologist, the archeologist, what it reflects about culture, people, ethics, mores—all that kind of stuff”.

He responds: “People love that. I just saw the [Grant Morrison](#) talk. It was very high-minded, it was very anthropological, and it got a standing ovation”. The Glasgow, Scotland, native is a comic-book writer, occultist (“[chaos magick](#)”) and playwright. [Editor’s Note: Days before this book first published, early-September 2013, [Morrison bid adieu to writing Batman comics](#), completing a storytelling arc started in 2006.]

Merriam makes a startling assertion: “Everyone here is kind of an anthropologist. People here who really are aficionados of comic books really have more nuanced ideas of literature and mythology probably than a lot of literature professors do—just because they’ve seen more patterns come and go, they’ve watched things more carefully and they also have been dealing with popular literature, which was constant”.

## The Nerd Culturist



Day Three, I walk from the [15 bus](#) stop at Broadway and First towards the convention center. A young man energetically pulls up and across construction pipes hanging over the sidewalk like they're monkey bars. We pass. He and a friend stop at a crosswalk. I hesitate, then turn back and ask for an interview.

Tauri Miller, who traveled from Los Angeles, is at the Con for the third time; all four days. Unlike many participants donning costumes, he's underdressed, but somehow appropriately. He wears a T-Shirt with Batman symbol, blue jeans, black cape and mask. The signature feature, which catches my attention, is an enormous light leather utility belt with gleaming gold Batman-logo buckle. Like the Caped Crusader, Miller has a fully-functional belt—it's more than decorative.

"Is food hidden in there?" I ask. Burgers cost \$7 and soda pop \$4 inside the convention center. "You've got to stow your stuff away", he answers and starts opening pouches. "You've got your mints. You've got your gloves. You've got your chargers [for cell phone]. You've got everything you need".

Miller clasps shut the last pouch and looks up. "Why come down here from LA?" I ask. He answers: "It's a great place. When you're, quote unquote, in 'nerd culture' you're a little on the outside, because all the things you enjoy most people don't know about".

Comic-Con is a refuge, by comparison.

"Everybody you see, everyone you come in contact with, has a reference of things that you love, things that you enjoy. I super enjoy the moments when you hear someone talking about Batman, and you're like 'Oh my God, I loved that issue as well', and it just starts this whole conversation. You're instantly friends. That's what I love about it".

Miller also enjoys the exhibit hall booths "and what it takes to bring this whole thing together. I could spend days, or weeks, just on the Con floor because there's so much to see, so many little things".

His response gets me to talking about breaking down barriers. I observe that I'm not a young, handsome guy, but people stop on the street to be interviewed by such a stranger. "But also you've got monsters approaching young women, and people don't seem to mind", I say. "But if you were somewhere else, people would be afraid. 'Oh my God, what's the creepy thing coming down the street towards me?' There's a freedom to be"—Miller says before I can, "yourself". I add: "Freedom to be somebody"—again, he fills the word first—"else".

I ask about that aspect, people dressing up to be the people they wished they could be, "that you can be someone else for four days; assume a role". He smiles. "It's kind of great. There's no feeling like having a cape flowing behind you. Honestly, I know within myself the moment I don a costume I start becoming that person. I start acting like they do, moving like they do. It feels great. When you're watching a movie you can feel like they do, but being in the costume and being that person you can really take that on and really have a lot of fun with it".

That's the role he plays. In real life? "I work in production. I manage assets and work on delivering online content". I ask if any of that resonates with anything going on at the Con. He gives a sideline, but appropriate, response. "I try to work in fields I have interest in. Like I used to work for an anime company, for the sole purpose it was anime. The company I work for now does the world of heroey-type of stuff, like [Stan Lee](#). I always try to make sure I can integrate the two. When I can't, I do like the break from the normal society and trying to immerse myself in the [nerd] culture".

Stan Lee is a legend in the comic-character community, having co-created the [Incredible Hulk](#), [Spider-Man](#) and [X-Men](#), among other superheroes. The day before, I moseyed into the end of a panel where Lee spoke about storytelling. Among his priorities: Make superheroes interesting as people, then give them superpowers. His presence and energy—at *90 years old*—is superheroic.

I ask Miller to describe in just a few sentences what is Comic-Con and what the event means to him. "Comic-Con to me is the biggest expression of non-romantic love. I've seen people cry at the mention of a new character in a title, or the sequel to a series that they love. I was watching a video of people seeing the announcement of a videogame, and it made me cry a little bit to see them so excited. That is the epitome of what Comic-Con is, being so consumed by your love of these titles and these heroes and these shows that it's overwhelming".

I ask if he would describe the experience as [cathartic](#). "Yeah, definitely", he answers.

This concept of emotional release is common among my Comic-Con interviews, which harkens to the event's aspirational qualities—people longing for something better or to participate in a larger communal experience. For many people, I observe, Hollywood replaces the role religion would have generations past. But the aspirations, of achieving something better, aren't far removed.

Miller is the first among several attendees who gets the controversial question, "one evil to ask on the streets of San Diego", I tell him. "Would you like to see Comic-Con move to LA?"

Los Angeles is an aggressive suitor, and given how much of the convention is dedicated to pulp media like movies and TV shows, the city would be a locale closer to the content source and people producing or acting it. Comic-Con could grow, conceptually, too. Since 2007, the event has limited attendance to around 130,000, which contributes to fast sellouts when pass sales start online. LA, or even Anaheim, another proposed location, could expand the size.

But San Diego is where the Con started and a city with much less car congestion than Los Angeles and a tourist destination that offers Conners other benefits.

Miller doesn't see LA as better choice. "It couldn't handle it. It can barely handle [WonderCon](#). To have a Con of this scale, it would never happen".

WonderCon is San Diego Comic-Con's sister show, and the same organization runs both. Anaheim hosted the convention in 2012 and 2013, with more modest 50,000 attendance.

Originally called the Wonderful World of Comics Convention, the event started in 1987 and was held in Oakland, Calif. WonderCon moved to San Francisco in 2003, the year after Comic-Con International took over responsibilities, at the request of owners Mike Friedrich and Joe Field.

According to the organization, the move from Northern to Southern California was supposed to be temporary, set off first by construction at the Moscone Center and later scheduling problems there. The venue is considered the only one large enough in San Francisco to accommodate the convention.

But an event name change—Comic-Con International Presents WonderCon Anaheim—suggests more permanent relocation. However, at this book's early-September 2013 publication, "dates and location are still to be determined".

Anaheim is about a 90-minute drive north of San Diego, putting the two shows in close proximity. In 2013, WonderCon took place in March and Comic-Con in July. According to [Variety](#) magazine, "WonderCon is essentially what Comic-Con was in 2006: A fanboy fest just on the cusp of exploding in popularity, but still accessible to the public".

Proximity to Hollywood, even if temporary, also could be used as a litmus test for gauging Comic-Con's relocation. However, to be clear: The organization has committed to staying in San Diego at least through 2016.

## The Writer



**W**hile waiting in line for a panel about writing for Hollywood, I meet Sean Bell. He's not a cosplayer or otherwise costumed. He's clean-cut with effervescent smile that evokes calm, confidence and clarity. He is articulate, and his neat business-casual attire communicates as effectively. If not for the yellow-and-black Batman-symbol tie, he could be attending a



convention for start-up entrepreneurs.

“I am dean of a massage-therapy college”, Bell reveals. “I am a massage therapist myself—I’ve been doing it for about three years now”. He was born in Jamaica, but raised in Florida, from where he traveled to attend the Con; his second year.

Bell’s girlfriend, a seven-year attendee, drew him to the convention. “She’s been doing it forever. She wanted to make me a part of it, so she brought me to Comic-Con—and it’s just phenomenal. It’s a lot energy, there’s a lot interesting. But personally, I get a lot out of it from all the creative people who are doing actually what I want to be doing when I’m all big and grown up. They’re here and willing to give their time and their advice, just to people who want to listen”.

To prove the point, Bell pulls out a book from his bag. On his walk to wait for the panel we attend, he saw author Tom King selling his first novel. The two men talked, and King offered advice, gave Bell a business card and encouraged further contact. I laugh, because my prior panel was a how-to-write-a-superhero-novel workshop—with King.

These continuing coincidences with interviewees are eerie. What’s going on here?

King’s first novel, [A Once Crowded Sky](#), illustrated by Tom Fowler, published the previous week. King, a former CIA counter-terrorism officer, spent a year writing the story about superheroes stripped of their powers—*playing new roles*. He told panel participants that “being a writer is not a magical experience...it’s no different than being a plumber”. He encouraged everyone to find time to write everyday, which for him typically is Midnight to 3 in the morning. Writing 500 words a day, a novel can be completed in as little as six months.

King inspires Bell, who wants to be a professional writer, and that would be “anything and everything—comics, TV shows. I’m big into the genre—give me my sci-fi, give me my action, give me my dragons...that’s what I’m into”.

I try to get clarity on his ambitions and ask what three TV shows he likes. Bell rephrases the question in his answer. “Three TV shows I cannot live without: One would have been ‘Battlestar Galactica’; ‘[Burn Notice](#)’ for its dialogue; and any and all of the Star Treks”.

In 2003, the [Syfy](#) Channel (then Sci-Fi) remade cheesy 1970s schlock space drama “[Battlestar Galactica](#)” into a tale of annihilation and conflict appropriate for the post-9/11 generation; first as a mini-series, then weekly drama. Many of the broader themes resonate with the United States’ “[War on Terror](#)”. Production values and storytelling give BSG an epic, cinematic feel. But at the close of the first season, Syfy bucked Hollywood attitudes about copyrights and piracy by taking a risk on fans.

[Sky1](#), in the United Kingdom, co-produced “Battlestar Galactica” with Syfy and aired the series first (October 2004). Americans waited nearly three more months. Anticipation led to

online piracy, as BSG appeared on [BitTorrent](#) within hours of the first UK broadcast.

“While you might assume the Sci-Fi Channel saw a significant drop-off in viewership as a result of this piracy, it appears to have had the reverse effect: the series is so good that the few tens of thousands of people who watched downloaded versions told their friends to tune in on January 14th, and see for themselves”, [Mark Pesce writes for MindJack](#) in May 2005.

“From its premiere, ‘Battlestar Galactica’ has been the most popular program ever to air on the Sci-Fi Channel, and its audiences have only grown throughout the first series”, he explains. “Piracy made it possible for ‘word-of-mouth’ to spread about ‘Battlestar Galactica’”.

NBC Universal and Syfy responded by streaming select “Battlestar Galactica” episodes, starting summer 2005. The approach broke with assumptions that free, online viewing would reduce legitimate TV broadcasts’ popularity and disrupt supporting advertising revenues. I watched the Season 1 finale from Syfy’s website in July of that year, which by itself was remarkable. Legally-distributed, commercially-produced video was tough to find online in early 2005. There was no [YouTube](#), [Hulu](#), iTunes TV shows or [HBO Go](#). Television networks streamed no programs. Coincidentally, YouTube beta debuted the same month the MindJack story published and opened to the public in November 2005. Apple started selling a handful of TV shows via iTunes a month earlier.

Google acquired YouTube in October 2006, iTunes offered more than 500 movies (in addition to TV shows) by April 2007 and Hulu opened for business in March 2008, after five months of limited-access testing. In 2013, streaming of TV programs is ubiquitous, and Americans can purchase or rent movies from online stores and watch them within minutes. Many movie and television studios actively engage fans across social networks, whether during broadcasts or content that is later streamed. The notable, first point of TV show streaming fan engagement began with “Battlestar Galactica” eight year earlier.

Coincidentally, or *not*, about the time Hollywood stepped up content streaming and using the Internet to engage fans, Comic-Con’s popularity ignited like a California wildfire. Increased Studio participation cannot be ignored as a spark. Fans flocked to the convention to see their favorite stars and get sneak peeks of upcoming TV shows and movies.

Among the attendee interviews, Bell is among the ardent fans but with a twist. He doesn’t want to just revel in the characters, he wants to create them. That harkens back to his quest to be a writer and his sense of storytelling.

I ask why “Battlestar Galactica” is a favorite program. “If BSG had been set in Afghanistan or Iraq, the same exact plot, same exact anything, it would have won so many awards it would have buried the show. The fact the BSG took place in space and the bad guys were robot people, gave it...things you would not be able to do with a domestic, real-time show, but at the same time actually turned off some people as to the quality of the show they were engaged in”.

Defining: “Just the way they present the characters, an ensemble cast that makes you care about every single person. You could have a ‘Star Trek’ where I care about the main people, but BSG had such a well-developed cast of main characters, you cared about *everybody*—even a minor character two seasons later, and you’re like ‘Oh my God, I’m going back and watch what this person was doing when they were in the background of the show’”.

Bell looks askance and decides to add a fourth TV show to his list. “‘[Babylon 5](#)’, for the same reasons as BSG”. Both choices reveal what aspect of storytelling matters most to him: Character development.

I ask which “Star Trek” series is his favorite. He divides them by broader themes:

- [The Original Series](#): “Your space adventure, with [Captain] Kirk kissing girls in body paint”.
- [The Next Generation](#): “It was philosophical, your politics, your sit down and discussion...it was definitely more cerebral”.
- [Deep Space Nine](#): “That was your religious [Trek]. That became a huge element of the show”.
- [Voyager](#): “Your soap opera. You have a confined crew in space, and their interpersonal relationships is what you watch the show for”.
- [Enterprise](#): “Went back to the old-school ‘Here we are, we’re on a space adventure’”.

What about the two “Star Trek” movies directed by [J.J. Abrams](#)? Bell prefers the first to the second. “They’re a phenomenal way to go about the series, and they’re going to introduce the series to an entire new generation”.

In the [2009 film](#), history is changed such that Trek follows a new timeline, which opens many storytelling paths. “The person telling you that is someone from the original cast”, Bell observes. “Spock is telling you it’s not what you expect it to be, so there you go, fanboys. It’s canon. It’s written off. If it’s told to you by an original cast member, deal with it and enjoy it for what it is”.

From his synopsis of the Treks, Bell clearly has good sense of stories, so I ask what kind he would like to tell.

“The kind where you can’t put down the book, not because it’s a cliffhanger but because you’re in there”. I ask if he means more character-driven because of his fav TV shows. “I’m a big fan of the USA Television [slogan] ‘Characters Welcome’ they’ve been pushing for a few years. I personally think that characters drive the story. If you don’t give a damn about the character, I don’t imagine you can engage in the story. Maybe there are writers out there that can give me the situation that drives it...but for me it’s the characters’ response to that situation that really makes it human, or alien, or whatever you want to call it”.

Bell places importance on identifying with characters, no matter how removed they appear to be. He uses the example of a hero fighting a dragon, “but you equate that with the time you had to deal with an ex-wife or ex-husband, because that’s *your dragon*. It lets you draw parallels in your own life to this fantastical event, and let’s you know there’s magic in regular life. It can be high-sci-fi, and you can see amazing things going on in your own life”.

Nirvana: “When you take the book and you put it down and you go outside and you’re still thinking about it. That’s the kind of stories that I want to write”. Medium doesn’t matter to Bell. “I don’t care if they’re in a comic book, a novel or a TV screen or feature film—as long as that’s the experience people have when they walk away from it”.

I am unable to elicit from Bell the type of characters he would like to create. He circles back to character identification from another viewpoint. As a male he used to struggle to identify with female characters. “Perfect example is the [Hunger Games](#) stories. You have a strong female protagonist in that. There was a point in my life where I never would have been able to put myself to read that book, because I can’t be her. Therefore, I want to write lots of characters that lots of people can relate to through whatever means, so that people like me can get over that hump and put themselves in the character’s position”.

The conversation takes a surprising turn, to a movie with unusual characters: “[Pacific Rim](#)”, which primary protagonists are CGI (computer-generated imagery)-created robots. They’re not human by any means. But the Jaegers (robots) are so well “personified, when you see one of those things damaged you feel—you wince in pain. They’re completely artificial creations... but you care about them. They are fake machines, made fakely through technology, and you still care”.

I ask Bell where he wants to be in a year. “I want to be paying some of my bills with writing work. I might not be able to step away from what I’m doing completely, but I want to say: ‘My cell phone, I pay that with my writing’...I want to start realizing that I’m making more and more of my income through writing so that sometime I am inevitably paying all my bills with writing and everything else I’m doing is fun money”.

## The Bicyclists



**B**ell and I go onto a terrace to shoot his photo. After we separate, I walk back inside the building and down to the indoor Mezzanine leading to the outside area where the fighters parlay. I pass a family of Batman characters—the Joker, [Batgirl](#) and [Robin](#). Out of place with them: A big-wheeled bicycle, like the one from 1967 TV show “[The Prisoner](#)” (Granted, I haven’t seen one of these bikes for awhile).

I meet Rick Persky, Brandy Lordigyan and her daughter Mercedes. They sit on three chairs, looking, well, *lost*, like they don’t know where they’re supposed to be.

“We were invited to come this year”, the adult Lordigyan says about bringing the bicycle—a penny farthing—onto the exhibit floor. “We came last year, and everybody loved it, but we

were walking down there and the floor manager threw us off the floor”. I assume there’s no problem now because of the invitation. I’m mistaken. “We tried to tell him we were invited, but the floor manager made us leave”.

That explains the lost looks. The bicycle is now like a ball and chain. There’s no place to take it.

Persky and Lordigyan are founding members of the San Diego Penny Farthing Club. “We have big-wheeled bicycles, old British, and we ride them all over San Diego County doing charity parades and benefits”, Persky says. The club came to be “because Brandy noticed that when we ride our bicycles people smiled—and that it’s a contagious smile”. They’ve been riding the mis-sized two-wheelers for 15 years.

“Mercedes has her own penny farthing, and it has training wheels on it”, Lordigyan laughs. The girl is nine years old.

The penny farthing is among the earliest bicycles. The name derives from the old British penny and farthing, two coins when placed side-by-side remind of the mis-sized wheels.

The bicycle’s popularity lasted only about two decades, falling out of favor around 1890—that is in Britain. The penny farthing came to the United States later. Design is principal reason the bicycle lost appeal.

“These were the original racing bicycles”, Persky says. “The big wheel in front, the larger the circumference, the faster you go. The engineer, with rather tunnel vision, made a large front wheel to go fast. He had no concept of gearing”.

Concerns about safety—falling off headfirst—and introduction of the bicycle chain, which brought similar benefits with smaller wheels, ended the penny farthing’s short-lived popularity. Still, I’m puzzled why anyone would ride the oversized bicycle more than 120 years later.

“Nostalgia is one thing”, Persky answers. “Second thing is late-1800s, gay `90s. A golden glow comes across people’s faces and they feel very warm and very courteous”.

“We bring them to Comic-Con because people are so happy to see them, especially the older people”, Lordigyan says. Yeah, I wonder how old. Surely anyone aged enough to have ridden one as a kid must be dead. “Last year a man who was 80-something”—“eighty-six”, Persky interjects—“we put him on a penny farthing and he almost started to cry. So we almost started to cry”.

But the bicycle also appeals to 21st-Century Americans who are overwhelmed by rush-rush demands. They are called back to another time, when life wasn’t so frenetic. “Penny farthings are slow-riding bicycles”, Persky asserts. “The concept is to slow down just a little

bit. Take the pace of life and slow it down”.

Perhaps, but this was at one time a racing bicycle.

The club rides penny farthings through San Diego’s Balboa Park, which coincidentally is less than a 3-kilometer bike ride from my apartment. Persky invites me to participate in a Tuesday meeting at the [San Diego Velodrome](#). There penny farthings take to the track, and Persky encourages me to mention one rising racer: [Guy East](#). “He rides one of my 48-inch penny farthings—that one right there”.

I ask about the Batman character costumes, which look out of place with the old British bike. Persky is the Joker, which suits his chatty, comedic character.

“We usually dress [steampunk](#) when we have our penny farthings, but I wanted to do something different today”, Lordigyan says. Steampunk is a popular genre seen around Comic-Con, and its Victorian Era-style surely complements the penny farthing. Lordigyan encouraged other club members to be Batman characters “but they wanted to dress steampunk”.

What about their other lives—the *real ones*?

Persky is a retired U.S. Department of Agriculture field biologist. Lordigyan owns a pest-control business. I studied biology, and tell him so, but pursued no career in a field then ranked among the 10-worst professions for the next decade. Persky understands. “After graduation, no jobs available in biology, my first career, 17 years, senior advertising copywriter”. He then finally worked in his chosen field.

“I also collect movie cars”, Lordigyan chimes. “I have the mystery machine from ‘[Scooby Doo](#)’”—I interrupt: “You mean like real cars?” She answers “Right, yes. We have the General Lee, the real one, from the ‘Dukes of Hazzard’. I have a Trans Am from ‘Smokey and the Bandit 2’. I have a Cadillac from ‘[Lemony Snicket](#)’ with Jim Carrey. I have a replica of the Andy Griffith car. We have the time machine from ‘[Back to the Future](#)’, and we have a movie car club, [Charger Steve’s Starz Carz](#)”.

Steve Lordigyan also organizes “Wild Rides Car Show”, which takes place every August in Pacific Beach, Calif.

Ms. Lordigyan emphasizes: “But the penny farthings are my favorite—over all the cars”. She laughs. So how does that explain daughter Mercedes’ name then?

## The Heroine



Perhaps influenced by the Batman Three and their giant-wheeled bicycle, I turn stalker. Hours earlier, a woman dressed as [Harley Quinn](#), who is the Joker's girl, caught my attention. She's back. I see her sitting at a table eating, while texting on a smartphone. I skulk around, trying not to be too obvious, waiting for her to finish. There's something appropriate about going from Mr. Persky to his character's love interest.

We sit down at another table. I sense apprehension, caution. She gauges how much to open up to a stranger, something I can understand.

Ericka Quesada is from Costa Rica, but she lives outside Los Angeles. I ask why she comes to Comic-Con. "It's a lot of fun. It's one of the places that I can go and when I make nerdy references, when I will make an obscure joke, people won't look at me like: 'What is the weird girl talking about?' They get it. In general the people are really nice—it's kind of like an



adventure”.

She doesn't strike me as being the least bit nerdy. Granted, I haven't seen her out of the Batman series costume. Her comment accentuates a common theme, in these interviews and others conducted during past Cons: A place to fit in, to be understood and accepted for who you *are*.

But Quesada's reasons for coming to Comic-Con are more multi-faceted. She is a makeup artist, “which is why I like the costumes a lot”, and why she dresses up. She has three different Harley Quinns for the four days.

“You must be pretty dedicated to have three costumes”, I observe. “Yes, I love dressing up”, she responds. The natural next question: Does she dress up other times, too? “Yes, at other conventions. Pretty much any chance I have to wear my Harley Quinn costumes, I'm all over it”.

I ask if she had trouble getting tickets. No. As a previous attendee she is eligible for pre-sale tickets, which for many Conners I speak with is the Holy Grail. “We're almost guaranteed a spot for next year, hopefully, if they keep it up”.

I ask the Comic-Con relocation question, since she lives LA way. “It would be great for me. It's less of a drive”. But the trip to San Diego is no big bother. “The people, whoever they are, will go wherever the Con is. I've always known Comic-Con as San Diego Comic-Con”.

She ultimately is pragmatic. “It all comes down to numbers. If the space can be bigger, and more people can enjoy an event, without being shut out of it, I'm all for it. I feel that anybody who wants to experience Comic-Con should be able to experience Comic-Con”. Her current boyfriend tried for a year to get a pass and couldn't. “It really bummed me out. He would really enjoy it, enjoy the people, the atmosphere”.

My recurring theme surfaces. “What I love about Comic-Con, people get to dress up and be who they want to be—is that true?” I ask. “Yes”, she answers. I continue: “The role that you play is the role that you wish you could be”. She nods agreement.

“Actually, my character, the Harley Quinn, has deep-seated meaning for me,” Quesada says. “I've always read comic books and played video games and always been the nerd girl kind of thing. When I was little and saw a female character on a show and she was loud and she was fun and she was quirky and she was the weird girl...I was really drawn to her as a character”.

She pauses. “As you get older, and go through your teenage years, you kind of lose touch with your kid side *because you want to be an adult so bad*”. She stopped watching some TV shows that mattered before.

Quesada “got into an abusive relationship, and I was in that for five years. Finally one day, I was sitting with my best friend on the couch and an old episode of ‘[Batman: The Animated Series](#)’ came on”. Quesada watched for the first time in years.

“It was the episode where Harley Quinn has had enough and finally leaves the Joker. But she’s still so dedicated to him, even though he’s so awful to her. She loves him so much that she just can’t get away. She’s scared and everything”.

Quesada turned to her friend and asked: ““Is that what I look like?”” Yes. ““But wait, watch this””, the friend said. She pulled out a “Batman: The Animated Series” DVD and played an episode a few later, “where Harley is free and she’s happy”, Quesada explains. “She does what she wants and she doesn’t have anything holding her back. It was a better version of herself. She finally had the strength to leave, and that gave me the strength to get myself together and get out”.

Quesada started dressing as Harley Quinn soon after.

“You’re the first person I’ve talked to who has a personal connection to your character”, I tell her.

She smiles and responds: “I come with my best friend, and it’s just a week of wackiness”. Her friend sometimes dresses as Batman nemesis Poison Ivy. “I consider her my Poison Ivy, because she pulled me from the ashes. We’ve been super close since we were little. She’s like my sister. But for everything else we’re opposites. I’m a DC girl. She’s Marvel all the way. She’s [Loki](#) today, but she’s very hero-oriented and dresses as a female [Captain America](#)”.

The women’s comic character choices are appropriately representative. Competition between DC Comics and Marvel is epic. Superheroic.

Both publishers formed from others in the 1930s. National Allied Publications became Detective Comics, later shortened to DC. Timely Comics published the first Marvel in 1939. Two name changes followed, first to Atlas Comics and finally Marvel in 1961. The Walt Disney Company acquired Marvel Entertainment in 2009. The same year, in response, Time Warner folded DC Comics into its Studio operations.

DC’s most-enduring characters came early—Superman (1938) and Batman (1939). Marvel scored with Captain America in 1941. But its most iconic characters, many co-created by Stan Lee, came in the 1960s: [Fantastic Four](#) (1961); [Thor](#) (1962); Spider-Man (1962); [Iron Man](#) (1963); and X-Men (1963), among many. Other DC superheroes include [Green Arrow](#), Justice League, [The Flash](#) and Wonder Woman.

According to data that Diamond Comic Distributors compiles, DC and Marvel were nearly tied for [retail market share in July 2013](#). By [September 2013](#), DC widened the lead—40 percent to 28 percent. Combined, they command 69 percent share. Among the top-20 selling

comics, DC published six and Marvel twelve.

Coincidentally, or *not*, around the time Hollywood's influence over Comic-Con increased, DC and Marvel characters, and those from some other comic-book publishers, started appearing in more movies and TV shows. I hear lots of talk around the Con about comic books' shrinking presence *but disagree!* The old superheroes are as popular, if not more so, than ever. They're even larger and more influential—as storytellers bring them to the screen, which certainly isn't bad for print or even digital comic sales.

[ComiChron reports sales data](#) for the ninth month: “DC's ‘Villains Month’ prompted North American comics retailers to order in record volume in September...\$48 million month for the trade overall. That figure is the largest non-inflation adjusted dollar amount for orders seen in the 2000s, beating both last month and last September by more than \$9 million. Despite the high month-to-month volatility recently, the quarter overall was up 7.64 percent. That looks a lot more like the rest of 2013”.

Hollywood helps *drive* comic sales and expands the universe of superheroes to more people.

## The Time Lord



**M**y stalking isn't just reserved for Quesada. During any given day, I make three or four trips to the upper-level autograph area to see what has-been actors are on display. I can't resist roaming the tables and *gawking* at the once-famous characters—often minor, or if major, born when grandpa wore diapers. Yes, I'm arrogant, which admittedly is unbecoming of a nobody

in the presence of once-somebodies.

Among the long-forgotten, as surely the short lines of fans or lack of them indicate, one surprises: [Manu Bennett](#), who just completed a highly-successful run as [Crixus](#) on Starz's "[Spartacus](#)" series. The New Zealander raised Aussie also appears in the three "Hobbit" movies as Azog the goblin king and break-out series "[Arrow](#)" as Slade Wilson. He is a working actor. Still, there's no line before Bennett. I love the guy on screen and hope there's no foreshadowing here.

As I walk away, standing near center of the room, an apparition appears. I see [Tom Baker](#), the fourth [Dr. Who](#). But this can't be because Baker is 79 years old, and this man is young like I remember the Doctor. I approach first from the side and the profile view is so uncannily Baker, my breath stops. But as I circle round front and to the other side, the resemblance fades just a little. Before me stands one of the best Doctor imitators I have ever seen, from iconic scarf to hat, overcoat, vest and mop of curly hair.

His name is Andrew Elkins. I tell him that from the profile-view, he looks like Baker. Elkins hears that a lot.

I ask why he attends Comic-Con. "I'm here to, to, to see everyone who has come to celebrate the 50th anniversary of 'Dr. Who'". Baker was Elkins' "favorite Doctor growing up". Mine, too.

"Dr. Who" is an iconic, and often cheesy, British sci-fi series that first aired in 1963. The "Time Lord" is one of the last of his kind and travels about in a blue police call box that disguises the TARDIS (Time and Relative Dimension in Space). While 2013 celebrates 50 years of the Doctor, the show did not run continuously. There is a broadcast gap between 1989 and 2005.

The series uses a gimmick to allow new actors to assume the same role. The Time Lord regenerates into someone else. The day I meet Elkins, there have been 11 Doctors. [Editor's note: While this book was being written, BBC announced that actor [Peter Capaldi will be the twelfth Doctor](#).]

Elkins attends his fifth or six Comic-Con, but isn't sure which, and like the Good Doctor apparently can't keep track of time. "This is my first for the whole weekend"—of that he is certain.

"I was highly involved with 'Dr. Who' fan clubs and 'Star Trek' fan clubs growing up. These are kind of like my people", he says looking around the room. "I spend a lot of time getting into costume". Besides Dr. Who, he "has Star Trek costumes, Wyatt Earp costume, pirate costumes, Renaissance fair costumes—I have a lot of costumes".

For "Star Trek", Elkins is more himself than any character from the series. "I consider

myself a captain, but not necessarily Captain Kirk”.

He explains more about his costume choices. “I run Renaissance fairs for my real job. I help people escape reality and enjoy part of the past”. So Elkins says. But Renaissance fairs by day and Time Lording by night is past *and* future.

For this Con he is the fourth Doctor only. I ask: “When you dress up as the Doctor, how does it make you feel?” “Honestly, I feel like the Doctor”, he answers. “Especially Tom Baker and the scarf, even if people haven’t seen him they know that’s Dr. Who and they get excited. I enjoy putting [on the costume], and it brings me close to one of the things I am passionate about”.

Elkins shares some of the reactions to his costume. “I’ve walked around the exhibit floor and come across several people, Britons, who are like ‘Oh my God! I can’t believe you’re dressed up as classic Doctor’—and I talk to them and [offer them a real Jelly Baby](#). They’re like, ‘Oh my God, you have a real Jelly Baby’. It helps the interaction, and I like interaction. In today’s day and age, and again that’s why I run Renaissance fairs, trying to get people out and interacting with characters, or the past, is a lot better than sitting in front of the computer and desensitizing us to what’s really out there”.

Time comes to ask the Time Lord the question asked to other fans, about people dressing up to be who they wish they could be and finding in Comic-Con a place for community and camaraderie.

“Everyone speaks the same language here. In public they may be more reserved talking about their passions about ‘Star Trek’ or ‘Dr. Who’. But here it’s a free-for-all. You interact with new people, you meet people you don’t get to see all the time. You can let your guard go and enjoy yourself, and with everyone who enjoys the same thing as you”.

He continues: “There are so many different levels. There are comic books, horror movies. You may not have the same interests as everyone else, you’ll get intrigued and learn more about things you wouldn’t necessarily have a passion for and might get interested in”.

Finally, I shift the conversation to something else top of mind, because of my conversation with Melanie Smith, the fighter. “Everyone else has another life, but yours sounds a little more interesting because it’s still kind of dress up—so let’s talk about the Renaissance fair. Whatya do?”

“I’m the general manager of a brand new fair starting in 2013, in November, called the [Nottingham Festival](#). It’s up in Simi Valley, California”. Elkins is from there. “It’s a non-profit fair. It’s geared towards history and education but being playful at the same time. Before that I was general manager of the largest fair in California”.

The purpose: “We help recreate history. You come into a 16th-Century Elizabethan

village. You step through that gate and you're stepping into a different world, stepping back in time. In this day and age we all could use an escape of our real lives for a little while".

The focus of Elkin's organization is quite different from Smith's. Two centuries might not seem like much, but it matters to groups like the Society for Creative Anachronism and Nottingham Festival. One's focus is the Middle Ages—the other the Renaissance, which is a later period. These groups treat such demarcation seriously.

For me history is a passion, and so I appreciate the distinction. My concern is loss of history, which I explain: "I read somewhere, and I don't remember where, that people today have as much in common with someone from the 19th Century as someone from the 19th Century as a caveman. I know that sounds extreme".

Elkins "thinks about that everyday. I was born in the '70s. Just the transition of technology—take 'Star Trek' as an example. Cell phones are communicators. iPads are pads. It's amazing how fast technology keeps turning over. It's not centuries, it's not even decades, it's literally *years*. That's how fast it's moving. Between the '70s and now, there weren't cell phones...until really the '90s when they started to become prominent".

I make another point about change, when my teenage daughter and I watched 1961 film "[The Parent Trap](#)". "She didn't know what a telegram was, and it was impossible to explain"—Elkins completes the thought: "Why would she need a telegram?" He laughs. "I understand that. Sometimes it amazes me how fast things are going versus how slow they were before".

He says what I'm thinking (damn Time Lords know everything): "It's important to look back at the history to see where we came from". That's where the Renaissance fair is "extremely important".

I point out Google as possible problem, where people can search and get instant answers with little effort and even less context. "That's what the Renaissance fair is for", Elkins says. "It's learning through interaction instead of just learning by reading or just glimpsing something".

While we have been speaking, people waited to take pictures of Dr. Who. The fan has attracted others, so I take my leave, with thanks.

After Elkins and I separate, I look around the room, reconsidering my cocky attitude about the actors and artists signing autographs. If elderly Baker was here, wouldn't someone like Elkins ask for an autograph? He is a true fan, and perhaps that's the point I miss.

During Comic-Con 2012, I attended the "Spartacus" panel, where Bennett and others hammed on in good spirits about the final season. Two years earlier, I got T-Shirt "I fight for no cause but my own", promoting the series. The Tee is ratty now but I still wear it, and no

day passes without someone commenting positively about the statement.

Bennett is here for the *fans*, and they are what the Con is all about. Sure some actors feed from the attention, and Hollywood uses every panel, character appearance or piece of swag to market movies, TV shows and more. But the target audience is always the fans. Everyone loves somebody, and who can say what fictional character—and the actors playing them—influenced, or even *changed*, someone's life. Quesada and Harley Quinn is good example.

I chastise myself and move on.



## The Volunteer



Evening of the third day, I'm the fan. I wait in line for the "[Strike Back](#)" panel. [Cinemax](#) co-produces the action series with Sky1, the original broadcaster. "Strike Back", based on former SAS commando Chris Ryan's [novel by the same name](#), follows the exploits of British Intelligence group Section 20 and sergeants Michael Stonebridge and Damien Scott, played by [Philip Winchester](#) and [Sullivan Stapleton](#), respectively.

The television program is a man's man's delight, with fierce action and sex, made more realistic because the principal actors perform many of their own stunts. So I am surprised to stand in line behind a maternal-looking woman wearing a "Strike Back" Tee and bulging backpack. She doesn't meet my stereotype of the average viewer. I expect men. Besides, my wife finds most shoot-'em-up dramas to be too violent; she doesn't watch many. So I just

assume most women are the same, but the surprising number of ladies in line proves me wrong.

Anjeannette McRoberts is former military, which explains some of her interest. We talk casually in line, but part ways when entering the room, for what is my most enjoyable panel of the Con. We all get coupons for free T-Shirts, but this means traipsing over to the Hilton to redeem them. Amazingly, McRoberts and I end up in line together. Again. I regard this as sign for formal interview.

This is her fourth Con, “and second year as a volunteer. I started volunteering last year because the passes sold out so quickly that I didn’t have another option”. However, she put a request to volunteer before failing to get a badge, as the service spots are offered first. “I made that choice as a precaution, but ended up being a volunteer”.

Volunteering is “three hours a day, and then you get your passes. If you work the days prior to the actual Con, then you get to have one free day as a pass. You still get to be here, you still get to see all the stuff, you still get to go on the floor. If you work the Tuesday or Wednesday before the Con actually being open, you also get to go to Preview Night, which is always fun”.

“It’s not bad”, McRoberts says of volunteering. “You can do anything from line management to handing out programs, or monitoring who goes in and out of rooms—checking passes, that kind of thing. For three hours, to be here with everybody, it’s pretty good”.

Now that I understand how she comes, the question is why. I would never have guessed. “We have a book club online that started for a bunch of friends, because of ‘[True Blood](#)’. We had a friend who wanted to come one year to have the whole experience. The rest of us decided to come as well, trying to get into the “True Blood” panel, so we could all be there together for the show. It became an annual thing. This is my third year with the group”.

“True Blood” is HBO’s vampire soap opera, which is based on a [vampire book series](#) by [Charlaine Harris](#). She has published one a year—all with “Dead” in the title—since 2001.

At a time when Facebook is supposed to be the social network for engagement, McRoberts and her other book clubbers acquainted on [Twitter](#). “We had never met each other before”. Comic-Con is where “we get to see each other once a year”. The women come from all over the states—California, Georgia, Maryland and North Carolina, for example.

“Obviously you’re more than just about ‘True Blood’”, I interject. “Absolutely”, she answers. “Usually if we’re in Ballroom 20, we try to go there the whole day”.

Many of the headliners take place in Ballroom H or 20 and getting in often means waiting several hours, and there is no guarantee of admittance. The women get into line early. “If you want to do it, you do it, and try not to be too grumpy about it. It’s all fun”.

“In a way you’re a modern Comic-Conner”, I assert, referring to her interest in TV shows like “Strike Back”, “[Supernatural](#)” and “True Blood”. “You’re not coming for comic books. You don’t come for dress-up cosplay”.

She interrupts: “I do come for books, though. There are so many authors who have books here, and then also...Random House has a lot of their books that are free. When they have new books in a series, they want to have people interested in them, so very often they’ll give you samplers or the very book itself”. She mentions Penguin as another big publisher. “I got a lot of books”.

Many people come to Comic-Con for the freebies, which for content publishers is free publicity. “Swag is always fun to get”, she says. “So you’re a swagger,” I interject. “I do get a lot of swag, yes”.

McRoberts looks forward to more annual book and swag pilgrimages, but worries. “I just hope it doesn’t get so crowded that you can’t even get in here as a volunteer”.

By this time, we have moved into a parking garage and the line is enormous. I decide to pick up my T-Shirt the next day. I head off to catch the 15 bus home.

When I get there and review the days’ interviewee photos, McRoberts’ are all blurry. I have a big problem.

## The Vendor



**F**amily Day, Comic-Con's last, is my favorite. The convention center fills up with locals, and most Hollywood stars have left the building. Day four is all about the fans.

There's energy in kids' passions, pride parents take in them and the delight and enthusiasm families share together. Groups of friends, many of them teens or young twentysomethings, also are plentiful; their laughter and goofiness is infectious. Then there is the sense of relief rising from many exhibitors, who see the end in sight of another frenetic and exhausting Con.

I nourish off the lively atmosphere like Superman might from the yellow sun. Most of my time is spent in the exhibit hall, soaking up the energy and visiting vendors. The final day

offers something else: Exhibitors give away more stuff and sell real merchandise cheap rather than pay to ship it out. There are deals to be had, and I'm the shark, constantly moving, hunting them.

One vendor grabs my attention more than others because the backstory is *different* than my expectation, and there is meaning to me.

Some background: Fifth grade was difficult for my daughter. She missed 40 days of classes, but still stayed on the honor roll, and asked that we homeschool her thereafter, which we did through the first year of high school. Homeschooling permitted her to competitive ice skate and to indulge her passion for Japanese art, culture, manga and language, which she started studying in sixth grade and continued for three-and-a-half years.

During 2005, while searching websites for a Japanese-themed birthday present for my daughter, I stumbled onto [Spicy Brown](#), which offered classic Tees with "Kokeshi Ink." designs. I purchased several then, and from the company's booth during the [National Cherry Blossom Festival](#), Washington, DC., over the next two years. But we relocated to San Diego in October 2007. My next Spicy Brown booth sighting wasn't until Comic-Con 2009.

Everything about the Spicy Brown website and booths speaks women, and they are the sellers and buyers most seen at the Con. So I'm surprised to come up to the 2013 booth and see not women sellers but a lone man—trim and fit, with big glasses and several days growth on his face that is about the same length as his close-cropped mop.

I meet Scott Brown, whose name is the first surprise. "I'm the Brown, my wife is the Spicy", he tells me. I never expected the company name to derive from a person's, nor for the operation to be a family-run small business.

In my imagination the brand name had more colorful origins, like partners about to start a new company and they are unsure what to call it. They go out to Japanese lunch but the Teriyaki meal is over-seasoned. One man looks down at the plate and blurts out: "Spicy Brown". Okay, the real story is more interesting.

I ask why he comes to Comic-Con, expecting a pat answer about selling stuff. Brown's response is better.

"I married into a crazy family", he says. I interject: "Who doesn't?" Brown continues: "The family is really into pop culture. They're big Hello Kitty fans". Someone steps up to buy something, one of many sales interruptions, and Brown loses his train of thought (Hey, selling is a *good* distraction).

"My wife and I started Spicy Brown", he resumes. "She was working at [Sanrio](#) at the time, and she knew two people working for Sanrio—the Hello Kitty company—and we thought it would be great to make products with their own designs. After work, they would go home and

make their own art, and we would take that art and put it on products—T-Shirts, wallets, handbags, that kind of stuff”. (I buy a wallet for my daughter’s birthday.)

Spicy Brown is one of the second-generation dot-coms, going online in 2003. Back in the late-1990s many startups attracted investors and seemingly everyone had a business plan and no means of making a profit. But by the turn of the century, the dot-com boom went bust, precipitating two years of global recession and putting many people, particularly in Northern California, out of work.

“The initial idea is that it was going to be just a part-time thing, to keep busy on the weekends”, Brown says. “But the first day I picked up product to make actual shirts, I went into work and got laid off my web job”. He committed full-time to Spicy Brown, “and we started doing events in the LA area. Friend of ours told us about Comic-Con, so we came down in 2006 and did awesome”. Spicy Brown rented a larger booth the next year, and sales were even greater.

I tell him about buying from the Spicy Brown booth in D.C. “Yes. We go around the country. There are other Comic-Con events...and there are anime events, like [Anime Expo](#), there’s [Otakon](#)—there’s all these Japanese-type festivals. We’re zipping around doing that quite a bit”.

Brown is a “Con connoisseur”, having tasted many events, so I ask what he likes about the San Diego convention. “I’m not a crowd guy, so it’s a little tricky for me. The only way I could come is I have a booth and my little safe space”. He laughs, then offers more meaningful reason. “I do like people watching, and there’s a huge variety of characters that go by. It’s great entertainment. I can people watch all day long”.

That’s among my reasons for coming to the Con and tell him so. “Some people come in different costumes everyday”, he says. “It’s crazy”.

Another reason relates directly to the business: “I like that you’re selling directly to your customer” (He makes many sales during our conversation, compelling me to repeatedly pause the recording). “You get to meet your customers. You get to talk to your customers. You have a lot of repeat customers, and it’s good to see the same faces year over year. When you sell directly to the stores, which we’ve done in the past, you make direct relationships with the buyers of the stores, but you don’t know who your customers really are”.

I ask who then. “That’s a fun one. Our product really appeals to a wide age-range. In business school they tell you ‘Oh what’s your target market—it has to be like 18-to-35 age group’. But that doesn’t really work for us. Girls all the way to 85 will like it”.

My family is case study confirming his point. I bought my daughter her first Spicy Brown Tee as a [Tween](#) and at 19 she still wears the designs. Same is true of my 50-something wife. Brown asks if my daughter “is into Japanese culture” and I explain that her interest goes so

far as studying the language.

“Anyone who is into Japanese culture, or Japanese food in particular, is our customer—into cute things and yummy things”, he says.

## The Millennial



As Brown and I finish up, a young woman starts shopping his booth. She is a college student, and I ask for an interview. Her whole manner is [Millennial generation](#) digital native, right down to the [Nokia 920 Windows Phone](#). She is a child of computing, connected and cell phone culture, the kind of attendee I presume drives the Con away from comics and who is more open to consuming entertainment many different ways.

[PewResearchCenter](#) describes Millennials as “confident, self-expressive, liberal, upbeat and open to change”. People born after 1980 fall into this generation. One quarter believe technology makes them “unique” compared to their forebears.

“They are history’s first ‘always connected’ generation”, PewResearchCenter says.



“Steeped in digital technology and social media, they treat their multi-tasking hand-held gadgets almost like a body part—for better and worse. More than eight-in-10 say they sleep with a cell phone glowing by the bed, poised to disgorge texts, phone calls, emails, songs, news, videos, games and wake-up jingles”.

Millennial Monica Kong attends the Con for the third time and she is here for all four days. “My brother and I have been going to conventions for over 10 years, so going to Comic-Con was sort of graduating from smaller anime conventions that are frequent around Orange County and LA. We wanted to do it pretty big, and Comic-Con is big, right?”

Her brother is into “‘Magic’ cards” and she “likes sci-fi TV shows”. Kong describes Comic-Con as a “nerd paradise”. I interject: “Nerd paradise? I love that. No one has said that”. She laughs. So we discuss the topic and the recurring theme of attendees coming to a place where they can be themselves. Be accepted.

“Yeah, you really do feel that way, and nobody judges you. Even if they do, you don’t care, because everyone has the same mindset. We’re just here to enjoy ourselves, and we have these passions and we’re not ashamed of them”.

Kong’s sci-fi interests aren’t just a pastime—they are her *life*. She studies “cognitive science with an emphasis on human-computer interaction”. The field tries to “bridge the gap between human intelligence and artificial intelligence”.

Comic-Con is a classroom of sorts, a look into what future technology might be developed. Many of the devices Millennials use now were past sci-fi visions of the future. Andrew Elkins’ observation about “Star Trek” is astute. What the TV show envisioned about the future already is the present: communicator (cell phone); tricorder (smartphone); tablet ([iPad](#)); and computer voice interaction ([Moto X](#)), among others.

Kong planned to study psychology but the university offers a “cognitive science major, which sounded much more interesting because of its interdisciplinary approach”. Artificial intelligence fascinates her because “the tech world has progressed so rapidly in the last several years. Understanding the human mind and behavior and applying it to developments in AI, I guess you could say I want to be part of the fun, too”.

She holds up her Windows Phone. “The way we interact with machines is getting more and more seamless and easier”. She hopes the trend “doesn’t make us into a lazier society”. I interject: “Don’t you think we are, with Google search, a lazier society?” She agrees.

“I believe that these services are gradually becoming an extension of us”, Kong emphasizes. “Our devices have enabled us to connect with others and access information so readily that we become consciously aware when we find ourselves in a place with no connectivity”.

She describes a kind of dislocation of ourselves, but extension, too, in ways that a Millennial better grasps than someone from another generation. “It’s difficult to memorize and store as much information in our brains as our devices can retrieve for us, so I feel like they’re important for those kinds of tasks. That combined with the extension of ourselves through blogs, photos and social networks makes our devices not just machines, but a place that contains a part of our essence as well”.

Voice interaction is top of my mind, as I see touchless control as the next big trend in computing. She agrees. “Right now we’ve got voice-command features like [Siri](#), and that’s a start in regards to our devices becoming smarter and responding to senses other than touch, but I think it’d be much neater to have our devices respond to our thoughts. Once we’ve bridged that gap, then I’d say they’ll be truly indispensable”.

Circling back to artificial intelligence, I observe that there are two contrasting views in popular sci-fi about artificial intelligence—the romanticized world will be better and robots will be the ruin of us all. “Battlestar Galactica” is extreme example of the latter. To which does she ascribe?

“I’m leaning towards ‘the world will be better’ outlook. Almost all bleak sci-fi scenarios are due to the inherent flaws of human nature, so it wouldn’t be the robots I’d be worried about, at least not for a very long time”.

Her favorite sci-fi with artificial intelligence themes: “[Blade Runner](#)”, “Battlestar Galactica” and “[Fringe](#)”.

Kong is fresh, expressive and *free* in ways that stand apart from everyone else I interviewed. She is a young woman comfortable with being Monica.

What else does she like about the Con?

“You see lots of people, too”, she says, referring to actors, actresses and artists. “That’s another thing I like. You can get up close and personal with them. It feels a lot more personable, that people in the industry can interact with their fans”.

I asked if she attended any panels. Kong tried but failed to get into “[‘Once Upon a Time’](#)”. If I got in there 10- or 15-minutes earlier, but the hall filled up”, she says, giggling. “But I did go to the ‘[Dexter](#)’ panel”, the last since the series ends in 2013. “I hadn’t finished it, so there were lots of spoilers galore”.

Since she’s sci-fi, I share my frustration about not getting into the “[‘Orphan Black’](#)” panel, which reached capacity 90 minutes before the doors opened. I’m surprised she isn’t familiar with the sizzling [BBC America](#) series, which clearly targets the Millennial audience.

We swap stories about missing out Con 2012’s “Fringe” panel. She, like me, “saw people

walking around with [Observer](#) hats” and *coveted*. But Kong got in the previous year. “That was amazing, and probably the most star-studded I’ve ever felt”.

For 2013, most of her time is spent on the show floor, “because the panels are so hard to get into”. But she and her brother caught several midnight screenings: “”[Evil Dead 2013](#)”, a remake of the 1980s version. It was so-o-o-o good. There were lots of hard-core fans in there”, which charged the atmosphere, with “people all freaking out at the same time”. They also watched “[Shaun of the Dead](#)”.

I can’t resist segueing to the idea I posed to Ken Camarillo, *The Dark Knight*: “Where’s the graphic novel where Batman becomes undead? He’s not like Superman, because he’s a real guy”.

“That’s true”, she agrees. What? A league of undead superheroes? “They’re combining superheroes together”. I interject: “Right, they’re all undead together”.

She remarks “that everyone is so obsessed with the undead thing”. I ask if she has seen movie “[World War Z](#)”. No. “Who’s in that?” she asks. Brad Pitt. “I haven’t kept up with ‘The Walking Dead’ as much as I should. My brother loves it”.

Because she is another person from the Los Angeles-area, I ask about Comic-Con relocating.

“I don’t care too much for the area that the LA Convention Center is situated in. It’s not close to a lot of food stuff, and there is traffic you have to deal with all the time”. Kong prefers San Diego. “But if it went to Anaheim, Orange County, for instance, which I don’t think is going to happen any time soon, that would be cool”. Still, she doesn’t mind driving to San Diego, “and the weather’s good”.

## Departure



I glance at my watch. Time is 4:50 in the afternoon, and the Con closes in 10 minutes. I emailed Anjeannette McRoberts earlier asking to shoot new photos. She didn't respond, and I've given up. I stop about 20 meters from the up escalator before me and the outside doors to my right.

A familiar figure breezes past, with a friend trailing behind. My God! It's McRoberts! What kind of gravity pulls us together? There are thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, still inside and around the convention center. We chance meet *again*? I chase after the women.

I finally understand why McRoberts likes “Strike Back”. She is a woman on a mission, focused, determined and moving fast. There is last-minute, official Comic-Con swag to be had if timed just right, she explains, on the upper level.

But she is too late for the bounty and walks away with a last lanyard as treasure. I never thought of lanyards as being valuable. From the buttons filling the one around McRoberts’ neck, clearly I’m a doofus.

I offer a consolation prize before taking two fast snapshots. Hours earlier, I finally got over to the “fulfillment room” for that “Strike Back” Tee. Cotton is my thing, but the shirt is 50-percent polyester. I explain and offer the T-Shirt, which she graciously receives.

Meanwhile, San Diego Comic-Con 2013 comes to a close.

Walking outside, I take a last long look at big-movie and television-show banners hanging around the convention center and contemplate Hollywood’s Comic-Con takeover. Ten minutes later, while riding the San Diego Trolley, I pull out my smartphone and Google-research, to support an idea coalescing in my noggin.

When the convention started in 1970, fantasy and science fiction was a small genre.

My discovery came from television not comics, on a Sunday afternoon in early 1967. Winters are snowy back home in [Aroostook County](#), and rather than go outside and play I switched on the television—all of two channels, one from [Presque Isle, Maine](#), and the other from [Saint John, New Brunswick](#), Canada. The CBC channel broadcast the most exciting movie I had ever seen, and only 30 minutes remained to watch.

As the credits rolled, the announcer said: “Tune in next week for the continuing adventures of ‘Star Trek’”. The episode was the second pilot, “[Where No Man Has Gone Before](#)”. I was 7 years old and elated.

The American station, WAGM, was unique at the time—the only broadcaster reaching a region one-fifth of the state. Networks ABC, CBS and NBC made an exception and permitted the station to be an affiliate with all three, rather than the typical one. “Star Trek” aired in September 1966 on NBC, but WAGM’s program director chose to broadcast another program from another network instead. I would have missed the show if not for CBC across the border. Oh, Canada!

“Star Trek” became a family ritual, every Sunday afternoon at 2 p.m., as my three sisters and I huddled around the television together. But the series limped along with low viewer ratings for two more seasons before NBC finally cancelled the original Trek, which wouldn’t find its audience until the early 1970s in syndication.

Gene Roddenberry’s “Wagon Train to the stars”, as he pitched the series to NBC

executives, was unusually good pulp media science fiction for its time. Other late last-century and early 2000s examples include the first “[Star Wars](#)” trilogy (1977, 1980, 1983), of course; successor “Star Trek” series and movies (1979-2001); “[Alien](#)” and “[Aliens](#)” (1979, 1986); “[The Terminator](#)” and “[Terminator 2: Judgment Day](#)” (1984, 1991); and a handful of TV cult favorites like “[X-Files](#)” (1993-2002); “[Buffy the Vampire Slayer](#)” (1997-2003); and the short-lived “[Firefly](#)” (2002)—all of which have strong fan followings. I won’t quibble about which others are good, but focus on their overall numbers. *Few*.

The 21st Century is altogether *different*. There is an explosion of speculative-fiction storytelling, and it *sells*. According to IMDB’s [Box Office Mojo](#), among the films with the all-time highest gross sales, 14 of the top 20 are comic character, science fiction or fantasy. If you count the “[Pirates of Caribbean](#)” series, the number is 17. All but two released during this century.

Look at the 2013-14 TV season and the number of science fiction, fantasy or comic-book hero programs—many already popular from previous years: “[Almost Human](#)”; “[Game of Thrones](#)”; “Arrow”; “[Dracula](#)”; “[Grimm](#)”; “[Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D](#)”; “Orphan Black”; “Once Upon a Time”; “[Once Upon a Time in Wonderland](#)”; “[Revolution](#)”; “Supernatural”; “[The 100](#)”; “[The Originals](#)”; “[The Tomorrow People](#)”; “[The Vampire Diaries](#)”; “The Walking Dead”; and “True Blood”, among others. The list is from mainstream broadcasters and excludes genre-focused Syfy, which adds many more.

The Con *is changing*, because society has changed, with the fast-pace of technology innovation as driving catalyst. Tech is in our hands and behind the films and TV shows we watch. What was niche storytelling in 1970 is mainstream today. We live science fiction, and CGI brings remarkably believable fantasy to life, everywhere from games to movies to television.

But the Con’s attraction stays the same. Characters like Spider-Man and Superman that drew attendees in the 1970s still command attention in the 2010s. DC and Marvel booths promote more live-action and animated superheroes than just static comics. That’s the difference.

Superhero movie franchises recently revived or sequeled tell the story: Batman, Fantastic Four, Iron Man, Spider-Man, Superman, The Avengers, The Incredible Hulk and X-Men, among others. Sales are huge. “Marvel’s The Avengers” is currently No. 3 in all-time gross global sales—\$1.5 billion, according to Box Office Mojo. “Iron Man 3” is No. 5 (\$1.2 billion), while “The Dark Knight Rises” ranks ninth (\$1.08 billion).

Among the same top-20 movies, 13 are based on characters from comic books or novels.

In 2012, [according to Box Office Mojo](#), three of the top-10 grossing movies were based on comic-book characters, with The Avengers and Batman ranking first and second, respectively. [For 2013](#), through end of October: “Iron Man 3” is first and “Man of Steel” third. Comic-book

hero movies were top-grossers in [2007](#) and [2008](#) as well.

Hollywood's Comic-Con influence started increasing around seven years ago. On television, "Battlestar Galactica" (2003-2009), "[Lost](#)" (2004-2010) and "[Heroes](#)" (2006-2010) lead a small cadre of programs putting compelling speculative storytelling *first*, and demonstrating science fiction and fantasy could appeal to mainstream viewers.

Meanwhile, moviemakers turned to some of the best storytelling on the planet, crafted by the people who write and illustrate comic books and graphic novels, and reimagined well-known heroes who, if for no other reason than their longevity, would appeal to audiences of all ages.

As I look around the San Diego Trolley car at the many faces of Comic-Con—the fans who make the greatest show on earth—I realize that Hollywood isn't taking over. Dreamers and nerds, the convention's lifeblood, have *taken over Hollywood*.

Proof-point: The large number of recent or current TV shows featuring oddball, socially-awkward, cerebral main characters, like "[30 Rock](#)"; "[Bones](#)"; "Fringe"; "[House](#)"; "[Lie to Me](#)"; "[Monk](#)"; "[Portlandia](#)"; "[Sherlock](#)"; and "[The Mentalist](#)", among many others. Then there is the strong shift in popular culture and entertainment towards speculative fiction genres like sci-fi and fantasy or sub-genres filled with magic, vampires and zombies.

For four days and nights, dreamers and nerds, whether they be fans or the content creative elite, gather the one place they can be the people they want to be. Every day.

That's the role Comic-Con plays.

## About the Author

**Joe Wilcox** is an editor, journalist and storyteller. He is best known for writing about technology trends, starting in the mid-1990s. He has worked for CMP, CNET and Ziff Davis Enterprise as staff reporter, JupiterResearch as senior analyst and BetaNews as executive editor. Wilcox was born and raised in Caribou, Maine, but now resides in San Diego, Calif., with his wife, daughter, and cat.