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Pilgrim Through Space and Time

by Marleen S. Barr

“Professor Barr?”

“Speaking.”

“This is the President of the Science Fiction Research Association. Congratulations! You have won the Association’s Pilgrim Award for lifetime achievement in science fiction criticism. You’re the latest recipient of the science fiction field’s highest honor which, as I am sure you know, is named for J. O. Bailey’s *Pilgrims Through Space and Time: Trends and Patterns in Scientific and Utopian Fiction*. Please join us at the next SFRA Convention in Los Angeles for the award ceremony taking place aboard the Queen Mary Hotel.”

My suitcase and I found ourselves located in a Queen Mary stateroom. I was thrilled to be on this historic ship. Marlene Dietrich, Clark Gable, and Winston Churchill had all sailed on the Queen Mary. They might have stood on the very spot where I was now standing.

Tradition stipulated that the Pilgrim’s identity had to remain secret until the award ceremony. One peep out of me and the word would spread as rapidly as water entering the Titanic. The vicissitudes of this locutionary imperative aside, I am grateful that the now permanently moored Queen Mary Hotel is not the Titanic. I get sea sick.

Keeping quiet was easier said than done, though. As one of the biggest yentas in the world, I literally had to bite my tongue when kibitzing with the science fiction critics who had been my friends and colleagues for years. It was particularly hard for me to keep the secret from Jeffrey Blumberger–one of the few male science fiction critics who never tried to seduce me. Jeffrey, a dead ringer for Steven Spielberg is warm, humorous, and charming He waved and approached across the starboard deck.

“Ahoy Marleen ,” Jeffrey said.

“Hi Jeffrey. Are you sure you haven’t changed your mind about marrying me? You’re still Jewish and single.”

“We have a great friendship and we should just keep it that way.” Jeffrey tried abruptly to change the subject. “Any idea who won the Pilgrim Award?” I extricated myself to avoid lying.

I made my way to the deserted leeward deck and wondered how I would manage to keep my secret. I walked to the prow, jumped up on the rail, and screamed as loudly as I could. “I am the yenta of the world. I have won the Pilgrim Award.” Even though the Titanic sodden Leonardo DiCaprio had nothing to fear from me, I felt decidedly better. Somehow I would be able to keep my secret for the next two days–even if I had to engage with people by acting analogously to an iceberg.

I entered the ship's bar and noticed that Sara Scottywitz, a young Scottish Jewish feminist science fiction critic, was holding court surrounded by a male horde salivating over her very large and very exposed breasts. As she bent to retrieve a fallen napkin, the force of her breasts pulled across her skin tight shirt almost caused the shirt to rip apart. The man seated closest to her nearly fell off of his bar stool. As I approached Sara, a new-fangled next generation Monster Me, I resolved to remain civil.

"What do I have to do to win the Pilgrim Award?" she asked. I provided the true answer.

"Spend fourteen years writing books. You're wearing a lovely shirt. But World War Two has been over for years. I didn't know that the British are still rationing fabric." Sensing an impending showdown between the planet's two most buxom Jewish female science fiction critic big mouthed broads, Jonathan Karl Goodman, one of the men in Sara's thrall, intervened to stop our deployment of weapons of mass destruction–weapons that would not fail to turn the immobile tranquil Queen Mary into the sinking of the Bismarck.

"I have very much wanted to meet you. I love your novel *Oy Pioneer*!. I think it is one of the great Jewish novels of our generation." Jonathan certainly knew how to get my attention. Nor could I fail to notice his heavy Southern accent.

"You're just saying that to be polite."

"Never! Never under any circumstance would I compromise my professional integrity. I have given y'all my unabashed professional opinion."

"I am thrilled that you think so highly of my novel. I'm writing a sequel."

"Create a compelling male protagonist modeled after me. I trust that you will use the phrase 'amazing sexual powers' to describe him. Let's take a walk on the deck." Desiring to see relic life preservers in the fresh sea air, instead of Sara's breasts in the musty bar, I accompanied Jonathan.

"Someone named Jonathan Karl Goodman must be Jewish. But you don't sound Jewish."

"I'm a Southern Jew. I was raised in Mississippi and I teach at the University of Mississippi. I'm divorced and I have twins named Rhett and Scarlett."

"Southern Jews, to my mind, don't count as really being Jewish."

"You're being a New York chauvinist pig. They're not kosher. We Southern Jews are Jews too. New York Jews erroneously think that you have to come from New York to be Jewish."

"You're right. I'll think about what you said. How well do you know Sara?"

"I just met her in the bar. Her breasts are captivating. Like all the men here, I could not take my eyes off them. She warned all the ogling men that if they slept with you, they would end up in

one of your novels. I'm willing to take my chances. Can we have sex right now? If you so desire, you can write away right away as soon as it is over."

In addition to being single and Jewish, Jonathan is brilliant, charming, and trustworthy. I took his hand and led him to my stateroom. We had great sex. Moonlight shone through the porthole and illuminated our entwined naked bodies. Jonathan had amazing sexual powers. "Write on," said Jonathan.

"Okay."

Maybe Churchill, Dietrich, and Gable had fantastic sex on the Queen Mary. I woke up entangled in Jonathan's arms. A rose adorned our pillow.

"I love you Marleen ."

"I love you too."

"Does a hotel ship have a Captain? Do you think the hotel ship Captain could marry us?" Jonathan asked.

"I don't think a hotel ship has a Captain."

"Yeah, you're right. I guess it is premature to marry someone who you have only known for twenty-four hours. I have a great idea. Why don't you come to Mississippi and live with me? You will love the Goodman ancestral antebellum mansion. It has been in the family for generations. My great great grandfather, Yehuda Goodman, named it Shady Pines. The property includes a beautiful white mansion replete with sweeping porticos and verandahs. An oak lined drive leads to the front door. You can run your fingers through the sacred red earth of Shady Pines. You can have your very own magnolia tree. I can just see us sitting under it sipping mint juleps while waiting for the groom to bring my favorite black stallion Beauregard Jackson Pickett Burnside over from the barn. Please say that you will become the mistress of Shady Pines."

"I love you Jonathan. I love you. You're perfect. Now change."

"Change? Change how?"

"Leave Shady Pines and join me in a Manhattan high rise."

"I can't leave my ancestral home. Mississippi is where I'd rather stay. I get allergic if I don't smell hay. Hey, I can't tear little Rhett and little Scarlett away from their ancestral roots."

"No matter how much I love you, and I do love you, Jewish women from Forest Hills, Queens do not live with Spanish moss."

"I see that we have reached an impasse. Why don't we become great friends?"

“I would love to have such a relationship. This romantic setting–this ship which transported all of those sexy actors–gives me an idea. There is a big difference between us and Marlene Dietrich and Clark Gable. We could never be as cool as Marlene and Clark. Let’s fantasize that we are. Let’s change our names. You could be Juan Carlo and I’ll be Marlene, pronounced in the German manner.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“One last thing. Juan Carlo, would you accompany me to this evening’s convention awards banquet?.”

“Sure thing Marlene. I’ll be back at your stateroom at six to escort you to the main dining room.” When Jonathan returned, he was resplendent in a white linen tuxedo and electric red tie. I wore an elegant gold designer pantsuit. We sat at a round flower adorned table. This was my night, one of the biggest occasions of my life. I was at once excited, anxious, and overwhelmed by this dining room’s historical import. “Juan Carlo, I have held out for two days without breathing a word to anyone. I can’t wait another second. I’ve won the Pilgrim Award.”

And then I panicked. I crawled under the table. Jonathan crouched down and moved the table cloth aside. “Marlene what are you doing under there? You have to accept the Pilgrim Award in about three minutes. Come out now. Come out immediately if not sooner.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I’m scared. What if people don’t like my acceptance speech?” .

I came out from under the table as I heard the SFRA President start to introduce me.

“SFRA’s Pilgrim for this year has published three feminist criticism books: *Alien to Femininity*, *Feminist Fabulation* and *Lost in Space.* Science fiction written by women is seen by this year’s Pilgrim as occupying a ghetto of its own within the more general ghetto of science fiction. Consequently, she has argued for placing it within the larger context of feminist fabulation. This year’s Pilgrim has devoted herself with remarkable courage and energy to her work. She is a controversial figure who would rather create real dialogue than go along with the status quo. Friends and colleagues, we are proud to present our new Science Fiction Research Association Pilgrim, Professor Marleen S. Barr.”

Oh my god. I worked all of my life to win the Pilgrim Award. And I just did. I walked on stage and began to speak.

“Although I am being given an award for producing a large amount of writerly verbiage, I do not have the words to express how grateful I am to receive this honor. I found it exceedingly difficult to be secretive about being the award winner. I so much wanted to run up to everyone, jump up and down, and scream, ‘I won the Pilgrim Award!” I’m standing on the Queen Mary

and this is no ordinary venue. Think of all the luminaries who have traveled on this ship. Marlene Dietrich or Clark Gable or Winston Churchill could have occupied this very room. But, despite their considerable achievements, Marlene and Clark and Winston did not win the Pilgrim Award. I did not want to be an actor. I did not want to be a Prime Minister. I did want to be a Pilgrim Award winner--and now I am. I am thrilled to have accomplished my objective. There is just one appropriate utterance: Thank you."

I returned to my seat as enthusiastic applause resounded. The dining room was soon empty–with the exception of Jonathan and myself. I began to cry my eyes out.

"Why are you crying? You were great. You just needed a little help to garner the courage to come out from under the table. Everyone was enthralled. Why are you so upset?"

"Everything that was said about me is true. But it is hard to be a courageous groundbreaker. I wanted to win the Pilgrim Award. And now it is over. What do I do now? What will become of me? Where will I go? What will I do?"

"Frankly my dear I do give a damn," said Jonathan as he picked me up and carried me back to his stateroom to make use of his amazing sexual powers.

"Juan Carlo, tomorrow is another day."

About the author

Marleen S. Barr is known for her pioneering scholarship in feminist science fiction and teaches English at the City University of New York. Together with figures such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, and Samuel Delany, she has won the Science Fiction Research Association Pilgrim Award for lifetime achievement in science fiction criticism. Barr is the author of *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory*, *Lost in Space: Probing Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond*, *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction*, and *Genre Fission: A New Discourse Practice for Cultural Studies*. Barr has edited many anthologies and co-edited the science fiction issue of *PMLA*. She has published two novels: *Oy Pioneer* (2003) and *Oy Feminist Planets: A Fake Memoir* (2015).