

# Two Odd Animal Stories

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

## The Ambitious Drone By Matias F. Travieso-Diaz

*To be successful, one has to be one of three bees - the queen bee,  
the hardest working bee, or the bee that does not fit in.*  
Suzy Kassem, Rise Up and Salute the Sun

Buzzy was unimpressive. Even by apiary standards (according to which the males, or “drones,” are much smaller than the Queen) Buzzy was puny. Barely half an inch from the orange tuft above his huge eyes to the tip of the abdomen, he could have been mistaken for a worker bee. But he was no worker. Indeed, as is the way with drones, he led a life of idle pleasure. The workers fed him honey, and he spent his days chatting with other drones or resting in his cell and watching the hive’s thousands of workers in their continuous activities: feeding the larvae and the Queen, adding and cleaning honeycombs, removing dead bees and other debris, storing pollen and nectar, and flying in and out in search of food for the hive. Buzzy took note of the diligence of the workers but had no desire to emulate them.

His mother, a common worker, had been tasked by the Queen with laying unfertilized eggs from which Buzzy and his brothers would emerge. He was the runt of the litter that she produced that year, a fact that both his mother and his brothers were quick to point out; she with regret, they with derision.

Buzzy’s only talents were an inquisitive mind and antennae that were constantly tuned to the rumors of the colony. Thanks to these traits, he managed to overhear when a senior worker responded to a novice’s question about the special privileges that drones enjoyed: “Poor devils. They will soon fly away and try to mate with a foreign Queen (ours, of course, would have nothing to do with any of them) and, whether they succeed or fail, their lives will soon come to an end. If they get to mate with a Queen, their pricks will fall off and they will die from the wounds. And if they fail to mate and return to the hive, we will run them off and they will starve or perish at the first frost. So let them enjoy their comforts, for the little time they have left.”

Buzzy did not like this forecast of his future. “That’s not going to happen to me. I will stay at this hive and die of old age, in comfort and glory,” he told himself. But how?

After much thinking, he came to the conclusion that the harried life of the worker bees held the key to his survival. One morning he emerged from his cell and began visiting the workers that were busy expanding the hive with more honeycombs, cleaning up, and feeding the young. “My, you work very hard, don’t you?” “Yes”, one of them replied, barely noticing him. “The Queen must be very happy,” he persisted. Still barely noticing him, the worker replied, “I don’t know.” He kept at it, asking “doesn’t she thank you for working yourselves to death?” A couple of workers paused to answer, “no.” They said this almost in unison and started to get back to their labors. “Well,” Buzzy said, “at least she works hard for you, doesn’t she?” They stopped again, this time a little longer. “Not really,” said another bee hesitantly. “All she does is lay eggs.” “Don’t you see how you are being exploited? The Queen sits on her throne while you work day in and day out. And you get nothing, no benefits from all your efforts. Let’s get rid of Her. Follow me, and I promise that this hive will be a great place to live.” Most of the workers ignored him, although a few did perk up their antennas and shook their heads in vague agreement.

As spring led into summer, things became difficult for the colony. A prolonged drought and scorching heat descended on the land, and the wild flowers in the field started wilting and dying. Each day the bees had to fly longer and farther to collect less and less nectar and pollen. Buzzy redoubled his proselytizing attempts: “I was told that this colony was twice this size last year, and that we had plenty of honey and nectar, and that scores of new bees were being born each day. Now we are shrinking and getting poorer. And it is all the Queen’s fault. She does not care that your life is getting harder. Follow me, and I will make this hive great again.” Over time, more and more exhausted workers began to pay attention to him.

When, in midsummer, it came time for the drones to fly away and seek their destiny in foreign encounters, Buzzy stayed behind. “I’m not interested in mating. My only interest is in staying in this hive, and making it great again.” That declaration was greeted with indifference by most workers, though a few rubbed their antennae in sympathy.

Shortly after the other drones had flown away, the hive was attacked by a swarm of smaller, darker bees that came into their territory and attempted to kill the Queen, usurp the hive, and steal the honey stores. Grievous fighting ensued and, at the end, the colony was able to drive off the marauders, but at a great cost in lives and ruinous honey stock losses. Buzzy wasted no time pointing out that the attack was the result of the Queen’s inability to defend her subjects, finishing his tirades with the warning “and they may come back again any day, and will find us still unready. Maybe the next time they will take over our colony and put an end to all of us.” These warnings elicited fear or apprehension among many workers, who tended to agree that greater vigilance would be essential for them to survive.

The summer was marching on and Buzzy was making little progress with his subversive campaign. Then, one morning in late July, he received a visit from a young worker. “My name is Sabeena. I will soon have to start going out to roam the fields for nectar and pollen to bring back to the hive. That is a thankless job and not what I want to do with myself.” Intrigued, Buzzy asked: “And what is your goal, then?” The answer was quick: “I missed the opportunity to become a queen for I was not fed royal jelly as a larva. But that mistake can be remedied. If you convince my sisters that the Queen is incompetent, and that they should start feeding me massive amounts of royal jelly, I may be able to make up for the lost time and become Queen myself.” Buzzy asked, dubiously: “And why would I want to do that? What is in it for me?” The young bee replied without hesitation, having already considered the matter carefully: “I will make you my prime minister. You will rule the hive in my name. I don’t want the responsibilities of power, only its benefits.”

Buzzy saw Sabeena’s plan as a refinement of his own. While his exhortations had won him a number of sympathizers who grumbled at the current state of affairs, nobody had as of yet offered to actually support his subversive campaign. “All right, Sabeena. Let’s give it a try.”

From that moment on, Buzzy became a passionate advocate of the merits of Sabeena and spent day and night comparing her favorably with the Queen, who knew of these attempts at subverting her but seemed indifferent to the threat. Sabeena, for her part, went around making outlandish promises to anyone who would listen. She even claimed that, once she was queen, she would order that her most faithful supporters be fed royal jelly so they could in turn metamorphose into queens and leave, leading their own swarms. Buzzy reinforced this claim by arguing that there was no rule that said that there could only be one queen. “I can make all of you queens, my dears, if you will only let me.”

Events came to a head when an unseasonably early frost destroyed the few flowers that had survived the drought. There was no pollen to be had, no nectar to be harvested. A winter of privation loomed. Buzzy went around talking to every worker, repeating the same message to all: “It’s time to act. Now or never. Let’s have a new beginning, let’s regain control over our destinies, for the good of the hive.” And Sabeena vowed: “I will myself go and challenge the Queen, I’ll do it alone if I must, but will you follow me?” Suddenly, there was a swelling of emotion, and a handful of bees, and then a few more, joined in a deadly swarm intending to attack the Queen in her royal cell.

The Queen, however, had received a last-minute warning and, rather than facing the mob that surged against her, took to the air and flew away, accompanied by the majority of the bees in the hive. She was never seen again.

Buzzy and Sabeena were left, much diminished but victorious, in control of the depleted hive. Buzzy wasted no time in making good on his campaign promises. “Let’s post guards to forestall any future attacks by foreigners, and let’s keep them out of our territory altogether. Let’s reduce the pollen and nectar gathering obligations of the workers. Let’s start feeding royal jelly to more and more bees.” And so on.

Sabeena, meanwhile, was being fed staggering amounts of royal jelly and was, if not growing into a queen, becoming bloated and getting to look less and less like her sisters. As she gained in weight and importance, she prohibited feeding royal jelly to any other potential queens, whether larvae or workers. She wanted no competition.

Finally, she felt ready to declare herself the Sovereign. “I, Sabeena, am your new Queen, ruler and protector of this heaven-blessed hive. I am ready for my maiden flight.” And, to the cheers of her subjects, Sabeena rose to the air towards the lone sycamore in the middle of the prairie, which from time immemorial was the trysting place of queens and drones.

No drones from foreign swarms came to meet her. Perhaps it was too late in the season, or she did not have the right pheromones, or maybe her looks were too strange to inflame the hearts of amorous drones. She hovered above the tree, swirling her wings coquettishly, to no avail. The sky remained empty, mocking her efforts.

Soon enough, a scout from the hive noticed the forlorn sovereign and hastened back to sound the alarm. “She is not getting any suitors... If this continues, our hive will perish for lack of new eggs to hatch... We will all die.” The lamentations soon gave way to reproaches. “Where are our drones? Why did they leave? How come they are not back, not one of them?” An ancient worker gave them the answer: “They all went because we forced them to go away. Maybe some will come back in a few days, because they failed in getting any queen interested in them. But we can’t take a chance that this will happen.”

“What are we to do then?” was the collective outcry. Suddenly, all eyes turned to Buzzy. “You are a drone. Go join Sabeena in joyous coupling.”

“I? No way. I am ruling this hive, I’m not going anywhere.”

But the desperate bees became insistent: “You are our only hope. Go discharge your duty as a male.”

“No.”

One of Sabeena’s lieutenants squared off to Buzzy and declared threateningly: “Either you go or you will feel our sting.” There was a chorus of assenting buzzes. Buzzy was not brave and, like all drones, had no sting. He reluctantly agreed: “All right, I’ll go.”

He flew off in the direction of the tree, but all the while he was thinking furiously: “If I mate with Sabeena I’ll die, that is the fate of every drone. What can I do?” He then concocted a desperate plan: “I will mount her, but will not enter her. I will ask her to agree to pretend we have mated and come back and start laying eggs. I will, for my part, claim that I am such a great specimen that I can survive an experience that would be the death of lesser males.”

As he approached the fatal tree, Sabeena detected an approaching drone and was heartened. “Here comes my savior, my knight in shining armor. Come to me, my love.” Then she noticed it was Buzzy and her enchantment withered. “You? Am I going to have to mate with you?”

Buzzy tremulously began making his proposal, but Sabeena cut him short. “I will have none of this. If we don’t mate and I return to the hive, all the eggs I lay will be worthless drones, and I will be banished or put to death. For once, be a male and do what you were bred for. Or I will sting you.”

If bees could cry, Buzzy’s huge eyes would have become drenched in tears. But nothing could be done. If he was going to die, at least he would enjoy the experience. He squared himself, took a deep breath, and mounted the awaiting female.

Alas, Buzzy was small in every respect. His penis bulb barely reached the inside of Sabeena’s vagina, but everted all the same and was lodged into Sabeena’s vaginal pouch. Sabeena shuddered and quickly flew away. Buzzy was left with his penis bulb torn from him at the penis neck, and fell to earth, bleeding to death. As he lay dying, one final thought flashed through his tiny brain: “It might have been better for me to conform to the ways of the hive and not attempt to tinker with the order of things.”

Sabeena returned to the hive in triumph, and proceeded to the empty cells, where she began laying eggs. Yet, Buzzy’s sperm proved inefficacious. One after another, the hatching eggs proved to be drones, for not a single fertilized egg had been created in their coupling.

Sabeena was put to death and the hive, diminished and queenless, tried to save itself by hastily breeding a new queen in the face of approaching winter. They had learned a bitter lesson: if someone makes promises that seem too good to be true, they most likely will not be delivered.

END

The Lying Cockerel -- A Modern Fable  
by Matias F. Travieso-Diaz

*I did not see the end of the battle. I forced myself to endure it as long as I could, but it was too pitiful a sight; so I made frank confession to that effect, and we retired. We heard afterward that the black cock died in the ring, and fighting to the last.*

Part I

Once upon a time, a man owned a farm in which he raised chickens. One day, his aviary holdings were increased when the widow in the farmer next door sold him her chickens: two dozen hens and pullets and an aging, overweight Orpington rooster called Rump.

When he heard through the grapevine that they were to be sold and moved to another coop, Rump became very unhappy. He expected that relocation meant a lowering of his status and the loss of his privileges as ruler of the coop.

Arrival at the new farm only confirmed his worst fears. Granted, hens were plentiful, among them some comely pullets that immediately attracted his attention, for he was of a lecherous disposition; but there were also a good number of roosters, most of them burlier than Rump and rather mean looking. There was no way he would get his fair share of feed and feathers under those conditions.

At once Rump realized that head to head conflict with his competitors would be fruitless and potentially fatal. Lucky for him, this coop was ruled peacefully. With so much ground to peck at, and so many available hens willing to oblige, the rooster leadership did not need to be determined by fighting, and was instead established by contest. A cultured rooster long ago had developed the concept of a singing competition to establish who among them should rule. From that day on, there was an annual crowing contest, the winner of which would be declared ruler of the coop.

The rules of the contest were simple: roosters were paired off, each pair being given the chance to hop atop a high tree stump and crow in a high voice to demonstrate their excellent qualities, and then proclaim their intentions as presumptive leaders. After each pair was finished, the entire coop – roosters, hens, and even chicks, for this was an egalitarian society – would vote by cackling loudly on behalf of their favorite. The contestant that got the healthiest endorsement from the crowd would win the round and move on to the next stage, until at the end an overall winner was declared.

When Rump arrived on the scene, that year's competition had been recently held and had been won for the second time by a Jersey Giant, a handsome dark bird who combined a powerful yet pleasing croon and the ability to make pronouncements on the weather, the food supply, the state of the world, and other topics.

As a newcomer, Rump was subjected to scorn and derision from everyone. He was not helped by his physique: he was pudgy, had a broad body with a low stance, his feathers were no longer buff but tended towards the orange-brown, and even

though he sported a generous comb, it was wrinkled, drooping and unhealthy looking. Other roosters, and even a number of hens, taunted him as “the cockerel” because of his unimpressive looks.

Rump was vain and did not take criticism well, but was forced to go along. He was playing the long game and believed his revenge would come when the next contest was held.

And that day finally came, one morning in late autumn. It started with a parade of all candidates, proudly displaying their multicolored plumage, to the cheers of the assembled multitude. There were eight roosters in all, plus Rump. He marched in last, to virtually no applause as he had nothing to recommend him. The reigning rooster announced his intention to retire because “he had served his time” and stepped out of the queue to preside over the proceedings. As tradition dictated, the favorite among the remaining candidates – a handsome Black Spanish named Herbert -- strutted in first, head up, one foot forward, calm, fully embodying the word “aristocrat” in his demeanor. Behind him ambled Rump, the last placed, attempting to look imposing.

Herbert fluttered to the top of the tree stump, perched himself elegantly there, cleared his throat, and uttered a sustained, well-modulated crow, and started his campaign speech: “My friends, you know me well, as you know my family, which for generations has provided sound, progressive leadership to this coop. I stand here today to ask for your support in continuing this tradition...” At this point Rump, from the ground, started jumping up and down, shouting: “Liar... you and your family are just a pack of thieves, who have bled this coop dry, stealing the feed that is thrown to us.”

Herbert was somewhat fazed by Rump’s speaking out of turn and his poor manners, and stumbled for a second. He then continued in the same calm, magisterial voice: “That is wrong. We respond to no interests other than those of our people, and the best cock...” Again, Rump interrupted him, shouting even more loudly: “Herbie, everyone knows your mother was unfaithful to her sire and you are the product of her illicit relationship with our current leader. You are just a pawn of his, who is secretly backing your campaign!!”

Herbert did not know how to respond. Finally he answered, indignantly but still in measured tones: “That is a calumny. Nobody has ever accused us of being illegitimate...” The rest of his response was drowned by Rump’s retort, which was loud and sarcastic: “Herbie, you not only lie about your shameful origin, but you have such low energy that you can’t defend yourself. You are just a weakling. Can this coop rely on you to defend its interests? Get out of here, you are a coward and are not fit to lead us.”

Herbert stood there, dumbfounded, and remained silent as the crowd began to hiss, fluff feathers and flap wings in disapproval. Finally, he slumped erratically to the ground. Rump immediately hopped to the stump, gave a victory crow, and was greeted with some loud cackling and clucking, as he basked in self-admiration.

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The rooster he had to contend with in the second round was a youthful but smallish Cubalaya. That rooster wilted under a barrage of loud charges in which Rump called him robotic, shallow, and unprepared for assuming control of the coop. “You are just a little chick. Go back to your mommy.” The Cubalaya countered with references to Rump’s questionable physique, age and lack of experience. Rump brushed those claims aside: “I am a much more experienced rooster than you. You should respect your betters and shut your beak.” The Cubalaya cowered, and Rump crowed in triumph once more.

Rocket, the last rooster Rump faced, had had time to prepare. He was a brawler, and would have brawled with Rump had the rules so allowed. A multi-colored bantam, Rocket made up for his small size with a ferocious attitude. The match between Rump and Rocket was a remarkable trading of insults; Rocket called Rump a pathological liar, a self-serving narcissist, and an insatiable philanderer and defiler of pullets, citing the testimony of some of the hens that had come with Rump to the farm. Rump, for his part, pointed to Rocket’s “obscure foreign origins,” and made accusations about the mixed race of Rocket’s ancestors, a matter that did not sit well with some chickens, who took pride in the purity of their lineage. This time the assembled multitude seemed divided in its allegiances and disheartened at both candidates, but at the end Rump won the contest because he managed to out-shout and out-insult Rocket, something that many found surprising.

Rump rewarded the support of the crowd with a stentorian crow and was just getting ready to take charge as leader of the flock when there was a stir in the back of the gathering, leading to a shifting of bodies to make room for something. The something turned out to be a Rhode Island White hen, a female named Gertrude (Gertie, for short) with a broad, deep body and an oblong and brick-like overall appearance. Gertie waddled to the front of the audience, and asserted in a strong voice: “I am placing myself in nomination for the leadership of this commonwealth.”

There was a clamor of protests. A hen had never tried to lay claim to leadership. Most roosters, including those that had been defeated by Rump, opposed having a hen as leader. “This has never been done.” “It’s absurd.” “The place of a hen is over her eggs.” “Hens are weak and have no leadership ability.” These comments were followed by others, more colorful and demeaning. Even a number of hens agreed. “How can a hen protect us so that we can safely raise our chicks?”



The outgoing leader, who up to that point had kept silent, let out a loud crow, drawing everyone's attention. "It's true that there is no precedent for governance by a hen. However, we are a progressive society and should look at the merits of an applicant, not its gender. We all know Gertie. She is an accomplished and much respected hen. Let's see what she has to say."

Chickens still shook their heads, but Gertie seized the moment and flew like an arrow until she stood on top of the stump. And the final debate began.

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Whatever one thought of her, there was no denying that Gertie was well prepared, as if she had spent all of her nine plus years grooming herself for this opportunity. She offered a dazzling array of facts and figures and statistics, and presented a detailed plan of action describing what she would accomplish as the next leader. Her initiatives included ways of protecting the unborn from predators; ways of keeping the coop warmer in winter; new methods for digging the ground for grubs, lizards and other morsels; and measures to force roosters to contribute more to the welfare of society.

Rump's tack was the exact opposite. He didn't say a word about his governing plans. Instead, he painted Gertie as an insufferable biddy, a crone with one foot in the grave. He cited her raspy voice and unsure walk as clear signs of her unfitness for the job. Could she guarantee that she would be around for a full year to lead the coop? Wasn't it true that she had been in poor health just days before? Would she be able to provide security against all the enemies that were gathered, just outside, ready to pounce on them at the first sign of weakness? When Gertie pointed to her many years of service to the commonwealth, he sarcastically demanded to know what good she had accomplished in all that time. He screamed and ranted, flew around the stump, hovered insolently over her as she tried to compose her speech, and hurled demands for her banishment or worse. When Gertie repeated her plea for making roosters do their fair share for the benefit of all, he shook his head in disbelief, declaring: "such a nasty hen, and she can't even crow."

Gertie remained calm and collected and spoke with an even voice, never bringing herself to personally attack her opponent. "When he goes low, we go high" she declared. Some were left unimpressed by her lack of passion.

They went back and forth for hours, and the choice among the two remained unclear. The roosters were a small minority but all squawked vociferously for Rump. They were joined by a surprising number of hens, who apparently were turned off by Gertie's coolness. On the other hand, Gertie's supporters launched vituperative attacks on Rump's credibility, his lack of a clear program, his chauvinism, and his many other sins.

The sun was setting behind the distant hills, marking the time when fowl retired for the night. The outgoing leader crowed for attention again, and declared: “the vote is close, but it seems that Rump’s supporters have the upper hand. He is our new leader.”

There was a collective gasp among Gertie’s supporters. No less surprised was Rump himself: he was heard muttering to his friends: “I really didn’t expect to win.”

## Part 2

“What do I do now?” became a mantra as Rump had to face his new responsibilities as head of state and an unending parade of supplicants approached him with problems that called for mature judgment and experience, both of which he spectacularly lacked. His approach to governing was the same that had won the position: talk tough and give every indication of being in control. Within days of assuming power, he had elevated friendly roosters to positions of authority regardless of merit. He had denounced and countermanded most of the policies of his predecessor. He had declared big portions of the yard surrounding the coop off limits to all but his supporters. And, throughout all of this, he had denounced his critics as lily-livered scum and sought to silence them by threatening to let loose a squad of enforcers to shut them up for good.

Emboldened by his victory, Rump dispatched couriers with self-congratulatory messages to all nearby coops, announcing that he was the new cock of the walk and they better behave or else. One of his emissaries, sent to a rival coop, was slain. The others were sent back with warnings never to return. Rump had insulted the world, and now the world was paying him back.

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Sometime in mid-February, Rump was visited by a committee of supporters, who put a question to him: “It has been several months and you have given us a lot of blunt talk but you have accomplished nothing. The winter is hard, and many blame you for not having enough to eat. You have to do something quickly, because this can’t wait ‘til spring.”

“Yes, but what? Any ideas?” he queried.

A young rooster ventured forward: “Sir, you may want to consider a show of force, a reminder to everyone that you are their greatest leader. A bit down the river is the coop that slew your messenger. Why not send an expedition there to punish those bandits, retrieve their food, and bring it back to the coop?”

Rump – who tended to follow the last piece of advice he received – warmed up to the idea, and soon adopted it as his own. “I will lead the expedition and demonstrate to all that I am the greatest leader they ever had,” he pronounced.

The following morning the sky was bright and cloudless, although it was very cold. Shivering, Rump gathered his entourage and set out towards the river. As they approached the rival coop, they loudly chanted war cries and uttered threats at the enemy. Rump sought to hearten his troop even more with tales of his exploits as leader in earlier days. "And I stood valiantly as this huge wolf, growling and drooling spit, came ...." At that point, from behind the shrubs and bushes materialized a host of angry fowl: their noisy approach had alerted their target and well over two dozen roosters and hens descended upon them and dove in their midst with unbelievable force while issuing hoarse, rasping screams.

The bravos that accompanied Rump scattered in all directions, fleeing in terror. Rump too tried to escape, but was the oldest and slowest of the group, so it was left behind as one of the assailants closed its talons in a death grip around Rump's midriff, and its pointed beak took several bites at the chicken's neck, comb and wattles. Rump instinctively squirmed and flattened himself upon the ground.

Rump lay on the earth unmoving as the other rooster readied for a final attack, but at that time a loud barking was heard as one of the farmer's dogs, a mean tempered giant schnauzer called Judge, hastened into the scene. The attacking rooster, sizing up the new arrival, rapidly took off with its companions.

Judge came over to where Rump lay and nosed him curiously. "Are you dead or alive?" he questioned. "Pretty messed up" answered Rump. "Please don't kill me." Judge let out a bark that was possibly a laugh, but one could never tell with those brutes. "I am trained not to kill the master's chickens. Come, I will take you back home." He cradled Rump carefully in his jaws and trotted back to the coop, depositing the bird on the ground in front of his astonished subjects. "You guys are really stupid walking out in the open so far from your coop. Next time I may not be around to save you." With that, Judge turned around and departed.

Rump picked himself up and took inventory of his wounds. He was bleeding profusely from a couple of deep gouges and hurt all over. But, all things considered, he was in reasonably good shape. He started preparing in his mind the speech he would give to justify the humiliating defeat. He would say something like how bravely he had faced the enemies and how he had been betrayed by incompetent advisors.

Events cut him short.

You see, chickens are a bit like sharks. When chickens see blood, they go berserk. Blood sends everyone into a frenzy and they attack the wounded animal. The more blood there is, the more they attack. So, all chickens in the coop descended on Rump as he bled, pecking him everywhere. No one rose in his defense, no one remembered how they had cheered him on when he

savaged his adversaries. And no one would give him credit for what he had done for the community, for he had done nothing good.

Rump's last thought, as consciousness faded away, was "I'm glad this is over. I was getting tired of winning."

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Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies and paying magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. Some of his unpublished works have also received "honorable mentions" from several paying publications. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" has recently been released and is available on Amazon and other book outlets.