Chicago Antisocial
Party-hop like a pro
p 10

Books
The women behind Nancy Drew
p 32

plus

Saved by Gay Hobbit Erotica

Into the world of slash fiction

Our guide to the 41st Chicago International Film Festival

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Nine years after she got sober, psychiatrist Sarz Maxwell was doing well enough. More than a decade earlier Drug Enforcement Administration officials had caught on that she had been prescribing herself amphetamines for about a year through her practice in Saint Joseph, Missouri. Initially the state's medical licensing board wanted to send her to prison. "It was very scary," she says. "It's a felony to write yourself a prescription for a controlled substance." She wound up making a deal with the board: in exchange for clemency she would let her Missouri license lapse. Prison was no longer a threat but Maxwell's life was nonetheless falling apart. "I was an alcoholic and was dying of it," she says. "The last year in Missouri it was: 'Hang on till we get home.'" She moved to Chicago, where she had family, and entered the Physicians Assistance Program for doctors in recovery at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital, where the evaluating doctor told her, "I think you might be salvageable." After four months as an inpatient, Maxwell took up a new direction as an addiction psychiatrist and eventually opened a small private practice at the Center for Personal Development on Michigan Avenue.

Life had gotten better but she was lonely. Her marriage had ended during medical school about 16 years before, and now that she didn't party it was hard to meet people outside. continued on page 24
continued from page 1 of 2-step meetings. “I’ve never been terribly good at relationships,” she says. “I’ve always had few friends. Close ones, but few.” Her two sisters—one a soccer mom, one a born-again Christian—lived in the suburbs and had little in common with their older sibling, who describes her sexual orientation as “untidy.” At one point after Maxwell’s move back to Chicago her fundamentalist sister announced, “Sarz, what you have to realize is that you and I are at opposite ends of the moral spectrum.”

Christmas of 2001 was particularly difficult for Maxwell—she’d had extensive surgery earlier in the month, and it was the first Christmas she hadn’t spent with her mother, with whom she had a troubled relationship. Her first foray out of the house after the surgery was on New Year’s Day, when she went to see The Fellowship of the Ring, the first film in the Lord of the Rings trilogy. A Tolkien fan from way back, she went reluctantly. “I’ve never seen a movie made from a book that was even reasonable, let alone usually by herself. “I could feel the clock moving toward 7 PM, when I knew there was a showing at Village North,” she says. “I saw it 20 to 30 times in that theater alone.” She also bought the sound track. “I would ride in my car and listen to the sound track every scene just from the sound track.” As she drove around town, when the music reached the point in the movie where Frodo screams, Maxwell screamed too.

At first she had a hard time finding anyone who understood her new fixation. “I’d say to people, ‘Did you see Lord of the Rings’ and they’d say, ‘Yeah, good movie.’ And I’d go, ‘But what does it mean that Frodo was an orphan, and then Gandalf falls at Khazad-dum? How did he feel?’ And everyone’s like, ‘Yeah, good movie.’” In frustration she turned to the Internet, where she found fan discussion boards full of people as desperate to analyze every facet of the movie as she was. She also discovered that quite a few fans were writing and posting stories about the show’s characters and distributing them at conventions. So readers could zero in on stories featuring their favorite characters, the stories were labeled with the characters’ initials: “K & S” for Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, for instance. “The first story to feature Kirk and Spock as lovers is thought to have appeared in 1974. By 1978 all Kirk-Spock slash anthology fanzine, Throat, had been launched. The term slash comes from the way those stories were labeled with a slash (K/S) instead of an ampersand. Enthusiasm for Star Trek slash waxed through the decades despite the show’s cancellation, and gradually the phenomenon spread.”

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good,” she says. “And so I went in there not expecting much.” Though better than she had anticipated, the movie was just entertainment for Maxwell until about three-quarters of the way through, when the wizard Gandalf falls into a fiery abyss while trying to defend Frodo and his companions from the demon- lord. A Tolkien fan from way back, she went reluctantly. “I’ve never seen a movie made from a book that was even reasonable, let alone

ing their own stories about Tolkien’s characters. Even more intriguing: some of those fan stories—the ones called “slash” were homoerotic. A friend she’d met through a Reader personal ad (“Tolkien addict seeks same for obsessive conversation”) showed her a story in which Frodo and his hunky male companion Aragorn get it on. “I was like, wow, this is really fucking sexy,” she says, grinning. “It was a lightening that I needed. It wasn’t all trauma; it was fun too. Look at that glance between Frodo and Sam. You just feel friendlier to someone when you know they’re sucking each other’s cocks.”

In short order Maxwell started writing her own slash. “I hadn’t written a word of fiction since college, and I sat down and in six weeks I wrote 30 short stories.” She chose the pen name Utahbid (“unconfuseable” in Elvish—and posted her stories to Lord of the Rings slash archives on sites such as fanfiction.net, where she quickly discovered the joys of reader feedback. “The slash world is extremely supportive and extremely helpful. When I post a chapter of my latest story, within 24 hours I’ll have 15 comments and Cry and cry. I got so I could picture every scene just from the sound track.” As she drove around town, when the music reached the point in the movie where Frodo screams, Maxwell screamed too.

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Lord of the Rings slash sites started popping up around 1999, but exploded in popularity with the release of the first movie in 2001. The stories are eminently slashable not only because of their huge, virtually all-male cast but because of Tolkien’s affinity for depicting comedically affectionate between men—an affection director Peter Jackson retained in the films. As Maxwell puts it, “You have this group of gorgeous men who are incredibly handsome. They sing songs to each other, they kiss each other, they ‘love’ each other, they talk about how they love each other, they carry each other in their arms.” Not only that, but many of the characters fall into pairs—the hobbits Merry and Pippin go everywhere together; the dwarf Gimli and the elf Legolas start out as enemies but grow close. Slash writers often write exclusively about a favorite couple, referred to as their OTP, or One True Pairing. Maxwell’s original OTP was Sam/Frodo. It’s the most obvious coupling in “Lord of the Rings” slash, what with Sam’s many teary declarations of devotion—“I can’t carry the Ring, but I can carry you”—but

continued on page 26
Caravaggio una mostra impossibile!

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Located on Chicago’s Magnificent Mile, 620 N. Michigan Avenue
Maxwell grew up in the Chicago suburbs during the 50s and 60s. Alcoholism killed her mother supported the family by working first as a school-teacher, then as a secretary for a printing company. At 13 Maxwell knew what it was like to lose a parent; like Frodo, she says, “so there’s always been this connection.” Like Frodo, Maxwell knew what it was like to lose a parent. Frodo is subject to an enormously powerful source of evil, a monster she, her boyfriend, and her best friend built for the two of them. Maxwell appended the following note to the first installment of the series: “Frodo is helping me so much. In telling his story, I can speak the truth. It was as if she could channel all her own pain into Frodo, and all the healing and gentleness she needed into Sam. The relationship she created for the two of them was sexual, but it was playful and loving instead of abusive and exploitative. That’s why the whole slash thing was so incredibly liberating,” she says. “If there’s safe sex, there’s safe voyeurism. I was borrowing other people’s bodies to explore my own head.”

Slash writers often use the services of a “beta”—another slash fan who volunteers to read a story and offer criticism. Maxwell needed a beta for “Remembrance” and she put out the call online. A female creative writing teacher who lived in Europe responded, and the two quickly established first a working relationship and then a personal relationship. “She says she fell in love with my writing,” Maxwell says. Maxwell appended the following note to the first installment of the series: “Frodo is helping me so much. In telling his story, I can speak the truth. It was as if she could channel all her own pain into Frodo, and all the healing and gentleness she needed into Sam. The relationship she created for the two of them was sexual, but it was playful and loving instead of abusive and exploitative. That’s why the whole slash thing was so incredibly liberating,” she says. “If there’s safe sex, there’s safe voyeurism. I was borrowing other people’s bodies to explore my own head.”

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Still Maxwell continues her friendships with slash writers and readers all over the world—"Anytime that I log on, there’s someone that I know online, at whatever hour"—and is still interested in following the careers of Wood, Monaghan, and the other actors. Last fall she bought the first TV set she’s ever owned so she could watch Monaghan on Lost, and she’s gotten into some of Wood’s favorite bands, such as Coldplay.

Maxwell’s professional life is going well these days too. Last year she was elected president of the Illinois Society of Addiction Medicine, and in addition to her private practice, she’s the medical director of Chicago Recovery Alliance, an organization that practices harm reduction outreach by providing clean needles, teaching addicts how to administer overdose antidotes, and providing health care referrals. The organization has received DEA approval for a mobile methadone unit—the first in Illinois—and they hope to have it up and running later this year.

Maxwell realizes that despite everything slash has done for her, many people find her relationship to it puzzling. “We all have our enthusiasms,” she explains. “Working out. Your children. Whatever. This is a concept in addiction that is really misunderstood. See, people think that what’s wrong with addicts is doing drugs. The only way to really tell if someone has a disease is to look not at what the person does to the drug, but what the drug does to the person. What this drug has done to me has opened up my life. I’ve made a couple of dozen friends. I’ve met someone that I want to spend the rest of my life with. What else could I be doing, needlepoint?”

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