



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

# Actuary of the Future

April 2014 – Issue 36

# Meet the Winners of the 10th Speculative Fiction Contest!

## Interview with Mel Windham (Second Best Overall Story)

By Madeleine Zhang

### EDITOR:

Mel, thanks for participating in this interview with *Actuary of the Future (AoF)*! Can you tell us a bit about yourself and briefly run us through your career history?

### MEL:

I'm an actuarial. (That's what you call a student before they've finished taking the exams.) Since 1998, my career spans three different jobs ... all in North Carolina.

I'm also a musician, a composer, and an aspiring writer. You can catch my videos on YouTube, and I hope to be published sometime very soon.

### EDITOR:

What made you interested in entering this contest? What is your secret of winning? Do you have any advice to share with future contestants?

### MEL:

Carol Marler and the online Rebel Outpost Forum introduced me to the contest. In 2007, I debuted with "Sam McAtry, P. I. and the Case of the Dead People." It was a hit on the Rebel Forum, but it didn't win any awards.

The contest is awesome. All stories are published—even the really bad ones. Plus, people will actually read your story. When the judging is finished, you'll get very valuable critiques from the editor (currently Gary Lange), and the judge, Dr. Bob Mielke.

My secret to winning? Keep entering, and listen to what Dr. Mielke has to say. It's all too easy to say, "What does Bob know? He doesn't get my story." But remember: He's the judge! If you give him what he wants, you'll have a good chance of winning.

Dr. Mielke basically asks the same things that professional magazines ask for: a good story, good grammar, and something that intrigues and grabs the reader.

In order to hone my craft, I've taken a couple of writing classes. I strongly suggest Uncle Orson's Writing Class, which I believe gave me the best advice available. I also joined the online critiquing community at *critters.org*. They were invaluable in helping me fix up my last story and achieve an award.

### EDITOR:

What inspired you to write "Actuarial Year"? Did you have any unique experience?

### MEL:

The idea came to me: What if everybody in the world was me? What would happen? At first I didn't think there was much of a story. But then I asked: What if this person didn't know people were slowly turning into him and it took him a while to figure out what was going on? I couldn't stop laughing.

It took me a few months to write the story. It was a funny idea, but I wanted it to be a "serious" story, and it took a while to get the right balance.

As for unique experience, I poured a lot of myself into the story. Yes ... I would really love it if someone made chocolate banana cheesecake ice cream.

### EDITOR:

Have you always had a love for writing? What do you like to write about? Are you writing any new stories?

### MEL:

My dad inspired me to write when I was in high school, and I've been writing ever since. By far, I usually write humor or sci-fi.

I have several projects in the works. My upcoming novel *Time Sleuths* promises to be a hilarious parody of time travel stories. I already have an idea for the 2015 actuarial contest ... I can't tell you what it is, but it'll be an



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experiment on the funnier side while touching on serious topics.

I also maintain a blog: “The Word of Mel.” It follows my journey from aspiring writer to (hopefully) a well-known published author.

**EDITOR:**

Why did you choose an actuarial career? What is an alternative career route for you?

**MEL:**

I discovered actuarialism right after college. I was attracted by the bits about lots of money and working with math. It’s done me well so far.

Though, I have just now accepted a job with a bank helping to develop models. It’s my first time being away from an “official” actuarial job, but this company will provide support for me to finish the actuarial exams. It’s an exciting opportunity.

**EDITOR:**

To those who have not read (and have read) your story, could you share with us what message are you trying to send? What do you want people to remember?

**MEL:**

First, the world has lots of problems. Many of these are exacerbated by human emotions of hate, prejudice and malice. Yet, actuaries tend to have the gift of looking beyond these emotions, and finding real solutions to any and all problems, while maximizing benefits to all parties involved. I really do believe that if we actuaries were given the reins to solving the world’s problems, then we’d get the job done.

Secondly, we are our worst enemies. If everyone became “me” then we would just get annoyed with each other. Variety makes the world go around.

**EDITOR:**

Could you share with us your favorite book?

**MEL:**

I’d say it’s a close tie between Orson Scott Card’s *Treason*, Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation’s Edge*, and Dan Simmons’ *Hyperion*. (Ask me again in a month and the list will change.) I love books that successfully send me into another world and give me something to look forward to at the end of the day.

**EDITOR:**

What have you done with your prize money?

**MEL:**

First, I took a picture of the check. After all, it’s my first writer’s “paycheck.” Then I put it toward a new Yamaha keyboard. It jams!

Overall, the whole experience with participating in the contest has been a positive one. I recommend it for all undiscovered writers. Give it a try ... write what’s on your mind, and see what comes out. ☆

If you would like to read Mel’s story “Actuarial Year” or other entries to the contest, you can find them at <http://www.soa.org/Professional-Interests/speculativefiction-contest.aspx>