

- [Welcome](#)
- [About Me](#)
  - [Contact](#)
- [Works](#)
  - [The Saga Of Davi Rhii](#)
    - [The Worker Prince \(The Saga Of Davi Rhii, Book 1\)](#)
    - [The Returning \(The Saga Of Davi Rhii, Book 2\)](#)
  - [Children's Books](#)
  - [Anthologies Edited](#)
  - [Online Articles](#)
  - [Online Reading](#)
- [Blog](#)
  - [Write Tips](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Interviews](#)
- [Appearances](#)
- [Links](#)
- [Store](#)
- [#sffwrtcht](#)
- [Editorial Services](#)

## [Bryan Thomas Schmidt](#)



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5/22/13—Ian Tregellis/TOR  
5/29/13—Erin Hoffman/PYR  
6/05/13—Zachary Jernigan/NSB  
6/12/13—David Annandale/Warhammer

Jun 17

## On SFWA Forums, the SFF Community & A Call For Civility

Passion is not wrong. Passion is the fertilizer of our craft. BUT there is a way to channel passion into productivity and a way to just let it loose like a rabid jungle cat. We need more of the former, less of the latter in SFWA forum discussions and the SFF community discussions. We all have a lot more in common than different and we should unite around that, rather than divide around our differences.

Nowhere has this been more evidenced to me than in SFWA forums and recent posts on the SFWA Bulletin issues. But I've been noticing the trend for a long time, and it's caused me to avoid such discussions a lot of late. What point is there in arguing with people who will attack you personally for any perceived disagreement?

I've suggested the two benefits SFWA most needs to provide members right now are Anger Management and classes in Basic Arguing Without Attacking. I'm not kidding. When the SFWA president himself is so unprofessional as to personally attack people in forums and beyond for disagreements, then I think we can say it's really gotten out of hand. This has happened. And he's far from alone, sadly.

Professionalism, maturity, decency, respect—I can go on and on listing things that are so often absent in people's behavior in the forums and any SFF community discussion on issues. It's really an ugly scene. And although it does result from people being passionate, that doesn't excuse it. Not at all.

For one, SFWA was founded to unite writers around common goals and needs so they could defend themselves against those who would try to abuse them—publishers, agents, etc. This was a unity despite political and religious differences. And though, as it always does with artists congregate, flare ups did occur, the original SFWA managed somehow to unite and make a real difference in defending writers. I often wonder if today's SFWA could do that. The Night Shade contract is an example. Did they help? Yes, maybe, but the contract still required writers to give up more than most wanted to. Overall, writers lost. That SFWA endorsed it makes one wonder if they are still the defenders of writers they used to be.

Okay, I get that negotiation is give and take. Negotiation is hard. But that doesn't change the perception and questions, especially when the contract required further modifications before most people were willing to sign on.

People in the SFF community generally seem to love to argue and to win at all costs when doing so. Arguments escalate and escalate into asshole contests to see who can one up the previous comment with something more inflammatory and more hurtful to whomever is being targeted. How is this promoting the welfare of the community?

To make matters worst, arguers feel free to mischaracterize what's been said to make their points. As if there's nothing wrong with that. They operate on mostly assumption, not fact, too. And it's been said with great truth: "Assumption is the mother of all fuck ups." I submit that "Assumption is the mother of stupidity, the mother of ignorance, and the mother of unprofessionalism," too.

If you can't listen to someone else and respond without anger, you probably shouldn't be having the dialogue. Everyone believes their worldview is right for a reason. Most have put a lot of thought into it and developed it over a long time through lots of experiences. To automatically assume that anyone who doesn't share your views is both wrong and evil is the height of arrogance and assumptive stupidity. True change cannot come in such an environment, only hurt and division. No one who attacked Resnick and Malzberg with ageism and other insults really did anything to further the cause of women. They did, however, add to ageism bigotry and assholedom. Congratulations. Is it just me or is it hard to take seriously one bigot arguing against another?

I quit reading the stuff because a) it's poison I don't need in my life; and b) it made me want to keep a list of assholes I never want to work with, some of whom used to be friends and writers I admired. Do I really want to be that kind of editor? No, but truthfully, you get one shot at being an asshole before I won't work with you again. It's simply not worth it. Still, judging people based on overwrought internet assattery is probably a less valid way to determine that than how they treat me one on one. Despite the temptation.

I know other editors, etc. who feel the same way. Do young writers not realize the people they have attacked have many friends and admirers and are often hiring writers themselves? Are these young writers so sure they're reputations and writing are solid enough to weather the possible repercussions for being asshats? If not, making their point with valid criticisms that don't assume, mischaracterize or personally attack might be worth considering.

I noted the pros were far more measured and many, many of them stayed completely out of it. Why? Because they know that people say things without thinking them through and get slammed all the time. They also know the value of professionalism, reasoned response, and respect to success in this community. Those who don't learn this will surely pay a price for it down the line. Sadly, most who read this will ignore that advice at their peril.

I have a policy of treating people how I want to be treated. Oh yes, we all have bad days. But my bad days are few and far between, because I've learned to think before I act, that words have consequences as do actions, and posting cruel words does more harm to my reputation and respect from others than to anyone I might rail against.

In times like this, I wish more people in the SFF community knew this. It really is a lovely and diverse group of wonderfully talented people. It really is fun to dialogue with them and hear their unique perspectives on the world, unique ideas, learn how they create, what makes them tick, etc. It enriches my world, my life, and my writing in numerous ways. But I refuse to waste time bearing a shovel to dig out the nuggets hidden beneath the vitriol. The dirty and disgusted feeling that leaves with me is just not worth the effort.

[ADDITION BECAUSE IT APPEARS NEEDED BY SOME:] And don't get me wrong, I'm a huge believer in free speech, too. But I think like any freedom, it must be exercised with responsibility. This is not about silencing people, but about encouraging productive dialogue.

I'm a big believer in the idea that if you want the world to be a better place, it starts with you. That's why I treat others how I want to be treated. It's why I keep SFFWRTCHT discussions off politics, religion and other controversies. SFFWRTCHT is about bringing people together, as am I. I am a community builder. I love good community and fellowship with others. To promote that, I try hard to create an environment that encourages conversation and interaction in positive ways, building community, not tearing it down. The excuse that "well if they were nice" or "they started it" doesn't fly with me, because you can't control what "they" do. You can only control what you do. And it's your choice. Don't allow someone else's asshattery to excuse your own. If you do, you're just as guilty as they are. Period.

History is filled with examples of like-minded individuals coming together to make a difference through unity. But well examined, most of the positive examples are of people behaving civilly and with respect while arguing for their cause. The destructive ones are filled with people spewing hate and cruel rhetoric, etc. in the name of their cause. And which ones are best remembered? Probably the haters, even though their impact was short-lived by far.

But how do you want to be remembered? What kind of citizen of the SFF community do you want to be? We each have a choice to make. I choose to be a community builder. What about you?

***For another perspective that's enlightening on such things, please see [Cat Rambo's Post "Arguing On The Internet: The Dwarves Are For The Dwarves."](#)***



Bryan Thomas Schmidt is an author and editor of adult and children's speculative fiction including the novels [The Worker Prince](#) and [The Returning](#), and the children's books [102 More Hilarious Dinosaur Jokes For Kids](#) (ebook only) and [Abraham Lincoln: Dinosaur Hunter- Land Of Legends](#). His debut novel, *The Worker Prince* (2011) received [Honorable Mention on Barnes & Noble Book Club's Year's Best Science Fiction Releases for 2011](#). His short stories have appeared in magazines, anthologies and online. He edited the anthology [Space Battles: Full Throttle Space Tales #6](#) (Flying Pen Press, 2012) and is working on [Beyond The Sun](#) (Fairwood, July 2013), [Raygun Chronicles: Space Opera For a New Age](#) (Every Day Publishing, November 2013) and [Shattered Shields](#) with co-editor Jennifer Brozek (Baen, 2014). He also edits [Blue Shift Magazine](#) and hosts #sffwrtcht (Science Fiction & Fantasy Writer's Chat) Wednesdays at 9 pm ET on Twitter and can be found via Twitter as @BryanThomasS, on his website at [www.bryanthomasschmidt.net](http://www.bryanthomasschmidt.net) or [Facebook](#).

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## 14 Responses so far.

1.  [Cat Rambo](#) says:

[June 17, 2013 at 6:36 pm](#)

“If not, making their point with valid criticisms that don’t assume, mischaracterize or personally attack might be worth considering.”

Yes, yes, a thousand times yes.

[Reply](#)

2.  [Paul Genesse](#) says:

[June 17, 2013 at 7:01 pm](#)

Hi Bryan,

Great blog post. I agree 100%. Thank you for writing this.

Paul Genesse

[Reply](#)

- o  [Bryan Schmidt](#) says:

[June 18, 2013 at 2:38 am](#)

It’s interesting to me, Paul, that someone on your FB where you posted this argued that those expressing outrage and hurt cannot make asses of themselves. I contend that you can be an ass in expressing anything if you poorly choose your words. And it’s a choice. That’s a very self-justifying denial and one designed to ignore the problem and continue the cycle of creating more hate and more hurt.

[Reply](#)

3.  [Deborah Jay](#) says:

[June 18, 2013 at 6:13 am](#)

Well said!

I stay out of any such ‘discussions’ because, frankly, they aren’t worth the time. I learned long-since that if you feel strongly about a point (particularly in a negative way) that taking time out and thinking things through before responding is far better, more productive -and safer too!

Whilst hot-heads will plunge in even in person, the anonymity of the internet has given many (especially those bigots you mentioned) the confidence to ‘share’ their opinions with the rest of us.

Such a pity when previously supportive organisations can go so far off the rails, but that so often happens when the most vocal are those who are more interested in their own voices than anyone else’s.

Keep up the community building, Brian. It’s worth it.

[Reply](#)

- o  [Bryan Schmidt](#) says:

[June 18, 2013 at 9:34 am](#)

Deborah, it’s funny the comments you receive for something like this, and there’s a reason I moderate comments. One

person posted a diatribe that suggests I am victimizing victims by silencing them. This post is about exercising free speech responsibly, not about silencing people. Another suggested that by calling out the SFWA president for behavior which many people have noted, frankly, that I invalidate my point with a personal attack. Well, no, because I am not suggesting the man is a bad person nor attacking his character, I am pointing out his behavior in certain instances has been less than it might have been. And frankly, that's valid criticism as the post tried to explain verses personal attacks. I will engage with anyone who is reasonable and able to dialogue without turning it into a flame war, but some people are incapable of seeing nuances and will always defend their way as superior and the only valid way. Those kinds of people can't be engaged with, so I don't bother.

I think dialogue is vital. I think engaging is vital. I think free speech is vital, but so is engaging in ways that encourage productive dialogue, not destroy people and shut it down. That was what I tried to convey in this post. Sadly, some still don't get it.

[Reply](#)

4.  *Beth* says:

[June 18, 2013 at 7:07 am](#)

You might consider adding a link to Nora's call for reconciliation.

[Reply](#)

o  *Bryan Schmidt* says:

[June 18, 2013 at 3:18 pm](#)

Beth, I'm sorry, I'm going to decline including that. It's been widely spread around and anyone who wants to see it can google NK Jemison GOH speech and find it. But since you sent it to me, I've read and wrestled with its content most of the day, and it contains an example of what I'm recommending against: an attempt to shame those who don't behave as the author expects and marginalize them because they "aren't with us if they don't act this way." That's really not a call to community. You can't build community on that. She makes strong points, some of which I agree with, but just because someone doesn't publicly condemn or even get involved in internet arguing on a topic doesn't mean they are in favor of it or unsupportive. Some people just choose not to engage that way because they don't like the dramatics or don't like conflict. Some people just don't want to deal with those who will attack them for not being strong worded enough, etc. It's silly and unfair to condemn anyone who doesn't do it your way as being "not with us." That makes no sense to me. People just can't be generalized that way, they are too complex.

[Reply](#)

▪  *Scott Eeman* says:

[June 18, 2013 at 6:39 pm](#)

I'm in disagreement with a lot of what you have to say here, and if I can find the time, I'll explain exactly why, but since I have no idea when and if that time might come, I felt I should at the very least pop in to let you know that your latest comment — that Jemison's speech "remains an example of what I'm recommending against" — leaves me gobsmacked.

Her speech was one of the most inspiring, uplifting, goose-pimpling things I've read in a long time, and deserves a standing ovation. To not spread it as widely as possible seems ... wrong. It should be required reading IMHO.

[Reply](#)


▪  *Bryan Schmidt* says:

[June 18, 2013 at 6:54 pm](#)

It is worthy of reading and discussion, Scott. There's plenty good there. But as it relates to this post's points about not assuming, etc., I found some issues with it and don't want people to think because I post it that it exactly lines up with what I'm arguing in favor of. Perhaps a better way to say it is "contains" not "remains,"

I've amended my post accordingly. There are underlying assumptions I feel are being made in it that are grossly unfair and a slap in the face of people who don't share her views, not the 10% bigots she sites, but those who might not respond with as much vehemence as she does. And I think that's a false expectation and poor foundation for someone claiming to call people to community. If you want people to unite, you should not attack or marginalize the value of the opinions of a large portion in doing so, but instead try to engage them, especially if your hope is to bring them alongside. That makes no sense to me. The issues involved are absolutely worthy of discussion but as far as it being an example of the kind of thing I'd put forth in this post, I don't agree at this point that it's a compatible link like Cat Rambo's is. But I'm still processing all of it, as there's a lot there. At this point though, I will stand by that, and I know others have similar issues with it. The point of this post is that we are all in this together and should try and work together to resolve things with more calm and less violent hyperbole and rhetoric if we really hope to effect change. I believe such is possible if people apply common sense and reason, and if they don't, we end up with a greater gap than we had before and the same problems ongoing. And I've seen this in action, not just inventing it.


[Reply](#)

5.  [David Niall Wilson](#) says:  
[June 18, 2013 at 9:09 am](#)

I avoided that whole kerfluffle, and honestly, let my membership lapse because of it. When people attack other authors for sexism and their own book covers are littered with half-naked women, it's silly beyond silly. In fact, the majority of the books on the back cover of that last issue – the ones up for Nebulas? Same thing. Exploitative in a far worse way than an older writer reminiscing about how things REALLY WERE for them and being slammed for it as if they'd suggested women stay home and bake.


There was so obviously no common ground that it reminded me of my own days as President of HWA, and reminded me why I never went back to that sort of situation again. I certainly won't pay money to be part of it. Is there sexism in sci-fi? Undoubtedly. DO most of us hope to end it and have a happier, calmer world to create in – I am pretty sure we do. Will arguing about it on the Internet solve anything? Of course not. No more than it will decide if the President is doing a good job, or whether cats are better than dogs. You are allotted so much time. For me, the arguing is a bad investment of it.

[Reply](#)

- o  [Bryan Schmidt](#) says:  
[June 18, 2013 at 9:46 am](#)

David: I think it's sad that people hold on to their anger in such unproductive ways. There was a real opportunity for affecting potential change in some hearts and minds lost because of the unproductive nature of the response. And if anything called out for dialogue, it was the SFWA Bulletin situation. I am tempted to let my membership lapse as well, if SFWA can't be what it should be and was designed to be, but my first inclination is to instead point out the issues and encourage people to let leadership know if they are dissatisfied. Which is part of what I am doing in this post, although I have also done it in other ways. I do think Resnick and Malzberg's intent was to be respectful and that though they may have used terms that are considered inappropriate these days, they certainly didn't deserve the level of vitriol they received. And really, being angry that not everyone has had that "oh" moment about such phrases is not the way to help them see the light, is it? There are people who are so far beyond offensive in their discrimination and deserve such wrath. I don't think this was such a case. Anyway, thanks for reading and taking time to comment.

[Reply](#)

6.  [Sabrina Vourvoulis](#) says:  
[June 18, 2013 at 1:05 pm](#)


Bryan,

I couldn't disagree with you more. Surprise! 😊 I think people often say "behave" to others when the topics are uncomfortable and things have gotten heated. But the thing is, the objections (to sexism, racism, you name it) don't usually start terribly heated – they get that way because the people listening aren't really listening. They're dismissing any valid points by saying the original

intention was misunderstood, or the impact was exaggerated, or people are making mountains out of molehills, or it's a liberal fascist agenda. Sure, "talking back" raises parental hackles, but nobody's the parent here and nobody's the child.


Change doesn't come about from sitting around doing embroidery together. It comes when voices that haven't been heard make themselves heard. Sexism and racism have no place in any part of the professional world, but unfortunately there they are, taking up real estate. If the price of career advancement is to let them pass unremarked, then the cost is much too high.

[Reply](#)

-  [Bryan Schmidt](#) says:  
[June 18, 2013 at 1:20 pm](#)

Ha ha, Dear friend, I don't think we're as far apart on this one as you have assumed. I am not saying to not express things, I am saying to do it without becoming bigoted and angry in return. There is a time for anger, for sure. But when things escalate to a point of hurling personal insult, they lose focus and impact, and become not about what they started being about but about humans being cruel to each other. And that, to me, defeats the purpose. I understand the reasons why people get angry. And this is not behave because your career's on the line, it's how about we behave like a community and embrace that then act accordingly, and, if we don't, here are some consequences to consider. Because I don't think the angry voices are really heard by anyone but fellow angry voices who agree. Certainly not by angry voices who disagree, and rarely by those put off by the anger. I agree that change doesn't come by sitting around, but the art of making one's self heard does not just mean be the loudest yeller either.

[Reply](#)

7.  [Bryan Schmidt](#) says:  
[June 18, 2013 at 7:09 pm](#)

One observation about the responses so far is that it's amazing how different people's assumptions come into play and interact with my own. It's eye opening. And it's also discouraging at times, when people get fixated on one aspect of what I'm saying and ignore the rest or get sidetracked by some side issue. But I'm very grateful overall that discussion is occurring and that people are thinking about things. And for the most part, so far, it seems they're doing so far more productively than in the forums that led to this post. But we'll see. (Except that one woman who keeps attacking me because I refused to be bullied into agreeing with her and obeying her every demand. OH well. Can't win with some people, even being nice.)

And to those who are claiming I am not interested in discussing sexism, racism, etc., you obviously missed my recent post earlier this month on the issue of sexual harrassment at cons and generally: <http://bryanthomasschmidt.net/2013/06/03/lets-talk-about-hitting-on-girls-boys-i-e-dont-sexually-harrass/>

They are topics I have actually discussed here quite a bit.

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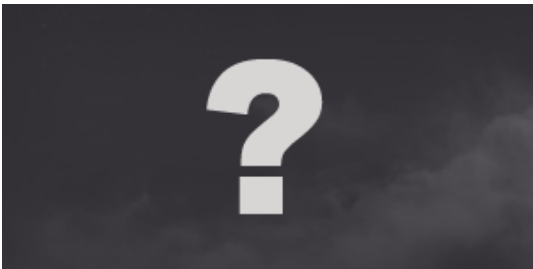
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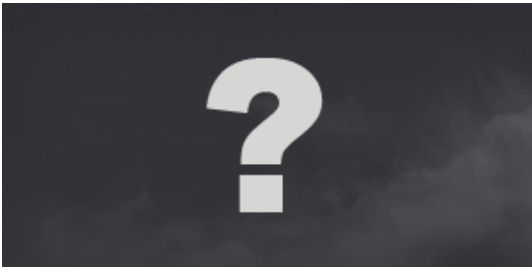
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
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














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- **Categories**

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[anthology](#) [Appearances](#) [Book Review](#) [Bryan Thomas Schmidt](#) [Business of Writing](#) [cons](#) [Conventions](#)  
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[Essay](#) [publicity](#) [Publishing](#) [saga of davi rhii](#) [Science Fiction](#) [space battles](#) [Space Opera](#) [The Returning](#) [the](#)  
[worker](#) [prince tips](#) [Writer's Tip](#) [writetip](#) [write tip](#) [write tips](#) [writetips](#) [Writing](#) [writing tips](#)

- **Archives**

- [June 2013](#)
- [May 2013](#)
- [April 2013](#)
- [March 2013](#)
- [February 2013](#)
- [January 2013](#)
- [December 2012](#)
- [November 2012](#)
- [October 2012](#)
- [September 2012](#)
- [August 2012](#)
- [July 2012](#)
- [June 2012](#)
- [May 2012](#)
- [April 2012](#)
- [March 2012](#)
- [February 2012](#)
- [January 2012](#)
- [December 2011](#)
- [November 2011](#)

- [October 2011](#)
- [September 2011](#)
- [August 2011](#)
- [July 2011](#)
- [June 2011](#)
- [May 2011](#)
- [April 2011](#)
- [March 2011](#)
- [February 2011](#)
- [January 2011](#)
- [December 2010](#)
- [November 2010](#)
- [October 2010](#)
- [September 2010](#)
- [August 2010](#)
- [July 2010](#)
- [June 2010](#)
- [May 2010](#)
- [April 2010](#)
- [March 2010](#)

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[anthology](#) [Appearances](#) [Book Review](#) [Bryan Thomas Schmidt](#) [Business of Writing](#) [cons](#) [Conventions](#)  
[Craft](#) [craft of writing](#) [Davi Rhii](#) [Debut Novel](#) [Editing](#) [Essay](#) [Fantasy](#) [Fiction](#) [Fiction Writing](#) [Flying Pen Press](#) [Full](#)  
[Throttle](#) [Space Tales](#) [how to](#) [Humor](#) [interview](#) [Links](#) [Marketing](#) [Mike Resnick](#) [military science fiction](#) [militarysf](#) [Networking](#) [Panels](#) [Personal](#)  
[Essay](#) [publicity](#) [Publishing](#) [saga of davi rhii](#) [Science Fiction](#) [space battles](#) [Space Opera](#) [The Returning](#) [the](#)  
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