

YOU CAN'T BE
WHAT YOU
CAN'T SEEDORIS PISERCHIA
FAIRMONT'S OVERLOOKED
SCIENCE FICTION SCIONby Jay Cole,
Contributor

One thing I have learned from my wife, a professor of leadership studies who specializes in women and leadership, is "You can't be what you can't see." As it relates to my wife's field, this aphorism means that for women to become leaders themselves, they need to be able to see women in leadership positions as role models and examples. I teach courses at WVU on science fiction and fantasy (SFF), applying "You can't be what you can't see" in these realms of the imagination.

As a child growing up in 1970s Fairmont, I became an avid reader of SFF thanks to parents who encouraged reading, bolstered by a local library and bookstore that were well-stocked in these genres. Isaac Asimov, Stephen R. Donaldson, Ursula Le Guin, C.S. Lewis, Andre Norton, J.R.R. Tolkien—I read everything I could get my hands on and dreamed of becoming a writer myself.

The realization slowly dawned on me, however, that writers of science fiction and fantasy always seemed to come from somewhere else, never my hometown. (I read and enjoyed the work of John Knowles, Fairmont native and author of *A Separate Peace*, but SFF he was not.)

Author bios on dust jackets implied the center of the science fiction universe was New York City—or Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Seattle, or perhaps the San Francisco Bay Area. Enclaves existed in Baltimore, Kansas City, and Milwaukee. But West Virginia? These hills seemed to echo Luke Skywalker's words about Tatooine: "If there is a bright center to the universe, you're on the planet that it's farthest from."

My love of the genre was undiminished, but in retrospect this paucity of local writers probably did deter me from pursuing a writing career. I couldn't be what I couldn't see.

Then I found Doris Piserchia. Forty years too late to change my career trajectory, but a revelation nonetheless.

Last fall while browsing a used bookstore, I picked up a paperback copy of Piserchia's *Star Rider*. The cover was intriguing and the plot enticing, but what caused me to gasp was the "About the Author," which revealed Piserchia was from Fairmont, West Virginia. My very own hometown!

Born Doris Elaine Summers in 1928, she graduated from East Fairmont High School in 1946. "I came from a large family, no one else wanted to go to college," said Piserchia in a 2000 interview. She attended Fairmont State until 1950—and appears in photographs of the swimming clubs that year, but is not among the senior portraits—then "boarded a bus to Pittsburgh and joined the Navy."

Doris served through the Korean War and married Army serviceman Joseph Piserchia in 1953. Though the new Mrs. Piserchia retired from the Navy the following year, the family moved around "approximately seventeen times" to keep up with Joe's military career. In 1966, she published her first science fiction short story, *Rocket to Gehenna*, in *Fantastic Stories* magazine.

Evidently, Doris had been a fan of science fiction since age 11, diving into the galaxy-spanning tales of A.E. Van Vogt, Theodore Sturgeon, and others. According to the interview she gave in 2000, even late in life her reading preferences ran back to these SFF authors of the 1940s and 1950s (though she did mention enjoying Vin Diesel's then-recent sci-fi movie *Pitch Black*, now something of a cult classic). Her first novel, *Mister Justice*, was published in 1973.

The novel I had stumbled into, *Star Rider*, was her second, published by DAW in 1974. DAW's trademark yellow spine was an imprimatur of quality and affordability to science fiction and fantasy readers for decades. And this novel was emblazoned with an endorsement from none other than Frederik Pohl, a giant in the genre. To these astonished eyes of mine, here were two sure signs that *Star Rider* was a serious work and Doris Piserchia was a serious author.

The price for this gently used paperback was \$2.95, but I would have paid \$295. No other SFF book, among the hundreds I have read over the last four decades, had accomplished what *Star Rider* did in an instant: put my hometown of Fairmont on the science fiction map.

Yet my euphoria was tempered by frustration. Why had it taken over 40 years to discover a successful science fiction author from my hometown? Even the excellent "From a Place Called Solid: West Virginia and its Writers" Literary Map, produced in 2003, does not mention Doris Piserchia.

Would it have made a difference in my own life had I known about her pioneering science fiction novels as a young man? If I had "seen her," would I have tried to follow in her footsteps? While Doris never again lived in Fairmont after moving away in 1950, she was certainly willing to answer letters from young fans, whom she told "to just write what was in them, to produce the very best that they could."



Doris Piserchia (Summers) in 1949, her junior year at Fairmont State College. "The Mound" Fairmont State College yearbook

I decided to channel my frustration into something positive. First I read *Star Rider*, a novel that defies easy categorization but has some characteristics of science fiction from that heady "New Wave" of the 1960s and 1970s that produced writers like Ursula Le Guin, John Brunner, and Octavia Butler. At the same time, I learned all I could about Piserchia from online sources (special thanks to the Internet Speculative Fiction Database).

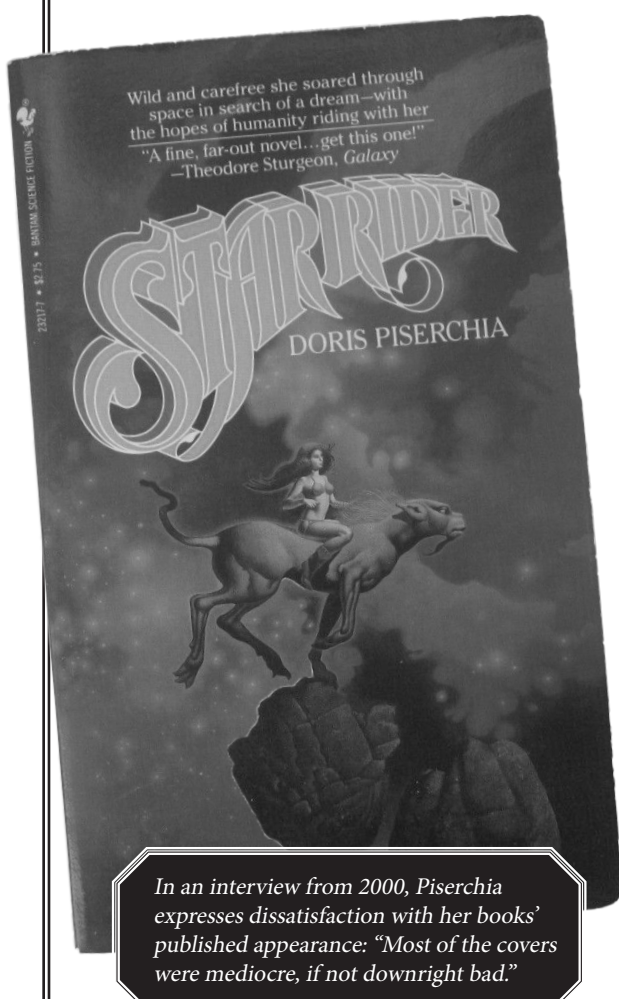
One of the first things I found was her obituary. Sadly, she died in 2021 at the amazing age of 92. How wonderful it would have been to invite her back to West Virginia as the guest of honor for readings, book signings, and a symposium about her work: 13 novels and 17 short stories, all written between 1966 and 1983. I am happily reading my way through these titles now.

Looking ahead, I will tell my students about Doris Piserchia. I will teach some of her novels and introduce her to a new generation of readers, many of whom are from West Virginia. I will take special pride in telling them about an author who was born and grew up in Fairmont, hoping it will inspire them to think about what they, too, can accomplish.

Of course, Piserchia is one great example among many West Virginians who have made contributions to the genre. Since the seemingly scarcer days of my youth, I've discovered that northcentral West Virginia has long been a veritable hot-bed of science fiction and fantasy creativity. For example, the December 2022 issue of *The Broad Side* includes an article about Jay Chattaway, who studied music at WVU and went on to compose soundtracks for multiple shows in the *Star Trek* television franchise.

Harry Otto Fischer, who helped Fritz Leiber create the archetypal sword-and-sorcery duo of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser from the 1930s through the 1960s, lived for many years in Clarksburg. Eric Flint began the long-running *1632*, or *Ring of Fire*, series of time travel/alternate history novels in Grantsville, a fictitious town inspired by Mannington, West Virginia. Flint dedicated *1632*, the first book in the series, "To my mother, Mary Jeanne McCormick Flint, and to the West Virginia from she came."

From *Star Rider* to *Star Trek* and much more, northcentral West Virginia has made significant contributions to science fiction and fantasy for almost a century. By helping our students to "see" these contributions, I hope we inspire them to "be" writers, artists, musicians, and creators who will ensure the Mountain State influences science fiction and fantasy for the next century...and beyond!



In an interview from 2000, Piserchia expresses dissatisfaction with her books' published appearance: "Most of the covers were mediocre, if not downright bad."

A SMALL BLACK MULE RIDES AGAIN

In our February 2023 issue, we featured a 1999 article from *The Hinton News* entitled "A Small Black Mule Dies," which briefly told the story of "a beloved local public figure named Mr. Leroy Jones, who famously performed at Christmas pageants at the local First Baptist Church in the seventies and eighties and worked at the Sassafrass Ridge Farm until his untimely passing at age 27."

Hitherto unknown to this publication, Mr. Leroy Jones's former owner is a reader of *The Broad Side*. Shortly after the issue arrived in mailboxes, we received a delightful correspondence from Mr. Chris Chanlett of Hinton. We reproduce it (lightly edited) here for your enjoyment.

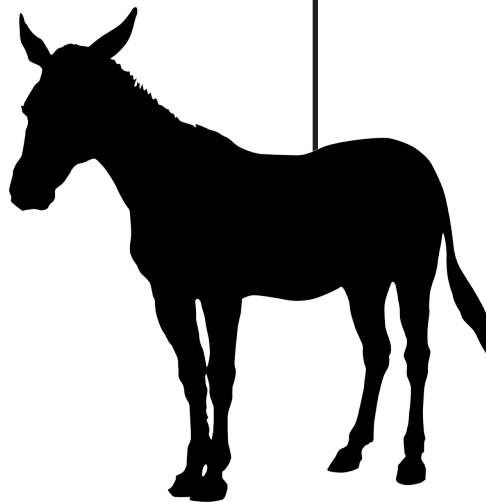
Mr. Waggoner,

I was flattered today to find in *The Broad Side* before I even opened it a short piece I wrote 24 years ago. Leroy was my mule and major character on our farm. His performances in Hinton endeared him and us to our larger community. He ate very little but trimming his very hooves was difficult.

I may resubmit it to the *Hinton News* considering that Leroy has again made news.

Thanks again for reviving Leroy's story.

Chris Chanlett



Few comprehensive sources exist to illuminate the life and work of Doris Piserchia. The firsthand quotes from Mr. Cole's article originate from a 2000 interview by Joanna Pataki and Tom Moody. Those interested in further reading can find the entire interview at:

www.digitalmediatree.com/dorispiserchia

CONNECTIONS ACROSS THE WAVES



A few years before Doris Piserchia (left) departed Fairmont in 1950 to serve in the Navy WAVES, Clara Goraczkowski (right) of Swea City, Iowa, joined the WAVES during World War II—on her twenty-first birthday. Clara was assigned as a telegrapher at the Washington D.C.'s Naval Communications Annex in 1944-45. It was there she met her husband, Navy electrician Meredith Riggs of Upshur County, West Virginia. Clara is interred alongside her husband at the West Virginia National Cemetery in Taylor County, and was profiled in this year's West Virginia National Cemeteries Project (see previous issue of *The Broad Side*). Her biography is now available on the Council's website.

A World War II Navy telegrapher reads a message at the Naval Communications Annex in Washington D.C.

Naval History and Heritage Command



EVENTS JUNE - JULY 2023

Jun 12, Mark Twain - History Alive!, Elk Valley and Jun 13 Clendenin Public Libraries, respectively. 6pm

Jun 15 Gabriel Arthur - History Alive!, Parkersburg-Wood County Library, Parkersburg. 6:30pm

Jun 20 West Virginia Day - Open house with refreshments at the MacFarland-Hubbard House, with live folklore/book discussion and signing by former State Folklorist Emily Hilliard, Charleston. 2-4pm

Jun 20 Ruby Bradley - History Alive!, Historic Glenwood Estate, Charleston. 2pm

Jun 24 Charles Schulz - History Alive!, St. Albans Public Library, St. Albans. 12pm Riverside Public Library, Belle. 3pm

Jun 24 Wild, Wonderful Woods - Heritage celebration, Governor Kump House, Elkins. 12-5pm

Jun 25 A Union State's Confederate Idol - Little Lecture on West Virginia monuments to Stonewall Jackson by author Cody Straley, MacFarland-Hubbard House, Charleston. 2pm

Jun 25 Abigail Adams - History Alive!, Youth Museum of West Virginia, Beckley. 2pm

Jun 27 Abigail Adams - History Alive!, Ohio County Public Library, Wheeling. 12pm

Jun 28 Nellie Bly - History Alive!, Clarksburg-Harrison Public Library, Clarksburg. 2pm

July-Dec Indigenous Appalachia - Exhibit from WVU Libraries showing at Marshall University Library, Huntington. Various dates and times

July 10 Charles Schulz - History Alive!, South Jefferson Public Library, Summit Point. 1pm

July 14 Gabriel Arthur - History Alive!, Tygart Lake State Park, Grafton. 7pm

July 20 Ruby Bradley - History Alive!, Parkersburg-Wood County Library, Parkersburg. 6:30pm

July 20 Harriet Tubman - History Alive!, Blennerhassett State Park Museum, Parkersburg. 7pm

July 23 Theodore Roosevelt - History Alive!, Youth Museum of West Virginia, Beckley. 2pm

The Council advises contacting the venue if you have questions about an event, as dates or details may change without the Council's prior knowledge.

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WEST VIRGINIA HUMANITIES COUNCIL

