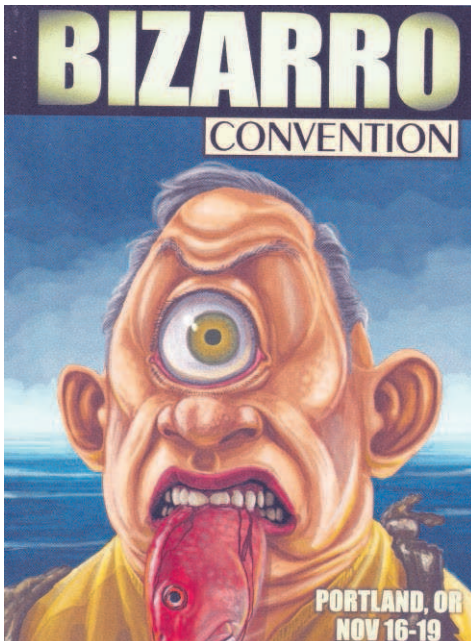


# BRING ON THE BIZARRO



BizarroCon 2017 poster art by Jim Agpalza



CHRISTOPHER LESKO PHOTOS

**LEFT:** Kevin L. Donihe, of Astoria, performing at BizarroCon 2017. **MIDDLE:** Cameron Pierce, petting a frozen duck, performs at BizarroCon 2017. **RIGHT:** Kirsten Alene, right, of Astoria, performing at BizarroCon 2017.

## The genre of the weird — and the Astoria connection

By **DON FRADES**  
FOR COAST WEEKEND

**B**izarro Fiction.”

I first encountered the term earlier this year when I met a newcomer to Astoria, Kevin L. Donihe, late of King-sport, Tennessee, who mentioned he had published 13 books in some genre I had never heard of.

Intrigued, I wanted and needed to know more — particularly because my own notoriously eclectic, oddball library didn’t include any of the authors he mentioned.

I delved into Bizarro without knowing much. I had no books in front of me, nor any immediately accessible. It’s a developing genre distinguishable from science fiction, fantasy or speculative fiction by going straight for the bizarre — not surrealism by traditional definition, but rather plots, stories and characters that drop the reader into unusual but accessible “what if?” worlds taken to the edge of outlandishness.

A man who wants to have sex with his house. A fairy tale about a pickle, a pancake and the apocalypse. Titles like “Night of the A--holes” and “Satan Burger.”

I started with Donihe’s “Space Walrus,” about a love triangle on a space station between a sentient (and partially bionic)

walrus, his female caretaker and an abusive head scientist. There are also spacewalking chimps. It was one of the most moving books I’ve read in quite a while.

### Local bizarro founders

Turns out, though, that Donihe was not the only local involved in the Bizarro fiction world. He asked me, “Do you know Cameron Pierce, who works at Fort George? He’s one of the founders of Bizarro, and one of the reasons I moved here. And do you know Kirsten Alene?”

Sure, I knew their faces and names. Cameron and Kirsten were brewers and servers, but I hadn’t suspected that such a softspoken trio were writers, editors and even publishers of Bizarro — and were, in fact, important to the founding of it a decade or so ago.

They, like many who labor in the dish-pits and countertops and tourist-satisfaction industry, came to Astoria for the same assortment of aesthetic reasons — which, if fully voiced, might draw unwanted attention and send us off somewhere else.

To really get a full grasp of the Bizarro scene, Donihe recommended that I attend the 10th annual BizarroCon at the appropriately eccentric Edgewater Hotel in Troutdale last month. Thanks to the generosity of Rose O’Keefe, the event organizer and owner/publisher of the sponsoring Eraser-head Press, I scored a press pass. And I’m

so glad I did.

### BizarroCon 2017

I didn’t know what to expect at Bizarro-Con, so I braced myself for any amusing eventuality. I’ve suffered through too many conventions — marketing, business and whatnot. This one would surely be surprisingly different. Goofy surrealism? A conclave of hipsters? Maybe some chaotic insiders’ tribe of awkward thespians or freaks? Bring it on.

Well, it was nothing like that. Or maybe all those elements were so tempered with sincere devotion to craft and humor that it just became OK.

What I encountered was unexpected, reassuring and inspiring. The Bizarro community is earnestly dedicated to and enthusiastic about the writing. These were professionals who had high standards and discipline, with a shared sense of humor and comfortable commonalities.

Writers, publishers, editors and fans — some veterans, many newbies — came for the 10th anniversary of a gathering that had begun with a couple dozen people, but now draws more than 100 from around the country, and a few from overseas.

Readings and performances ranged from downright soothing — Pierce stroking a small, frozen duck by fireside — to stenorian: Donihe finishing a frenetic performance with “I must become my own there-

min!” to be “played” by audience members, before collapsing to the floor in a heap.

### In a world gone bonkers

During the day, workshops and forums, often back-to-back, included “Character Development in Bizarro Fiction,” “World Building and Atmosphere,” “How to Adapt Your Book into a Script” and the challenging “The Weird in a Post-Weird World.”

Then came the concluding awards ceremonies in the ballroom on Saturday evening, followed by the “Ultimate Bizarro Showdown,” an hour or more of all-out absurdity and prizes.

I talked with one attendee who works as a waiter at an all-night diner in Denver about whether he thought this could be a social event for people who don’t normally like social events, or even society. He noted: “This is a place where people who might be a little awkward in trying to fit in don’t have to expend that energy to explain themselves or be judged.”

Not having the wherewithal to buy every book they had, I came away with a dozen or so volumes by authors I’d met. I made some new friends, and the whole experience sparked a hope in me that Bizarro fiction may be just the thing a lot of us are looking for: the creative ground from which to deal with a world gone bonkers.

Find out more about local Bizarro fiction writers at [eraserheadpress.com](http://eraserheadpress.com). 