

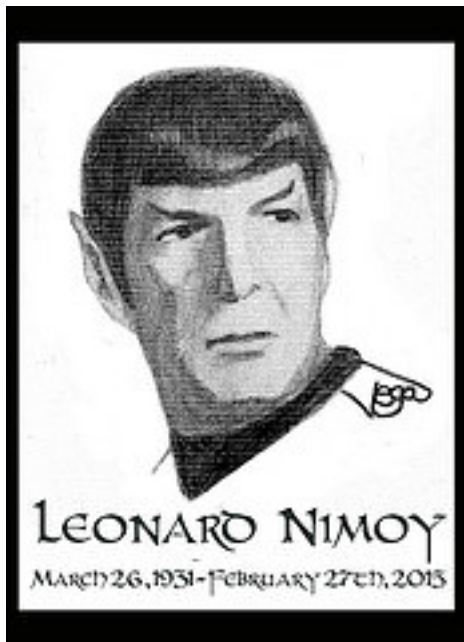
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Essay by Martha Nichols

A Personal Salute to Leonard Nimoy, 1931–2015



I would never claim to be the only teenage girl who kept a picture of Mr. Spock in her locker. Amid all the well-deserved tributes to actor Leonard Nimoy, who died last Friday at the age of 83, I know at least a few will touch on the enduring guy-you-can-never-have quality of Spock.

When I first learned that Nimoy had passed away, my sadness felt like a gut wallop. But it didn't surprise me. I raised a glass at dinner Friday night and said, "R.I.P., Leonard Nimoy." My husband, who hadn't yet heard, said, "Awww—really?" and lifted his glass in a toast: "To Mr. Spock." Even my thirteen-year-old son, who's more familiar with Zachary Quinto in the latest *Star Trek* movies, stopped glancing at his iPhone for the toast, saying, "I can't believe Mr. Spock died."

It's more personal for me, though. I'm a longtime *Star Trek* fan, going back to high school in the 1970s, when I watched the original series in reruns every weekday night. Nimoy created a character—the resident alien of the Starship *Enterprise* crew, never at home with himself, always battling the human emotions his logical Vulcan half is not supposed to feel—who firmly resides in this geek girl's interior. His struggle wasn't just romantically appealing; it spoke to my own internal divisions at the time, including my desire not to be constrained by gender conventions.

It's no accident that Spock resembles my father when he was young: tall, dark, austere handsome. My dad, very close in age to Nimoy, passed away a little over a year ago. A sensitive man, he kept his feelings under wraps and wrote poetry toward the end of his life—as did Nimoy in his later years. In 1967, when Nimoy told the *Boston Globe* his Vulcan alter ego was "a pretty groovy guy," he could have been describing my father: "[Spock is] very compassionate, intelligent, curious, logical."

You don't need a Freudian link to a Spockish daddy, however, to be drawn to this kind of guy. For bookish white girls, in particular, this was and is catnip; Benedict Cumberbatch as Sherlock Holmes is just a current variation.



For decades, Spock romances have been a staple of fan fiction. Some of the most popular involve Mr. Spock and Captain Kirk consummating their forbidden attraction. But many a female fan has penned a story about Spock finally getting it on with Nurse Christine Chapel—who in the three years that *Star Trek* first aired, from 1966 to 1969, made unrequited sad eyes at him—or one of the other *Enterprise* crew members. In a nod to this fan fantasy, young Spock (Quinto) in the new *Star Trek* movies is romantically involved with Lieutenant Uhura (Zoe Saldana).

I won't fess up to writing fan fiction, although that hardly feels like a confession these days (*Fifty Shades of Grey* began as *Twilight* fanfic, after all.) Still, in the '80s, at least one good friend of mine had a Spock fanfic love story accepted and published in print. And that high school locker picture of mine was not just a photo clipped from *TV Guide*; it was my own charcoal sketch of Spock with his eyebrow raised, based on a studio shot from a pack of *Star Trek* bubble-gum cards.

For creative people, the conversion of fantasies into art—popular, literary, satirical, or private—is where it begins. My brother and I were also *Dark Shadows* fans in the '60s and early '70s, and my brother became so obsessed with the many incarnations of Quentin Collins, the cursed werewolf born in the late 1800s, that he decked out his bedroom in Victoriana—pulling back his curtains with red velvet ribbons, hanging portraits of Quentin he'd made, constructing a gramophone out of cardboard.

Nimoy himself, the son of immigrant Orthodox Jews, channeled who he was into his most famous character, much as he tried at times to shed Spock. He often said he was the one who came up with the "Live Long and Prosper" salute. A *New York Times* feature in 2007 about Nimoy's photography notes that the gesture, now a pop-culture staple, "is actually rooted in Judaism. It represents the Hebrew letter 'shin,' the first letter in the word Shaddai, which means God."

In a spooky sort of synchronicity, the night before Nimoy died, I happened to be looking over far less esoteric images of Spock and crew. I was finishing an upcoming TW column that refers to one of the worst *Star Trek* episodes ever—"Spock's Brain" (1968). Yet, the fact that I even remember it after forty-plus years testifies to the imaginative power of the character. As for so many *Star Trek* fans, my memories of the show hinge on Spock, especially in my favorite episodes. There's "The Devil in the Dark" (1967), in which he does a Vulcan mind-meld with a fiery rock creature. There's "Journey to Babel" (1967), where Spock's parents first appear—his judgmental diplomat of a Vulcan father, his loving human mother.

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I can still recall dialogue from the "Babel" episode, including this classic from Spock's mom: "Logic! Logic! I'm sick to death of logic."

Nimoy's passing is the right time to celebrate not only his work as an actor, director, photographer, and writer, but also the impact great fictional creations have on the way we continually re-create the world. Enduring characters like Spock have sparked generations of authors and other artists.

My sadness now is certainly tied to my father's death, intimations of mortality, and all the embarrassing, silly things I fantasized about as a girl. But both silly and profound feelings fuel my writing—and for writers, first loves and crushes *matter*. I'm not a writer because of Mr. Spock. Yet, what I felt for Leonard Nimoy's complex character, at one of the most vulnerable, identity-making times in my life, will always be part of the writer I've become.

Publishing Information

- ["Leonard Nimoy, Spock of 'Star Trek,' Dies at 83"](#) [4] by Virginia Heffernan, *New York Times*, February 27, 2015.
- ["Leonard Nimoy, 83; was TV's Iconic Mr. Spock"](#) [5] by Ty Burr, *Boston Globe*, February 27, 2015.
- ["Girth and Nudity, a Pictorial Mission"](#) [6](on Nimoy's photographs of obese women) by Abby Ellin, *New York Times*, May 13, 2007.

Art Information

- ["Leonard Nimoy and William Shatner"](#) [7] (Mr. Spock and Captain Kirk from *Star Trek*), part of January 12, 1968, press release from NBC Television; public domain.
- ["Leonard Nimoy RIP"](#) [8] © Laurel L. Russwurm ("This is a drawing of Mr. Spock I did for my very first self-publishing effort, the science fiction fanzine CANEKTION); Creative Commons license.
- [Photo of graffiti image of Spock as Warhol's Marilyn Monroe](#) [9]© Lord Jim; Creative Commons license.

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Stay tuned for Martha's next "First Person" column, which will lead off TW's Spring 2015 issue on nature and technology—and connect "Spock's Brain" to high-tech entrepreneurs.

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