



“Investing in stocks and bonds and mutual funds is pretty boring. It doesn’t appeal to me. I’ve invested in things that are exciting — and I do think they are giving something back to this community.”

George R.R. Martin

How the creative genius behind *Game of Thrones* is using his fortune to invest in Santa Fe and shake up its arts scene by thinking outside the box once again

BY JOSEPH GUINTO PHOTO BY KATE RUSSELL

G

George R.R. Martin's professional kingdom is kind of a mess. Mail clutters the red tile floor inside the simple Santa Fe home where the *Game of Thrones* creator and his staff — he calls them “minions” — work. An Emmy award collects dust atop a tall cabinet. A 4-foot-high stack of books weighs down a rough-hewn, wooden coffee table.

Various novels comprise that stack, all from Martin's six-part series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The book series, boosted by the HBO adaptation *Game of Thrones*, has sold 60 million copies and been translated into 50 languages, with several of those translated copies piled up here, including *El Dragón de Hielo* and *Gelo e Fogo*.

Lenore Gallegos, Martin's Santa Fe-born, speed-talking business manager and CFO — her official title: “Vice Admiral Minion” — leads me past the front room's disarray to the somewhat tidier inner sanctum of Martin's library. There, the scraggly bearded author cheerfully greets me. He wears his trademark black pants, black T-shirt, and black suspenders, but not his usual black engineer's cap.

We sit down to chat in massive, plump leather chairs with wooden feet carved to resemble talons. Dragons' talons. A human-size Robby the Robot from *Forbidden Planet* — Martin's favorite movie, which he has seen more than 100 times — stands watch over my right shoulder. Across from me, dozens of custom-built cabinets stuffed with figurines from *Game of Thrones*, *War of the Worlds*, *Lord of the Rings*, and others surround the author.

Even though he conjured up *Game of Thrones*' intricate world of Seven Kingdoms on its continent called Westeros, Martin could hardly have imagined having so much while growing up the son of a longshoreman in Bayonne, N.J., and living in a federal housing project near the city's docks. Nor could he have seen this coming when he quit a teaching job and relocated to Santa Fe in 1979 to start a career as a full-time writer. But here, he became slowly, steadily successful and then suddenly, almost shockingly famous when, in 2011, he helped HBO turn his fantasy novel series into one of the most popular programs in pay-television history. Martin has achieved so much notoriety and made so much money since then that he has



FUNHOUSE:

Venture into a seemingly normal Victorian-style home to view the interactive “House of Eternal Return” art installation at Meow Wolf, a project Martin helped fund.

run out of space to display collectible gifts from his fans and grown tired of watching his wealth expand through traditional financial instruments.

“At a certain point,” Martin says, interlacing his fingers and twisting sideways in his leather chair, “investing in stocks and bonds and mutual funds is pretty boring. It doesn't appeal to me.”

That's one reason Martin started putting his money elsewhere — investing in the arts right here in his adopted city. Since 2015, Martin has reopened an old independent theater, established a foundation for new movie projects, and provided financing for a local art collective to create an immersive modern art experience in an old bowling alley. The last of those smashes every stereotype about what people expect Santa Fe art to look like.

Fine by Martin. He wants to both help other artists reach their audiences and banish the perception of Santa Fe as a sleepy, if artsy, mountain town. “I've invested in things that are tangible,” Martin says. “I've invested in things that are exciting — and I do think they are giving something back to this community.”

Martin wants Santa Fe visitors to see all of this tangible, exciting, and new stuff for themselves. That's why he agreed to meet with me today, and why he's serving as my virtual tour guide for my visit, offering me sneak peeks into the new places he has funded and the restaurants he loves. (Spoiler alert: They all serve chilies, the New Mexican staple ingredient.)

But there's one thing Martin doesn't want visitors to see. “Don't say anything about where

LINDSEY KENNEDY (HOUSE EXHIBIT 4 AND CREATURE)



I live,” he admonishes me in an accent that still reveals his working-class Jersey upbringing. “I'll have people showing up at my front door, and I'll have to train my minions to chase them off.”

THE AFTERNOON AFTER I visit Martin, I'm inside the old bowling alley that his checkbook helped convert into a 22,000-square-foot interactive art installation that's part storytelling, part visual art, part hands-on exhibit, and multiple parts bizarre. People of all ages pop out from places they're not supposed to be, saying things they're not supposed to say.

“Where does the dryer come out?”
“Is this a doorway?”

“Let's go back through the refrigerator.”
The exhibit, called “House of Eternal Return,” opened in early 2016 and comes from a collective of Santa Fe-area artists known as Meow Wolf. In fact, most people just call the place Meow Wolf, because that's what the sign on the outside of the building says.

Located in the Siler Road District, “House of Eternal Return” joins a handful of artisan shops and performance theaters such as the Adobe Rose Theatre, which opened in 2016 in a former door factory, one of many industrial facilities populating the area until a 2014 rezoning. But now, you'll even find a Belgian-style brewery called Duel Brewing here.

On the inside, I've just passed through a ticketing area (\$20 for adults) and entered what looks like a normal, suburban street with a Victorian-style home. Inside the home, things go from normal to

BEHIND THE DOOR:

Above, every room in the “House of Eternal Return” leads to a new adventure. Below, you'll meet a few creatures along the way.

abnormal quickly. The straight trim on the walls suddenly breaks into waves. Some kid emerges from the washer and dryer; another from the refrigerator. A couple of guys walk out from under the stairs. I follow where they came from and end up in an underwater world, a tree house, a trailer home, a tiny Chinatown-style alleyway, and a spaceship. I also stumble onto a giant rabbit and a horned, furry monster. It's mind-bending. It's overwhelming. I have to stop and close my eyes at one point so I can listen to audio explaining (sort of) that the family in the Victorian house has somehow been sucked out of their typical Americana existence and cast adrift into space and time and different dimensions, all of which I now seem to be walking through as well.

I grab my notebook and jot down a thought, “If you stuffed every piece of art from the Whitney Biennial in New York City inside an attraction at Universal Studios, you'd have something like Meow Wolf's ‘House of Eternal Return.’” No, wait. That's not it. “The House of Eternal Return' is like finding yourself inside a live-action episode of FX's *Legion*, that trippy series about a possibly schizophrenic superhero.” No, that's not quite the right way to describe it either. “Um?????”

Even Martin, as prolific and creative a writer as he has been, struggles conjuring the words to describe the exhibit. “How do you explain it?” asks the man who put up \$1.5 million of his own money to buy and gut the old bowling alley, renovate it, and rent it to Meow Wolf. “Do you just call it modern art? An interactive art exhibition? People get all the wrong impressions if that's what



you tell them. One article I read described it as 'Disney on acid.' And that might be closer. But, whatever it is, it's pretty amazing."

Ah, there. Simpler always works better: "It's amazing." Successful, too. More than 400,000 paying customers came through in just the first year — more than four times the expected number.

But what it's not is something you'd see in the tony galleries along Canyon Road, Santa Fe's famously dense art strip, nor something stereotypically thought of as Santa Fe art. To wit: If coyotes, buffalo skulls, and sand paintings sit inside Meow Wolf's converted bowling alley, I certainly didn't see them. Instead, the works I saw from the 150 artists involved in this project included a Power Ranger doll with a can of Old El Paso on its head and several frames filled with dried insects. Strange, yes. But it's precisely the kind of unexpected quirk Martin hoped Meow Wolf would provide when he funded part of this project.

"There are so many creative people in Santa Fe," Meow Wolf COO Sean Di Ianni tells me just before I head into the exhibit. "They're not all making the kind of art that most people may have in their minds when they come here. So we feel like this project is something that builds upon the cultural identity of Santa Fe. You have the gallery scene here and Canyon Road, and that's important. Now, this space can provide opportunities for young, emerging artists who don't have other support systems in Santa Fe. They can contribute to the amazing artwork here and generate some economic opportunities for themselves."

THE NEXT DAY, I take a walk through the Railyard District, where a handful of new restaurants, such as the farm-to-table eatery Radish & Rye, have opened in the last couple of years. The weather is perfect, with the sky an ethereal shade of blue. Snowcapped mountains stand tall in the distance and charming adobe buildings surround me. There's also a disturbing racket coming from a construction site. I've just stumbled onto the renovation of Site Santa Fe, a contemporary art center that reopens this fall with expanded exhibition and performance space, adding to Santa Fe's growing number of spots featuring modern artists.

George R.R. Martin isn't involved with Site Santa Fe, but a few blocks later, I arrive at a place he does own, the Jean Cocteau Cinema. Martin bought this space in 2015, revamped it, and redefined it as an eclectic community theater, bookstore, bar, and art gallery. That purchase of an art-house-size space led him to back more local art projects, including financially supporting Meow Wolf; opening Dragonstone Studios, a space



MOVIES AND MORE:

Clockwise from top, at the Jean Cocteau Cinema, see classics such as Martin's favorite film, *Forbidden Planet*, and attend such events as a screening of the *Westworld* series, a *Max Headroom* reunion panel, and Q&As with authors including John Nichols.



for emerging artists; and establishing the Stagecoach Foundation. Stagecoach leases below-market-rate offices to film production companies in exchange for internship and mentorship opportunities for locals trying to crack into Hollywood.

Stagecoach is closed to the public, but not Dragonstone, a vacant school when Martin bought it in 2015 to store his books and collectibles. Visitors can wander through the space and buy any art on display that speaks to them. "I like old buildings, and I hate to see them just sitting there, boarded up," he told me.

Now, two dozen artists work in one of the campus' three buildings, selling their work to visitors who come by mostly in the evenings when the still-unfinished space fills up. Elias Gallegos, a square-jawed actor who works alongside his sister, Lenore, as one of Martin's "minions," took me around just before Martin and I met in his library. Gallegos pointed out that the sign outside — a fire-breathing dragon, of course — had just been installed and still lacked a light. "This space is just in its infancy," Gallegos told me. "But with George's name attached to this place, this is where the next generation of Canyon Road artists is going to come from."

Some of them may also get discovered at the Cocteau cinema, which has a small art space where

"I like old buildings, and I hate to see them just sitting there, boarded up." — George R.R. Martin

local artists can hang their works for free. The theater opened in 1977, then closed in 2006 before Martin bought the entire building it's attached to, revamped it, and reopened it in late 2013. Today the single-screen, 128-seat theater shows movies and hosts live events, including author Q&As that Martin sometimes conducts. The week of my visit, a local music teacher and her students performed to a full house one night, and stand-up comics cracked wise to a capacity crowd on the next. Both performances drew an eclectic mix of what appeared to be mostly locals. But on the afternoon that I get a two-minute tour of the place, exactly one paying customer sits in the house. Similar-size crowds have shown up for the kinds of movies Martin hoped he could bring back to early-to-bed Santa Fe — midnight movies — or "late-night," as they call them here.

"Santa Fe still goes to bed most nights at 9 and that drives me crazy," Martin says. "I don't want to go to bed that early. I'm 68 years old, but inside I'm 16. I still have, in some ways, the tastes of a high school kid. So I wanted midnight movies. But we still can't make midnight movies work, and that frustrates the hell out of me."

This points to a serious concern for city leaders, as well. Santa Fe goes to bed early, in part, because it's graying. The city's median age has risen recently to 44.1, more than six years older than the U.S. median age. For that reason, Martin's investments in community-minded arts projects that can give young artists new outlets or young residents something to see in the wee small hours after 10 p.m. is important.

All these investments present only one problem for the man bankrolling them. "Some of my fans get crazy about it when they read articles about me doing all these things," says Martin, who has a legion of followers impatiently waiting for him to finish the sixth and final *Game of Thrones* book, *The Winds of Winter*. "I don't really do all these things," he continues. "I hire people to do all these things. What I do is write books and screenplays and function as a producer."

With that, we say our goodbyes and Martin leaves the library to sit at a desk in the cluttered front room. There he takes out a pen and starts writing — his name, that is, on a large stack of autograph forms.

Well, at least that will make *some* of his fans happy. ■



George R.R. Martin's Favorite Santa Fe Spots

STAY

Hotel Santa Fe, Hacienda & Spa: When producers, agents, and others come to town to meet with Martin, he recommends they stay in this charming, art-stuffed hotel with a separate, 35-room hacienda building with butler service. From \$99. 505-982-1200; hotelsantafe.com

EAT

Maria's: Plank wood floors. Rough-hewn brick and stucco walls punctured with portal windows, and an inexpensive, spicy, green chili stew that is one of Martin's favorite dishes here. "It's hot, so have some sopapillas and honey with it," Martin says. "Rookies try to wash chilies down with beer and water. But you need to counteract the heat with something sweet whenever you get something that's a little too righteous for you." 555 Cordova Road; 505-983-7929; maria-santafe.com



Tecolote: Casual, family-owned for 35 years and Martin's "end-all, be-all spot for breakfast." Get something, anything, with green chilies on it. "That's the reason I can't leave Santa Fe," Martin says. "I'm addicted to chilies and I can't get them anywhere else." 1616 St. Michaels Drive; 505-988-1362; tecolotecafe.com

Tomasita's: Where to go to celebrate when you're finally, finally done with the sixth and final *Game of Thrones* book? How about this Martin favorite that's consistently voted the city's best margarita? 500 S. Guadalupe St.; 505-983-5721; tomasitas.com

Our Santa Fe Picks

EAT

WORKS IN PROGRESS: Peruse and buy pieces by emerging artists at Dragonstone Studios, another of Martin's endeavors.

Coyote Cafe: Opened in 1987, this longtime standby for elegant Southwestern fare is as good as ever. Grab a cocktail on the roof and soak in that famous Santa Fe light before dinner. 132 W. Water St.; 505-983-1615; coyotecafe.com

Radish & Rye: This hipster-style hangout, which occupies an old house, offers craft cocktails, farm-to-table food, a huge whiskey selection, and a crowd of locals. 548 Agua Fria St.; 505-930-5325; radishandrye.com



KATE RUSSELL (MARTIN); LINDA LYNN CARFAGNO (THEATER EVENTS); GABRIELLA MARKS (HOTEL SANTA FE)