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ABORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

Tales of the Human Kind

May-June 1989 / \$3.00

The Wishing Game
By Larry Niven

Eating Memories
By Patricia Anthony

David Brin on:
Science and the Fantastic
Part II

ARCH HEYER



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The Wishing Game

By Larry Niven

Art by Courtney Skinner

Crunching and grinding sounds brought him half-awake. He was being pulled upward through gritty sand, in jerks. Then the stopper jerked free, sudden sunlight flamed into his refuge, and the highly compressed substance that was Kreezerast the Frightener exploded into the open air.

Kreezerast attempted to gather his senses and his thoughts. He had slept for a long time ...

A long time. A human male, an older man not in the best of shape, was standing above the bottle. There was desert all about. Kreezerast, tall as the tallest of trees and still expanding, had a good view of scores of miles of yellow sand blazing with heat and light. Far south he saw a lone pond ringed by stunted trees, the only sign of life. And this had been forest when he entered his refuge!

What of the man? He was looking up at Kreezerast, probably perceiving him as a cloud of thinning smoke. His aura was that of a magic user, though much faded from disuse. At his feet, beside Kreezerast's bottle, was a block of gold wrapped in ropes.

Gold? Gold was wild magic. It would take no spells. It drove some species mad; it made humans mad enough to value the soft, useless metal. Was that why the man had carried this heavy thing into a desert? Or had its magic somehow pointed the way to Kreezerast's refuge?

Men often wished for gold. Once upon a time Kreezerast had given three men too much gold to carry or to hide, and watched them try to move it all, until bandits put the cap to his jest.

Loose white cloth covered most of the man's body. Knobby hands showed, and part of a sun-darkened face. Deep wrinkles surrounded the eyes. The nose was prominent, curved and sharp-edged like an eagle's beak, and sunburnt. The mouth was calm as he watched the cloud grow.

Kreezerast pulled himself together: the cloud congealed into a tremendous man. He shaped a face that was a cartoon of the other's features, wide mouth, nose like a great axe, red-brown skin, disproportionately large eyes and ears. He bellowed genially, "Make yourself known to me, my rescuer!"

"I am Clubfoot," the man said. "And you are an afright, I think."

"Indeed! I am Kreezerast the Frightener, but you need not fear me, my rescuer. How may I reward you?"

"What I —"

"Three wishes!" Kreezerast boomed. He had always enjoyed the wishing game. "You shall have three wishes if I have the power to grant them."

"I want to be healthy," Clubfoot said.

The answer had come quickly. This was no wandering yokel. Good: brighter minds made for better entertainment. "What disease do you suffer from?"

"Nothing too serious. Nothing you cannot see, Kreezerast, with your senses more powerful than human. I suffer from sunburn, from too little water, and from various symptoms of age. And there's this." The man sat; he took the slipper off his left foot. The foot was twisted inward. Callus was thick along the outer edge and side. "I was born this way."

"You could have healed yourself. There is magic, and you are a magician."

Clubfoot smiled. "There was magic."

Kreezerast nodded. His own kind were creatures of magic. Over tens of thousands of years the world's *mana*, the power that worked spells, had dwindled almost to nothing. The most powerful of magical creatures had gone mythical first.

The afrights had outlived the gods. They had watched the dragons sickening, the merpeople becoming handless creatures of the sea; and they had survived that. They had watched men spread across the land, and change.

"There was magic," Kreezerast affirmed. "Why didn't you heal your foot?"

"It would have cost me half my power. That mattered, when I had power. Now I can't heal myself."

"But now you have me. So! What is your wish?"

"I wish to be healthy."

Did this Clubfoot intend to be entirely healed from all the ills of mankind on the strength of one wish? The question answered itself: he did. Kreezerast said, "There are things I can't do for you —"

"Don't do them."

Was there no way to force Clubfoot to make his wish more specific, more detailed? "Total health is impossible for your kind."

"Fortunate it is, that I have not wished for total health."

The wish was well chosen. It was comprehensive. It was unambiguous. The Frightener could not claim that he could not fulfill the conditions; they were too general.



GARY
SKINNER
1980

Magic was still relatively strong in this place. Kreezerast knew that he had the power to search Clubfoot's structure and heal every ill he found.

To lose the first wish was no disaster. One did like to play the game to the end. Still Kreezerast preferred that the first wish come out a bit wrong, to give the victim warning.

Pause a bit. Think. They stood in a barren waste. What was a man doing here? His magic must have led him to Kreezerast's refuge, but —

Footprints led north: parallel lines of sandal-marks and shapeless splotches. They led to the corpse of a starved beast, not long dead, half a mile away. Here was more life: scavengers had set to work.

Saddlebags lay near the dead beast. They held (Kreezerast adjusted his eyes) held only water skins. Three were quite dry; the fourth held five or six mouthfuls.

The prints blurred as he followed them further. Dunes, more dunes ... the prints faded, but Kreezerast's gaze followed the pathless path ... a fleck of scarlet at the peak of a crescent dune, twelve miles north ... and beyond that his eyes still saw, but his other senses did not. The *mana* level dropped to nothing, as if cut by a sword. The desert continued for scores of miles.

It tickled Kreezerast's fancy. Clubfoot would be obscenely healthy when he died of thirst. He would suffer no ill save for fatigue and water loss and sunstroke. Of course he still had two wishes ... but such was the nature of the game.

"You shall be healthy," Kreezerast roared jovially. "This will hurt."

He looked deep within Clubfoot. Spells had eased some of the stresses that were the human lot, and other stresses due to a twisted walk, but those spells were long gone.

First: brain and nerves had lost some sensitivity. Inert matter had accumulated in the cells. Kreezerast removed that, carefully. The wrinkles deepened around Clubfoot's eyes. The nerves of youth now sensed the aches and pains of an aged half-cripple.

Next: bones. Here was arthritis, swollen joints. Kreezerast reshaped them. He softened the cartilage. The bones of the left foot he straightened. The man howled and flailed aimlessly.

The callus on that foot was now wrong. Kreezerast burned it away.

Age had dimmed the man's eyes. Kreezerast took the opacity from the humor, tightened the irises. He was enjoying himself, for this task challenged his skills. Arteries and veins were half-clogged with goo, particularly around and through the heart. Kreezerast removed it. Digestive organs were losing their function; Kreezerast repaired them, grinning in anticipation.

In a few hours Clubfoot would be as hungry as an adolescent boy. He'd want a banquet and he'd want it *now*. It would be salty. There would be wine, no water.

Reproductive organs had lost function; the prostate gland was ready to clamp shut on the urethra. Kreezerast made repairs. Perhaps the man would ask for an houri too, when glandular juices commenced

bubbling within his veins.

A few hours of pain, a few hours of pleasure. For Kreezerast to win the game, his three wishes must leave a man (or an afright, for they played the game among themselves) with nothing he hadn't started with. To leave him injured or dead was acceptable but inferior.

The man writhed with pain. His face was in the sand and he was choking. His lungs, for that matter, had collected sixty years of dust. Kreezerast swept them clean. He burned four skin tumors away in tiny flashes.

The sunburn would heal itself. Wrinkled skin was not ill health, nor were dead hair follicles.

Anything else?

Nothing that could be done by an afright working with insufficient *mana*.

Clubfoot sat up gasping. His breathing eased. A slow smile spread across his face. "No pain. Wait —" The smile died.

"You have lost your sense of magic," the afright said. "Of course."

"I expected that. Ugh. It's like going deaf." The man got up.

"Were you powerful?"

"I was in the Guild. I was part of the group that tried to restore magic to the world by bringing down the Moon."

"The Moon!" Kreezerast guffawed; the sand danced to the sound. He had never heard the like. "It was well you didn't succeed!"

"In the end some of us had to die to stop it. Yes, I was powerful. All things end and so will I, but you've given me a little more time, and I thank you." The man picked up his golden cube by two leather straps and settled it on his back. "My next wish is that you take me to Xyloshan Village without leaving the ground."

Kreezerast laughed a booming laugh. "Do you fear that I will drop you on Xyloshan Village from a height?" It would make a neat finale.

"Not any more," Clubfoot said.

Here the magic was relatively strong, perhaps because the desert would not support men. Men were not powerful in magic, but there were so many! Where men were, magic disappeared rapidly. That would explain the sharp dropoff to the north. Wars did that. Opposing spells burned the *mana* out locally in a few hours, and then it was down to blades and murder.

To east and west and south the level of power dwindled gradually. "Where is this Xyloshan Village?"

"Almost straight north." Clubfoot pointed. "Rise a mile and you'll see it easily. There are low hills around it, a big bell tower and two good roads —"

The man's level of confidence was an irritant. Struck suddenly young again, free of the ever-present pains that came with age in men, he must be feeling like the king of the world. How pleasant it would be, to puncture the man's balloon of conceit!

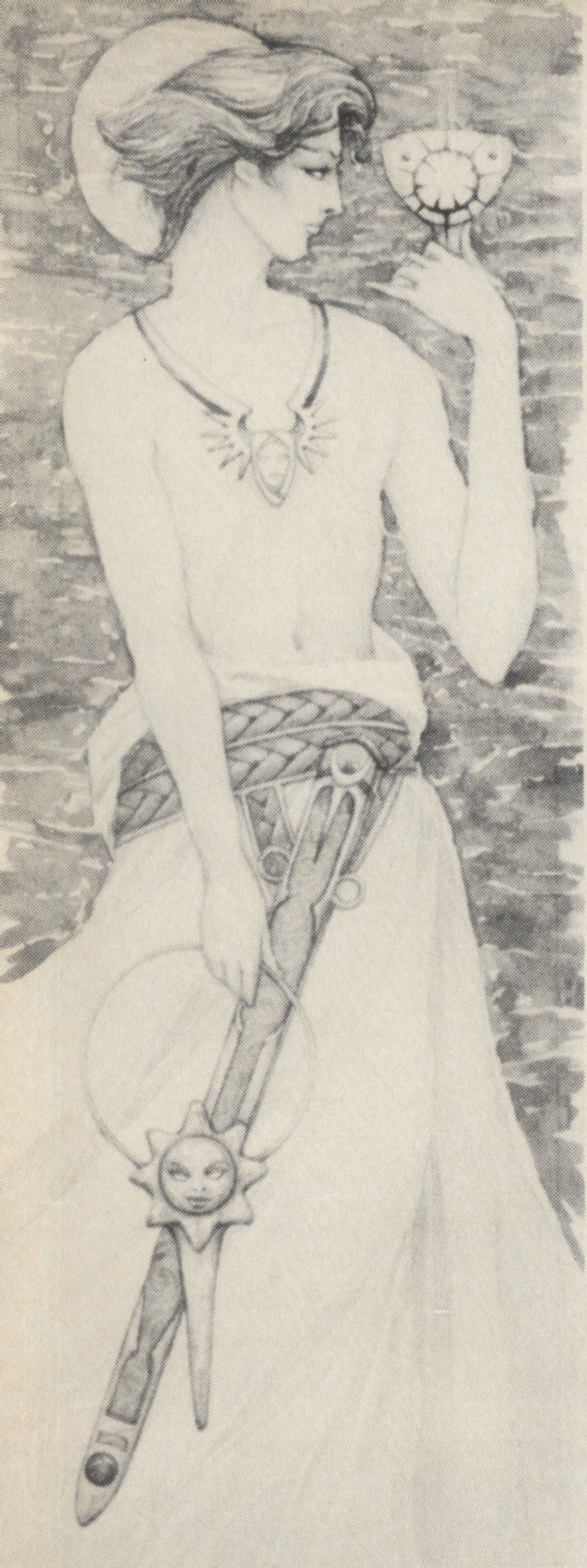
"— Take me to Xyloshan Village without leaving the ground." Very well, Kreezerast would not leave

(Continued to page 54)

From the award-winning author of the *Elric* saga — the long awaited sequel to *The War Hound and the World's Pain!*

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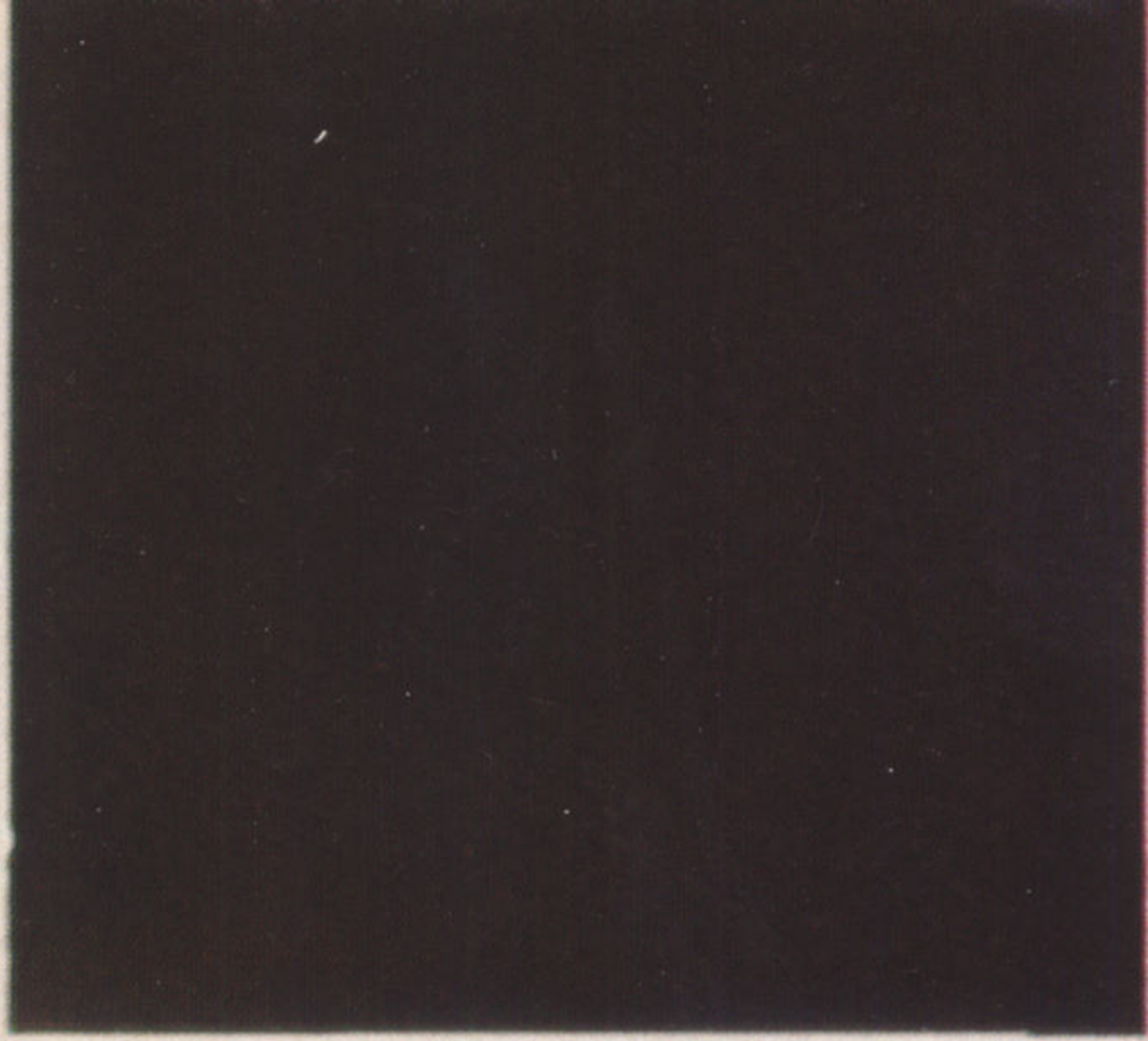
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A Peaceful Heart

By Warren G. Rochelle

Art by Byron Taylor

The door slams and the sound of the wood striking the frame echoes throughout the house, bouncing from wall to wall, shattering the silences into harsh, jagged pieces. Darius McAllister winces at the sound, which catches him half-way down the hall, just outside his bedroom. He stands in the doorway, and through the window, he can see down into the yard, and there is the door-slammer, at the fence gate, fists clenched, mouth in a thin line, jaw tight. Alex. Sixteen, with his dark eyes as cold as stones in the winter beneath one of Ocracoke's rare snowfalls. The boy opens the gate slowly and steps into the soft white sand of the street. There he stands, still, balanced on the balls of his feet, staring up at Darius's window. He half-lifts one hand, drops it and runs down the street, kicking up little clouds of sand. The boy runs toward the harbor and the street lined with the empty gift shops and hotels, lined with rotting boat docks. Darius watches the empty street for a long moment, imagining Alex running all the way to the ferry ramps, down to the Ditch, to stand on the rock walls leading out into the Sound. There he'll stand and watch the water and the gulls.

I should have called him right then, at the gate. I should have shouted his name: A-lex! Don't go, come back. I love you. The syllables could have wrapped around his legs and held him there or caught him in mid-run, below the live oak tree's canopy of gray-green leaves. I could have reeled him back into the house, reeled back the words we both said, undid the past twenty minutes. A-lex! But the name is only whispered, and the boy, he knows, is too far away to hear. Darius can still hear Alex's last words; they echo louder than any slammed door. They repeat themselves, like a broken record on a stereo. *I said that once to the boys, he remembers, and they stared at me as if I were speaking Greek.* The last records in the house had long since been skipped across the Sound or rolled down the street. The stereo cabinet had been burned for firewood.

You aren't my real father. The words, once said, had frozen them, staring hard at each other. Alex stood right by the door, his hand poised above the handle, his face red, his dark hair falling across his forehead, hiding the tears that were making his eyes even darker. Darius stood across the room, the silence between them lasting a thousand years, until he had to turn away and retreat into his bedroom. Behind him

the door slammed.

It's true, Darius thinks, watching the ghost of a breeze move through the thicket obscuring the fence: I'm not his *real* father. At least it was six years ago. Six years just slammed away? Just like that? You're being melodramatic, he chides himself. The boys aren't sons of my flesh, but they are the sons of my heart. He wants to stop re-playing the final scene with Alex, but he can't; the words echo and re-echo in his brain, pulling him through the scene as if he were trapped on a continuous tape loop, slamming him against the climax over and over, until he covers his face and cries. He knows that Alex is crying as well, that tears are washing tracks in the sandy dust on his face as the boy walks around the Creek, steps over the gray stones that line the Ditch, the water channel that leads out into the Sound and the Ocean.

Darius looks up as he hears the door make another sound, the hinges squeaking and pulling, and then, footsteps in the living room. Duncan, Alex's eleven-year-old brother, Darius's youngest son, I'm not his real father, either.

"Dad? Dad? Are you home? Alex?" Well, maybe I'm still Duncan's father, real or make-believe. Darius gets up from his chair, sighing heavily and noisily. He glances once more out the window: the leaves rise and fall, one at a time, lifted by a slight breeze. The street is still empty. He finds Duncan in the kitchen, cutting the heads off the freshly-caught channel bass. He stands in the door, leaning against the wood, watching his son (foundling, orphan, ward, fosterling) as the boy decapitates each fish neatly, with quick, sure strokes of a sharp, polished butcher knife. Dull-colored fish scales litter the cutting board and the floor and the counter. Duncan is as dark as his brother, and at this point in the summer his olive-complected skin has become the color of soft leather. The boys will never be big; both are small-boned and slight.

"Dad? Where's Alex?" Duncan asks without turning around. He has always been able to do that: sense the presence of others, knowing when those he cares for are near or are gone, or are happy or sad or just need him to be with them. Darius remembers Duncan just appearing, a dark ghost out of nowhere, to sit beside him, lay his head on Darius's shoulder. Even when he was very little, Darius remembers, Duncan did this. Alex would cry out in a bad dream, and the

next morning he would find the two of them in the same bed.

"We had — ah, he went down to the Creek. He'll be back." Don't ask me anything else, please.

"Oh, yeah, sure." Duncan knows that Darius and Alex have fought. The very air of the house is laced with tension and sadness and guilt.

"Need some help, Dunc?"

"Yeah, this is a pretty big mess of fish." The boy moves to let his father stand beside him at the kitchen counter, digging out another butcher knife, testing the sharpness of the blade before he hands it to Darius. The late afternoon sunlight falls through the back door, touching each knife blade, the panes in the window above the sink, and the light is scattered and flung about the room in flashes of brightness.

Thursday, January 6, 1972

If I had waited another day to go visit old Mary Craig, another week — who knows in what shape I would have found the boys. Her body was starting to smell. I didn't even have any real reason to go. I just set out from the house, stretching on the front steps and heading right up Howard Street and down past the old tourist shops and the Post Office. Stopped to read what had been served at the Pelican Restaurant six years ago. I had the streets to myself; I guess everybody is still keeping to themselves and staying inside. Nobody on Ocracoke has died of any of the Plagues, but who knows what could be or will be carried on the wind or in the rain? I liked talking to old Mary, sitting on her front porch, rocking and watching the still waters on the Northern Pond, that little thumb of Pamlico Sound, so I just kept walking until I was knocking on her door.

Alex and Duncan are their names. Ten and five. Mary Craig's grandchildren, from just over the border in Philadelphia. Their father brought them here, in the first part of November. Alex says his dad *knew* the War was coming and that after the Red Cross had brought them a letter from their grandmother he had borrowed the helicopter from the TV station he had worked for. I remember Mary telling me she had written, hoping maybe her daughter would send her a picture of the boys; she had never seen the younger one, born after the Revolution had started. To hear Dunc tell it, the flight from Philly was the greatest of adventures: leaving in the middle of the night, flying through the dark, close to the earth, touching down at dawn in the schoolyard, waking, rubbing their eyes, and, still sleepy, meeting a white-haired old woman, and then, one last hug, and standing on the back porch and watching the chopper fly over the Sound, dip once, and disappear.

Their daddy's dead somewhere between here and Pennsylvania. Maybe he's dead in Pennsylvania, killed by anthrax or cholera or bubonic plague or radiation from New York City. His helicopter could have run out of fuel, lord knows there isn't any in the South. His grave could be a heap of scorched metal, stained with old blood and covered with tall grasses.

None of the Plagues killed old Mary Craig. She was an old, old woman and she was just too old to take care of two little boys by herself. She slipped in the

kitchen and hit her head on the counter. If there had been a doctor, maybe she would have lived, I don't know. There haven't been any doctors on the island since — well, not counting the Red Cross last summer — since the Montgomery Massacre, nine years ago.

Alex and Duncan dragged their grandmother into her bedroom and covered her with an old spread and closed the door. They didn't want to let me in — their grandmother had told them never to let strangers in the house. I'm a friend of your grandmother's, I told them, we go to the same church, the one next to the school. You tell her Darius McAllister is here. We can't. She's dead.

They are in the spare bedroom now, sleeping, I hope. They are such little boys, even Alex, the ten-year-old, looks a few years younger. Small, slight, fine-boned, like little dark birds. Skinny, too. There wasn't too much left to eat in Mary's house. I closed the door when I left; it was just one more empty house. So many have gone, fleeing North when things started to get bad, before the borders were closed, here one day, the house empty the next. Every ferry was full, until they were all blown up. Now, no one leaves, even those with boats that can cross the Sound to the Mainland don't; they just watch the sky and the water and close their doors. I buried Mary in the sand, by the water.

What am I going to do with two little boys? They aren't stray puppies. I fed 'em, made 'em take a bath, listened to 'em talk, put 'em to bed. Now, I am watching them sleep.

Duncan brings in the wood and carefully blows on the banked coals in the wood stove until there is a tongue of flame curling around the kindling. The fish, cleaned and filleted, are in a frying pan on the top. Darius stands at the door, staring, unseeing into the twilight. Alex has been gone since early afternoon. The July sun will not set for another hour or so, but, still, the shadows are longer and he wants the boy to be home and not out walking alone. Darius sighs and turns back inside, knowing his worry is a little ridiculous: Alex is sixteen and there is nothing and nobody on Ocracoke that would harm him. Not one of Darius's boys. Not anybody's boy.

The fish are beginning to sizzle. Darius watches as the boy moves the pan slowly over the stove lid, back and forth, so that the hot fish oil is spread evenly. Darius feels content watching Duncan, and soothed. This at-peace feeling strikes a fine balance with his unhappiness; he feels poised in the middle, knowing how easily he could fall into either side.

"Where's Alex? When's he coming home?"

"He didn't say, Dunc."

"I saw him going down the street. He was running toward the Creek."

"Say anything to you?"

"I don't think he saw me. He — he seemed pretty mad."

"He wants to go to the Mainland. I told him he couldn't, that it was too dangerous and that I didn't want him to go. He was pretty upset with me."

"He wants to go to the Mainland?" Duncan is in-

credulous. In the six years since the Thanksgiving War, only two people have gone to the Mainland. They never came back, and their families are still waiting for them, walking down to the Sound, out to the edge of the Creek, all the way to the Ditch, looking across the twenty-odd miles of water, trying to imagine the land there: bombed, burnt-out towns and white skeletons.

"Yeah, the Mainland. He and a couple of his friends have been planning an expedition. They want to go exploring and see what's left of the country." Darius sighs. "I don't want him to go and he's mad at me."

"Well, I wouldn't want to go — hey, Dad, get a plate, these fish are ready."

They sit on the back steps with chipped blue-rimmed plates on their laps, and tin cups of lukewarm cistern water at their feet. They eat slowly, picking up the white meat with their fingers, sipping the water and watching the shadows lengthen and the sky slowly fade from blue to blue-gray. The air is heavy and damp and still. Storm's coming, Darius murmurs and Duncan nods his agreement, both of their mouths full of fish. Darius wishes he had some spoon leaf yucca flowers, but there are none left to fry and munch, the last blooms were in May and June. Maybe there were a few Indian figs left; Duncan would know.

"Tell me The Story, Dad, OK?" Duncan says, when both their plates are empty and their cups drained. The sky has grown dark and Darius' storm prediction is coming true: heavy thunderheads are rolling in from the sea. The air has become charged and is saturated with the promise of a hard rain.

"Dunc, you *know* The Story — it happened to you."

"You tell it better, Dad, OK?"

They have replayed this conversation about The Story over and over for the past six years, ever since Duncan first told Darius The Story one night when the boy had awakened with nightmares. Duncan has not told The Story since, insisting that Darius can tell it much better.

"Dunc, are you sure you aren't too old for The Story?" Darius asks gently. They can see the rain now, a leaden curtain hanging from the clouds. Thunder rumbles and Duncan turns toward the street to see lightning forking down to the sea a few miles away.

"Nope, not too old. Tell The Story."

Once upon a time there were two boys: Alex and Duncan Tyson. Alex was ten and Duncan was five and they lived with their mother in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, just a few miles north of Philadelphia. Philadelphia was a big city and a lot of people lived there. Their daddy worked there in a TV station and their mama worked in a drugstore in the Willow Grove Mall. She was a pharmacist. They were all happy.

The day after Halloween their mama got a letter. She opened it at the kitchen table. She started crying as she read the letter.

"Mama's crying, Daddy, why's Mama crying, is she sad?"

"Margaret? Honey? Why are you crying?"

"This is from my mother. I thought she was dead, but the Red Cross visited Ocracoke and she's still alive. She wants to see us. You know, she's never seen Duncan and Alex was just four—"

Grandma Craig lived in the South, in the Confederacy. She lived on a tiny island called Ocracoke, which was part of North Carolina. Mama was born there. She grew up there and went to college in Chapel Hill. That's where she met Daddy who was from the United States, the North. They got married and moved to Pennsylvania. They would have gone to visit Grandma Craig when Duncan was born but a war started in the South and nobody could visit or write letters.

"Go see her? In North Carolina? How? Even if it were safe to travel down there, you couldn't — the roads have all been blown up. Margaret, Ocracoke is a tiny island, over twenty miles off shore, and every ferry was blown up years ago." Daddy sounded a little irritated.

Alex and Duncan listened to their mama and daddy argue back and forth about Grandma Craig for the next week: she's an old lady, Sandy, and she needs me! She survived the war, she'll live a little longer. She's my mother! Be reasonable, suppose something happened — who'd help us, there's nobody in charge in the South, the war just ended in February! Duncan asked Alex what they were talking about, but Alex wasn't sure. He could barely remember Grandma Craig: a small, white-haired woman who smelled of Jergens Lotion. There were other things on TV that worried Mama and Daddy even more. Another war, in Europe. Where? Europe. Mama showed them on the globe and told them the Russians had invaded Yugoslavia, Greece, Norway, Austria, and West Germany. They were our friends and so Americans are fighting to help them.

Everybody was scared. Mama and Daddy whispered and talked, in their bedroom, in corners, behind their hands, and the house began to fill with fear. The TV talked of tanks and air strikes and body counts and Mama and Daddy often just stared up at the sky, squinting, trying to see — missiles? Russian jets?

One night, the week before Thanksgiving, Daddy woke Alex and Duncan up. It was very, very late. Outside, it was very dark. There were no street lights burning and the streets were empty. Duncan was sleepy and grumbled and complained. Daddy made both boys get dressed and go downstairs. Their suitcases were at the door. Mama was there, too, and she hugged them both, very hard, and said they were going to go visit Grandma Craig for Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is next week — what about school? Don't worry. Daddy and I will come in another week or so; it'll be just the two of you at first, won't that be fun?

They drove to Philadelphia, to the TV station where Daddy worked. The helicopter was in the back, and Daddy made sure everybody was buckled in before he took off. They flew all night. It was very cold and they slept only a little, as the chopper blades constantly beat the air. They flew over the dark city and then down a river and they followed the river to the

ocean. Duncan could see the beach below, with the waves breaking. They never got warm, although they huddled as close together as they could. Daddy didn't say very much, but he gave each of them a candy bar every now and then. A canteen for a sip of water.

How their daddy found tiny little Ocracoke no one will ever know. The helicopter touched down in front of the village school and Daddy led them through the still-sleeping streets to Grandma Craig's house. By the time they came to an old campground, now a wide green field with a phone booth at the edge, people were beginning to stir. Daddy nodded and waved and so did Alex and Duncan and the people stopped and stared and one or two followed them all the way to Grandma's house.

"It's all right, this is my son-in-law and these are my grandsons, it's all right," she had said and Daddy had left them there, promising to be back, with Mama, after Thanksgiving. Mind your grandma, I love you. The helicopter flew away and they watched until it was out of sight, standing on the back porch, facing the waters of Pamlico Sound.

"He never came back."

"No, he never did, but I know he wanted to, probably tried to. Maybe the helicopter ran out of fuel or maybe they both died when the plague bombs hit Philly on Thanksgiving. Come on inside, it's starting to rain."

Darius and Duncan stand on the front porch, their faces wet as the storm breaks and rain lashes the earth. Lightning splits the sky again and again, and Darius thinks it is like an enormous camera flash, a severe white light exploding, silhouetting all the trees and houses. Duncan says he can barely remember seeing a camera flash work; his fourth birthday and the room had seemed filled with light: candle flames, the flash, and all the faces around him.

"Aren't you going to tell the end?"

"You mean about the two boys living with their grandmother until she dies and then Darius finds them and brings them home, the three of them walking down Howard Street until they came to a house with a white fence and a cistern and trees growing against the fence?"

"Yeah."

"I just did."

They stand, side by side, letting the rain lick their faces through the screen.

Alex Tyson is drenched. His clothes are stuck to his body, and water drips off his nose, runs down his neck, into his eyes. He sits on the floor of the old Post Office, in the main lobby, his back to the counter where people used to come and buy stamps and mail letters and packages. That's what Darius told them people used to do before the Black Revolution and the Thanksgiving War. Alex does not doubt Darius; he and Jerry and Laney have explored the Post Office more than once, sifting through the stacks of molding, yellowed letters and mildewed magazines, reading out the addresses to each other: 305 Mangum, Uni-

versity of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; 2550-Q Glenwood Avenue, Raleigh, N.C.; the visa office of the U.S. Embassy in Washington, District of Dixie; the Confederate Consulate in New York. They found sheets of old stamps: CSA 10 cents, with pictures of Jeff Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson, old Centennial issues.

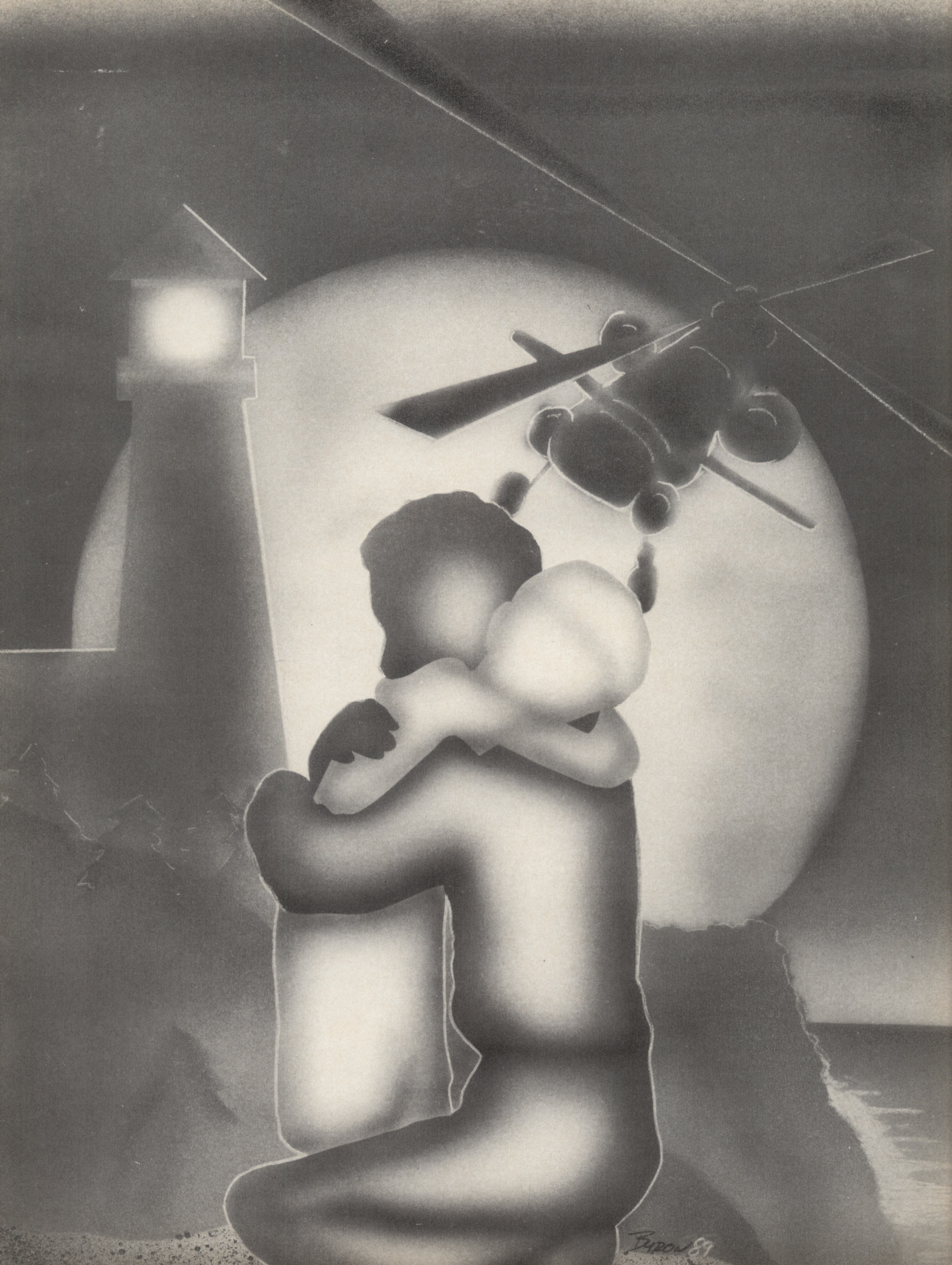
Now Alex is waiting out the storm. He keeps looking over his shoulder, as if he expects the ghosts of the old letter-writers to appear. He jumps when something — a rat? scurries across the floor. He is hearing again what he said to Darius: *you aren't my real father*. Alex wishes he could unsay the words, and erase the swift pain he had seen in Darius's face. Perhaps he won't have to say anything, like when he was little. They would fight and yell and scream and Alex would run away, out of the house and down to the harbor. He would sit there, staring at the old rotting sail boats, and count the fishing boats, starting with the *Ocracoker*, the boat Darius and Johnny Lambertson took out. Dar had promised Alex he could go the next time for sure. Finally he would go home and one of them, usually both, would mutter they were sorry, grin, half-laugh, and things would be all right.

But this is different, Alex thinks. Can't he understand that *this* (and he gestures to include the entire island) isn't enough? So what if nobody, well, almost nobody has left since the old ferries were blown up. I've seen it all, over and over and over. Walked all the streets. Climbed up and down the Lighthouse a thousand times. Counted all the graves on Howard Street (this is your grandma's family, the O'Neals). Memorized the names and dates in the British Cemetery. Dug for Blackbeard's treasure. Heard every story about the 1899 Hurricane at least twice. Ridden the ponies up what's left of the Hatteras highway (a nor'easter erased most of it, remember, when you were eleven?). Tossed bread to the fat little white-bellied gulls. Dar fussed for that, boy. How was I to know there wasn't any flour left?

Alex shakes his head, throwing water like a dog. This island is only sixteen miles long, and nobody but Dunc, Jerry, and Laney would ride with me north to Hatteras Inlet, let alone take a boat over. Bet there are still people up at Nag's Head and Kitty Hawk. Frisco, Buxton, Avon. Salvo, Waves, Rodanthe, Whalebone. Names like beads on a string. He has traced the black line of N.C. 12 up the narrow Bank Islands over and over, whispering these names. The dotted lines of the old ferry routes have led him to Cedar Island, all the way to Morehead City, and beyond. Jee-sus. Alex holds his head in his hands, despairing that grownups will ever understand. He looks up and sees that the rain is finally slowing down. The thunder is fainter and farther away; the storm is headed for the mainland. *The Mainland. The Main Land.* Alex murmurs the words over and over, as if they were a charm.

Sunday, May 28, 1972

When the radio popped and hissed and sparked, we all just sat there and stared and said nothing. Nobody moved or asked Ed Gaskill to get up and get a new battery. Everybody knew there weren't any



Byron 89

more, not on Ocracoke anyway. Probably the precious few in North Carolina were corroding and collecting dust on some store shelf. There were probably some in Bogota. That was where we'd been listening: Bogota, Colombia. Not New York or Chicago or Philadelphia. There wasn't a New York or Chicago anymore and Philadelphia had gone off the air around Christmas. Anthrax and cholera and mutated hyperactive bubonic plague were going around. *La Voz de America*. Is anybody listening? Well, we were.

"Well, Dar, that's it. We might as well be on Mars now," Ed said, his voice gray and soft. "Might as well be on Mars."

Hell, we are on Mars. Been there since all the ferries went down.

I took a long walk after that. Walked and thought. There hadn't been that much news from Bogota anyway: the collapse of another Central American government, Panama, the last of them. The latest estimate of plague deaths, in millions. Colombian and Venezuelan soldiers shooting down refugees at the Canal, so no plague-carriers would cross. The world has gone to hell and just a few years ago, the Yankees put a man on the Moon. I found myself at the old Park Service campground. I stopped there and sat at a picnic table, to catch my breath. It won't be so bad on Mars, I guess. Earth hasn't done too much for us Ocracokers anyway. But, still, it was good to know we weren't alone.

Alex was awake when I got home. Sitting in the living room on the couch, crying. I sat down by him and put my arms around him and let him cry on my chest, until the sobs slowed down and turned into half-gasps and sniffles. Why are you crying, what's the matter? I woke up and you were gone; I was afraid you were never coming back. Of course, I was coming back, I wouldn't leave you. I was just saying good-bye to the Earth.

Duncan is asleep. Darius has checked on the boy three times and yes, the boy is asleep, sprawled out across his bed, flat on his stomach, his dark head sunken into the pillow. Duncan's bare body looked even darker in the wash of the moonlight. He could almost be, well, not black, Darius thinks, maybe Cherokee. He remembers someone asking him that once: if the boys were part nigger. Part *what?* Nig — Negro. Colored, Black, Darkies. They sure look — Listen, Darius said, I don't think your daughters are good enough for my boys anyway. The man left, sputtering, and everybody had heard the story by the next day. One hundred-odd people had to talk about something. Some were actually disappointed that there hadn't been a fistfight. Most of them laughed, telling Darius he should have been a revolutionist and should go to New Africa. Huh, Darius thinks, what do they know? There are no blacks on Ocracoke; haven't been any for a long time, long before the Revolution. Probably most of them died, too. There had been plague reports from re-named Tampa, Uhura, and then New Africa Radio had gone silent, too.

Darius sits down on the couch in the living room, watching the one candle lamp flicker and burn. I

wouldn't care if the boys were as black as night, I'd still love them and I'd still sit here and worry, just like this, waiting for the prodigal to return. The air is beginning to cool and Darius thinks that maybe Duncan won't be so restless, that he will let sleep capture him and hold him still. He wants to get up and check on the boy again, but he makes himself be still. Sit, he tells himself; think about what you're going to say to Alex.

The boy wants to go to the Mainland, with his friends. Patch up a boat and sail across Pamlico Sound to Cedar Island. Take some ponies on the boat and ride around when they get there. See what's what. I was sixteen once, Darius thinks. Is that it? Has he forgotten what it is like to be sixteen? To feel like you *know* and that nobody else knows or could possibly understand. Yes, he was sixteen once, here on Ocracoke, in high school, but he knew when he graduated he was going to the Mainland for college. Not to Chapel Hill or Duke, just to Wilmington State College, but still, he knew he was leaving. Darius had come back, to help his dad run the Pony Island post cards. There are hundreds of them still. The last order, along with an order for Pony Island towels and sheets, is on the bottom of the Sound. The post cards, the towels and sheets, went down with his parents and about a hundred others and their cars and pickup trucks, when the ferries were sunk in '68.

He sighs. Alex doesn't have those choices, doesn't have a future with such certainty. He's like a bird that's grown too big for the nest, but all he knows is the nest and there isn't anything but the nest. You can go, Alex. You can go. There are footsteps outside, feet on the sand. The gate opens, squeaking. Darius waits on the couch. He does not call out the boy's name. The porch screen door opens, its hinges protesting, echoing the gate.

Alex opens the front door and stands still, caught there, by Darius's shadowed presence on the couch. Darius feels his bones have locked in place; he cannot stand erect, offer his hand. His mouth seems locked as well; the words are waiting to be said, but they have met a closed door.

"I'm sorry for what I said; I didn't mean it," Alex mumbles, as he steps into the dimly lit living room, the stiff lines of his body softening with the shadows, hiding what is behind his eyes.

"Yeah, I know," Darius whispers in return, "I'm sorry, too. Come and sit down; we need to talk."

"I'm tired — can't it wait until morning?"

"No — now. Sit down."

Alex flops in an armchair beside the couch. The candle lamp is between and the patterns of light are flickering and breaking against their faces.

"Tell me why you want to go to the Mainland, Alex."

"I've told you and told you; you won't listen," Alex says sullenly, looking away from Darius, staring down at the floor between his feet.

"Well, I'm listening now. Tell me."

Alex begins, in a tired voice, speaking at first to the floor, to his feet, to his hands. When he is almost through, he looks up at Darius and he seems surprised at what he sees there: the man's eyes are wet and

understanding.

"Is it that bad here, with me and Duncan?"

"No, no, it's not you, not Duncan — it's everything, Dar. Don't you see? This is all there is," and he makes the same inclusive gesture he made in the Post Office: the island and everything on it. "Ocracoke isn't — you've lived off — I mean, I was just ten — I've got to see another place, *be* another place. Every thing is always the same here, nobody's ever different. I can tell you what Orvis Howard will say tomorrow when you see him, or the next day — it's always the same: Mor-nin', Dar-ee-us, howse boys, yerself? Me, I'se jes' fine, passin' the time; I'se real fine. I'll come back, Dar, I promise. This is my home and you and Dunc are all that I've got. I'll come home, always."

"How will you get across the Sound?" Darius asks, still in a low voice. He cannot respond directly to what Alex has just said, and he knows that they both cannot easily say such things and that saying them removes all their carefully erected defenses, leaving each one raw and vulnerable. I love you, Alex, he wants to say, and he knows that Alex's words are but a disguise for the same words. They turn their faces from each other, each knowing that the other's feelings are plainly visible. The very air of the room is filled with emotion, so much that one could almost reach out and touch the love, as if it were tangible, a skein of gold wrapped around the two of them. This is my son, Alex. I love you, Dar. I love you, Dad. Darius wishes that Alex could be more like Duncan, who says plainly: this is how I am, this is how I feel, bluntly, with no timorous uncertainties. But Alex is Alex and because he is, Darius steps lightly, offering meaning behind meaning, indirect, oblique. Some things must remain implied, unvoiced, barely gestured.

Instead, the sixteen-year-old boy and the thirty-eight-year-old man talk of repairing boats to be sturdy enough and big enough to support three ponies and three boys, bows and arrows, one old gun and some unsure ammunition that has never been fired. Darius tells Alex that there was never any fighting on Ocracoke; weren't any blacks on the island, for one thing. They were all on the Mainland. The only fighting Darius saw was on TV, then in '68 the stations in Morehead and Wilmington were blown up. They talk of dried fish and cat-tail roots and carrots. They talk and talk, until finally Darius stands up, yawning stretching.

"Tomorrow, boy, tomorrow." They both glance at the clock hanging up on the wall. A tourist clock, Darius has always said. It is made of polished drift wood and was powered by AA batteries. The last of the AAs went dead last year, stopping the clock's spidery hands at 4:02.

"Yeah, I'm really beat," Alex says and he smiles and Darius squeezes his shoulder, thinking that he hasn't done so bad, raising these boys by himself, not so bad at all, considering he never thought he would be any kind of father at all.

"I'll be colder in October and November, but at least," Darius says, "the hurricane season will be

over and well — forget it, I was going to say it would be safer crossing the Sound, but there are always nor'easters." Nor'easters or hurricanes, it doesn't matter, the boys want to leave now, yesterday. They will have nothing to do with parental advice counseling caution and delay. Darius sighs. He commiserates with Fred and Sally Wahab and Louise and Jamie Howard about the bullheadedness of sixteen-year-olds, swearing they were crazy to let the boys go. Yes, they are bullheaded and we were very crazy, but let them go. Forget hurricanes, nor'easters. Go. Fix up a boat, corral the ponies. Dry the fish; go. Alex is everywhere, doing this, doing that, getting this, getting that, talking with Laney and Jerry, asking Darius if this would work, poring over old maps and running and running.

"Why is he in such a hurry to leave, Dad?" Duncan asks.

"I don't know, maybe he's afraid I'll change my mind, or maybe it won't be real until it actually happens."

"Do you want him to go, really?" Duncan asks. He is incredulous that Alex has been given permission for such an insane trip to such a dangerous place.

"You know I don't, but he would go anyway, sooner or later. Some people go, Dunc, and some stay. Alex is one of those that has to go," Darius replies, realizing that he has finally understood why the boy has to leave and why he would be waiting, watching the Sound, straining his eyes to see a boat coming home.

Darius wakes up early the day Alex and Laney Howard and Jerry Howard are to leave. It is just before dawn and a few stars linger in the blue pearly-gray sky. The sky is changing colors: the gray is becoming blue and there is a yellow-rose glow staining the clouds. 23 August 1978 is beginning. The boat has been rebuilt and a raft has been attached for the ponies. Near the docks, the ponies wait, and three packs filled with trail food in three different houses. The sail is ready to be hoisted. They are leaving *this* morning, and Darius knows he is still afraid that Alex will not come back. Who knows what he will find there, at the end of those twenty-odd miles of water? He sighs. The boy is leaving. He'll come back; he promised he would.

Darius gets out of bed, shaking himself to rid his mind of these thoughts that have haunted him, pale wraiths hiding on the peripheries of his consciousness. He dresses quickly and goes into the kitchen to blow the banked coals into flame and stoke the morning fire. He mentally lists the breakfast menu: seagull eggs; battered fish; Indian potatoes boiled in sea water, and cool cistern water, fragrant with dotted horsemint. Satisfied that the fire will not go out, Darius rises to get the Indian potatoes and there, standing in the doorway, are Alex and Duncan.

"I was just going to wake y'all up," he says, wishing there was a painless way to say goodbye. Goodbye is a little death. The boys tell him that they could not sleep either. Alex says he tossed and turned and wrapped and unwrapped the sheets around his

body, getting the mosquito netting entangled between arms, legs, and sheets. Duncan says very little; he just stares very hard at Alex as if to be sure he won't forget his brother's face, the curve of his jaw, the folds of his eyes. They fix breakfast and eat with few words and just when they are finished, there is a knock at the door and they all jump.

"I guess that's Laney and Jerry — they're probably ready to go — I guess it's time — um, Dar, Dunc—" It has already been agreed upon that the good-byes will be said at the house.

"Well, I guess I'll see y'all later — I'll be right out, Jer, wait for me at the gate, OK? Dunc, you look after Dar, OK?"

"I'll look after Dad," Duncan mutters, looking away.

"Dar, Dunc—" and the words collapse of their own weight and there are tears and hugs and I love yous and I love you, toos, and then the back door slams and Darius and Duncan listen to the sound of running feet, and then, the front gate squeaks open and closes and voices murmur and fade away.

"He's gone," Darius says and picks up Alex's plate from the table.

Thursday, November 2, 1978

It's been over two months since Alex and the other boys sailed away. I still go with Duncan down to the Creek, to walk up the Ditch and look out over the water. Sometimes we walk over to the Lighthouse and climb up to the top, to peer through the salt-encrusted windows. Duncan keeps one pane clear but we have seen nothing but water, and the dark shadow of Portsmouth Island. Other days we walk down to the beach and wade in the cold surf and watch the waves break on the sand. We feel the coming winter in the air and the wind rubs our faces ruddy and dry.

Of course we are not just watching for them to return. There's fishing with Johnny, drying the fish, repairing boats and nets, gathering herbs like rabbit tobacco for stuffing pillows and mattresses, yarrow for toothache, and Indian figs and Indian potatoes and myrtle berries for candles, and chinking and chunking the cracks in the house, and reading. Reading at night, under the candlelamps, aloud to Duncan, who sits by, sometimes inside the crook of my arm, sometimes, snuggled against the couch arm. He reads to me as well. Now we are reading *The Once and Future King*:

"On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, it was Court Hand and Summulae Logicales, while the rest of the week it was the Organon, Repetition and Astrology. The governess was always getting muddled with her astrolabe, and when she got specially muddled she would take it out of the Wart by rapping his knuckles."

"He's in school, huh?" Duncan asked.

"Yeah, a governess is a special teacher, a private teacher that's at your house, not in a school," I answered, wishing that Duncan and Alex could have gone to school. There just weren't enough kids, or maybe there just weren't enough adults who cared. I want my boys to know their history and I don't mean just Ocracoke, Blackbeard, the Lighthouse and the ponies, and the British sailors buried in their little

cemetery, but the Confederacy and the Southern Revolution, the United States, the World Wars, the Black Revolution and the Burning of Washington — back to the American Revolution and farther back. I've brought home old history books, encyclopedias; they've read those. Maybe their kids will go to school.

Alex promised to bring books, as many as he could. I gave him a list; told him to go to the college, the public library, bookstores — to think of all those books molding. We haven't read all the books here, in the old school and the public library, but they are really just a handful. We talk and listen to each other, Duncan and I, and when Alex returns, we will talk and listen to him. I know that when he returns, he will not stay long. He will probably go North, to Philadelphia, and finally put his parents to rest. Duncan will go as well, but he will return and stay.

I think Alex will come in the spring, when the dogwoods are white and the air is scented with Carolina jessamine. He will bring a pile of books and stories of another land, where weeds are growing in the cracks of the highways and kudzu is everywhere. He will have seen a lot of snow and met all kinds of people, and he will tell us stories beneath the live oak tree.

I have peeked ahead to the end of *The Once and Future King*, there Arthur meets his future, his destiny, with a peaceful heart; that is how I will meet mine. Outside, it is clear and cold, and there is a dark, star-sharp sky. At the ocean, the tide is wiping clean the sand. □

Soviet humor?

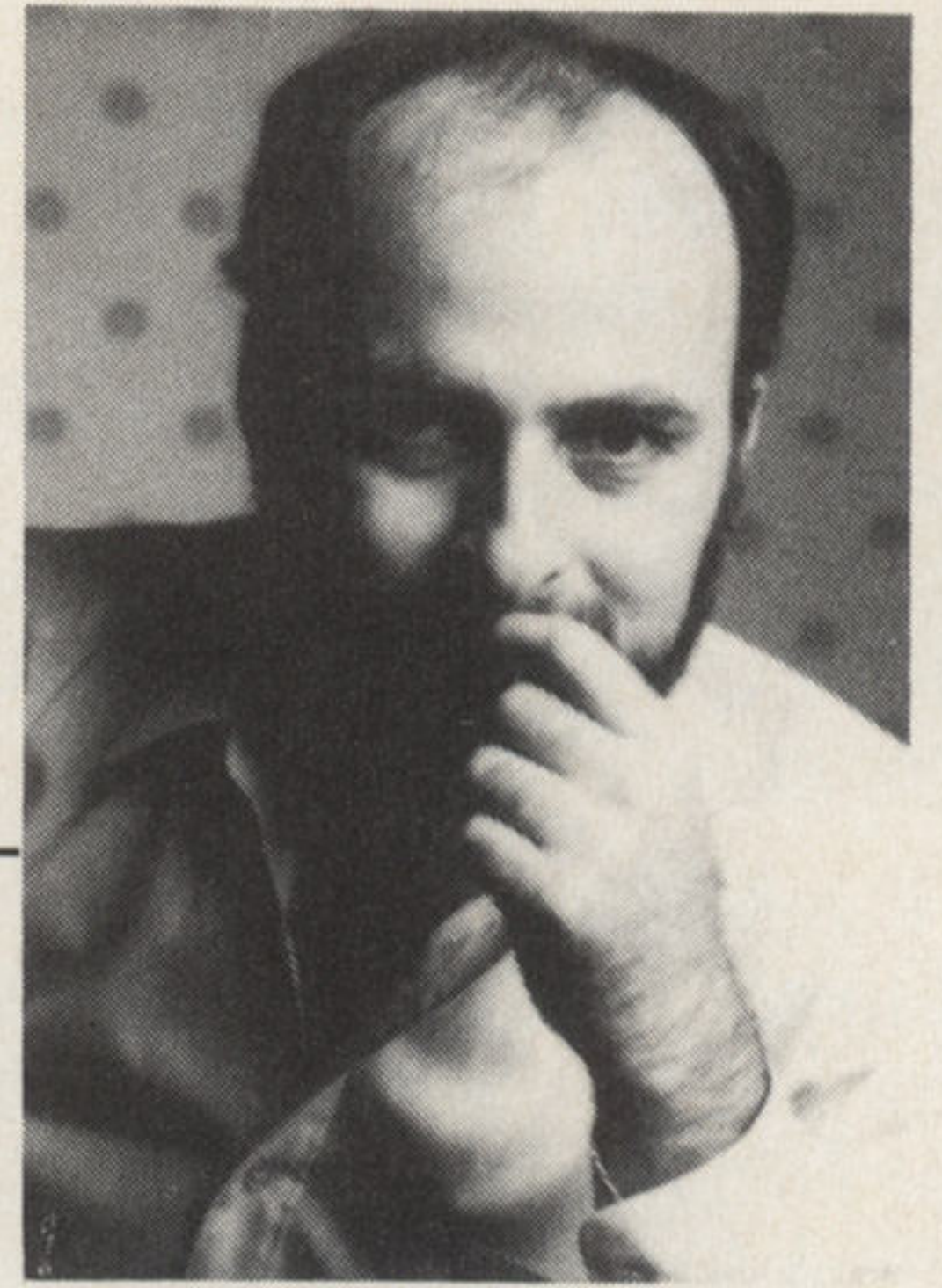
Our next
issue:



Anyone who thinks that Soviets don't have a sense of humor may be surprised when they read Kir Bulychev's "The District Domino Championship" in the July/August issue of *Aboriginal*. It's a truly zany piece which might even out-gonzo our resident humorist Robert A. Metzger, who will also have a story in the issue. Not to be outdone, though, Mr. Metzger will also kick off the first installment of his new science column. Bob will not only give us insights into the farthest reaches of current research and theory, but he'll extrapolate the impact that new technology will have on science, science fiction and everyday life. We will also have stories by R.P. Bird, Patricia Anthony, David Ludwig, Brooke Stauffer, and as many more as we can fit. And in the following issue, Larry Niven will return with "A Portrait of Daryanree the King" and Thomas A. Easton will amaze you with his ecological solution to waste disposal in "Sing a Song of Porkchops" — both will appear in the Sept./Oct. 1989 issue along with many more stories. □

Science and the Fantastic

By David Brin



Part II The Image of the Magician

In an earlier article I spoke of the conflict between science and magic. It is a conflict, far more than just a difference in packaging on the SF book shelves. In fact, last time I maintained that it's a serious breach between two established and ancient ways of looking at the world.

This doesn't mean one can't appreciate them both. I enjoy a good magical story as much as the next guy, for it can take me far away on a marvelous adventure of escape and wish-fulfillment. Or give me insight into the way some of humanity's older cultures might have thought about themselves and nature ... cultures transfixed by the magical worldview.

Still, one has to choose, in the end, which is to be Home Base and which shall only be Vacationland. In some very basic respects, this is an important decision.

Last time we considered the two opposite and contradictory ways we can look at the *time flow of wisdom*. In the old "Look Backward" view, knowledge is inherited from some long past Golden Age, and wisdom is to be found in the oldest tomes. The "Look Forward" view, on the other hand, contends that we are slowly improving our *models* of reality, and next year's versions will likely be better than this year's, and so on into the future.

We also spoke of a new ideal ... that says *humans are naturally egotists who tend to see what they want to see; therefore, an honest person always seeks outside checks of what he thinks is true.*

We may not always live up to this ideal, but it is the essential basis of science. (And tolerance and democracy, as well.) What we fail to realize is how *recent* this ideal is, and how incompatible it is with most versions of magic.

But let's move on. Consider, for a moment, the idealized images of two professionals — the scientist and the magician, as portrayed in popular culture.

The magician is often depicted as a solitary being of great power, living on a craggy cliff-top eyrie within which he guards the secrets of his craft. His prowess derives not only from his knowledge but from some indwelt force of will, a talent which at an early age set him aside from other mortals. He (and in the magician's most powerful manifestations it's nearly always a "he") generally uses the manna at his disposal sparingly. (Even "good" magicians perform their beneficial wonders only grudgingly, and at long intervals.)

Note how seldom magicians cohabit with printing presses, indoor plumbing and other democratic amenities.

Naturally, his power is accessible only to a select few. He may have a talented young apprentice, but he shares his secrets with the neophyte only slowly. His works and ideas are not subject to scrutiny.

Naturally, Joe Magician thinks he's pretty hot stuff.

So does the scientist, at least as he or she is portrayed in

popular media. And yet, think for a moment of the truly great scientists, the ones most admired by all. Are the very best of them not seen as kindly? Unassuming? Even saintly? In their most ideal image, they are depicted as men and women who seek to keep their egos under control.

A scientist who makes a discovery does not hoard it. Not for long, at least. For among scientists the greatest credit comes from immediately *sharing* the new knowledge, publishing, not scribbling it in into a locked book of arcana.

Indeed, the top scientists seem to love nothing better than to get grants to do 13-part nature shows for PBS. The assumption seems to be, "The public paid for my research. And anyway, no one really knows his subject unless he can explain it to a nine-year-old."

The scientist can accomplish nothing without the cooperation of hundreds of thousands of skilled professionals — filter manufacturers, glass blowers, electricians, photocopier repairmen. She must be a team player, or fail.

Finally, in comparing the scientist with the magician, there is one last, non-trivial difference to note The scientist's miracles often *work*. The magician's, generally, do not.

So Why Is There Magic?

So, if magic is so damned inferior, why has it dominated

over rational skepticism for most of the last 60,000 years? Why is it that, even now, we're attracted to it? Why does the appeal of fantasy not wane in the face of technological marvels and the promise of a glittering tomorrow? Why do so many of us still love to scare ourselves half to death reading horror novels by firelight?

Even within "science fiction" this urge remains strong. And I speak not solely of fantasists. A lot of so-called "hard SF" is just as "magical" as anything containing elves and dragons. Many authors whose protagonists work with glossy, ultra-tech machinery are nevertheless describing — not engineers — but magicians dressed up in white coats. The telltale signs are apparent in the *attitudes* and *behavior* of a book's resident wonder worker. He may labor in a "lab," but most of your solitary, egotistical, angry Mad Scientist types bear more resemblance to wizards than to any modern researcher.

Why, then, is the image of the magician so damned compelling? I return, as in the last article, to the author Tom Robbins for a partial explanation.

"Science gives man what he needs, but *magic* gives him what he wants."

We may be growing up. The signs are there. Glacially, barely noticeably, we may be maturing as we absorb the "Look-Forward" wisdom of science. We may be getting what we need in order to become responsible citizens and caretakers of the world. Maybe.

But does science give us what we really *want*?

Our wants and desires are complex and arise out of many sources, from the lofty aspirations of our "official" ethics to deep drives hard-wired into the reptilian portions of the brain. Much, if not most, of our literature has been about reconciling the inevitable conflicts amongst our motivations. Striking this reconciliation anew is the unique story of every human being.

Some of these desires science can address. If we want safety

from disease, we donate to medical research. If we want to feed the starving, we cheer the Green Revolution and the agronomists who brought it about. If we dream of spaceflight, we make heroes of the celestial navigators at JPL and join the Planetary Society. And if we fear war, made worse by the violence of technological weapons, well then, we also look with hope to those workers developing the means to verify arms control treaties — seeing them as scientists whose research serves our fondest wishes.

Even some of the baser motives are well served by new technologies. The Pill gave a generation of men their chance to romp in unprecedented sexual permissiveness — until AIDS arrived and, more importantly, women grew wise to the scam of Free Love. Designer drugs are just the beginning of the possibilities for the 21st century as — in the words of William Gibson — "the street finds its own uses for technology."

And yet, there are some drives the scientific view is inherently less capable of satisfying ... far less so than older ways. One of these is almost certainly the deepfelt need many humans feel to expand the territory of their egos.

We are only now beginning to understand the complex effects that come about when essentially tribal beings (for that is what we were for millions of years) are forced to adapt to complex new social systems. We are descended from people who lived generation after generation in groups ranging in size from roughly ten to fifty individuals. To feel one *belongs* in the context of a such a group is still an extremely powerful human drive. It was adaptive, that need, during our evolution.

Also potent is a desire to rise to the *top* of our group. This is seen in all of our near animal relatives, and was observed in all natural human tribes.

Sometimes the need to belong and the need to be strong work together. Sometimes, especially among some males, the latter

dominates. And in order to take the risks and expend the energy this competition requires, a man must clearly convince himself he has a good chance to make it all the way.

In other words, he needs a large ego.

Now a mature, science-based worldview says, "Tsk, tsk. *Control* that ego. You can fool yourself ..."

Bah! Who wants to hear that when the adrenaline is pumping and that old ego-roar is surging between the ears saying "I'm great! Go for it!"

Some SF authors make a career of pandering to this ego-roar. In book after book they depict protagonists who, because of some indwelt, inborn greatness, rise above humble, abused beginnings to assume fantastic power. Whether the scenario is inherited kingship, psionic talent, or genetically engineered transcendence, the theme is the same. It is magical wish-fulfillment. And it feels great!

In daily life our foes are complex, seldom wholly good or evil. (Though we do let ourselves categorize people, our frontal lobes keep reminding us that even Hitler loved his dog, and even Einstein forgot his wife's birthday now and then.) Often, in order to get through life, we must compromise and make complicated alliances with many others, each with his or her own murky agenda.

Even if we have our outer selves under control, what then about the inner man? We may spend our days taking part in the great enterprise of building a mature, decent, complex society ... one based on diversity and knowledge. But inside each of us there may remain that tribal warrior who wants out.

In fantasy we are free to become heroes and heroines, either within our own daydreams or by riding along with an author's character. Through the medium of the protagonist, we can go forth and battle unadulterated evil — by ourselves or in the company of a few stalwart, archetypal sidekicks numbering no more than the dozen or so our ancestors

knew in a tribal hunting party.

In fantasy we give vent to the bubbling and fizzing that inevitably simmers in the recesses of a brain which, after all, spent a lot longer peering into forest glooms than sitting in safe houses lit by electric lamps. In the fantastic we can give our egos room to stretch, and give our fears simple shapes we can fight.

Midway along in our evolution from bipedal apes to ... who knows? ... we simply can't give ourselves over wholly to maturity. In all of us there is a need for the extravagant, the irrational, the vividly unreasonable. Some of us squelch that need. Some bring it into the real world and so lose touch with reality.

For some, however, that need is fulfilled marvelously well through art, through imagination, and through fantasy.

Is A Synthesis Possible?

Are we doomed forever to be at war within ourselves? Or can forebrain and midbrain find common ground for cooperation?

After all, the whole purpose of the frontal lobes is to solve problems. Once we understand that we have a *need* for the irrational, well, then why don't we use our problem-solving abilities to come up with a way to fulfill that need?

Some may see an inherent conflict here ... like someone *rationaly* deciding that he needs to become more *spontaneous*, and planning a way to go about expressing that trait. And yet, others will testify that the conflict is only apparent. There is no paradox.

An example might be the venerable old SF "cautionary tale," which takes some minor trend in the here-and-now and extrapolates, saying, "If this goes on"

Your scenario may be unlikely, and yet, if it is well drawn it will, at least for the moment, seem plausible. And the result may be to fractionally *change* the attitudes of your readers, as did Huxley and Orwell in *Brave New*

World and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Those novels may have frightened people into changing their society so that — ironically — the scenarios depicted in them are no longer possible.

Images, drawn from the pit of the author's fears, are clothed in raiments of believable extrapolation, then used to scare us into exorcising those very monsters from the real world. That is the synergism of the cautionary tale, the self-preventing prophesy, the plausible horror story, in which frontal lobes and tribal man collaborate to defeat their common enemies.

If we are slowly maturing into wisdom, that maturity will not be one of uniform, white logic throughout. The antiseptic utopias, the stainless steel smugvilles so loathed by the new romantics — these are not reasonable depictions of any desirable human tomorrow. Any thoughtful child of the Enlightenment will join with the grittiest cyberpunk in finding those visions of sterile perfection

loathsome. The citizens of any such "paradise" would not be human, just as any city bereft of shadows would not be a human city.

As we mature, some of the rage may slowly seep away. We may grow more sane and less cantankerously crazy. But I have a sense we will never lose a hankering to hoot and holler at the fringes of the campfire, to shout at the silences in the night, or to shiver when the wings of an owl momentarily eclipse the moon.

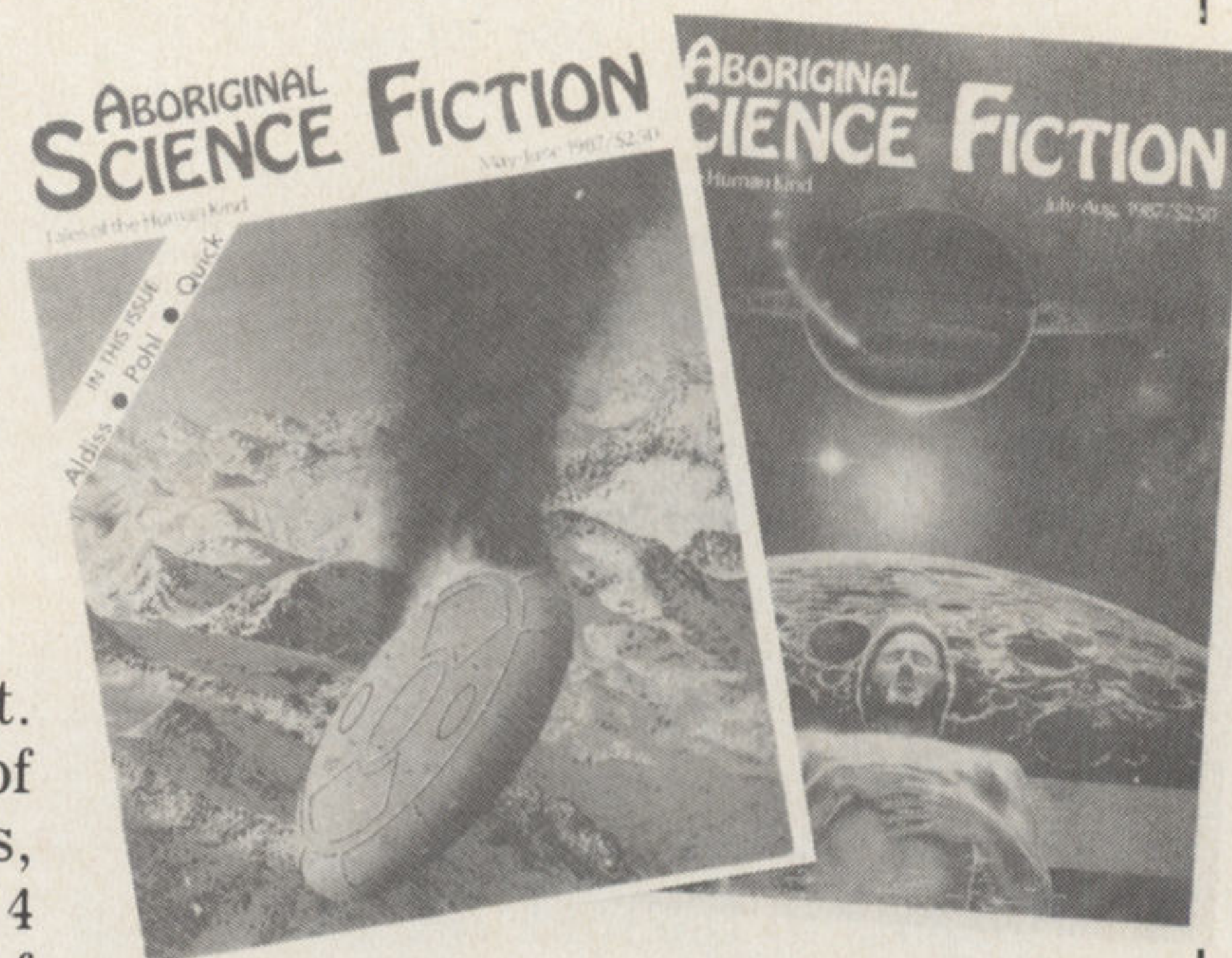
I have a feeling that a thousand years from now, when all our dreaded mental ailments have gone the way of smallpox, when war and murder are little more than fading memories, children will still listen wide-eyed as their dads whisper ghost stories in hushed, suspenseful tones, and will shriek in momentary play terror when he shouts, "Boo!"

And then they will grab his arm pleading, "Tell us another one!" □

Missing issues 4 & 5?

OK, so we ain't perfect. Somehow, in stacking issues of the magazines from the printers, we buried one box each of issues 4 and 5. We now have 100 of each of them left, but that's it.

So here's what we decided to do: For a very limited time (until we run out of the 100 copies) we will sell a complete set of *Aboriginal Science Fiction's* first two years, issues 1-12, for \$50, plus \$5 shipping by UPS. We will only honor this offer as long as copies last, so hurry if you want the missing issues. If you only want issues 4 and 5, then we are forced to charge \$17 for the pair, plus \$3 for UPS shipping. We will only ship these UPS because we don't want any of the rare copies lost in the mail. Please note that



UPS will not deliver to a P.O. Box, so you need to give us a street address. To repeat: To just order copies of issues 4 & 5, send \$20. To order the complete set of 12 issues, send \$55. We will not sell 4 & 5 separately, only as a pair. By the way, hang on to your copies of issue 13 (Jan.-Feb, 1989) because issue 13 is **completely sold out**. To order 4 & 5 or the complete set, send your payment to:

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BOOKS

By Darrell Schweitzer



Old Masters

I have an optimistic theory that being a writer actually makes you live longer. One thinks of Bernard Shaw lasting till 95. I am reminded of a senior writer in our field I visited recently who remarked — about hauling huge, heavy crates of books from the basement to the second floor in preparation for a move — “Well, carrying five or six of those a day is about all an octogenarian can manage ...”

I suppose that if there's any truth to my theory, it's simply that if you're a writer, you don't retire at 65 and become a couch potato. Continued mental activity (and physical: travel, conventions, etc.) keeps one, er, on one's toes.

But a writer doesn't become a respected elder figure in our field through mere longevity. There are a surprising number of writers in the “Oh! Is he still alive?” category.

The talent has to survive and change with the times. I can think of one writer whose work I saw at the various magazines I've worked for. He had been a star of *Amazing* in the mid-'30s and was still, pathetically, trying to sell. Subsequent editors didn't even know who he was. The problem was that he simply hadn't learned anything new in 50 years.

The big breaking point in our field was the beginning of John W. Campbell's editorship of *Astounding* in which, in the space of perhaps three years, the stan-

dards were raised beyond the reach of many of the writers who had formerly been the top performers. Some, like Jack Williamson, adapted and survived. Others didn't.

I find long careers particularly admirable, in the same way I don't quite comprehend what makes writers suddenly stop. Why did Walter M. Miller stop? Why did Chad Oliver stop, only to resume very, very sporadically? And, in the category of “Oh, I didn't know he was still alive!” I've heard that Robert Abernathy — a very promising talent of the '50s — is alive and well, but he doesn't write anymore. It seems a kind of betrayal. One has a certain responsibility to one's work, which, after all, does not exist unless we bother to put it down on paper.

So we can only praise the writers who keep at it, especially when they continue to grow, rather than just repeat what made them famous when they were young.

And now a book from one of the great survivors of our field:

The Knight and Knave of Swords
By Fritz Leiber
Morrow, 1988
303 pp., \$17.95

Ignore the publicity release that says this is the first Fafhrd & Gray Mouser book ever published in hardcover — *all* of the previous ones have been in hardcover, either from Gregg Press or Whispers Press — and I hope we can ignore the more serious claim that this is the last Fafhrd & Mouser book, the “climax” of the “epic,” as the jacket puts it. As long as Fritz is around, I don't see why he can't do another one.

There is nothing inherent in *The Knight and Knave of Swords* to preclude another volume. Like all but one of the previous Mouser books, this one contains several stories in sequence: a short story, a novelette, a novella, and a shortish novel (a never-before-published original). All tell of Fafhrd and the Mouser at the threshold of old age, subsequent to the events in *Rime Isle*, as the (excuse me) dynamic duo have settled down after a lifetime of roguery and become — almost — respectable citizens with responsibilities and even families.

But they are also *heroes*, and heroes are expected to continue to have adventures. This prolonged absence from their usual haunts has not gone unnoticed by either Lankhmarian magicians, who find that without Fafhrd's naive belief spells don't work as efficiently, or by various sleazy godlets, who miss their most illustrious (if errant) worshippers.

What might have been, early in the series, an opportunity for wild adventure-comedy, becomes a matter of black irony, very Cabellesque, almost stately in its gloom — but shot through with flashes of vivid horror and explicit eroticism. These are serious stories about aging, and about the problems heroes have living up to their own legends.

Fafhrd and the Mouser must endure (slightly ridiculous) supernatural curses, apparitions, assassins, and finally, in the new short novel, “The Mouser Goes Below,” something very much like a preview of death as the Mouser is snatched beneath the ground in what can only be described as a relentless, waking nightmare in which he views his old foes, has a memorably ghast-

Rating system

☆☆☆☆☆
☆☆☆☆
☆☆☆
☆☆
☆

Outstanding
Very good
Good
Fair
Poor

ly encounter with Pain, the sister of the Lankhmarian Death, and still manages to save Fafhrd from his own doom.

The series has very much changed over the years in tone, in style (now much more elegant and convoluted — sometimes too much so, leaving the occasional long sentence to be puzzled out rather than read), but most strikingly in theme.

Fafhrd and the Mouser are no longer happy-go-lucky scoundrels, eternal adolescents like most sword & sorcery figures. They aren't even masters of their own destinies anymore, but are instead part of a vast flow of forces and circumstances — just like in real life, and finding a little contentment is enough of a



challenge for either of them. It's a striking effect. One can only wonder what might have happened if Robert E. Howard had survived to the present day (he would be 83 in 1989) and continued to write about Conan the Barbarian.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆½

Steady State, Main Sequence

I can only hope that all the writers reviewed this time don't come gunning for me because I've made them feel *old*. No, the idea is that they are *timeless*. They seem to have been around forever, and it seems they will be

writing forever with no diminution of quality. Even many years from now we'll still be able to read what they have written and get the same experience from them that we always have.

And now, let us consider:

Homegoing

By Frederik Pohl
Del Rey Books, 1989
288 pp., \$16.95

I wonder how many of you have stopped to recall how long Frederik Pohl has been enriching science fiction. He began editing — and writing — in 1940, contemporaneously with the John Campbell revolution in *Astounding*. Pohl was one of the most talented members of the opposition then. His magazines, *Astonishing* and *Super Science*, were no match for Campbell's, but they were often interesting, which is more than could be said for many of the big-budget rubbish heaps of the same era.

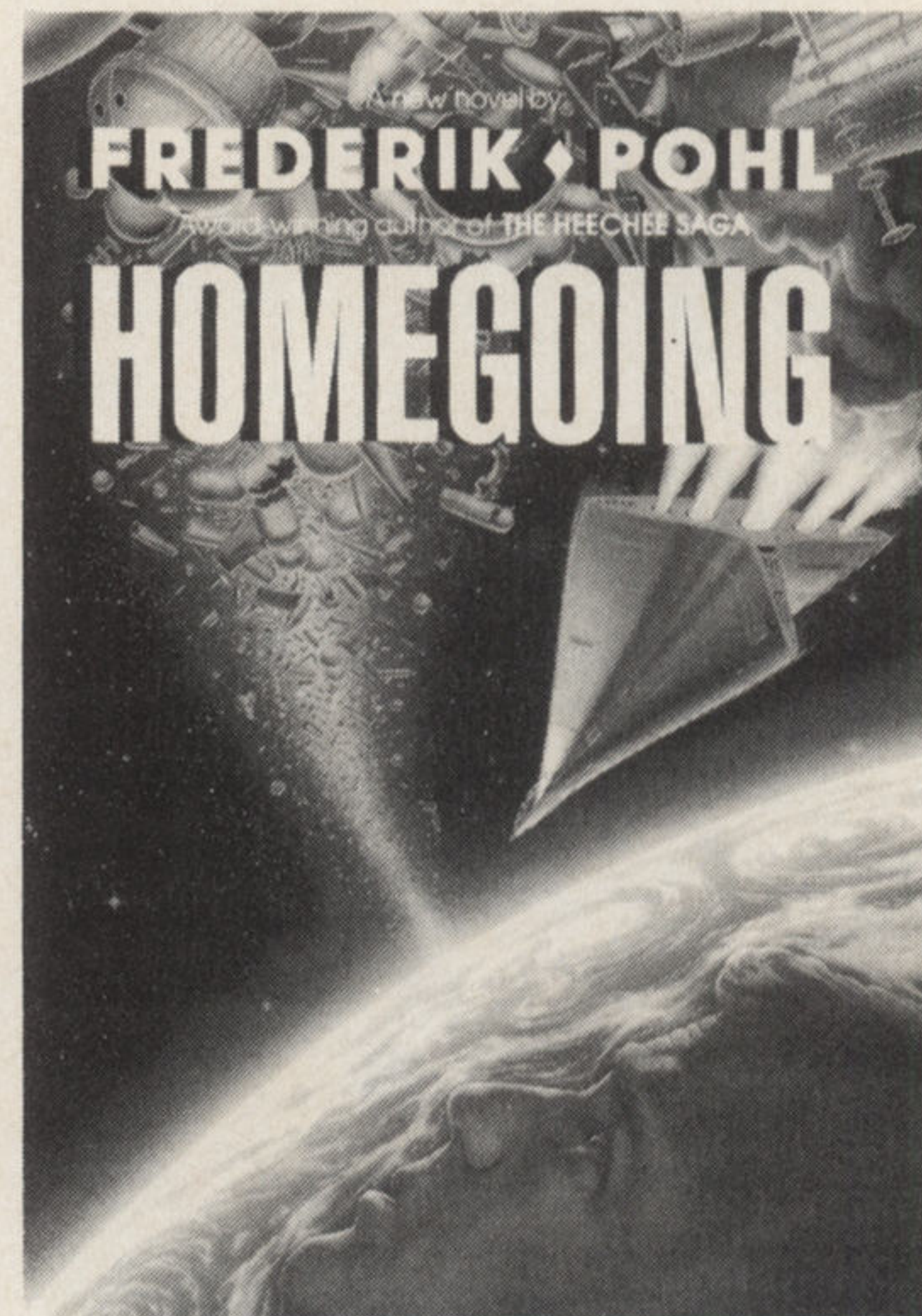
Pohl's earliest writings, mostly for his own magazines (editors were paid starvation wages and, with starvation budgets, both they and the magazines could survive only if the editor wrote many of the stories), are clearly journeyman work, but after World War II he started producing classics, and, aside from occasional heavy stints of editing, he has been writing high-quality fiction ever since.

I have a hunch that some of his recent novels have been attempts to rewrite the pulp plots he knew in his youth into something an intelligent adult reader of today can accept.

Homegoing is an alien-invasion story, but hardly a matter of stalking monsters and deadly rays. The aliens, from their own point of view, aren't doing any harm. The humans, from theirs, are trying to be sensible. But this is not old-time pulp fiction, and in the real world things aren't always what they seem. Leaders lie, then lie some more to hide their screw-ups. Our hero is supposedly a human rescued from the womb of a dead astronaut. Supposedly, his alien friends (masters?) only want to visit and

perform mutually beneficial cultural exchanges.

But (shades of 1950s movies!) they've learned all about Earth from watching television, and are a bit out of date. The hero knows something is wrong when he lands in the middle of a hurricane in semi-tropical Alaska. It seems that humans have let the Earth go to hell, with melting icecaps, a minor nuclear spat (the problem with Star Wars technology is that it — sort of — *worked* and now the Earth is surrounded by a deadly belt of debris blocking humans from space), and unchecked AIDS, which has totally depopulated Africa. The aliens, who won't admit that they're out of touch with their home and getting desperate, keep pointing out



that, well, no one is actually *using* Africa just now....

In an old-time pulp story this inevitable conflict would probably be resolved by the hero discovering his human heritage and blasting the aliens, who probably want to eat us anyway. At the very least he, alone or with one or two sidekicks, would save the day. That was the whole point of the power-fantasy, the idea that one man (usually young and naive, but brave, and looked up to by "girls" — *i.e.*, any female under 50) could make a difference — and quickly.

I won't wreck the surprise(s) for you, but rest assured that Pohl doesn't conclude his book so simplistically. Yet the one young

man does make a difference. As for his heritage, there are surprises there, too.

This is an intelligently conceived book, based on good science, that goes down fast. It lacks a certain intensity, as if it were constructed rather than felt. But it is better than most people's best.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

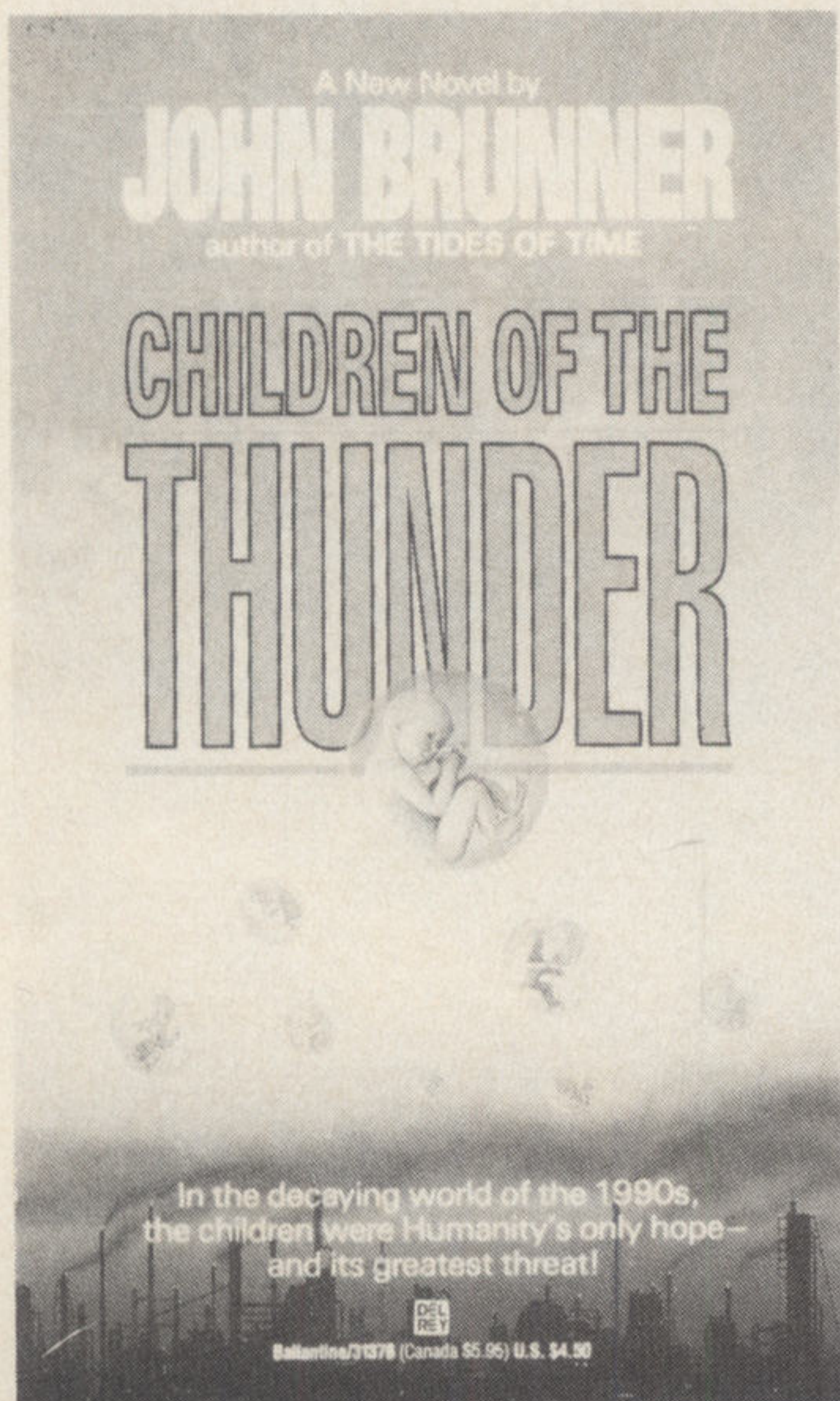
Children of the Thunder

By John Brunner

Del Rey Books, 1988

340 pp., \$4.50

John Brunner is another writer who has been steadily creative longer than most of us realize, with no sign of slowing down.



I don't think he's going to have any problem in the future, either, because he is very much a *realist* in science fiction, and as long as the real world is changing, Brunner will continue to have new subject matter.

He, in the very best sense, writes from the headlines and beyond. Where a bad writer would do a simple, one-line extrapolation from a news story (Rubik's cubes are becoming popular; therefore, in the future, society will be utterly dominated by gigantic Rubik's cubes), Brunner is able to see what these headlines *imply*.

So *Children of the Thunder* is

about pollution, AIDS, the computer revolution, rising totalitarianism in Britain, the Christian fundamentalist assault on science, etc. It is set barely a decade in the future, in which Britain has become a decaying third-world nation and the United States is getting more anti-intellectual by the day. Our hero, a science writer, must battle increasing restrictions on freedom of information to get to the bottom of what seems to be a spate of juvenile crimes in which the offenders get off utterly unpunished.

The culprits are, we know from very early on in the book, super-children with limited mind-control powers, all of them the result of one batch of artificial inseminations back in what must have been the mid-1980s. My one objection is that the "fantastic" element of the psi-children somewhat destroys the realism of the extrapolated future. We may very well arrive in that future, but I don't think those kids are going to be there. Telepaths, empaths, and the lot continue to be figures of fantasy, "proven" imaginary as well as anything can be negatively proven by 50 years of non-progress in psychic research since the days of J.B. Rhine. Of course, such elements work fine in fiction. Here we have two kinds of stories going on at once, one immediate and realistic, the other not. They don't quite mesh.

Think of it as *Children of the Atom* plus *The Midwich Cuckoos* in the setting of *The Sheep Look Up*. It is good Brunner, not his very best, but gripping, fast-moving, and, as always, well thought out.

Rating: ☆☆☆½

Farewell to the Master

New Destinies, Vol. VI

Edited by Jim Baen

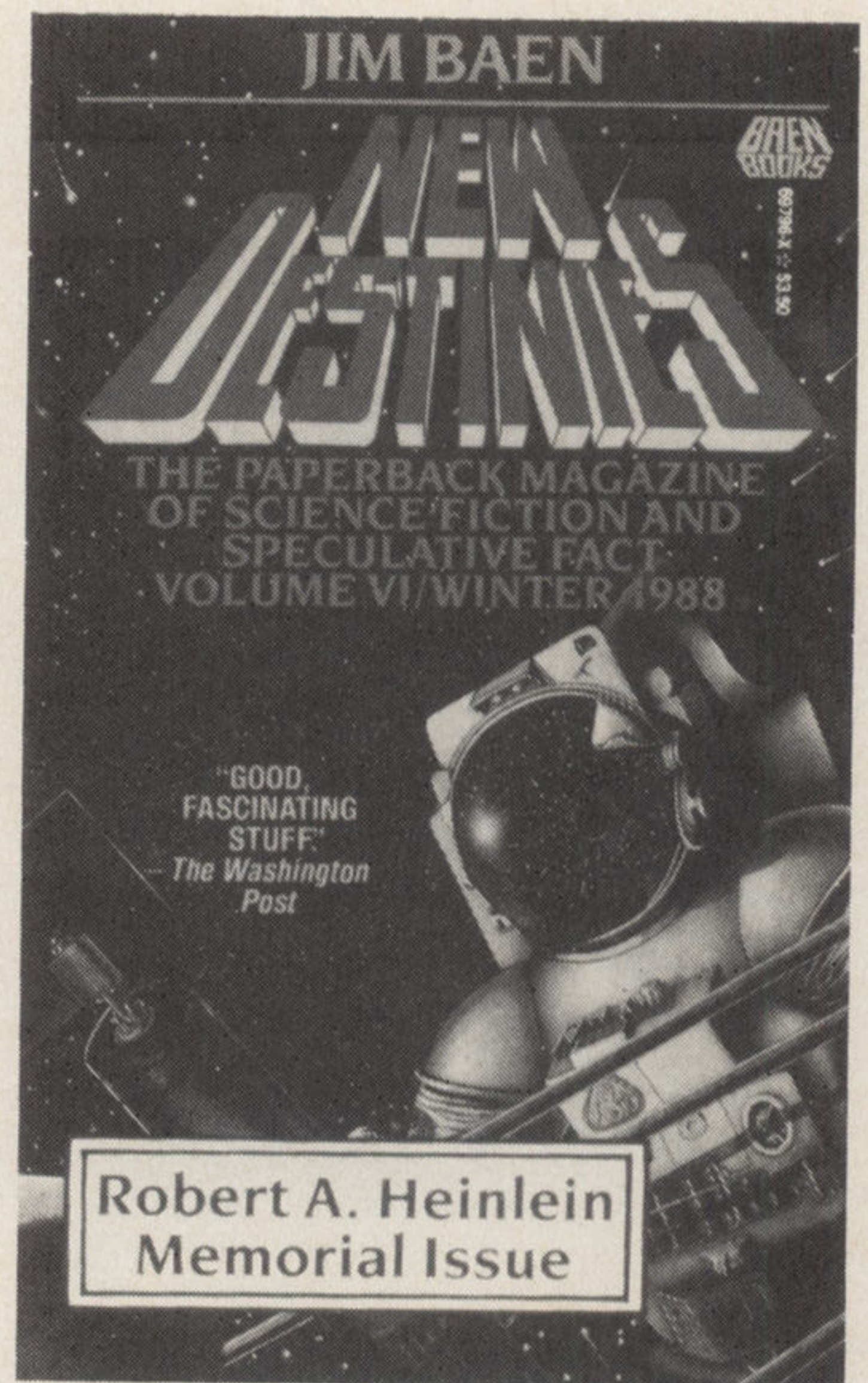
Baen Books, 1988

285 pp., \$3.50

This is the Robert Heinlein memorial issue. There are some other stories present (by Harry Turtledove, Vernor Vinge, etc.)

but the focus is squarely on Heinlein, what he meant to the field and to the world at large, and so forth. It's all very well and tastefully done. One can hardly argue with any of it, even with Spider Robinson, who is as utterly uncritical about Heinlein as ever. One doesn't argue at a wake. The only new Heinlein material is some poetry (minor), but there are reprints from the notebooks of Lazarus Long and two stories, "The Long Watch" and "The Man Who Traveled in Elephants."

I find it interesting that the latter was Heinlein's all-time favorite among his own works. There's none of the hard-headed thinking in it that the Master was so noted for. It's not going to in-



spire anybody to political action. It's a delightful, gracefully written bit of sentiment, a happy version of Lovecraft's "Celephais," in which a man, in the fullness and inevitability of time, dies and goes into an afterlife based on his private fantasies — in this case, endless Midwestern American parades, circuses, and small-town good fellowship. Heinlein was a softie at the core, which in no way diminishes him.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Bare-Faced Messiah

By Russell Miller

Sphere, 1988

521 pp., 3 pounds, 99 pence

Henry Holt, 1989
Hardcover \$19.95

There is an American hardcover of this, from Holt, which I have never seen. Since this book is the one responsible biography of L. Ron Hubbard, you can well imagine that the Scientologists have been after it tooth and nail with lawsuits and even an attempt to buy out the entire print run. But in Britain, happily, they have far less power than they do in the U.S., and a judge told them, in essence, that they deserved what they got. So the Sphere paperback is freely available, and Americans can get it from British dealers.

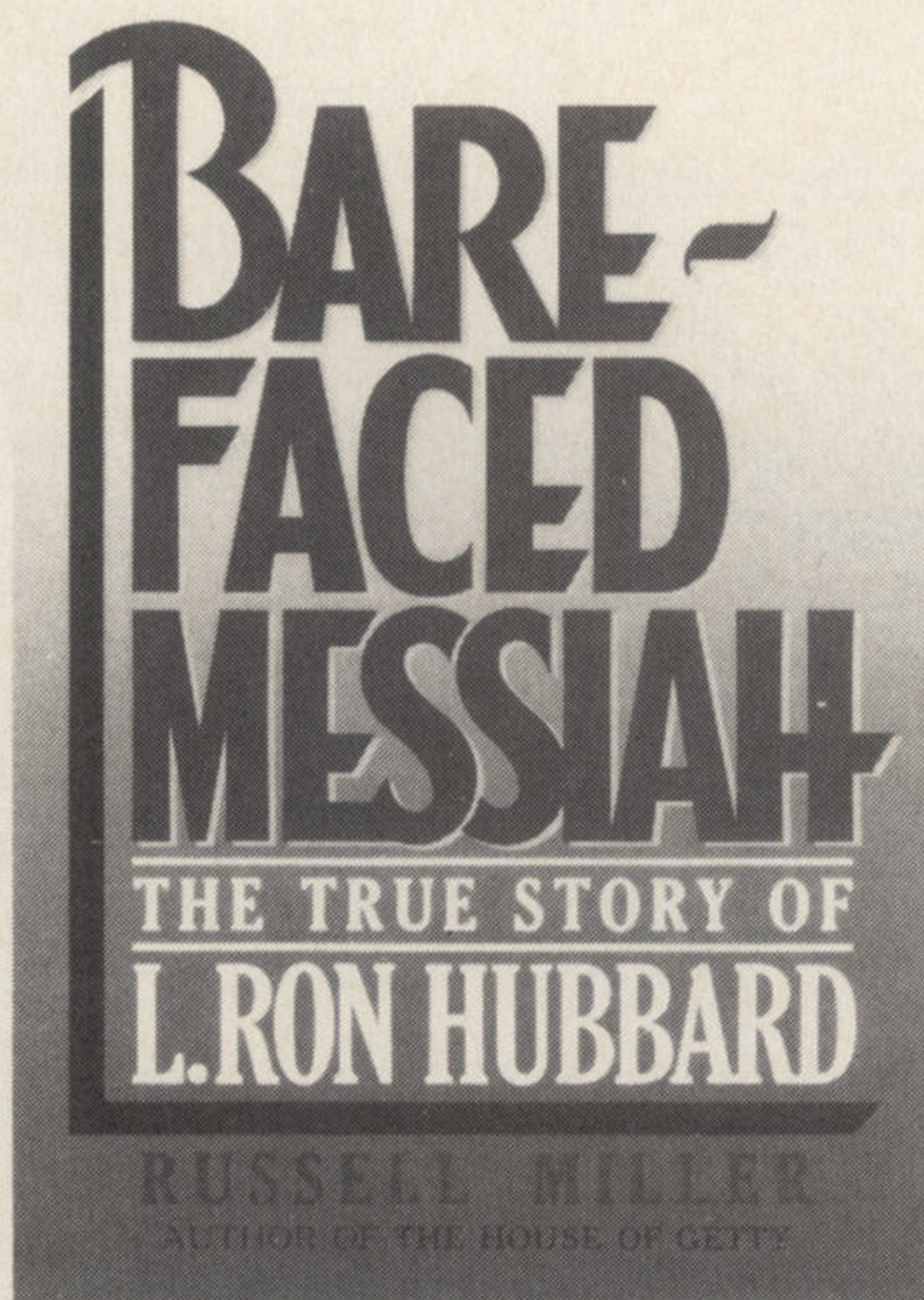
This is the book every Writer of the Future should read. So should everyone in SF, as Hubbard's followers try desperately to erase the past and install the Great Man in the pantheon right next to Wells and Heinlein. Russell Miller is a journalist with no particular axe to grind (unlike Hubbard's son, whose *L. Ron Hubbard, Messiah or Madman?* is fully as crazy as his father's more *outré* ravings) who got access to a vast hoard of Hubbard's personal papers, discovered by a disillusioned Scientologist.

What the defector discovered was, simply, that Hubbard was a pathological liar. He spent his whole life telling one lie after another, until even he couldn't tell what was true anymore. He was one of those people about whom it could be truly said that if he announced the sun comes up in the morning, you'd better check.

But the young Hubbard wasn't particularly unsympathetic. I imagine that he must have been quite an entertaining fellow, even if one didn't take him seriously. He was a natural storyteller and could always be relied upon (like that great liar of fiction, Lord Dunsany's Jorkens) to come up with a thrilling anecdote about his adventures as an explorer or naval hero or young seeker-after-truth wandering the Mystic East. Alas, none of this was true. Hubbard got quite upset

once when fellow pulpster Frank Gruber listened to a bunch of these stories, calmly added up the years, and said, "You're 84, aren't you, Ron?"

But after World War II Hubbard turned to serious crime, first continually trying to defraud the Veterans Administration, then moving in with a noted black magician, winning his confidence, and absconding with said magician's girlfriend and \$10,000. He blew the money and bigamously married the lady, only to be denounced by her years later as hopelessly insane. (Later, a Hubbard agent informed the daughter of this union that her mother was a Nazi spy out to get Hubbard, and he wasn't her father anyway.)



So things continued, to absurdity and beyond. Hubbard founded Dianetics, then Scientology — for the money, yes, but more than anything so that his ego and his wild imagination could have more room to expand. Even with worshipful followers lapping up every word, he could only cram so much into the imaginary life of young Ron — he really wanted to be Indiana Jones, explorer, adventurer, inventor, philosopher — so he added reincarnation, "operative thetans" (pulp terminology for "souls"), and other goodies. Then he could happily reminisce about his days as a racing-car driver on another planet millions of years ago.

Here we have the definitive portrait of a storyteller gone bad, who wrote lurid, wildly implausible yarns with a certain vigor as a young man — and continued to tell them throughout his life. At times he seems a monster, at times a seedy real-life equivalent of a James Bond villain (not good enough for a Sean Connery film, but I could well imagine Roger Moore alternately battling and seducing the mini-skirted minions of the Sea Org), at times ludicrous, and finally just a little pathetic, like the aging Cagliostro, on the run from enemies real and imaginary, leaving a trail of wrecked dreams behind him, while his mind still turns on wilder, more impossible schemes.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆

Other Americas

By Norman Spinrad
Bantam/Spectra, 1988
273 pp., \$3.95

Spinrad isn't exactly a senior figure in the field, but he's hardly a young turk anymore either. He has been steadily producing — frequently at quite a high level — for longer than many of his readers have been alive. He, too, has staying power. He's a lifer.

The present volume consists of four novellas, one of them new, all of them the very thing for which the phrase "with a blunt instrument" was coined. Here we have the author in his satirical/political mode, often vivid, funny, sometimes thought-provoking, but seldom subtle or even plausible.

Consider the oldest story in the book, "The Lost Continent" (1970), in which future tourists visit the ruins of New York. It's a familiar theme, dating at least as far back as J. A. Mitchell's *The Last American* (1888), but still valid. Spinrad pulls off the interesting technical feat of telling the entire story through the viewpoints of characters who hate each other. He writes meaningfully about racial tensions and the American past.

But the sort of hard-science

(Continued to page 48)

A Symbiotic Kind of Guy

By Robert A. Metzger

Art by Larry Blamire

Two sweating soldiers dressed in khaki had automatic weapons trained at my head. The soldier on the left was nothing more than a pimply-faced kid, while his associate looked like Darwin's missing link. Both of them kept twitching. Stress on the job can be lethal. I should know. Like any good insurance man, I had the stats to back that up. Unless these two changed their ways, they'd be looking at some major medical problems.

"General?" I asked.

The two soldiers were standing, but the General was seated across from me. A week ago there had been a ramrod straightness to his back and a glint in his eyes. But now he looked just like any other old man, ready to feed pigeons and bitch and moan about ill-fitting dentures. He also twitched. I never realized just how stressful the military life must be.

"Yes," he said, avoiding eye contact, pretending to study a liver spot on the back of his hand.

I could read people, like any good insurance man had to be able to do. But in the past few weeks that ability had become incredibly sharp. Fear poured off the General in thick, billowing purple clouds. His hands were cold and damp — no blood in the extremities. I knew, I could smell the blood. It was pooling in his butt. The General's circulation was shot.

"I'm not making any sales hanging around here," I said, trying to maintain a professional attitude, but not able to totally hide the annoyance in my voice. "If I don't meet my monthly life insurance quota, my ass is going to be in a sling." In the last week I must have seen over a hundred of these military types. I had damn near run out of business cards, and yet I hadn't gotten even so much as a nibble. This was definitely no place for an insurance man to be. "I've got to get out of here."

The General's heart rate picked up by twenty-three beats a minute, and I could hear his colon spasm. The khaki-clad grunts pressed their rifles tightly against their cheeks as they sighted at my head. The pimply-faced one burped. I could tell that he'd had pizza and wine for breakfast. The stink of sausage, mushrooms, and anchovies filled the room. I shook my head, disgusted with what I smelled. The sale or possession of anchovies should be a felony offense. The wine was pretty good, though, a nice little rose from the Napa Valley.

Before I could determine the year the wine was bottled, I was distracted by someone walking up to the

other side of the room's solid oak door. That someone was a she. Pheromones don't lie. It must have been *the* Dr. Kristine Ryan, the hotshot Fed who was supposed to put everything straight. I didn't hold out much hope. She probably couldn't even blow her own nose without a half dozen authorizing signatures.

"She's here," I said.

Three quick raps sounded through the thick door.

The General's already pale complexion turned chalk-white. He still would not look at me. Instead, turning in his chair, he faced the door. Beneath that bald spot on the back of his head, under skin and bone, deep inside, was a bloated, tangled mass of blood vessels. The good General was at best only weeks away from a stroke. I'd have to warn him. Like any good insurance man will tell you — prevention is the key.

The door quickly opened, and Dr. Kristine Ryan marched in, swinging a briefcase and poking at the glasses that slid down her nose. She looked at me and didn't twitch. That was a definite point in her favor.

The General stood, relief enveloping him in swirls of fluffy pink cotton candy, and held out his chair for her to sit. Dumping her briefcase on the table between us, she then dumped herself into the chair.

"I'm Dr. Kristine Ryan," she said, offering her hand.

With a movement that had become ingrained somewhere deep within my brain, I shook her hand, while with my free hand, I pulled out a business card from my vest pocket.

"Howard T. Thurber," I said while sliding my business card across the table toward her. "Friendly Insurance, specializing in Home, Auto, and Life." I smiled with my insurance man's smile.

She returned the smile. It was the first I'd seen in a week.

"Are you aware, Mr. Thurber, that there is a six-inch length of hexagonal, close-packed, aqua-blue crystal protruding from the side of your head?"

In fifteen years of selling insurance, I must have made my pitch to over a million people, and not a single one of them had ever accused me of having something protruding from the side of my head. Tall, willowy, with long blond hair, and dressed in a black cashmere sweater, black skirt, and red pumps, she looked so incredibly normal. Obviously it was all a facade. Beneath that thin layer of taut, tanned skin



W. H. Harrison 88

and East-Coast fashionable clothing was someone who probably talked to fire hydrants and believed she was a channel for Rudolph Valentino.

"A six-inch length of hexagonal, close-packed, aqua-blue crystal?" I asked, hoping that if I simply repeated what she had said, the absolute insanity of the statement might shock her back to reality. I looked at her carefully. Beneath her sweater, and below her left breast, was a small dark mole shaped like the Island of Mindanao. I'd have to warn her about that. You can never tell when something like that might turn cancerous. Prevention is the key.

"Would you care for a mirror?" she asked.

As I wondered what sort of medication she was on, I realized that the only way to deal with something like this was to face it head on. I'd have to take a look at the side of my head, then force her into agreeing that there was absolutely nothing there.

She reached for her briefcase, apparently intent on getting the small mirror that was packed alongside her calculator and a bundle of pencils. The pencils were wrapped together with a rubber band — a frayed rubber band. I could smell the long-chain polymers.

"Not necessary," I said. I stared at the air between us, my vision both magnifying and rising through the visible spectrum, going past ultraviolet and settling into the hard X-ray range. Fuzzy atoms of nitrogen and oxygen buzzed about. I ignored the trace amounts of neon and argon, but was a little surprised by the large number of complex hydrocarbons. Then I remembered the soldier who had been smoking in here yesterday. Cigarettes really should be outlawed — a truly nasty habit with no more social merit than the consumption of anchovies. I focused on the nitrogen and oxygen atoms and, blowing a lungful of air through my almost-touching lips in a series of quick, rapid pulses, separated the fast-moving atoms from the slow-moving ones. As I watched, the atoms quickly assembled themselves in alternating layers of hot and cold air, several hundred thousand layers thick. Paying careful attention to the spacing between the layers and the relative temperatures of the gas atoms, I was able to manipulate the index of refraction of the composite structure so that visible light would reflect from the sandwich of atoms. A mirror. Blinking, I decreased magnification and dropped back down to the visible spectrum.

The General made a moist, guttural noise that came from deep in his throat.

The pimply-faced soldier burped convulsively. He'd had pastrami for dinner last night. I could pick up no telltale spectrum of mustard. This serious indiscretion instantly gave him away as a truly uncivilized individual.

The second soldier, the one who probably had to shave his back twice a day, tugged at the shorts that had ridden up into the crack of his ass, oblivious to anything that was going on in the room.

Dr. Kristine Ryan peered around the edge of the chunk of reflecting air that hovered between us.

Looking at my reflection, I saw nothing that resembled a six-inch-long hexagonal, close-packed, aqua-blue crystal protruding from the side of my head.

"I don't see anything," I said, while looking back at Dr. Ryan. Little rainbows burst from the corners of her eyes. That was the telltale mark of confusion. I'd seen lots of rainbows lately.

"Approximately two inches above your left ear, I see something that I consider out of place. Do you see anything there?"

I looked back into the mirror at the reflection of the side of my head above my left ear. At first I didn't see anything out of the ordinary, and then, suddenly, I realized what she must have been referring to. It's funny, but only by really staring at it was I able to even notice it. It was a lot like looking for a long time at your eyebrows. The longer you look at them, the bigger and bushier they appear. I'd misjudged her terribly. She wasn't deranged at all, just terribly lacking when it came to her ability to describe things.

Snapping my fingers, I produced a sonic shock which disrupted the arrangement of layered atoms in the mirror, causing it to disintegrate. "I must apologize, Doctor," I said. "It's just that I didn't realize that you were talking about Herb."

"Herb?" she asked. Her face practically vanished behind a montage of rainbows.

"Is that what all this has been about?" I asked, not believing that I'd been detained for an entire week because of Herb. These military types had been too devious for their own good. Instead of asking about Herb, they had wanted to know about things like warped space, alternate realities, and brainwave anomalies. Reaching up, I stroked one of Herb's ice-cold facets. Music filled the room, and the black notes bounced from wall to wall. A large, lopsided quarter note danced across the table, then, jumping up onto the General's thinning white hair, did a little jig. The General didn't even seem to notice. "Is that what you're all concerned about?" I asked, while continuing to stroke Herb. A piece of Amazon rain forest materialized in the corner of the room, in which a large python wearing bifocals, lounging in a leatherette-covered easy chair, was flicking its tongue in and out, sucking down red licorice spiders that drifted down in small lace parachutes.

"Amongst other things," she said.

I lowered my hand. The dancing notes, rain forest, and even the licorice spider-eating python vanished. Perhaps I was finally on track. If I could answer her questions, maybe I could get out of here and write some life insurance policies. "Will you let me out of here if I tell you about Herb?" I asked, realizing suddenly that it just couldn't be that easy. There had to be more to this fuss than just Herb.

"We'll see," she said. "First, tell me about Herb, and we'll take it from there."

"No problem," I said cheerfully, but knew I had been right. They were interested in something a lot bigger than simply Herb. "My territory is the west end of the San Fernando Valley, and up over into the Simi Valley, just north of Los Angeles." It might have been a Tuesday, or possibly on a Wednesday, when I first met Herb, but I couldn't seem to remember. I stroked Herb, and a small troll materialized on the table between myself and Dr. Ryan. It was an ugly little thing, dressed in rags, and had a nose that looked

like a dill pickle.

"It was Tuesday night," said the troll. "You were at the Indian Hills Trailer Park seeing the Rustmeyers."

I dropped my hand from Herb, and the Troll vanished.

"That's right," I said. "It was just like he said."

"Like who said?" asked Doctor Ryan.

"The troll, of course," I answered. For a Doctor she didn't seem all that sharp. But of course, allowances would have to be made — she was, after all, a federal employee.

"I didn't quite catch what the troll was saying," she said while smiling, as confetti exploded from her ears.

"He reminded me that it was on a Tuesday night, right after having written up the Rustmeyers' new Yamagishi Impaler, that I first met Herb." It was funny, but until she had asked me about it, the whole thing somehow seemed to have slipped my mind.

"And what was Herb doing?" she asked.

"Well, you see, Herb never does all that much. It was an old calico cat, a Mrs. Witherspoon, whom I first met, and who actually did the talking."

The Neanderthal soldier with the short problem snickered. I had been planning to tell him about the high sugar level in his bloodstream, but not if he behaved like that. He certainly wouldn't be laughing when he dropped into a diabetic coma.

"And what did Mrs. Witherspoon have to say?" she asked with a voice that sounded deadly serious. And she was serious. The spaghetti that crawled from the neck of her sweater attested to that. It looked *al dente* — very serious.

"Mrs. Witherspoon told me that she had met someone named Herb. At least that's what she called him. She wasn't all that good with names, of course. Cats rarely are."

Dr. Ryan nodded her head, and the icicles that had been dangling from her ears for the past several minutes suddenly turned blood red. Apparently she'd had some experience dealing with cats.

"She told me that Herb had been injured when he slipped into this reality continuum, and that his sensory input structures had been damaged. He needed a host nervous system that could act as an input device."

"And what nervous system was Herb using at the time you met?" she asked, rainbows once again spilling from her eyes.

"Mrs. Witherspoon, of course," I answered. "Herb was wedged right between her ears. Mrs. Witherspoon explained that, while Herb was grateful for her services, he'd like to move on to a nervous system that was a little more complex."

"You," she said, while pointing a finger at me. A nearly microscopic leprechaun sat on her fingertip, polishing a gold coin on the green lapel of his coat.

I nodded. "Mrs. Witherspoon said that Herb wouldn't hurt me, and in exchange for my services he would offer whatever compensation I thought equitable. Apparently the deal he had cut with Mrs. Witherspoon had something to do with the acquisition of a minimum of ten field mice a week."

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"And the deal you made?"

"Well, field mice weren't really of interest to me, but I was having a lot of trouble meeting my life insurance quota. We never got into actual numbers, but Herb agreed to help me sell insurance. He'd be sort of a silent partner."

"You didn't think any of this strange?" she asked.

The leprechaun had crawled under the sleeve of her sweater and, judging by the rapidly moving lump beneath the cashmere, and seeing how it was heading for her skirt, I knew he was definitely up to no good. Leprechauns are notorious sex fiends, and I guess this one was no exception.

"Not strange at all," I answered, trying to ignore the perverted leprechaun beneath her skirt. "As Mrs. Witherspoon explained it, Herb is a symbiotic kind of guy. You do him a favor, and he'll do you a favor."

"So you agreed to this symbiotic relationship?" Dr. Ryan suddenly squirmed in her chair. Apparently the leprechaun had reached its target.

I almost answered yes, but then remembered that I hadn't actually agreed. "No," I said slowly and hesitantly. "I can't remember very clearly, but I think up until that point I was somehow paralyzed. The instant I was released, I think I started to run. I remember a lot of screaming, pounding on doors, breaking glass, a screeching cat, and then nothing at all. The next thing I can remember is driving down Topanga Boulevard, and Herb was with me. When I think back on it, I just can't seem to remember what all the fuss was about. I have some vague feelings that I was somehow frightened of Herb, but of course I now realize that's ridiculous. Herb's the best partner I've ever had. Most of the time I don't even notice he's there, and of course he's a real whiz at helping me sell policies. I definitely got the better end of the bargain."

"CAT scans have shown that Herb has penetrated several inches into your brain," said Dr. Ryan. "We're concerned that Herb's intrusion may have altered your way of thinking, and even possibly altered your perception of reality. Judging by some of your responses, I believe that you may be experiencing some form of hallucinations."

"Certainly not," I said, ignoring the yellow-scaled dragon that sat behind her, curling its long forked tongue around her neck. "I haven't changed a bit. Once an insurance man, always an insurance man."

Doctor Ryan nodded at this, little bolts of green lightning lancing out from the sides of her neck as she did so. She flipped open her briefcase and pulled out a folder.

"Did Herb help you with the Craigs?" she asked.

I nodded. "The Craigs live in the hills at the west end of the San Fernando Valley. The place is fire prone, and the insurance rates high because of it, but the Craigs' house is wedged between two hills that act as a natural wind tunnel. Whenever a fire starts anywhere in that area, it races right for that canyon. They've been burned down to the foundation twice in the last fifteen years, so no insurance company would touch them. They were considered uninsurable."

"But you sold them insurance," Dr. Ryan almost whispered. Her long blond hair swirled and whipped around her head as if charged with static electricity.

"Of course," I said. "Prevention is the key."

Dr. Ryan flipped through the folder, and peered down her nose when she came to the page that seemed to interest her. "You've mentioned this several times before. What do you mean by *prevention is the key*?"

"It was simple. The Craigs were uninsurable because of the winds formed by the two hills that surrounded their home. I could only sell them insurance by preventing the condition that made their home such a fire trap." I wasn't sure why she was dwelling on this. It was all so obvious.

"You removed two hills that were both over a hundred feet tall," she said, her face this time totally masked by rainbows. "With this."

Reaching into her briefcase, she pulled out a photo and placed it on the table between us. It was a shot of a tape recorder that was no longer quite a tape recorder. It had once been part of my telephone's answering machine, but for the past several years it had been packed away, hidden beneath a pile of wingtips in my bedroom closet. That is, until about a week ago. I'd made a few modifications. I was able to scrounge most of the additional parts I needed from an old calculator, an alarm clock radio that had died only days after I had bought it in a garage sale, and an assortment of miniature plastic dinosaurs from a specially marked box of Captain Gonzo's Fruit Munchies. The few specialty organics that I had needed, I had grown under my kitchen sink, where it's warm and damp, from a mixture of skin I had scraped from my elbow, half a carton of spoiled milk, and a few chips from Herb's tough hide. Besides the Fruit Munchies, the only other real expense had been on batteries for the tape recorder. That had set me back almost three bucks. But I saved my receipts. The whole thing was a legit business expense, and I'd get some of that back at tax time.

Dr. Ryan then reached back into her briefcase and took out a second photo, this one an eight-by-ten glossy.

"The space telescope took these shots this morning. It's of the Mare Imbrium, about two degrees south of Hilicon crater." She pushed it across the table toward me. "Notice anything strange?" she asked.

I looked at the photo. It was of the Moon, that much was obvious judging by the harsh black-and-white landscape, but something looked out of place. There were two big green smudges.

"Look right there in the center," she said.

I just nodded my head. I hadn't really been all that sure where they'd actually gone.

"Those green mounds have been identified as the hills that up until a week ago were in the west end of the San Fernando Valley." She narrowed her eyes, and green-winged beetles crawled from her nose. She didn't seem to notice, but let them scurry over her lips and down her chin, where they burrowed in and then disappeared. "How does it work?"

"It's really quite easy," I said. "Just record what you want moved and where you want it moved to, then play the recording back, and the job gets done. I figured that the Moon was as good a place as any to move those hills to, since up there they wouldn't be getting in anyone's way, and they certainly wouldn't be caus-



Harry BB

ing any fire hazards.”

“We’ve tried moving things,” she said, “but we can’t make it work. Why?”

I shook my head, totally disgusted, having finally realized what all this was about. They’d held me for over a week, and because of something as simple as this. If they’d only asked, I could have been out of here a few minutes after they had picked me up. “Two reasons,” I said. “It can only be operated by me, since it’s tuned to my own DNA, but, more importantly, it’s only to be used for business. That’s the deal that I made with Herb. I can only use it as a tool for prevention, in order to sell a policy.”

“That’s what we thought,” she said. The blood-red icicles that had been hanging from her ears exploded into pale pink mist.

Again I shook my head. If they had already known that, then why all the questions? These government types were nuts. Pushing back my chair, I stood.

The khaki-covered grunts swiveled their rifles, carefully tracking my head.

“Can I go, then?” I asked. “I’m so far behind now that I don’t see how I can possibly make my monthly life insurance quota, but I’ve got to try.” My reward for being a good citizen and having put up with all this nonsense was that I’d probably lose my job. I was leaving.

“I have been authorized to purchase some insurance,” said Dr. Ryan.

I stopped moving.

“Life insurance.”

I sat.

“The President has authorized me to purchase from you a national life insurance policy for every man, woman, and child in this country. That’s approximately 250 million people.”

I could feel my eyes bulge outward and my jaw actually hang slack. I’d never have to worry about quotas again.

“However ...”

My gut tightened. This was the clause that would kill the deal. I knew it.

“The President very much agrees with you and your philosophy of prevention. He wants the very best rates possible, and hopes that, by eliminating certain conditions that currently face the populace, a better rate can be obtained.”

I found I could breathe again. That should be no problem at all. A satisfied customer was the only kind worth having.

Dr. Ryan reached back into her briefcase and removed several sheets of paper, which she passed across to me. “The President could only sign a national life insurance policy if these potentially lethal items are *removed*.”

I looked at the list and began to read it. “Nuclear weapons. Biological weapons. Missile warheads. Warsaw Pact, NATO, and Sino tanks. All military aircraft.” I stopped reading aloud and quickly scanned the page, then flipped to the second. It was a list of every weapon, from nuclear all the way down to muskets, even including high-velocity slingshots.

“Looks reasonable,” I said. “But I may need some more batteries.”

The General hit the floor like a lump of wet laundry. His soldiers didn’t move, but kept their rifles trained on me.

“Excellent,” said Dr. Ryan, smiling once again. “Air Force One is waiting for us outside. The President would like to hammer out the details of the insurance policy immediately.” Snapping her briefcase closed, she stood and, walking backwards, stepped over the General. “Oh, one more thing,” she said. “This may interest you, and it’s something we can look into after you take care of your business with the president, but NASA would like to talk to you.”

“NASA?” I asked.

“They’re interested in a special type of injury insurance for their astronauts. They’re concerned, however, that the danger involved in blasting off in rockets and all that traveling about in spaceships is so dangerous that they may not be able to afford the rates. But if there was some way of getting the astronauts up into orbit, or to the Moon, or possibly Mars, without the risk of traveling in spaceships, they feel that the rates might be reduced sufficiently that they may be interested in working up a policy with you.”

This was getting better and better. “No problem,” I said. “Prevention is the key.” My tape recorder could transport organic as well as inorganic materials. “Do you think they might be willing to increase the rates a bit if I could provide transport to other star systems?” I asked.

She just nodded, as streams of gold-colored sparks exploded from the tips of her blond hair.

This week certainly had turned around in a big way. As I started to move away from the desk, I could feel those rifles still trained at my head. I’d had just about enough of that. For something as small as a rifle, I didn’t need my tape recorder. I could handle that myself.

“Good-bye, gentlemen,” I said.

They didn’t answer. They were too busy trying to hold onto the jelly donuts that I had transported into their hands after having dumped their rifles deep into the Pacific. It seemed an equitable exchange. Hell, I was even nice enough to make sure that the borderline diabetic grunt’s donuts were made with a sugar substitute.

As Dr. Ryan opened the door, the miniature leprechaun fell from beneath her skirt, and, hitting the thinly carpeted floor, bounced several times before it came to rest on its pointed, bald head. I could have easily avoided stepping on him, but just couldn’t resist. Hell, I considered it a public service.

Besides, a little elbow grease and lemon juice would take leprechaun residue out of a carpet. Everyone knows that. Even military types. □

Quit smoking.

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A Message from Our Alien Publisher To Serve Man?



Ryan is pretty decent for a human being, but he knows I only dine on peanut butter crackers, green salad, bourbon, and aspartame packets, so when he takes me to dinner, we go some place cheap. Last week, I gratefully accepted his invitation after I'd had a hard day on my feet trying to observe human beings under stress at a U.S. Postal Service facility.

It is no easy matter to disguise yourself as a postal worker. You must move as slowly as a mollusk and take care to keep any evidence of intelligence out of your conversation.

I attribute the habits of postal workers to the great stress of their jobs. The complete absence of mental acuity and drive among them seems to be the cost of an unrelenting 3½-hour work day. I was quite on edge by the time Ryan ushered me into the restaurant of his choice.

"You'll like this place," said Ryan. "It has a great salad bar."

"That only applies to first class," I said.

"What are you talking about?" he said.

"You'll have to ask him," I said.

"Ask who?"

"Next window, please," I said.

"Were you at the Post Office today?" said Ryan.

I said nothing but let my eyes glaze over.

"I thought so," said Ryan.

After I'd had a quantity of bourbon (Ryan only drinks beer), the waiter came and asked what we wanted.

"I want salad," I said.

"The salad bar is right over there," said the waiter, pointing across the room. "You can go make your salad whenever you are ready."

"I don't want to make my salad," I said. "I want you to bring me a salad."

The waiter laughed.

"I am serious," I said. "I would like you to bring me a salad."

The waiter, astonished, said, "But if you get your salad at the salad bar, you can have exactly what you want."

"What I want," I said, "is for someone to wait on me. I've been standing up and making decisions all day long. I don't want to stand up just now, thank you. And I certainly don't want to make decisions about cherry tomatoes or croutons. I came here to be served a meal. If I wanted to make my own salad, I would have stopped at the grocery store along the way and brought my own lettuce to dinner with me. Would you please get me some aspartame packets and make me a salad?"

I could see Ryan was getting a little nervous at this point. Human beings hate what they call "scenes," especially in restaurants.

"I'll get your salad for you," he said, trying to dismiss the waiter.

"I don't want you to make my salad, Ryan," I said. "I've read your magazine. I can only imagine what kind of salad you would make." Heavy on the corn relish, probably.

"Well, don't give this man a hard time," said Ryan, pointing to the waiter, "just because you're in a bad mood."

That's Ryan, of course. Were he less human, he might understand that to me a "mood" is nothing more than a grammatical form.

Ryan ordered blackened swordfish and rice pilaf for himself. Since I would let neither him nor the waiter make my

salad at the salad bar, I asked him if he would get me some peanut butter crackers. Anxious to avoid a scene, Ryan left the restaurant to go find them, while I had another quantity of bourbon.

During my study of the Postal Service, I had become quite attached to little packets of six peanut butter crackers wrapped in cellophane. They are not like any normal human food, in that you can eat them unobtrusively. Once you've torn the cellophane open with your teeth or any sharp object that comes to hand, you just pull them out of the package and eat them, one by one. With any luck, you can get through the whole package without anybody even knowing that you are eating. This is rare in a world that makes a big production out of eating. If you've ever seen a human being with a leg of lamb or a pizza, you will appreciate what I am saying.

Ryan returned with my crackers.

"I got you these," he said, handing me a package that looked a little strange.

I opened it. The package had two compartments, one with naked crackers and the other with unspread peanut butter. And there was this little piece of plastic that you're supposed to use to spread the peanut butter on your cracker. Who are they trying to kid with this? This is the salad bar version of peanut butter crackers.

I've lived among human beings for nearly three of their

(Continued to page 48)

Eating Memories

By Patricia Anthony

Art by Cortney Skinner

The ambassador made a flapping one-man tent of his raincoat and held a handkerchief against his nose. In the dark alley there was no use in walking carefully. He stepped in puddles and slipped on spongy, slick piles of refuse. Fetid water splashed up his pants.

At the third hut from the corner he stopped, pausing just a moment before he entered the curtain. He'd been in Karee eighteen months and had not yet conquered the desire to knock.

"Hello," he said in English as he entered, giving in to the niggling urge to announce himself. Even with that, he felt like a thief.

The room was black with shadows and soot. A murky fire against the far wall glowed sullen, smoky red. To the ambassador, raised in Earth's parochial schools, the room was what Sister Mary Ignatius had once told him of hell.

A Karee looked from the table where it had been cleaning *shota*. Its hands froze. The articulated bony ridges around its eyes flowered open in astonishment. For an instant the human and the Karee stared at each other; then the Karee absorbed itself once more in work.

George watched for a few minutes. The three-fingered hand of the creature sorted through the pile of tiny, hard bodies, snapping off the heads with a wet click and then tossing them into the pan where they hit with a clatter. It never looked up.

When the ambassador had first arrived, his staff had told him of the Karee's lack of privacy. The human understanding was flawed. It was just that the Karee had no sense of outward space. The privacy of their minds was absolute.

"Besseh Yo?" George asked.

Snap went the neck of a *shota*. Plink, it hit the pot.

"I come to find Besseh Yo."

The Karee didn't look up, but it laughed. George stood, water still dripping from the ends of his salt and pepper hair, and accepted the disdain of its amusement. Snap. The *shota*'s head was tossed to the floor.

"I bring money."

The hand paused. The Karee finally looked up. Its eyebrows unhinged again. "What moneys is you bring?"

"Platinum." George was irritated now, bored with the intricacies of Karee social rituals, angered by the cavalier attitude which made him feel like a

fool. "Are you Besseh Yo?"

Without answering directly, the Karee rose and went to an interior doorway. "Yuma here!" it shouted.

There was an answering mumble from the other room.

"Yuma!" the Karee repeated.

With a jerk and a rattle the curtain was opened. George was staring at the oldest Karee he'd ever seen. Besseh Yo was bent by disease into a tortuous S-shape. Its eye-joints had calcified into huge misshapen knots. At first the ambassador assumed it was blind, but then Besseh Yo tipped back its head to bring George into its narrowed line of sight.

The magician laughed hugely. "Yuma," it said with something like humorous suspicion. "Why does a yuma come through here to find Besseh and throw platinum at us? You got shit on your shoes. Smell it, Tyoresh?" it asked the other, younger Karee. "You smell shit on the yuma?"

Tyoresh wrinkled its nose, widening its nostrils so they covered half the width of its brown face. "Maybe yuma shit its pants."

George fought the urge to check the soles of his shoes. If he even looked down, he knew the Karee would erupt into hurtful, loud merriment. "I hear Besseh Yo has magic," George said, coming right to the point.

The old Karee scratched its bare stomach. It was naked. Folds of gray-brown skin hung from its waist, making a convenient skirt of flesh.

"I have come to buy this magic," George told him.

Besseh turned, showing the cleft of its bare backside to George, and walked away. In a moment George followed.

The bedroom was small and dim. The oil in the single lamp threaded black, stinging smoke into the heavy air. "Money," Besseh said, gesturing to a table with an imperious wave.

George tugged the sack from his pocket and tossed it on the bare wood. Instantly Besseh was on it, running its gnarled hands through the chips of metal.

Tipping its head, Besseh studied the human through the slitted openings of its eyes. "Why do you come when yuma hate the Karee?" it asked softly enough so that the Karee in the other room could not hear.

His instinct was to dispute what Besseh had said,



CORTNEY SKINNER
11/12/88

but that was the result of his diplomatic training. Here, in the close confines of the room, all he could manage was the evasion of the truth. "I've lost my wife," George whispered. I've lost my wife, he remembered. The death was fresh enough so that even now he failed to believe it.

The Karee hooted. "Where you lose her, yuma? You ain't so careful?"

George had always disliked the Karee. Most of the diplomatic staffs did. Now, looking into the distorted face where bone grew cauliflower masses against the pebbled skin, he realized what he felt went beyond dislike. He hated them. "She died," he said in a strangled voice.

Lauren of the quick eyes; the graceful neck; the elegant, wild stride of an antelope. It couldn't be, he thought just as he had thought the night they'd told him. Not Lauren.

George didn't sleep much any more, and sometimes, when he did, he would wake with a throat-cramping gasp and pass his disbelieving palm over her side of the bed.

"But you say you lose her. She die and you put the body away someplace you can't remember where?"

"Shut up!" George snapped. His anger caught Besseh by surprise. The Karee inched away. "God-damn you, shut up! Is everything a joke with you people?"

In the other room there was a clink and then silence. Besseh and George turned, knowing Tyoresh was listening. Suddenly Besseh chuckled. "You hate us, ta?"

The only sound in the room was George's labored breathing. He licked his lips, tasting the tart residue of smoke and the moldy taste of Karee sweat. "Yes," he admitted. It was senseless to deny it. "I hate you. But I hear you'll do anything for money. If you don't help me, I'll take my money and go home."

"Tyoresh!" Besseh shouted.

George stiffened, suddenly afraid they would throw him out. They'd throw him out of the house and he'd never find Lauren again.

The younger Karee poked its head in the door.

"Food for me. Food for the yuma," Besseh said. The magician made its way to a rumpled cot and sat down, its legs spread in an unconscious and uncaring exposure of its bisexual organs.

George looked away.

"Magic," Besseh said philosophically, "some is good; some is bad. You tell me what to do. If it is good, you have the good. If it is bad, you carry the hurt. I am..." The old Karee searched for a word, then gave up and uttered the rest in its own language, "*reslani orgit.*"

"Blameless tool," George muttered to himself, staring at the lamp rather than at the flagrant nakedness of the magician.

"Ta? Blameless tool, yes. You want someone dead? You want a new wife? I do this for you, poor yuma who needs another to make sex with." Besseh laughed, crooking its head so that it could see George's expression. "Look at me!" it shouted when it noticed the direction of George's gaze. "You look at me! You come for help, so you look!"

Resentfully, George forced his head around.

"What you see, yuma?"

"I see Besseh Yo, a great magician."

The Karee got to its feet and shuffled its way towards George. "Your words is pus. Say what you see."

George tightened his jaw.

"I see an ugly yuma with shit on his shoe and fear in his face," Besseh said, shoving a hard finger into George's shoulder. "What do you see, ta?"

With a quick movement, George slapped Besseh's hand away. "I see a naked little savage," he said.

"Ta. What else?"

George bit his lip and stared hard at the lamp.

The finger punched him hard in the arm. "Naked little savage, ta? And more?" The finger jabbed bruises into George's muscle. "More?"

George moved out of Besseh's range and turned away from him. "No more," he said softly. The Karee enjoyed confrontations. They thrived on scenes. When other beings lost their tempers with Karee, as they most often did, the Karee laughed with strident voices. The Karee were primitives with a taste for the dramatic.

There was a flash of movement at the side of his head, a jerk and then a gout of pain. Alarmed, breathing hard, George backed to the wall, one hand over his stinging scalp. Besseh had torn out a lock of his hair.

The magician stood for a moment, the neat silver-gray curl in its hand. Then it opened its toothless mouth and swallowed it. "You and me is one now, yuma."

George's lip curled in bewildered confusion. He felt violated and more than a little afraid. "Maybe I'd better go."

"Lauren," the Karee said.

George flinched.

"I eat of you so I know. Eating is knowing. You come here about eating the memories."

"I come here to remember her, not like I can remember her now, but to relive those memories as if they were real. I want to touch her again. I've heard you can do that."

Instead of replying, Besseh called for food again. Tyoresh came in with two bowls, one for George, the other for the magician. For a while George simply watched the old Karee eat.

"You eat, yuma," Besseh said as he sucked the meat from the casque of a *shota*.

George looked down into the pinkish mass, plucked a *shota* from its gravy and peeled it. It tasted of mud.

The Karee ate with the slurping abandon of gluttony. When it was finished it rinsed the bowl in a pan of sand and water.

"You haven't asked who I am," George said.

Besseh stuck out his bottom lip, a Karee shrug. "You is yuma. More doesn't matter. All yuma is alike."

"All humans aren't alike, Besseh."

"All yuma is alike," it said, twisting its face in George's direction and tilting its head back so that it could see. "We got power of the mind; you got power

over the body."

George's eyes were drawn to the hunched back, the twisted limbs, the deformed eye sockets of the creature. The magician, he imagined, had an intimate relationship with pain. For the first time since he had come he felt more pity than discomfort.

"You take the body from here to there, yuma. You come from your planet to this. But the body is stupid."

"Stupid. Is that what you think of us?"

Behind the twin slits on his face George thought he could see Besseh's eyes glitter, black diamonds in a cave. "Stupid," it said.

George got up from his stool and walked to the pan of sand and water. Besseh, with an odd gentleness, took the bowl from his hands.

"You ain't eat much," it said critically as it washed the bowl.

"Will you do the magic for me?"

"Sure."

"When do we start?"

George was unprepared for the splash. Grit and stale dishwater exploded against his eyes. He raised up a protective arm, but it was too late.

"Now," Besseh said with a laugh.

George felt himself falling. He twisted his body to the side, trying to catch himself.

Across the thick mauve carpet in the lobby a woman stood with Sanderson, the chandelier above her casting bright lights in her hair. As he approached into the subtle gravity of her slim body, the tug of her perfume, Sanderson asked in a strangely far away voice how he'd liked the Beethoven. Then he turned to the woman at his side. George's eyes had never left her face.

"George Hatterly," Sanderson said, "Lauren McKnight."

"Yuma!"

George thrashed.

Lauren was arguing politics with him over the breakfast table. He won a point more by sheer force of the argument than facts. Smiling, she lifted the pitcher of orange juice, flourished it and poured it into his coffee. The cup overflowed onto the counter.

"Yuma!"

George was a pragmatic man with a limited sense of the absurd, so irritation hit him first. Then, because Lauren had been a good teacher, the humor finally kicked in. He glanced up, fighting a smile. She was laughing.

"Goddamn! Yuma!"

Lauren's perfect face burst like a warm bubble.

"Yuma! You got visitors!"

George took in a deep breath that tasted of damp and old food. He opened his eyes to see Besseh standing over him in the semi-dark. The Karee looked scared.

"You get up," Besseh said as he pulled on George's arm. "They think you dead. You get up and talk."

George's mouth felt funny. He swiveled his legs from the cot, but his knees wouldn't hold him.

"Ambassador Hatterly?" a resonant voice asked.

Blinking, George looked up. His aide and the Chief of Intelligence stood just in the curtain staring at him.

George lifted a slow hand and ran it over his face. There was stubble on his cheeks. "How long?" His lips didn't work right.

"Sir?"

"How long have I been here?"

"Presumably eighteen hours, sir," the intelligence officer said. "That's how long you've been missing." The officer had flat, suspicious eyes and he kept his hand near the weapon at his belt.

"George. We've been looking all over hell and gone for you," his aide told him. "Jesus Christ. We nearly started an interplanetary incident."

The ambassador coughed. He licked his lips. They felt glued. With practical, professional solicitude, Besseh brought him a drink. George had raised it to his mouth when the intelligence chief stepped forward. "Don't!" he snapped.

"You don't know where that cup's been," his aide sighed, "or even what's in it. You know the hygiene around here."

George took a sip, anyway, much to the intelligence officer's alarm. It was fresh water.

Taking another sip, George turned to the subdued and frightened Besseh. At one time George had wanted the Karee to be cowed. Now he found it painful. Besseh had crawled into himself and was looking at some neutral spot on the floor, what the Sisters at Sacred Heart School used to call "custody of the eyes"; only the nun's institutional shyness came from duty. Besseh's came from fear. The magician knew what the humans were capable of. The mind was powerful, but sometimes the body was stronger.

"... can never tell what these people can do with drugs and the like," the intelligence officer was saying. "Anyway, to extract information by kidnaping is a crime in anyone's book."

"I wasn't kidnaped. You know that."

The officer closed his mouth with a nearly audible snap.

"I came here of my own accord." He smiled weakly. "Besseh Yo is merely ... a blameless tool."

"Guard!" the intelligence officer ordered. "Get this stinking Karee out of here!"

George watched in silence as an embassy officer shoved the magician out of the room. "You can't arrest Besseh," he said when the Karee was gone.

The aide sat down on the cot next to George. "Look. Let's be reasonable, okay? The magician does its little magic number on you. You don't know what you'd say. Shit, George. This was stupid."

"That Karee has to disappear. Hence you were kidnaped. That's what we'll tell the League. No questions about that. They don't like the Karee, either," the intelligence man said.

George was only half listening. Suddenly his gaze lost its focus. "Oh, my God. I can't remember how I met her."

"Huh?" asked the aide.

"I can't remember." He stood. Vertigo hit him and he nearly toppled. His aide grabbed his arm. "Get Besseh in here!" George shouted. He was terrified and it came out in his voice. "Get Besseh in here

quick!"

The intelligence officer left and came back with the little Karee. Besseh crooked his neck to look at George.

A violent tide of tears rose in the ambassador's eyes. He blinked, scattering light. "I can't remember. Oh, Jesus God. I can't remember."

Besseh put out a calming hand that stopped some inches above George's arm. "Yes, yuma," he told him softly and with some hint of compassion. "I eat the memories. I tell you this."

"Get out!" George screamed at the two other humans. Both men hesitated a moment before they left the room.

The little Karee stood before him, less mysterious in the light from the open door. "You simpering, ugly dwarf," George said. "You made me forget her. God-damn you. I know you hate us, but how could you do that?"

"Sit. You will be tired."

He sat on the cot. Besseh sat on the stool next to him. In a moment George gave in to exhaustion and laid down. The ceiling of Besseh's room was black with soot.

"The memories are good, George," Besseh told him. It smacked its lips. "Tasty memories. I understand yuma now. Only sometimes is your words pus. But Lauren is different. More like a Karee, I think. Hah. You love her for make you laugh, and hate us for laughing. Stupid, the yumas, like I say."

George flicked a glance to the side. Besseh was smiling, more sure of itself. Irony suited the magician better than servitude. "I can remember the last few months with her. I can remember that. But I can't remember how we met, or the first house we lived in."

"We don't finish because the stupid yuma come and think you dead."

"How much, Besseh? How much besides Lauren do you remember?"

With a groan the Karee rose and walked to a barrel of drinking water. Besseh dipped in a cup. "You don't tell me you be ambassador, ta?"

"I tried. You wouldn't listen."

Besseh stuck out its lower lip. "Well, the body is stupid, but sometimes the mind, it stupid, too. When I eat memory, I have to eat everything."

The ambassador knew the governmental secrets were important. He knew that, but it didn't seem to matter. His mind was besieged with Lauren's death and the rest of his thoughts were laid waste.

He pictured her, but the image of her face was faded somehow, as if usage had dulled the colors. "In my mind she's got four months to live. I'll always remember her as dying."

One hand to its contorted back as if its spine were sore, the Karee shuffled its way back to the stool and

sat. "I never stop in the middle before like this. Maybe I shouldn't eat more."

"What would you do?"

Besseh sat quietly for a moment, its hands in its lap.

"What would you do if you were me, Besseh Yo?"

The Karee nodded. "I seen this a lot, this sort of bad stomach like you got. I would live it. The hurt in you should come out like vomit."

The magician was a brown gnome crippled by the weight of vicarious pain. "Is that what it's like, eating vomit? Does it hurt you, Besseh, going down?"

There was a jerk of the bent shoulders. Besseh was surprised by the question. "I don't keep the memory, yuma. When you finish, and I am full, I go and wash her away in the water. All will be gone," Besseh warned him. It leaned forward so closely that George could smell the musky, dank odor of its body. "Be gone, understand? Everything. Secrets. Lauren. Everything. Can't get it back never."

"I understand." At that moment George realized how much he had loved Lauren. He loved her enough to give up his happiest memories to end the pain of her loss. "Please do it," he said before he could change his mind.

He closed his eyes and felt the moist press of Besseh's hand on his forehead. George wanted to utter some murmur of gratitude. His mouth wouldn't work.

And Lauren was laughing in the kitchen.

Something hit him hard in the chest. He opened his eyes to see Besseh over him. George put his hands to his face and discovered he had been crying. He couldn't remember why.

"Men still outside, George."

"Yes." He sat up. His staff was angry with him. But why had he come to the Karee's house? he wondered. It was something vaguely connected with a death.

"You help me? You protect me? I only do what you ask for."

George hesitated. "I'll protect you," he said. It seemed as if, for some reason, he and the magician had known each other for years. George's trust was instinctual, as it would have been for a good, close friend.

The magician handed him a cup of water and twisted its head so it could see him. "Lauren," it said.

"Yes? Should I remember?"

Besseh rose stiffly and walked over to the barrel. For a moment the magician simply stared downwards. George felt a tug of sympathy and more than a clutch of fear. Then Besseh raised its hands and brought them in a slow downward plunge to the water.

"Wait!" George said.

The gnarled hands paused a scant inch above the liquid surface. Besseh turned towards him.

"Should I?" George asked anxiously. He hated to see those hands come down. The movement seemed so final, but he wasn't sure why. "Should I remember?"

For a moment the magician regarded him. "No," Besseh whispered. His voice was nearly lost in the splash his hands made. □

Moving? Moving?

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CORTNEY
SKINNER

Jim-Bob and the Alien

By Vivian Vande Velde
and T. Serio

Art by Carol Heyer

Margaret was nothing but an alien, that's all there was to it. An honest-to-goodness, no-denying-it, no-blaming-her-looks-on-inbreeding-or-nothing, fish-lipped, snake-hipped alien.

Jim-Bob Beaudine hated the aliens. Damn if they didn't give him the willies. Sneaky. That's what they was. Always coming at a thing from behind, or off to one side. Never straight-on.

He adjusted his sunglasses and his smile. While he checked both in the rearview mirror, he almost missed the last curve before Margaret's place. Hard to tell, anyway, where the dirt road ended and the formal underbrush started. He had the window open since the air conditioning wasn't working right and some weed tall as the car scraped along the side. Jim-Bob sneezed and tried to keep the flaxy dust out of his nose.

There went the professional impression he had hoped to make. Hard on the image when you're barely in control of the company car, snorting and snuffling and waving your arms just like one of them damn spastic kids at that special camp up north.

And of course Margaret was there on the porch to see. Too tall, too skinny Margaret. No make-up, of course, though some of the alien women used it. She was wearing that expression of hers like she'd been squinting into the sun all morning. And who the hell did she think she was with that shotgun cradled in her arms, Annie Oakley? Lord protect us from aliens and women, and alien women with guns.

Jim-Bob pulled up onto the grass in front of Margaret's house. Ten o'clock in the morning and already hot enough that his shirt stuck to his skin under his official Yellow Dog Realty blazer. The place smelled of thick, damp grass.

"lo, Margaret," he called, getting out of the car. "Hot enough for you?" He was going to have to leave the windows open or it'd be an oven in there, and that meant he'd bring a whole load of mosquitoes and chiggers back into town. He'd have to make sure and trade cars with Canara for tomorrow, even though this one was his favorite, what with the genuine Naugahyde interior and the outside being tawny gold, like it was made to match his company blazer.

Margaret just looked at him with those damn don't-blink-enough eyes of hers. "Hello, Jim-Bob,"

she said. Cold, that's what those aliens was, cold. Come with their blood. *Ain't it amazing how we could end up looking so much the same?* Canara liked to say. Hell, Jim-Bob couldn't see the similarity. Humans was humans, aliens was aliens, where was the similarity there? Jim-Bob liked to think of Margaret as second cousin to a snake, even if she had gone to school with him and graduated the same year. Everyone knew the aliens was reptiles, even if it was considered polite not to mention it.

Margaret swung off the porch rail, and for a second the shotgun pointed at him, and for a second he thought she knew. But she was only on her way to resting it butt-side down on the floor. The morning sun glinted off the bluish-steel barrel. It was an old Winchester twelve-gauge. An Earth weapon. Aliens, they liked to use Earth stuff. "After snakes," she explained. "They're everywhere this year."

Oh, Jim-Bob almost said. *Dinner*, Jim-Bob almost said. But that was on the edge of pushing too far. You didn't go around pushing the aliens too far. Not more than once you didn't.

"You're looking good," he told her. (Didn't he have a way with women, alien or not?) "Haven't changed since high school." Sure. Almost a quarter century later and she was as homely as ever.

"Come on in," she said. "I'll show you around."

"Hell, Margaret, I guess I should know what the house looks like by now." Jim-Bob got out the listing form. "All the parties we had in school, eh? All the good times?" Like hell. But nobody turned down an alien's invitation — they might think of it as unfair competition.

Aliens didn't like unfair competition.

"It's all here. You read it, Margaret."

He held the form out to her, but she didn't take it. "We've lived here a long time," she said, "my family and I."

Didn't he know it? Ever since the invasion. Business merger, people called it. The aliens, they was high into commerce. But invasion it was. Commerce is where you have a choice.

Jim-Bob said: "Lotta work, house like this." Margaret's folks had died last year in a car crash — Lord, those aliens liked fast cars, and they *never* learned! — and her brother ... Jim-Bob hadn't seen

Ambrose in years, not since that time at school. Did she remember? Of course she remembered. Did she know? "Don't you worry, Margaret," he said, "we'll find someone who'll just love this place, someone who won't change a thing, you got it fixed up so fine." *And if you buy that, Margaret...*

Margaret took the listing form. "Not a lot of money," she observed.

"Now, Margaret, you know we talked about that on the phone. This same house, if it was in the city, it'd bring you two, three times that price easy. But out here.... Hell, this ain't city, it ain't farm; it'll be tough to sell even at that price. Think of what your daddy paid. Fair is fair. Heh, heh." This was the one tricky part. Aliens was into free enterprise — as long as they come out on top every time. Hot-shot Big Rory Chambers at Chambers Brothers Realty had gotten stuck with a house just a couple months back — fat lot of good his college degree done him then. He must of seen it coming all along. The alien owners decided on an inflated price and wouldn't budge. Nobody bought it and nobody bought it, and the owners looked at Big Rory and suggested, nice as pie, never blinking those lizard eyes of theirs, that maybe they was the victims of unfair competition. Big Rory bought that overpriced sucker right quick, he did. Bought it himself as an investment property, though everybody knew Big Rory had more business savvy than that. Nobody wanted the aliens thinking they was the victims of unfair competition.

But Margaret, she didn't complain. She just said, "You don't mention the smoke house."

"The what?"

"The smoke house. Hasn't been used in years. But it might have some sort of historical significance."

"Well...." Jim-Bob said, glancing at his watch, which any normal person — even an alien — should have taken as a hint.

"Come on, I'll take you there. It's not that far."

"I'm not big on the great outdoors." That didn't half say it.

"You don't like snakes," she said. "I remember that about you." She poked him in the gut. "The walk'll do you good."

"Sure thing, Margaret." He wasn't going to be the one to say no to an alien. President of the United States, he'd said no to the aliens once. The aliens had said, *Oh. O.K.* Nice as pie. That day all the kids in Washington, D.C., aged five years. Not five years smarter, not five years more mature. Just five years older. Next day they was five years older yet, and so was the kids in the surrounding states — Maryland, Virginia, and whatever the hell it is to the west — Ohio? Kentucky? The President said, *Oops, sorry, wait a minute, we meant to say yes.* That's the way the aliens was: sneaky as all hell.

Margaret slung her shotgun over her shoulder, once more letting the muzzle momentarily point in the general direction of his chest.

"Hope you know how to handle that thing," he told her. "Heh, heh."

"I know," she assured him.

Her voice was so cold and her eyes so devoid of recognizable emotion that for a moment he was *sure*

she knew. But then she said, "Well, come on," and started walking, and he followed her.

She led him through the stinky boxwood hedge (Lord, he hated boxwood!) which bordered the more or less tamed section of her yard around the house. Then they was into trees, scrubby bushes, decades' worth of musty-smelling fallen leaves, burdocks.... Damn lot of burdocks.

"Is it far, Margaret?" he asked, pulling a burr from his sock. If he'd known he was going on a nature hike, he'd of worn the shoes for it.

"Not very," Margaret said. "Ambrose used to love to walk here. Reminded him of home."

No wonder they come to Earth, then, if that was the best they had. Ambrose, that was Margaret's brother. The aliens, they picked the damnedest names for their kids. What'd they think — that if they called their kids things like Margaret and Ambrose, people wouldn't notice their pointy little noses, or the fact that they didn't have any lips?

"Isn't that nice," Jim-Bob said. "Ever hear from old Ambrose?"

"He just killed himself." She didn't even turn around, just kept right on walking. Cold-blooded thing.

"Is that so?" Jim-Bob said noncommittally, after it became apparent she wasn't going to say anything else. The sweat was rolling down his collar, and he feared his official company blazer would never be the same, permanent press or not.

At this point Margaret did turn around, and Jim-Bob took the opportunity to stop, to lean against a tree and wipe his brow with his company-monogrammed hankie. "He couldn't take it anymore," she said. "The shame, the ostracism."

"That's too bad," Jim-Bob said, swatting at a cloud of mites.

"You see, my people take education very seriously. Anyone accused of cheating: that's the end of him."

"Is that so?" Jim-Bob repeated. Of course it was so. That was why he had made the accusation in the first place, when Ambrose turned those damn, unblinking eyes of his on Jim-Bob's girl at the time — what was her name? — Billie. Hell, she'd been ready to go to the Spring Social with Ambrose instead of Jim-Bob — with a damn high-talking iguana, of all things! So Jim-Bob had planted some crib sheets in Ambrose's notebook and gotten the word passed on to the principal. Cheating, that was one thing the aliens didn't tolerate any more than unfair competition, even in their own kind. Hell, Jim-Bob hadn't known the kid would eventually die from it, but that was the fault of their own culture, not him.

Margaret was watching him. Coldly. Appraisingly. Then again, that's the way the aliens always looked at you.

"Hey, Margaret," he said.

She raised the shotgun to her shoulder and pointed at his head.

"Hey, Margaret." He took a step back. He saw her finger tighten on the trigger. "Son of a bitch!" he yelped. He ducked and the rifle went off, sounding like the Fourth of July an inch from his ear. The shot splintered the branch he'd been leaning on. Birds



CAROL HEYER

broke cover, screeching and dropping feathers. He'd be lucky if he wasn't deaf for life in that ear. Then he realized how short that life might be. He dove off the foot path and into the woods.

Branches slapped at his face, caught at his tawny gold blazer. *Oh damn, oh damn, oh damn*, he thought. The space between his shoulders itched with the anticipation of Margaret drawing a bead on him.

Sticks crackled under his feet, one breaking upwards and gouging his shin. He slipped on some half-rotted leaves and almost fell, saving himself at the last instant with an outstretched hand into the putrid muck. Which way back to the car? Damn, why hadn't he paid more attention to where they were going?

He forced his way through bushes, and through weeds tall enough to be bushes in their own right. Stupid bugs that didn't know enough to fly out of a person's way hit against his face. Sweat ran into his eyes, stinging and blurring, and he fell again. He landed in a thick weed that exuded an acrid white ooze that stuck his fingers to each other. He wiped his face with his tattered sleeve.

Crazy Margaret! She couldn't of found out he was behind Ambrose's disgrace, could she? He'd covered his tracks, just like he always did. Just like he'd covered his tracks with those mall developer people that were interested in her property. She couldn't know he was going to buy her land, then sell it for close on to ten times what he was giving her. Could she?

The taste of bile filled his throat. His sides ached. The pounding of his heart thundered in his ears.

He thought of Canara saying, *Oh, Jim-Bob, you know they's some nice ones*, or, *Jim-Bob, you stop that now. Look at Lou-Henry. How he comes to church on Sundays, all dressed up so cute with four belts to hold his pants on*. Cute, my ass. There was no such thing as a cute alien. But Canara was always pouring sugar, trying to make everything so sweet and pretty. Too bad she wasn't here instead of him, to see how nice and cute they really was.

He fell yet again, ripping his knee open on a stone.

There, that must be the smoke house. It was a stone building, about the size of an outhouse, with a wooden door and no windows. A nice, solid wooden door. Jim-Bob pushed it open. Cool air hit his face. Oh, nice, nice cool air, smelling like a package of hickory-smoked bacon.

He threw himself against the door, closing it behind him. He sank to a crouch in the dark, wincing at the strain on his abraded knee. He steadied himself with an outstretched hand on the floor. Damn it all. The blazer was a goner, the pants were a goner. That Margaret. Gone off the deep end, that one. The aliens, they was no fools. They didn't abide crazies. He wasn't without recourse.

The drumming of his blood faded, his ragged breathing slowed. The sweat on his body turned cold and he shivered. He leaned against the door. It was only the pressure of his weight that held it closed.

He thought he heard a noise, and he held his breath. His eyes had yet to adjust to the darkness. A tiny noise. Like a sigh. Like the whisper of paper. *Old leaves*, he thought. Nothing to be scared of about old leaves. Margaret was the one to be scared of. Crazy

Margaret and her rifle. He leaned his ear against the door, but could hear nothing from outside.

What if Margaret guessed he'd find this place? What if she knew he was here? Could this wooden door withstand whatever she'd loaded that thing with?

He cringed, imagining her on the other side, her alien hand pointing her human-made weapon at the door. But if he moved away from the door, it would swing open and then she could just walk in. She had him where she wanted him. Lord, they was all so tricky. Pretending to be friends. You turn around and find them breathing on your neck.

Again he heard the faint noise from inside the smoke house. His heart was like to stop. Oh Lord, she was in here all along. Somehow she'd circled round and was hiding in the dark just waiting for him, he knew it, he knew it. He braced himself, still crouched on the floor. He knew it.

Nothing happened.

Maybe she was just waiting for them stupid alien eyes of hers to adjust to the dark. He squinted, straining to see. Something moved nearby — he thought.

"Margaret?" His voice shook. "I didn't do it. I don't know what you think I did. But I didn't do it."

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Jim-Bob released the breath he'd been holding.

Something slid over the fingers that were supporting his weight on the floor.

"Son of a bitch!" he yelled, knowing, suddenly knowing. The small room was alive with whispers and movements. He flung the door open, letting in the daylight.

Snakes.

Margaret's second cousins, he'd called them. Hundreds of them. On the floor. Poking their heads out of crevices in the stone walls. In the spaces where the walls met the ceiling. Crawling over his shoes.

He'd been too preoccupied with Margaret to think. Jim-Bob gave a cry of fear and disgust. He ran out of the smoke house, now not remembering Margaret at all. He tripped over the doorstrip. He sprawled to the ground. Then, there, with his mouth pressed to the dirt, he once again remembered Margaret. "I swear I didn't do it," he cried. "I didn't, I didn't. It was Canara."

Nothing.

He sat up, looked around.

The breeze stirring the leaves, that was all.

He rubbed his hands on his pants. Snakes. They'd felt all cold and dry and papery. Like the artificial alligator-skin wallets he'd given as Christmas presents last year. But alive. He shook. And rubbed his hands the harder. Suddenly he whirled around, jumping up and away from the door. What if they could squeeze out through the cracks around the door, coming on him from behind, slithering down over his shoulders, up into his hair? *Get out of here*.

After the dark coolness of the smoke house, the hot air burned all the way down into his lungs. Didn't make any difference. Had to keep running, had to keep running.

Unexpectedly, without looking for it, he came to

the boxwood hedge. He threw himself to his knees in the tall grass. There was the car. No sign of Margaret. His face was puffy from sweat and insect bites.

He slithered. *Lord, just get me through this.* He poked his head up out of the grass, saw that he hadn't even got half way.

This was just too much to expect a man to bear, after all. But he didn't have the energy for anything else, so he kept on crawling.

He could smell the hot-car smell, the trace of gasoline, and the rubber tires. He saw the glint of metal. He reached up, opened the door, slid in the driver's seat. The keys slipped from his sweaty hands, between the seats. Damn. He fished around, found a hairball and a wrench. Damn, damn, and double damn. He found the keys and got them in the ignition.

Margaret's shotgun was pointing through the car window at him.

Jim-Bob closed his eyes and prayed for an easy death.

"Lordy, Lordy, Lordy, what's got into you?" Margaret said, nice as pie, all friendly like. Too friendly like.

Jim-Bob opened his eyes.

She had removed the weapon and was leaning with her elbow in the open window. She blinked, once, slow motion the way the aliens did, every minute or two.

"You can't get away with killing me," he said. "Even your people wouldn't allow you to get away with unwarranted murder."

"Now, Jim-Bob," she said, smiling in her lipless way, "why would I want to kill you? I swear I don't know what's the matter with you. There was a snake in that tree you'd stopped by, right near your head. I was only trying to help you, Jim-Bob. I don't know why you went tearing off into the woods like that. Snakes everywhere this year. I told you that already."

His mouth worked, but after three tries he realized his vocal cords wouldn't. He turned the key in the ignition, and the engine rumbled to life.

Margaret straightened, then leaned down again. "You be careful, hear?" she said. "Oh, by the way, I've decided not to sell the old place after all." Once more her lid lowered over her eye then retracted. "Sentimental reasons."

"Shit," Jim-Bob said. The car jerked into the rutted, three-mile-long path she called a driveway, sending up clouds of dust. He could still see her, though, standing in the front yard, the shotgun cradled in her arms. He half expected to see her raise it, to have her blow out his brains at the last minute.

Watching her, he almost missed the damn curve again. He leaned on the steering wheel, then glanced into the rearview mirror again to see if she was following him.

No sign of Margaret.

But he saw something else. Something like to stop his heart. A snake. A brown and black thing, flicking its tongue to taste the air. It must of been wrapped around his headrest, it was that close.

He slammed on the brakes, jumped out of the car. Goddamnsionofabitch! If he'd had something to throw, he would of.

He glanced down the road toward Margaret's.

He glanced down the road toward town.

The road bordered by tall grass and weeds. *Snakes everywhere*, she'd said.

He got a stick and opened the door. Damn thing was gone. He checked the front seat. He checked the back seat. He opened the trunk. He poked at the mats. Damn thing was gone.

It must of crawled out the door he'd left open.

Slowly he got back into the car, started it, remembered how much trouble he'd had finding the keys when he'd dropped them.

He glanced in the rearview mirror.

The snake peered at his reflection in the mirror. It was close enough that Jim-Bob could feel its tongue graze his cheek. It was close enough.... It was close enough.... It was in his ear, for God's sake! His ear!

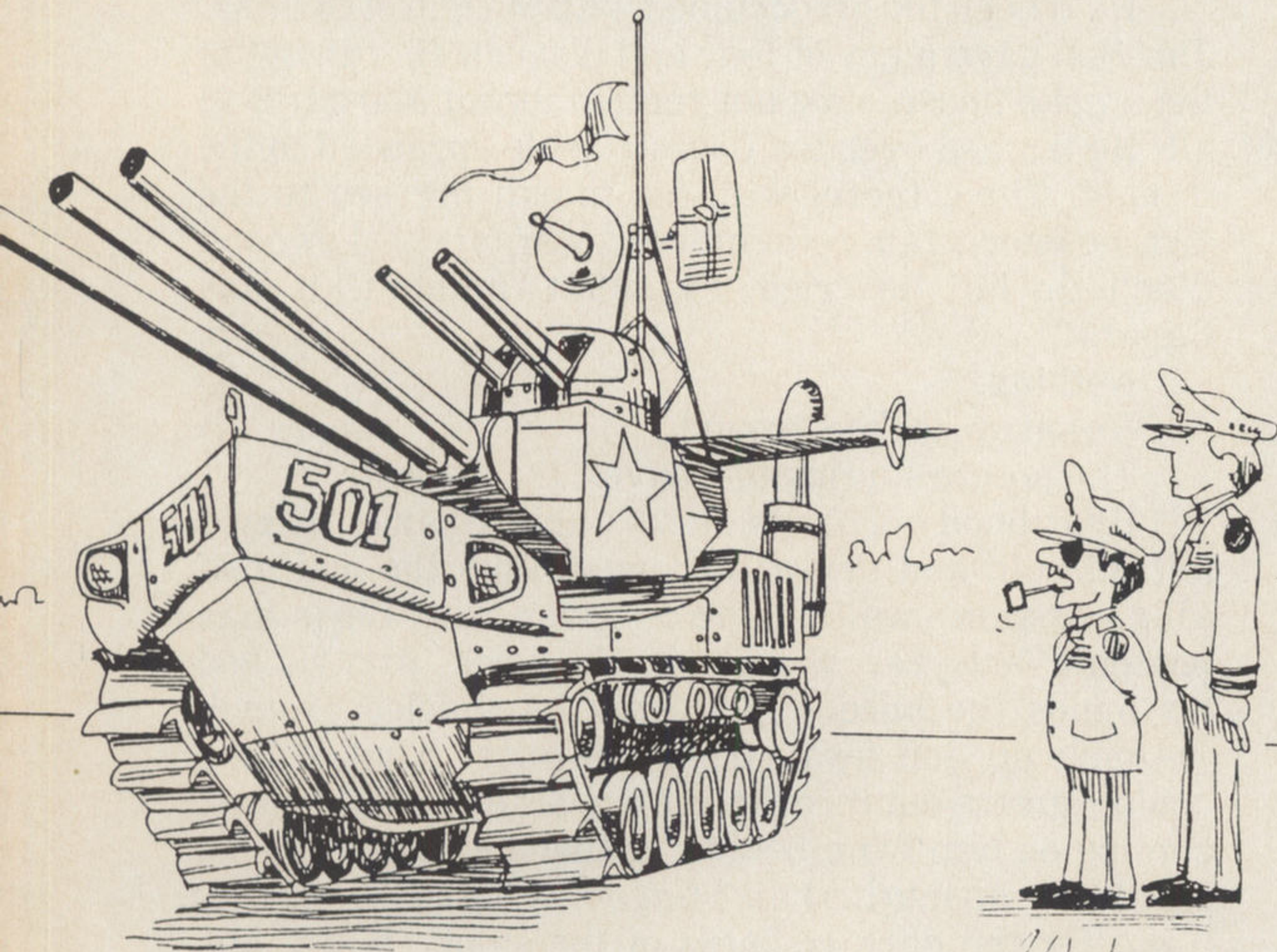
He hit the brakes so hard the car fishtailed, sending up a cloud of dust. He clawed at the obscene thing, but the snake bobbed and swayed, evading him. He grabbed his ear, and the snake retracted, disappearing into his ear with a last flick of its tiny tongue. Jim-Bob groped for his pen — the tawny gold one that said "Yellow Dog Realty."

He stuck it in his ear, as far as he dared, until the pressure tingled in his jaw. He felt no resistance. But he heard a sound, like the soft whisper of leaves. Like a thousand snakes in a smoke house. Like laughter inside his head.

He stared in the mirror. Nothing showed now. Had it been his imagination?

Snakes everywhere, she'd said. *Were they second cousins?* The aliens was sneaky. They come at you from behind, the sides. You never knew for sure. Not now, not tomorrow. Not never.

He started the car but stopped to check the mirror three more times before he hit the main road, and twice after that. □



It don't float, it don't shoot, it don't run,
and it costs too much ... it's just what we
need.



FROM THE BOOKSHELF

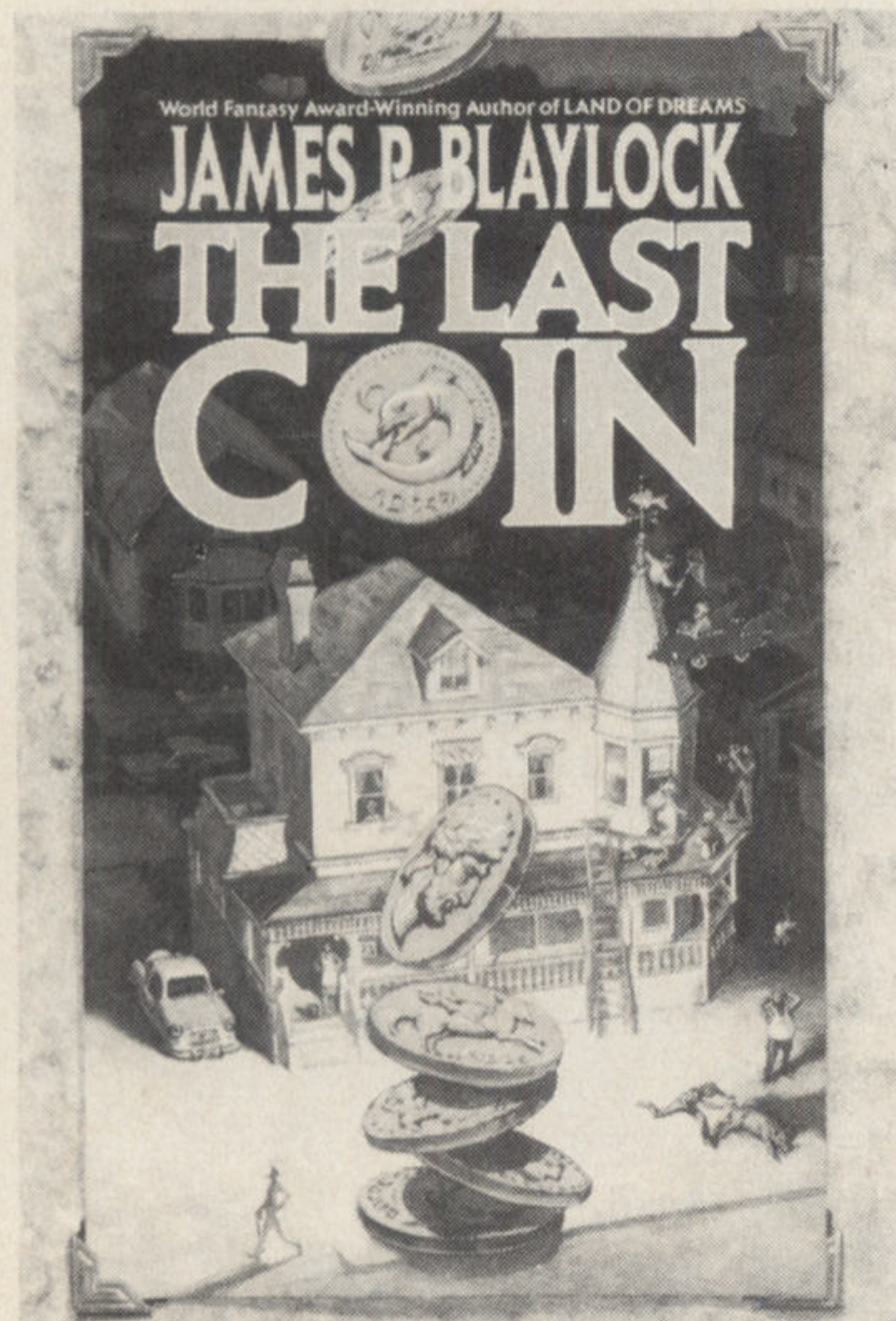
By Janice M. Eisen

Brilliant Fantasy, Flawed SF

The Last Coin
By James P. Blaylock
Ace, 1988
328 pp., \$17.95

James P. Blaylock's new novel is a delightful, funny, poetic, unusual fantasy. *The Last Coin* manages to deal with the mysteries of the universe while remaining thoroughly grounded in the solid present.

The coin of the title is one of the thirty pieces of silver Judas Iscariot received for his betrayal; the coins, which have great magical power, have since been



scattered around the globe. The plot involves the efforts of one man to collect the coins again, and the efforts — often unwitting — of the hero and his allies to prevent this.

Rating system

- ☆☆☆☆☆ Outstanding
- ☆☆☆☆ Very good
- ☆☆☆ Good
- ☆☆ Fair
- ☆ Poor

Copyright © 1989 By Janice M. Eisen

Andrew Vanbergen, the main character, is brilliantly done. He's sort of a fey Walter Mitty — full of pipe dreams, always making jokes no one else gets, impulsive when it's to his advantage not to be, manufacturing elaborate lies to explain what he's doing and unable to resist embroidering them to the point where they collapse of their own weight. He is thoroughly believable, and somehow likable even when you want to kick him in the pants to get him to behave the way he ought to.

Blaylock has devised an excellent mix of drama and humor. On one page he'll give you a solemn, worrisome scene, then on the next he'll push you into hysterics. He had particular fun with the epigraphs — most are apparently for real, but then Blaylock throws in a joke, ranging from the subtlety of a translator named C. K. Dexter Haven (the Cary Grant character in *The Philadelphia Story*) to a rhyme beginning, "One pig to rule them all, one pig to find them...."

The Last Coin is one of those books that show that magic is all around us if we just look at it in the right way. Blaylock ranges from slapstick farce to high drama without ever losing control. I could wish that a couple of things were explained better, but the novel as a whole is so dazzling you barely notice the loose ends. It is quite an achievement for Blaylock, and a delight for the rest of us.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆½

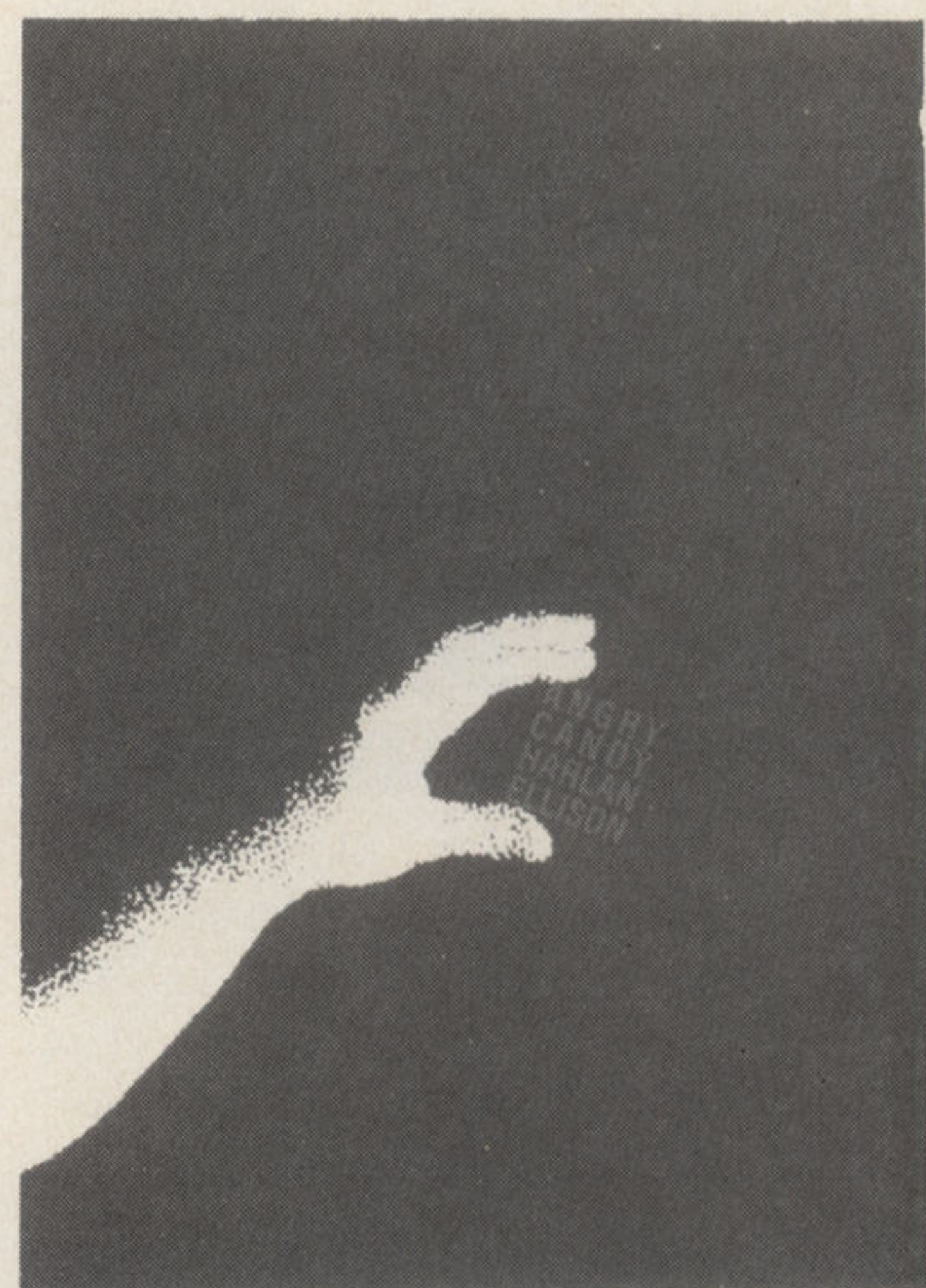
Angry Candy
By Harlan Ellison
Houghton Mifflin, 1988
324 pp. in proof, \$17.95

May/June 1989

Short review: There's a new Harlan Ellison collection out. Buy it.

Longer review (so Charlie Ryan feels he's getting his money's worth): After a six-year hiatus, Harlan Ellison has released a new collection of short fiction, *Angry Candy*. (The title is apparently a reference to the E. E. Cummings sonnet "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls," but it's also a good description of the contents.)

The common theme of the stories in this collection is death.

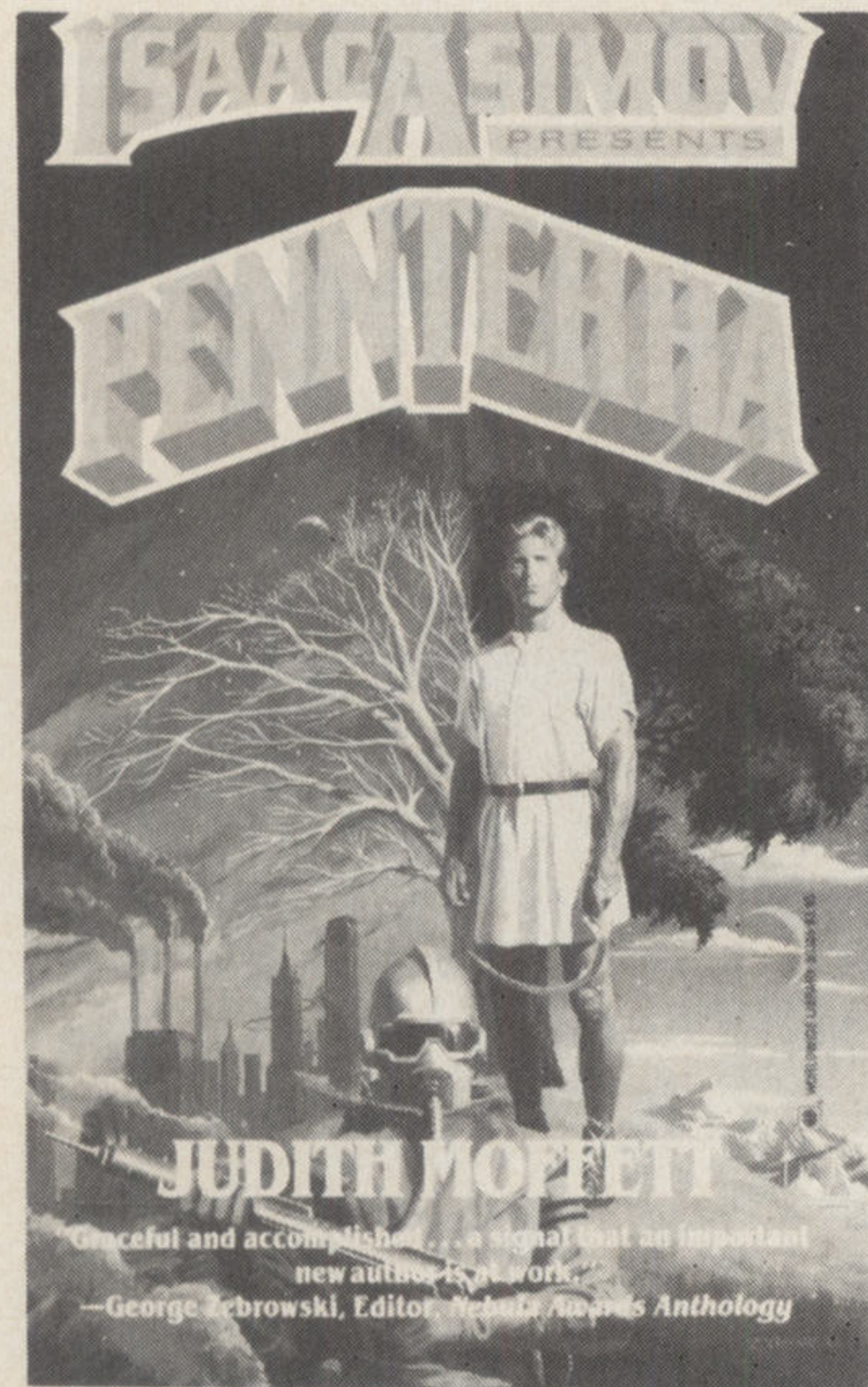


Ellison's long introduction, "The Wind Took Your Answer Away," elaborates on this, recounting the many deaths of friends and "icons" over the last couple of years. It is difficult to read this book at one sitting, although there are a few lighter stories. Ellison did not include his usual introductions to individual stories; I missed them, not because the stories need them, but because

they are wonderful in their own way.

If you're an Ellison fan, you know what to expect; the long dry spell has not let his talent rust in the least. If you've never read Ellison before, this is a fine collection to start with. Like Fred Astaire, he makes it look easy. The stories are controlled, not (in general) as flamboyant as some of his earlier work, but just as intense. There is only one story done in a stylistically unusual fashion: "The Region Between," which was designed and illustrated by the late Jack Gaughan.

As always, Ellison's fiction triggers powerful emotions, and his images haunt. The best stories



include "Paladin of the Lost Hour" (a Hugo winner and *Twilight Zone* episode), "The Region Between," "The Function of Dream Sleep," "Soft Monkey," "Eidolons," "Broken Glass," "Footsteps" — I find myself wanting to list 80 percent of the stories in the book.

If you can read these stories and remain unmoved, you're not quite human.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆

Pennterra

By Judith Moffett

Worldwide Library, 1988

320 pp., \$3.95

Pennterra is the first novel by Judith Moffett, who won the 1988

John W. Campbell Award for the Best New Writer. From the cover blurbs, it looks like a preachy ecology novel, but it is much more complex than that. It is interesting and well written, with very good characterization, but with some serious flaws as well.

The planet named Pennterra is the last hope of humanity, which has very nearly succeeded in killing the Earth. A small vanguard of Quakers has begun the settlement; six years later, the first main colony ship, the *Down Plus Six*, arrives.

The Sixers are appalled to find that the Quakers have not carried out their original mission, succumbing to the will of the planet's native intelligent race, the empathic/telepathic *hrossa*, who have confined the humans to a small area and forbidden nearly all machinery. Despite the Quakers' urging that the Sixers live within the restrictions, the new arrivals begin to set up a full-fledged, mechanized colony, ignoring the *hrossa*'s warnings that the planet itself will destroy them.

I like the Quakers and the Sixers, and Moffett's been very successful at making the *hrossa* alien. But the parts don't fit together well as one novel. People who seem to be important characters disappear after the first section. There are disturbing point-of-view shifts. After being mostly in George Quinlan's head in the first and second parts, the reader is thrown into his son Danny's viewpoint for the entire third section, except for a brief epilogue.

Apart from the structural flaws, there are problems with the book's believability. The worst of these is the depiction of the social development of the non-Quakers, most particularly when it concerns sex roles. It's 2233, and half the officers of *Down Plus Six* are female, but as soon as they settle down in households on Pennterra they revert to 1950s sex roles, down to boys being unwilling to cook. It reminded me of old pulp writing in which Donna Reed is dressed in funny clothes and transplanted to the 25th century. To believe that, I need an

explanation why the pendulum swung all the way back.

Maybe Moffett was using the old-fashioned sex roles merely to emphasize the differences between the Sixers and the Quakers; if so, it was not a good choice. Sexual mores also seem unchanged.

In a related problem, what we hear about Earth (very little) could be taking place now, or two decades ago — in fact, the only evidence we have that this novel is set in the future is some of the technology. Human nature may not change, but human society is bound to, particularly under the stress of a dying planet.

Pennterra also leaves too many loose ends and unexplained



things: Why doesn't the planet like machinery? (Danny says at one point that he really wants to know this, but it's never answered.) Why does food have to be eaten raw? Is the planet truly alive, in the manner of the Gaia theory, and even if so, how do the *hrossa* know some of the things they know? Are we meant to take the *hrossa*'s myths as real?

From all these criticisms, you might get the idea that I didn't like the novel. In fact I did, which is the reason I'm taking the time to analyze its problems this way. It's an enjoyable novel with a lot going for it, and I recommend it, but it could have been much better.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

Maiden Flight
By Eric Vinicoff
Baen, 1988
405 pp., \$3.50

The more new books I read, the more I come to believe that talk of the decline of editing is valid. Eric Vinicoff's *Maiden Flight* is yet another case in point: a clever, fairly enjoyable novel that could have been much better. It would have benefited greatly from the work and advice of a judicious editor.

It's a little over 60 years since the final war, a nuclear, chemical, and biological Armageddon. The Earth's surface is uninhabitable, so the survivors live in underground communities and in small floating cities known as windriders. But there's a wolf in the fold — a remnant of the military forces that destroyed the world, living in a windrider named Alpha hidden in the Arctic, and preying on the other floaters. The Alphans' only ethic is survival, and they'll do anything to protect the secret of their existence, no matter how many deaths it takes.

Vinicoff starts off with some cliched, overblown writing, particularly when it comes to describing people, and I almost put the book right back on the shelf when I came to the line: "‘Oh, splash!’ Wanda swore." But I persevered, and the author does settle down, though purple passages continue to crop up on occasion. He dumps in a paragraph or two of engineering explanations from time to time, but this dwindles after all the technology's been set up.

One more overriding flaw is similar to one of *Pennterra's*: a failure of imagination when it comes to depicting the society and culture of the windriders. Their life appears to be much like ours in the '80s: both men and women hold down jobs, but women still seem to be responsible for the household, and the main character left work for each of her children — there's not even a thought given to the idea that there might be other arrangements, especially given Vinicoff's statement that, in a small community, every able-bodied adult

is needed. This mimickry of the '80s extends even to dress; when a woman's professional clothing is described, it sounds like something I might wear to an office!

The characterization is pretty good, especially for hard SF. The character Miguel Ramirez, however, is just too much the stereotyped Latin lover; also, there's no real motivation for the protagonist's falling back in love with her husband, other than the author's feeling that it's the moral thing to do.

The Alphans are incredibly villainous, but it's forgivable in context. Vinicoff's characterization of them fails at one point, however; seemingly he could not bear to have his 14-



year-old character raped, so he implausibly has her would-be rapist be careless enough to allow her to knee him hard in the groin and temporarily disable him.

The plot is generally well thought out, though the romantic subplot is shallow, cliched, and completely predictable. I did get very annoyed by one episode where a character is introduced solely to think for a couple of paragraphs about how wonderful his wife and children are before he gets killed. Not only is this a manipulative device, it's transparent and stupid.

The novel has a number of good points. It's interesting and

involving, as well as suspenseful (not so much, Will they win? as, How will they win?). It's reasonably believable, if a bit too sanguine, in its depiction of these survivors some 60 years after the war.

Maiden Flight can be fun, especially if you like technical stuff. Vinicoff needs to work on character and culture, though, and he badly needs an editor to tame his overblown prose. Thank goodness he rarely uses the purple ink on the machinery.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Who's Afraid of Beowulf?
By Tom Holt
St. Martin's, 1989
206 pp., \$15.95

As you might suspect from the title, *Who's Afraid of Beowulf?* is a hilariously and consistently funny fantasy novel. You may want to avoid reading it in public, because it's nearly impossible not to laugh out loud at frequent intervals.

Hildy Frederiksen, an archaeologist specializing in Vikings, is called to the site of an intact ship-burial mound discovered in Scotland. She soon learns that the mound's inhabitants were not dead, only sleeping, and she must help them to defeat an evil sorcerer-king, who turns out to be responsible for the 20th century.

Tom Holt's novel never drags, and keeps jabbing you with unexpected, delightfully humorous twists. The concept that most of "modern" life is old hat to the Vikings sounds as if it would make for a one-joke book, but the author keeps it funny. It makes perfect sense that a sorcerer-king would be a computer wizard these days, too. The Mutt and Jeff act of two "chthonic spirits" buried with the Vikings provides regular funny interruptions.

Holt has a terrific sense of timing, and a view of the world that's marvelously askew. What more can I say? This book is damned funny.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆½

Shadows of the White Sun

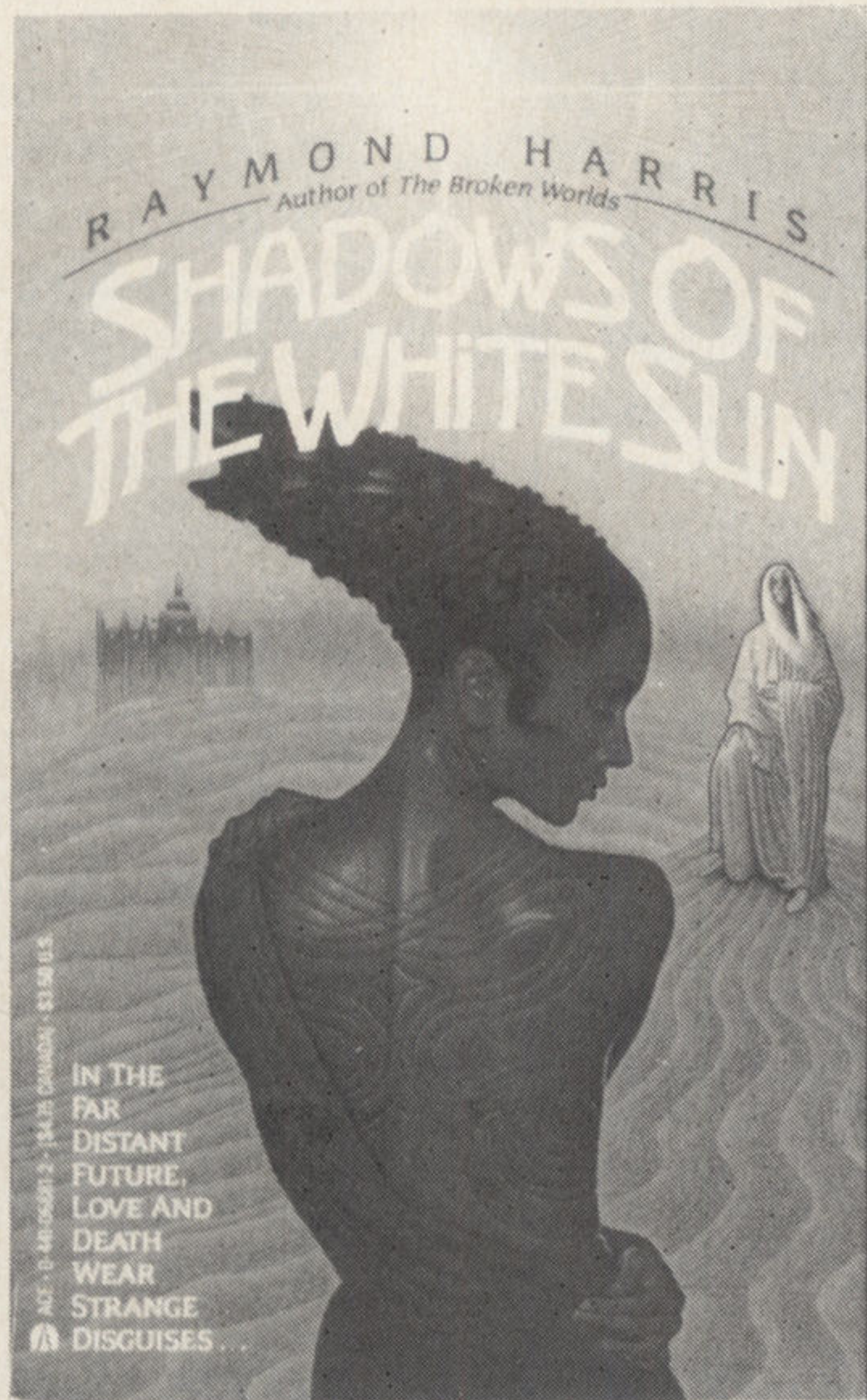
By Raymond Harris

Ace, 1988

230 pp., \$3.50

I'm of two minds about *Shadows of the White Sun*. It's an interesting, elaborate, ornate far-future SF novel, but it somehow remains essentially uninvolved. My attention was never really caught and held.

Risha Skorb is an aristocrat among the Revenants, the descendants of humans who returned from fruitless journeys to the stars to rule the Solar System, living in orbiting communities known as Hypaethra. The courtiers in Gheo, the Hypaethron that is home to the Despot, live lives of



play-acting and jockeying for position and prestige. When one of the highest-ranking Revenants is murdered, his murderer flees to Veii (which we know as Venus), and Risha is assigned to find and kill him, assisted by Chwefro, one of the android Firin who administer the planet.

The book comes most alive in the sequences on Veii, but if the author doesn't catch you in the first chapter or two, he has lost. The framing device chosen by Harris is distancing; we know that Risha will survive, only to suffer interrogation. Risha's life in Gheo is stylized, emotionless, and sterile, and it's hard to summon up interest in it, even when

there's a murder. The tone of the book also reeks of aristocratic distancing.

Veii, on the other hand, is a more absorbing creation. Its terraforming was in progress when the Revenants returned, and was never finished, so that while humans can and do live there, the climate is harsh and unforgiving. The Firin deliberately maintain Veii's inhabitants in a relatively primitive state in an attempt to recapitulate human development. The Veiiian culture is interesting, varied, and coherent in its details.

Toward the end of the book Risha realizes how much she's been manipulated, and I realized that that was one of the novel's problems: she's essentially a puppet, not an active character. In Gheo, the Despot watches and manipulates all; on Veii, the Firin serve the same function. Also, some parts of the plot are predictable; in the worst instance, Harris telegraphs the death of an important character, making it less affecting when it happens. The motives of most of the characters — the non-Veiians, primarily — are obscure, difficult to comprehend because they are truly different creatures from us.

On the other hand, Harris did a number of things right. Risha feels real and sympathetic. The detailed construction of Veii is marvelous; the planet lived for me. Given the character of the people (and Firin) of this future, the plot is convincing. Harris avoided the temptation to fall into clichés when designing his history.

Shadows of the White Sun is worth reading, but it's more like studying a sculpture than reading a novel: you can admire its beauty, but you don't feel part of it.

Rating: ☆ ☆ ☆ 1/2

The Dragonhiker's Guide to Battlefield Covenant at Dune's Edge: Odyssey Two

By David Langford

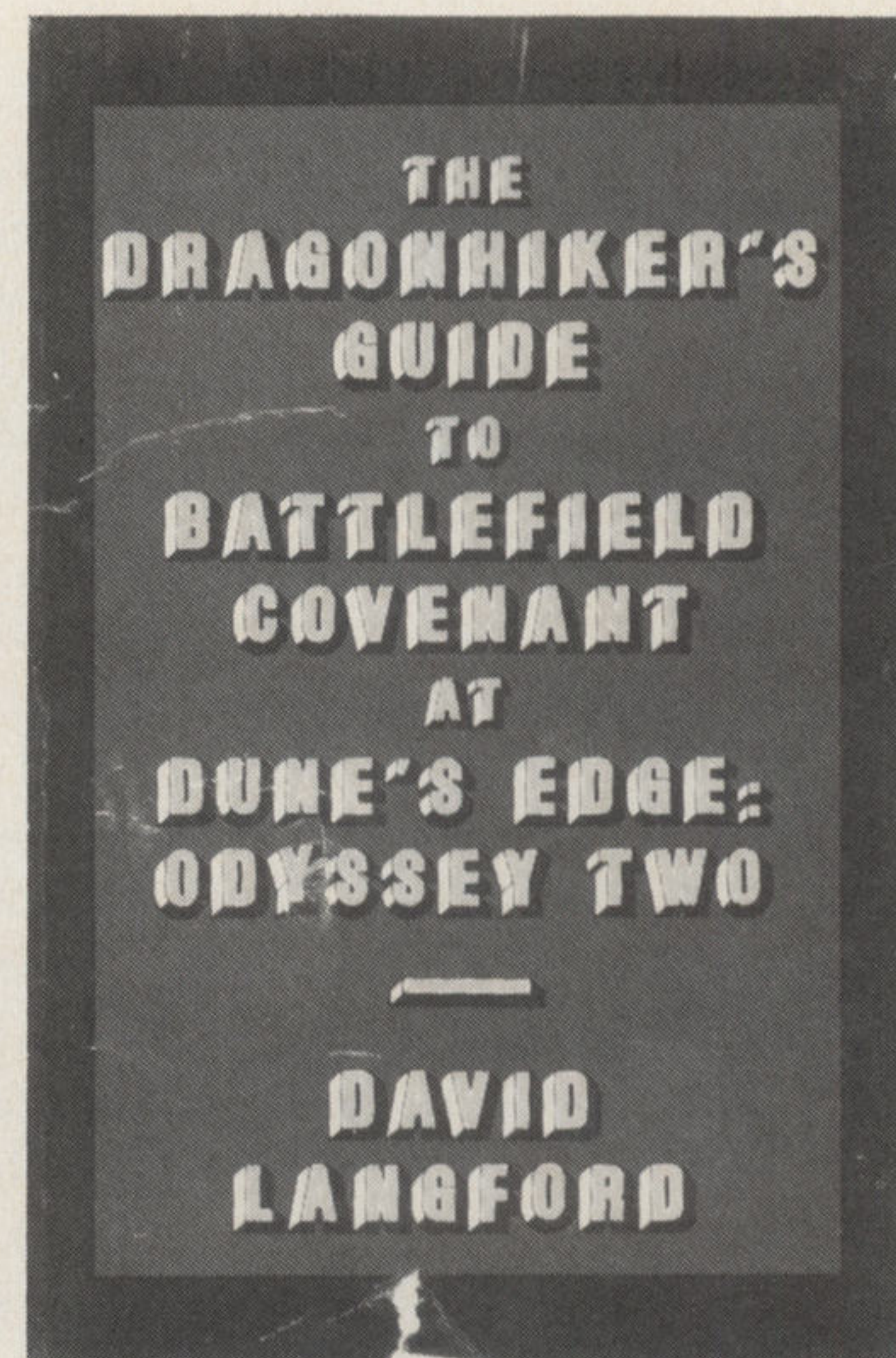
Drunken Dragon Press, 1988

142 pp., 9 pounds, 95 pence

Available in U.S. from Dreamhaven Books and Art, 1300 4th St. S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55414

“Hellfire!” erupted Thomas Covenant, his raw, self-inflicted nostrils clenching in white-hot, stoical anguish while his gaunt, compulsory visage knotted with fey misery. His lungs were clogged with ruin, and a snarl sprang across his teeth. A hot, gelid, gagging, fulvous tide of self-accusation dinned in his ears: *leper bestseller outcast unclean...*

David Langford, a well-known British reviewer and fan, has just perpetrated this collection of hilarious and dead-on SF and fantasy parodies. Among the victims are Harlan Ellison, Piers Anthony, Isaac Asimov, Frank Herbert, Michael Moorcock, E. E. Smith, James White, and A. E. van Vogt.



There's not much I can say about the book, which speaks for itself; every time I look for sample lines to quote, I find myself wanting to quote the entire piece. Parodying well is very difficult, and Langford does it brilliantly.

... The fitful light of the gibbous moon sent no ray into this fungus-ridden abyss, where blackened and disfigured stonework was tortured into eldritch, cyclopean geometries, as though wrought by some elder race of nameless abominations which frothed in primal slime for unhallowed aeons before the birth of mankind.

‘‘These stairs,’’
whispered Marcus Whateley,
‘‘are of no human shape.’’...

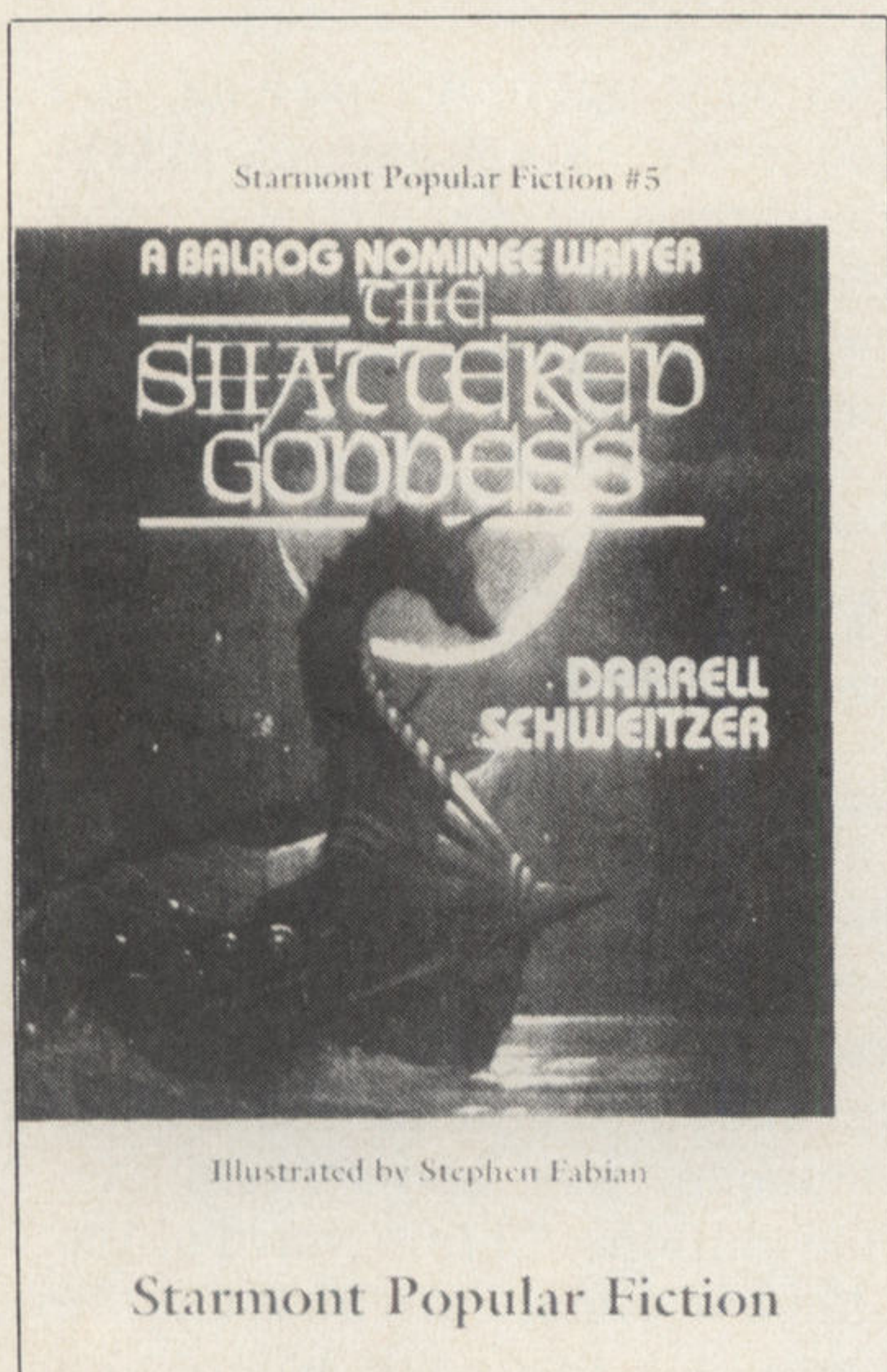
Enough.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

The Shattered Goddess

By Darrell Schweitzer
Starmont House, 1988
183 pp., \$9.95

While I have, of course, been reading Darrell Schweitzer's review columns in this magazine, I had never read any of his fiction. Starmont House recently reprinted two of his books, and I picked up *The Shattered Goddess* without knowing what to expect. What I got was an interesting fantasy



which displays a grotesque, vivid imagination.

Since the death of the Goddess, the world has been in turmoil as the good and evil powers battle. When a witch's vengeful curse succeeds in turning to evil the heir to the Guardianship of the Bones of the Goddess, it seems the world will be lost to the Dark Powers. Young Ginna, who has some poorly understood magic power and an occult connection to the new Guardian, must race against time to find a way to defeat the witch's curse.

Schweitzer has done some interesting things within the framework of the coming-of-age/quest novel. The death of the Goddess and the consequent

chaos of powers is an intriguing and original conceit. Ginna is very well characterized, the other characters less so.

Ginna is, however, a little too good to be true; while the author was careful to humanize his hero, he's still too much the white hat, with never a bit of hatred, resentment, or pettiness, despite all that's been done to him. The narrative drags during the latter stages of Ginna's journey, and it gets a bit tedious. Though the ending is somewhat confusing, it is exciting and satisfying, with an ambiguously happy ending.

Probably the biggest strike against the book is the remarkable ugliness of this edition. Starmont seems to have done it as cheaply as possible, apparently even photocopying the cover from the novel's prior publication. The interior artwork by Stephen Fabian, however, holds up well.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Free Zone

By Charles Platt
Avon, 1989
233 pp., \$3.50

Charles Platt's *Free Zone* is a bizarre, tongue-in-cheek concatenation of every major theme in SF (the appendix in the back lists 71, from Aliens to Weightlessness, and off-hand I can't think of any Platt has missed). It's sometimes hard to tell when the author is putting us on.

The novel is set in a near-future Southern California. The environment is a disaster, with the ozone layer nearly destroyed, and the United States has suffered an economic collapse. The small Free Zone, run in accordance with ‘‘libertarian socialism,’’ is menaced from all directions: the fundamentalist minister who runs Los Angeles, rampaging mutants escaped from Midwestern nuclear test sites, enormous snail-like aliens, and dinosaurs from Atlantis, not to mention the FBI. Platt provides a diagram tracing the major characters through the plot, and it helps a little.

Toward the end, when the plot becomes more solid and important, the book becomes weaker and less funny (perhaps because the author's serious, or perhaps because it's just less funny — either way, it doesn't work well). The ending actually becomes preachy about libertarianism, and if this is intended as a spoof of preachy novels, it doesn't succeed.

The Whitfield character annoyed me: I'm tired of the easy target of a fundamentalist preacher who is an utter hypocrite, which is boring and makes no demands on the author or reader. I liked the *Weekly World News*-style chapter titles, though it would have been nice if



Platt could have created them for all the chapters instead of most of them.

You'll enjoy the book more if you put your brain in neutral and go along for the ride. *Free Zone* is a mostly successful spoof/pastiche.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Cobalt-60

By Vaughn Bode, Mark Bode,
and Larry Todd
Donning/Starblaze, 1988
Unnumbered, \$7.95

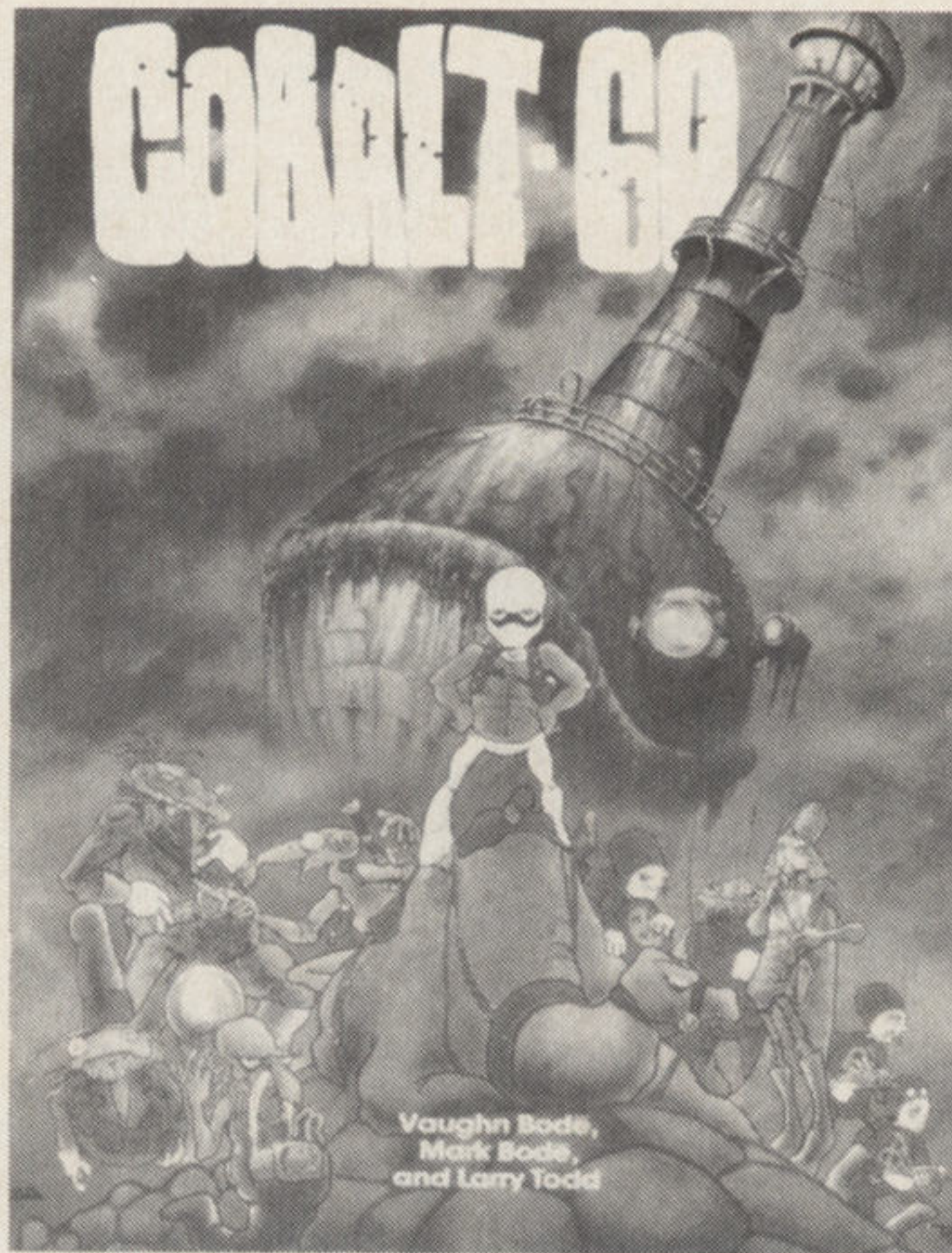
The late Vaughn Bode was a creative, highly original cartoonist, and so I opened this book with great expectations. I

was sorely disappointed.

Vaughn Bode's billing as the first author is misleading. He did only the first ten pages; the rest are based on the same characters, with art by Vaughn's son Mark and story by Larry Todd. Mark and Larry are no Vaughn Bode, I'm afraid, and the book never rises above the mediocre.

Mark Bode does a fine imitation of his father's style, down to the idiosyncratic grammar, spelling, and punctuation, but what's the point? There are a few flashes of wit, but the story is predictable and failed to hold my interest. I'd pass this one up.

Rating: ☆ ☆



Noted:

Collier Books (an imprint of Macmillan) recently reissued John Christopher's Tripods trilogy: *The White Mountains*, *The City of Gold and Lead*, and *The Pool of Fire*. It's a boxed set, and the individual volumes are marked \$3.95 each. These books were the first science fiction I read, and I still remember the story of teenagers helping fight to free the Earth from its alien conquerors. Mention the trilogy to anyone who read it as a child, and you're bound to provoke an enthusiastic reaction. I realize it's too late for Christmas gifts now, but pick up a set anyway for a child you love — or even for yourself. □

Books

(Continued from page 23)

realism Spinrad has advocated in his essays rapidly disintegrates. We are left to believe that there are permanent, lethal "smog banks" blanketing much of the former United States, even after decades of reduced population and no industrial output. Strangely, there is no wind-circulation in the future. More seriously, the story fails to take a world view, as

of the world are still in existence, then why did only New York collapse, and in any case, why are the tourist Africans marvelling at the size of it all, when presumably London and Tokyo are still around, still inhabited, and *bigger*? If this is not the case, then the world is dotted with ruins of such cities, so why is New York so unique?

The best of the newer stories is also set in New York: "Street Meat," an action story about homeless cannibals and lost dogs in the Big Apple. It's very vivid, very gritty, meaningfully absurd, though Spinrad's attempts at future slang only serve to remind us how real people are unlikely to talk the way they do in much SF. (Gardner Dozois made this point after seeing a play with dialogue like "Centralgov will get you ...") I imagine this as a movie, with Sigourney Weaver as the hard-bitten heroine, trying to mouth "Snap your yaps, or I'll ice your dice, lice!" without the audience laughing.

Then we have "World War Last," in which a sex-maniac American president and an animated zombie Soviet premier save the world — pure slapstick, as if the Three Stooges were doing an X-rated version of *Dr. Strangelove*; and "La Vie Continue," in which Spinrad himself is a character, an exile in France, and the subject of wild buy-out bids by both the CIA and KGB.

It's funny, but much too long, and frequently narcissistic as everyone carries on about how great a writer Spinrad is, who has, alas, never been recognized in his own country.

Rating: ☆ ☆ 1/2 □

Alien Publisher

(Continued from page 31)

years now, and I can hardly take it any more. The ice cream parlor where you make your own sundae. The Sunday morning buffet brunch. The automatic teller machine at the bank. Direct-dial telephone calls. Self-service gasoline stations. In this world of the salad bar ethic, I am afraid there is only one place left where you can get someone to wait on you: the Post Office. □

10¢ a word?

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if New York were the sum and total of 20th-century civilization. One asks: if the other large cities



ABORIGINES

By Laurel Lucas

Hard SF?

SF lovers with a yen for hard-science fare can always count on the work of **Larry Niven** for satisfaction. Niven's Hugo- and Nebula-award-winning, 25-year career has produced "Neutron Star" and *Ringworld* and, with **Jerry Pournelle**, *Footfall* and *Lucifer's Hammer*, to name just a few.

We are delighted to bring you Niven's "The Wishing Game," a story set in a world where magic obeys very scientific laws.



Larry Niven

Niven's most recent book is a collaboration with Pournelle and **Steven Barnes** called *The Legacy of Heorot*. He's also been working on *The Barsoom Project* with Steven Barnes, which Ace is set to publish this year. "The Wishing Game" will appear in the *Arabesques II* anthology later this year.

The photo of Niven shows him dressed in Regency attire for a party in Brighton, England. The occasion was the publication of *The Ringworld Engineers*.

When *The Ringworld Engineers* was serialized in *Galileo* magazine a decade ago, the cover and illustrations were done by **Cortney Skinner**, who is also the illustrator for "The Wishing Game."

David Brin gives us more in-

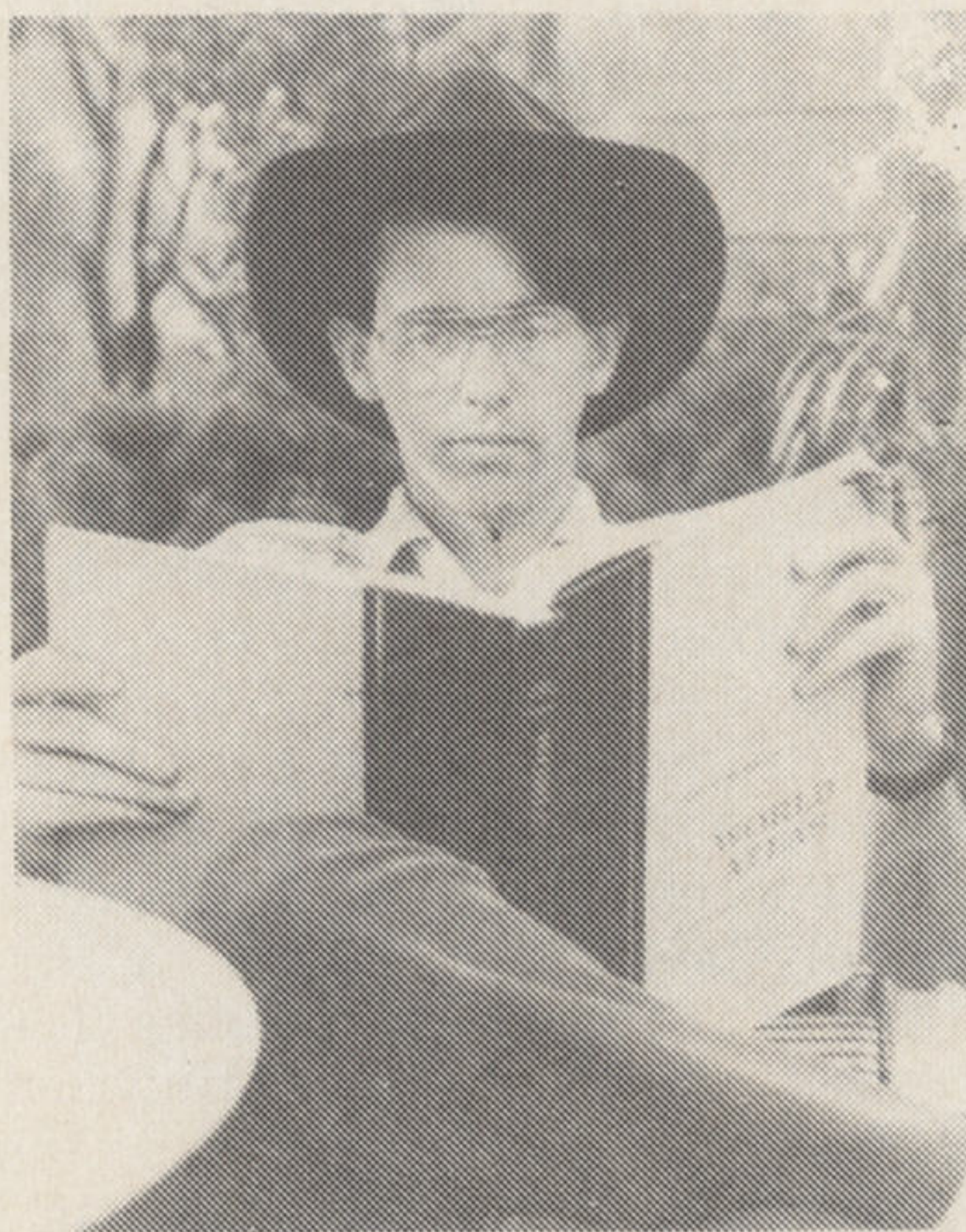
sights on the relationship between science and magic in Part II of his essay, "Science and the Fantastic: The Image of the Magician."

Brin is the award-winning author of *The Uplift War* and *Startide Rising*. He says his eighth book, *Earth*, is now up to a quarter of a million words and will be published by Bantam.

Film director **Richard Donner** (of *Superman* fame) is reportedly interested in turning Brin's *The Postman* into a Warner Brothers movie. When I spoke to Brin he was just back from Utah, where he skied for the first time in many years but also caught a dreadful cold.

Robert Metzger's Gonzo SF is back in "A Symbiotic Kind of Guy." I had to ask him how he came up with the main character. He told me he lives in an area where you can find very intense business people walking to and fro, taking little notice of anyone else. Metzger remembers thinking that "even if they had an alien growing out of the side of their head they wouldn't notice. The only thing they can relate to is selling more insurance policies." *Voila*.

Metzger is busy working on his second novel. The semiconductor physicist has also agreed to write a science column for *Aboriginal*. He'll be exploring actual science topics, "stuff on the edge, out there."



Robert A. Metzger



Larry Blamire

Larry Blamire has illustrated "Symbiotic Guy." Blamire the actor is appearing in the play "Murder at Rutherford House," which is entering its seventh month at Boston's Wilbur Theatre. Blamire the writer is taking some time out from writing plays to write some short stories.

Larry's story "In the Days of the Steam Wars," written with **Eugene Potter**, appeared in the last issue of *Galaxy* magazine back before "steam punk" became a marketing phrase. Now he is writing another story set in that same Victorian-style, warfaring universe, and it's titled "The Bounty Wing."

"Eating Memories" is a story by **Pat Anthony**. Her half-dozen *Aboriginal* stories to date include "Good Neighbor" in the Sept.-Oct. 1988 issue and "Anomaly" in the Nov.-Dec. 1988 issue. Both received nominations to the preliminary Nebula list.

Anthony says she recently tried to quit smoking and discovered she couldn't write anymore, so she went back to those nasty cigs.

She's turning her talents to horror lately. Her story "The Name of the Demon" will appear in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and "The Murcheson Boy" is coming out in *Weird Tales*.

Pat says she is trying to knock out



Cortney Skinner doing his research for "Three If by Norton"

a short story a weekend and has written several chapters of a new novel.

"Eating Memories" is illustrated by **Cortney Skinner**, who says he loves illustrating Pat Anthony stories because they get the reader (and the artist) so emotionally involved.

Cortney used friend Larry Blamire's likeness for that of the ambassador in the story.

Skinner bravely spends two afternoons a week teaching art to elementary school kids in an after-school program. He says he likes checking out "what's going on in their little minds" but admits that by the end of the second day he is "wasted."

Cortney says he recently painted something just for himself. It's a small still life after the 17th-century Dutch masters, and it now hangs on his wall.

"Jim-Bob and the Alien" is written by **Mary Talla Serio** and **Vivian Vande Velde**, who met through a local writers group in Rochester, N.Y. Both women saw promise in work the other had given up on, and a collaboration was born.

"Jim-Bob" was Serio's idea,



Carol Heyer

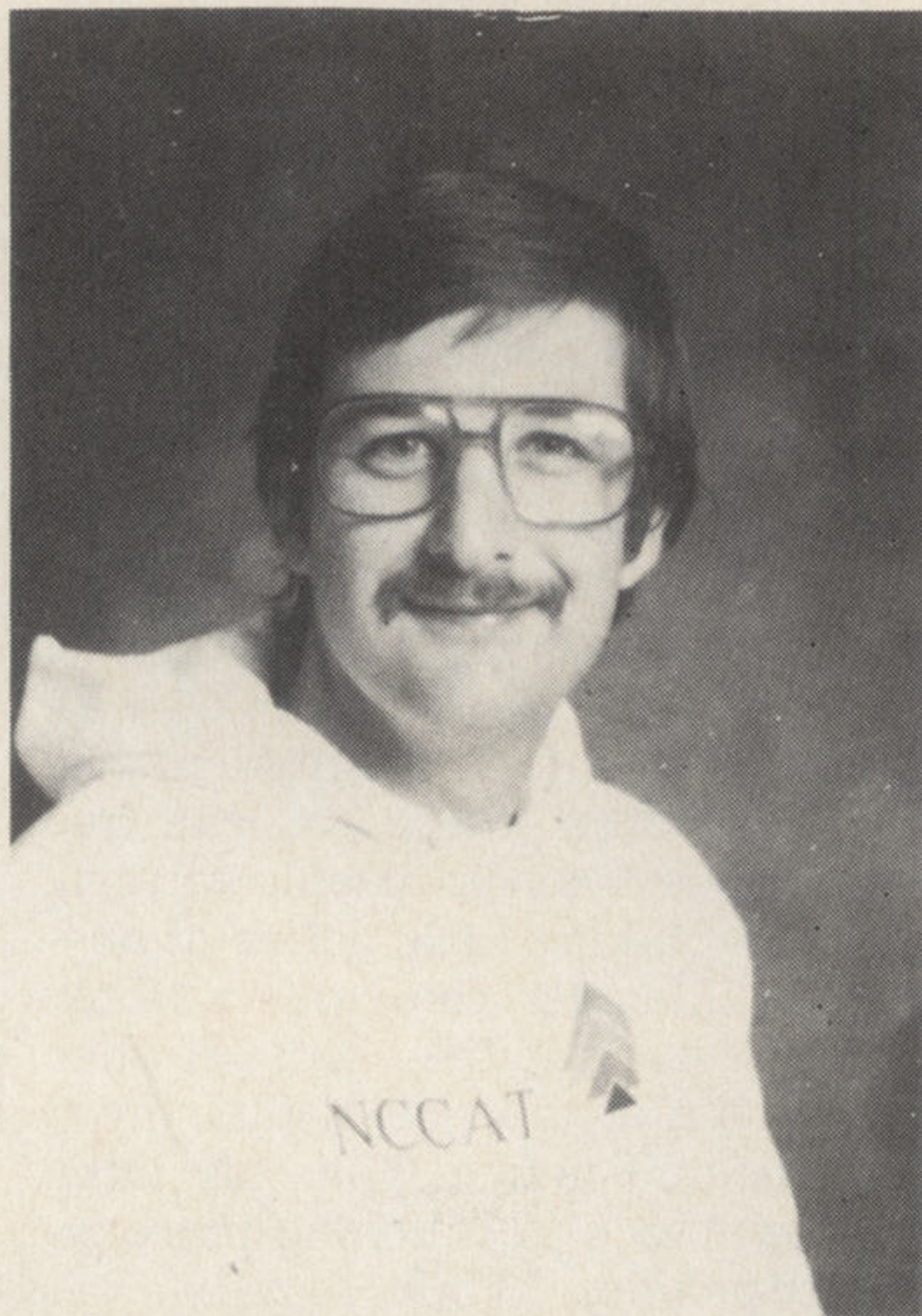
reshaped by Vande Velde. Talla says it was fun working with Vivian, "though I wanted Jim-Bob to wear earmuffs for the rest of his life and she nixed it."

Separately, Serio is finishing up a suspense/mystery novel. Vande Velde has written more than a dozen short stories for children and adults. Her book *A Hidden Magic* was published in 1985, and another novel of hers is due out later this year from the same publisher, Crown.

"Jim-Bob" is illustrated by **Carol Heyer**, who has the distinction of earning the cover spot with her very first *Aboriginal* assignment.

Heyer makes her living as a script writer for the film industry. She is the author of the screenplay "Thunder Run," and is negotiating the sale of another action/adventure screenplay called "Death Play."

Heyer's art has been on the cover



Warren G. Rochelle

of *Dragon* magazine and she's written and illustrated several children's books.

Her latest book, *Beauty and the Beast*, is due out from Ideals Publishing in the fall of 1989.

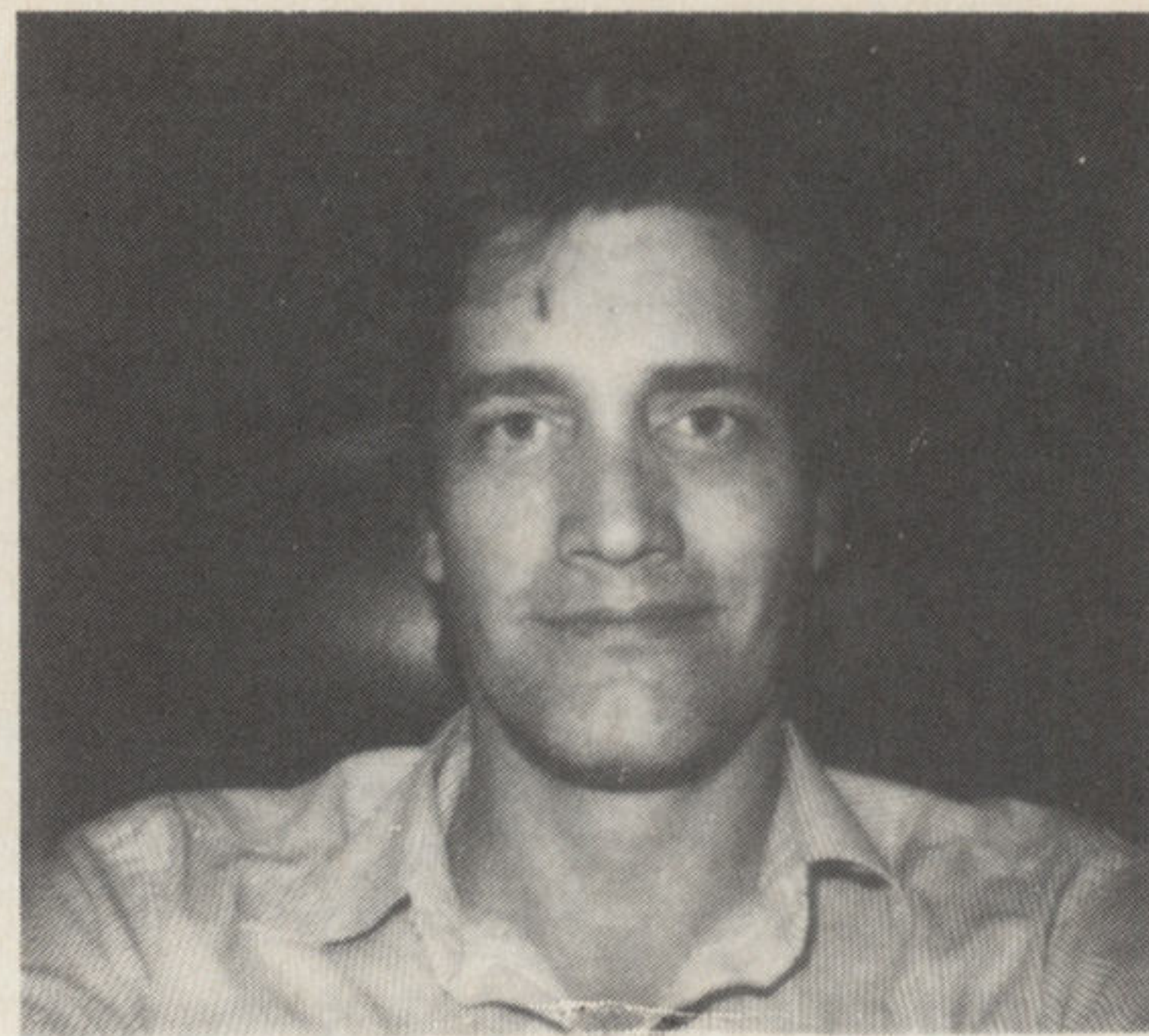
"A Peaceful Heart" is written by **Warren G. Rochelle**. It's one of 10 SF stories he is writing or has written that are set in the same alternate universe.

He sold his first story, "The Book of Days," to *Starwind* in 1987. Rochelle says he fell in love with science fiction and fantasy in the third grade and decided he wanted to be a writer. He lives in North Carolina, where he is a school librarian by day.

"A Peaceful Heart" is illustrated by **Byron Taylor**.

Taylor's latest work includes illustrations for the Vonda McIntyre book *Starfarer*.

But Taylor has been having a tough time with painting and



Byron Taylor

sculpting in recent weeks. He's got tendinitis in his right hand. The hand has been in splints ever since he made the mistake of dropping a bed on it.

Taylor is trying all kinds of remedies to avoid surgery, even a Chinese plaster made of musk and tiger bone. He says the hand *has* to improve soon because fly-fishing season is fast approaching.

Janice M. Eisen, who writes our "From the Bookshelf" column, will be writing a mystery criticism column for *Mystery Scene* magazine. She says the magazine focuses on news, reviews and commentary, and she'll be doing in-depth reviews of mystery books.

Well known editor and anthologist **David G. Hartwell** will be teaching a summer course on writing SF at Harvard University. For more information write to: Harvard University Summer School 1989, 20 Garden Street, Cambridge, MA 02134, or call (617) 495-2494. □

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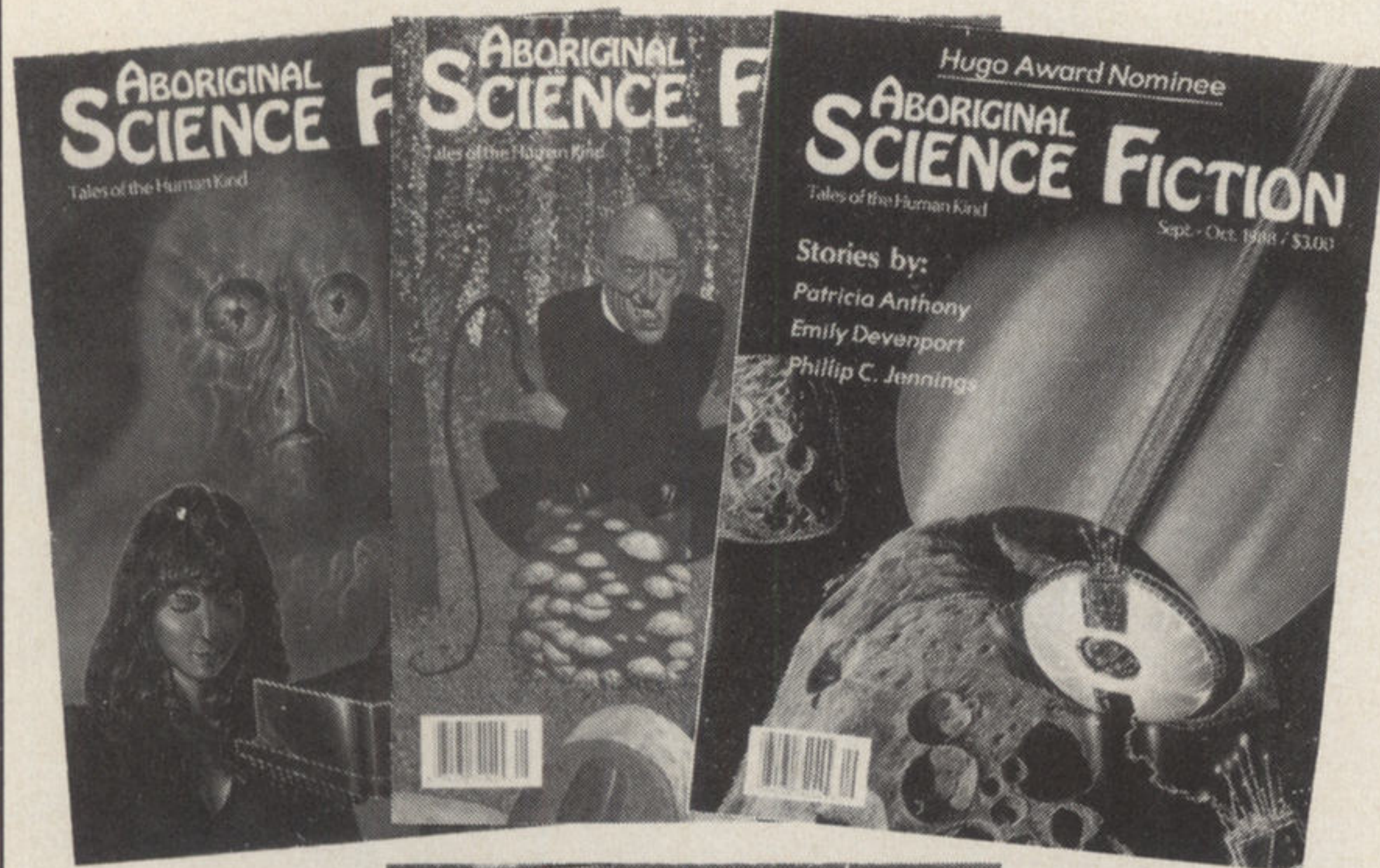
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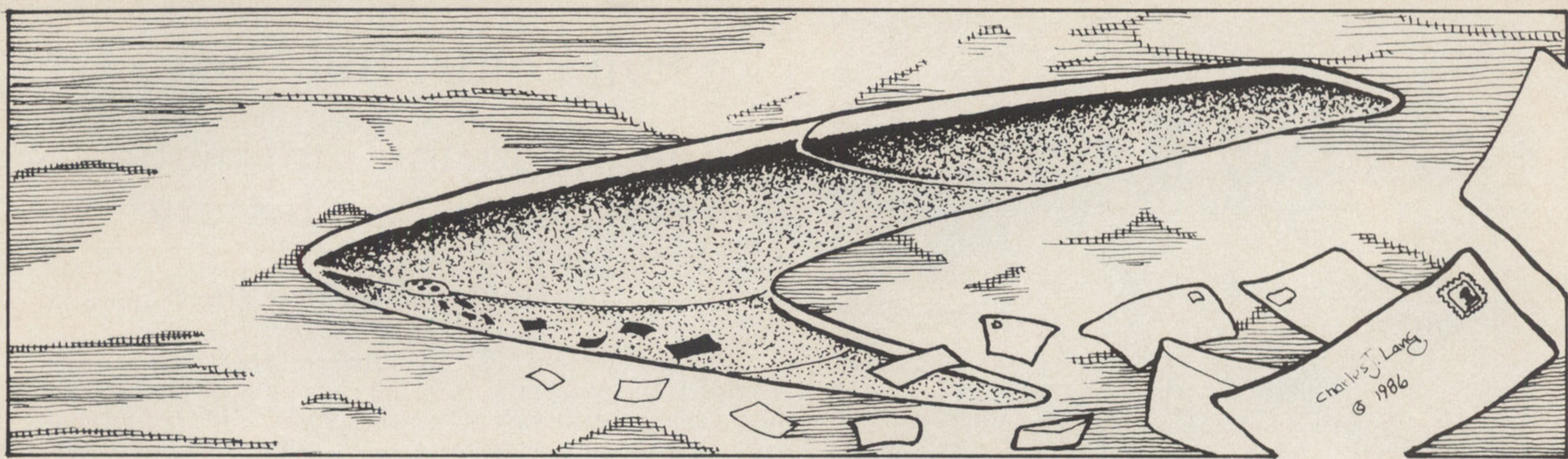
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Boomerangs

Comments From Our Readers

Dear *Aboriginal*,

I, a loyal and charter subscriber, have a few comments about issue No. 12. First to the august Mr. Ellison. Sir, (really makes you feel old, doesn't it?) every single point you made in your essay has been made before about different artists at different times. It all has to do with the human habit of over-reacting, as displayed by your essay and my letter. By the way, did you know that another hair goes gray every time someone calls you sir, sir. My other point for Mr. Ellison is this. I am a devoted, albeit young, fan of Robert Heinlein, and it is my opinion that you have slighted the late master's influence on your "New Wave." Did you omit mention of his early forays into speculative fiction on the grounds that he wasn't, to borrow your phrase, so kneejerk liberal as your contemporaries? Perhaps I just missed the point, but in future I hope that you will leave trend bashing to hypocrites such as myself.

Enough small talk. To Mr. Ryan and his less visible compatriots I give my humblest thanks for creating such an inspirational magazine. Damned magnanimous of me considering your rejections of my stories. Then, writers must learn to accept these things (especially when they're as bad as me). One minor complaint, though. Due to your magazine, I have been forced to buy an unabridged dictionary (or so they say). I don't understand how you people expect to compete against television and comic books. Do you really believe that people would rather be forced to think about your stories than be entertained without so much effort as wondering how many times they've seen this lot before? Be serious!

At least a few words for those who have contributed to this rising force in science-fiction: amazing, astounding, awakening, brilliant, beautiful, creative... (I'll get back to you around "W").

PAGE 52

Your fan,
Robert Fleck
San Ramon, Calif.

P.S. I was wondering, Mr. Ryan. How many people have mentioned that your initials bear a remarkable resemblance to those of a famous rock band?

Harlan Ellison replies:

Mr. Fleck can take umbrage that I didn't mention Bob Heinlein in my reminiscence of the New Wave period, if he so wishes; but I suggest he add to "the offense" no mention of Lord Dunsany, Edward Bellamy, Murray Leinster, Charles Dickens and the Bronte sisters. I didn't mention Marcel Proust, either. That's because none of the above — including Bob Heinlein, who was a friend, and whose work I mainly respect and continue to enjoy — had anything to do with the New Wave. Such as it was. So Mr. Fleck cobbles up a paper tiger. It don't apply, Mr. Fleck — it don't parse.

Dear Charlie,

Harlan Ellison's article is valuable as a primary document of the New Wave Wars, as essential to the historian as would be soldierly memoirs by men who were there to someone trying to write the true story of the Gallipoli Campaign. It tells us how one of the participants saw things and how he felt, this filtered through twenty years of subsequent memory.

It's not the whole story by any means. Now, I don't think anyone would deny that the New Wave had a wonderful, liberating influence, and that the subsequent SF was (where the writers wanted it to be) more mature as a result of all this having gone on; but it was not an unmixed blessing.

What Harlan doesn't tell us is that *New Worlds*, under the editorship of

Moorcock and his friends (in the later issues it's a bewildering round of musical chairs), died a lingering death, shrinking from a readership in the reasonable thousands to just a few hundred by issue No. 201 in 1970. He doesn't tell us that it was revived in paperback, quickly dropped by its American publishers, to die *another* lingering death, with several of the later volumes never published in America. And after that it was revived as a kind of fanzine around 1980, only to die a lingering death...

Nor does he tell us that *Orbit*, although it lasted 21 volumes, lost its paperback publisher after Volume 13 and declined in influence thereafter; or that *Quark* died almost instantly.

What he doesn't tell you is that the New Wave image/label became a kind of publishing equivalent of bubonic plague. It killed anything it touched. The one *fact* I would dispute in Harlan's article is that the masses stampeded to embrace this stuff, leaving J.J. Pierce trampled behind in the dust.

Quite the opposite. They stampeded to embrace Larry Niven and James Hogan and *Star Wars*. There was a period in the mid-'70s when SF publishers tried very hard to remove any possible New Wave taint from their product, and all the covers suddenly had spaceships and robots on them. No more Leo & Diane Dillon abstracts. (To our great loss. The Dillons have been more than able to get better-paying work elsewhere.)

This led the decidedly untrampled reactionaries to announce a simplistic conclusion summed up in two words: "We won."

Well, no they didn't. A true synthesis had occurred, but the economic damage had been done.

What the public was so furiously stampeding away from was all the material in *New Worlds* and *Orbit* and *Quark* that you *don't* hear about today. Yes, those publications included

May/June 1989

many wonderful classics, some of which, surely, could not have appeared anywhere else.

But they also included a lot of pretentious junk, tightly written little lumps of paragraphs reminiscent of what you see in academic (or even undergraduate) literary magazines: the works of Langdon Jones, James Sallis, and Graham Charnock; Michael Butterworth's ridiculous attempts to be William Burroughs.

These are not names to conjure with today, but there's an important lesson in this for writers and editors: *there have to be minimum standards*. Every fiction entry in a magazine or anthology has to be a *story*, not what little magazine editors call a "prose piece" or what fans used to call a "New Wave thing." Readers will reject anything else. If a book contains four brilliant stories and six bits of incomprehensible fluff, the reader is going to feel burned. What you need are those four brilliant stories plus the other six which are somehow also stories.

So what readers were objecting to was not that New Wave material was allegedly anti-scientific or depressing or unpatriotic or perverted, but that much of it had no discernible content at all. For a brief period there, about 1966-70, it became possible to publish "fiction" in the SF market without

having any ability to write stories at all. You didn't have to know character, structure, plot; you didn't need fresh ideas or insights.

Happily, Harlan didn't succumb to this nearly as much as Knight or Moorcock or Merril did. That's why his work is still popular and why people still read the *Dangerous Visions* books. But other editors did. The contents of *Quark* are not endlessly reprinted.

So, the New Wave looks much better in hindsight. We remember the classics. We forget how *bad* much of the contents of *New Worlds* was. I recommend that readers find those issues and see for themselves. (We're talking about the entire Moorcock editorship, not just the later, "revamped" issues, so that means *New Worlds* 143-201.)

As for the damage this did, the most lingering and regrettable effect of the New Wave is that it is increasingly hard for good British writers to get published at all anymore. Anyone who was too closely identified with the image of "arty books that don't sell" is still anathema in the very sales-conscious publishing industry of today. Numerous Keith Roberts books don't get published in the U.S. Numerous R.A. Lafferty books only see specialty-press publication, sometimes only in Britain.

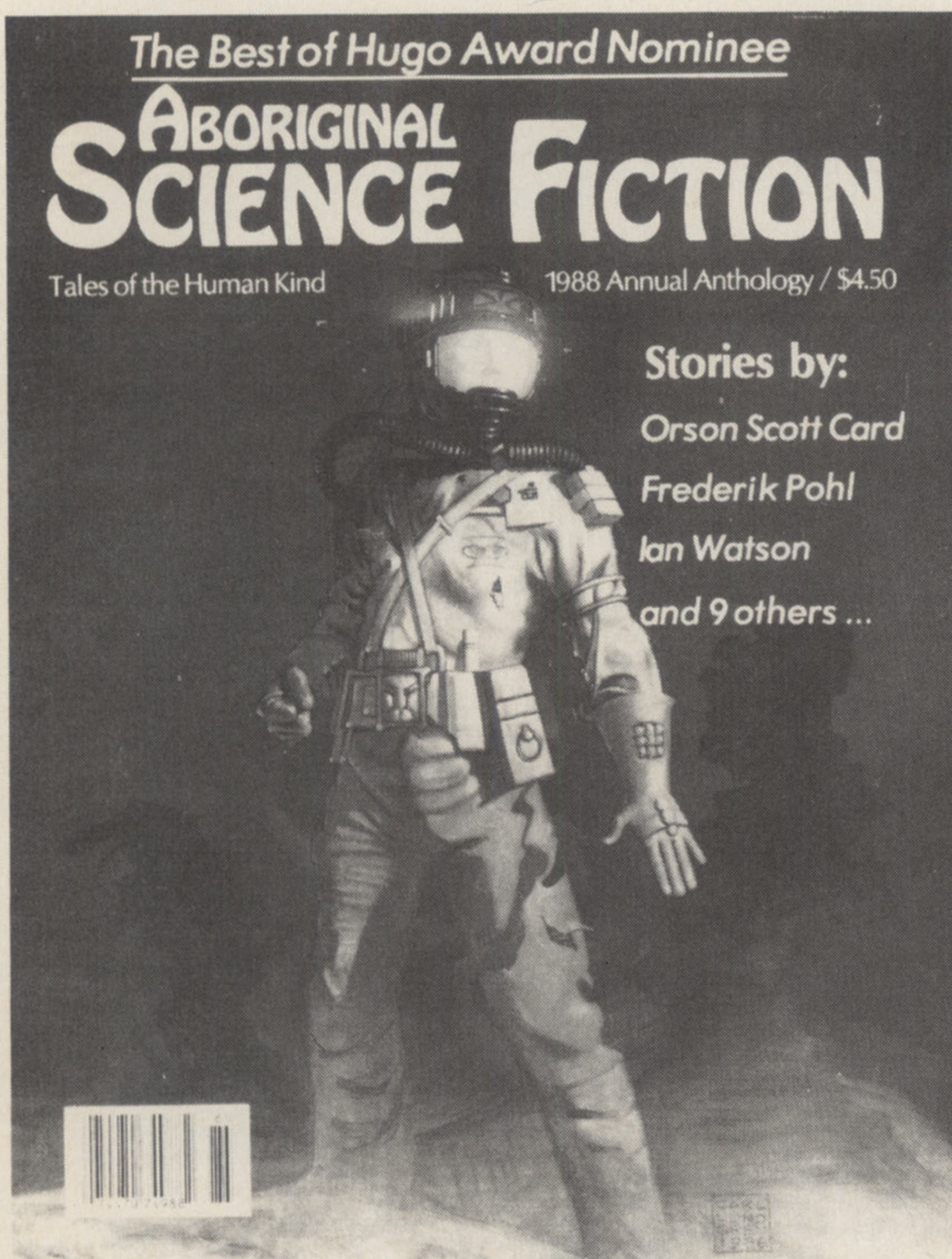
Even as tremendous a figure as J.G. Ballard was knocked out of the running for years, only to recover with the wider recognition *Empire of the Sun* brought him. For years Ballard books like *Hello America* (which has seen its 1st American edition in the past year; first publication in Britain, 1981), *Low Flying Aircraft*, and *Myths of the Near Future* appeared only in Britain. My experience as a used-book dealer often gave me a feel for what the current fans knew. Young readers, I discovered, eagerly bought early '60s Ballard paperbacks, but they didn't know he had written anything in 20 years. More than one asked me, "Is he still alive?"

So the New Wave was not an unmitigated triumph. Its immediate effect was to convince readers and editors that literarily ambitious books and particularly literarily ambitious British books were to be avoided. So they have been. This has impoverished us all.

It's quite another matter, which I won't discuss now, how much damage the New Wave did to the original-anthology market. I think Moorcock, Knight, and Delany between them were fully as destructive as Roger Elwood. Another legacy of the New

(Continued to page 58)

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Wishing Game

(Continued from page 6)

the ground.

The Frightener didn't rise into the air; he *grew*. At a mile tall he could scan everything to the north. Xyloshan was a village of fifteen or sixteen hundred with a tall, crude bell tower, two hundred miles distant. If he hurled Clubfoot through the air in a parabola ...

He couldn't. It was too far and he didn't have sufficient magic. Just as well. It would have ended the game early.

He still had two choices.

Clubfoot had made the wrong wish. It could not be fulfilled. The afright could simply say so. Or ...

He laughed. He shrank to twenty feet or so. He picked up Clubfoot, tucked him under his arm and ran. He covered twelve miles in ten minutes (weak!) and stopped with a jar. He set Clubfoot down in the sand. The man lay gasping. His hands had a deathgrip on the ropes that bound the gold cube.

"Here I must stop," Kreezerast said. "I must not venture where there is no *manna*."

The man's breathing gradually eased. He rolled to his knees. In a moment he'd realize that his minuscule water supply lay twelve miles behind him.

Kreezerast needled him. "And your third wish, my rescuer?"

"Whoof! That was quite a ride. Are you sure rescuer is the word you want?" Clubfoot stood and looked about him. He spoke as if to himself. "All right, where's the smoke? Mirandee!"

"Why should I not say *rescuer*?"

"Your kind can't tolerate boredom. You built those little bottles as refuges. When you're highly compressed and there's no light or sound, you go to sleep. You sleep until something wakes you up."

"You know us very well, do you?"

"I've read a great deal."

"What are you looking for?"

"Smoke. It isn't here. Something must have happened to Mirandee. *Mirandee!*"

"You have a companion? I can find her, if such is your wish." He had already found her. There was a patch of scarlet cloth at the top of a dune, and a small canopy pitched on the north side, two hundred paces west.

Clubfoot played the game well. He had a companion waiting just this side of the border between magic and no magic, on a line between Xyloshan Village and Kreezerast's refuge. The afright had taken him almost straight to her. And to their camp, where waited two more loadbeasts and their water supply.

A puff of wind could cover that scarlet blanket with sand ...

An afright would have gloated over his two victories. The man merely picked up his gold and walked. In a moment he was jogging, then running flat out, testing his symmetrical feet and newly youthful legs. He bellowed, "Mirandee!" half in the joy of new youth, half in desperation. He ran straight up the side

of a tall dune, spraying sand. At the top he looked about him, and favored Kreezerast with a poisonous glare. Then he was running again.

Kreezerast's little whirlwind had buried the scarlet marker. But of course: the man had failed to find it, but he'd seen a dying whirlwind!

Kreezerast followed, taking his time.

The man was in the shade of the canopy, bending over a woman. Kreezerast stopped as his highly sensitive ears picked up Clubfoot's near-whisper. "I came as quick as I could. Oh, Mirandee! Hang on, Mirandee, stay with me, we're almost there."

The Frightener could study her more thoroughly now: a very old woman, tall and still straight. An aura of magic, nearly gone. She was unconscious and days from death. The golden cube lay beside her, pushed up against her ribs. Wild magic ... it might reinforce some old spell.

Once upon a time, a man had wished for a woman who didn't want him. Kreezerast found her and brought her to him, but he made no effort to hide where she had gone. He'd watched her relatives take their vengeance. Humans took their lusts seriously ... but this woman did not seem a proper object for lust. She'd be thirty or forty years older than he.

The man must have thought the Frightener was out of earshot. He rubbed her knobby hand. "We got this far. The bottle was there. The afright was there. The magic was there. The first spell worked. Look at me. Can you see? It worked!"

Her eyes opened. She stirred.

"Don't mind the wrinkles. I don't *hurt* anywhere. Here, feel!" He wrapped the woman's fingers around his left foot. "The second spell, he did just as we thought. I don't think we'll even need —" The man looked up. He raised his voice. "Frightener, this is Mirandee."

Kreezerast approached. "Your mate?"

"Close enough. My companion. My final wish is that Mirandee be healthy."

This was too much. "You know we hate boredom. It is discourteous of you to make two wishes that are the same."

Clubfoot picked up the gold, turned his back and walked away. "I'll remain as courteous as possible," he snarled over his shoulder. "I remind you that you carried me facing backward. Was that discourteous, or did you consider it a joke?"

"A joke. Here's another. Your ... companion must be nearly one hundred years old. A healthy woman of that age would be dead."

"Hah hah. Nobody dead is healthy. I already know that you can fulfill my wish."

Kreezerast wondered if the man would use the gold to bribe him. *That* would be amusing. "I point out also that you are not truly my rescuer —"

"Am I not? Haven't I rescued you from boredom? Aren't you enjoying the wishing game?" Clubfoot was shouting over his shoulder across a gap of twenty paces. In fact he had walked beyond the region where magic lived, while Kreezerast was still looking for ways to twist his third wish.

That easily, he was beyond Kreezerast's vengeance. "You have bested me. I admit it, but I can

limit your satisfaction. One more word from you and I kill the woman."

Clubfoot nodded. He spread a robe from the saddlebags against the side of a dune and made himself comfortable on it.

No curses, no pleading, no bribe? Kreezerast said, "Speak your one word."

"Wait."

What? "I won't hurt her. Speak."

The man's voice now showed no anger. "Our biggest danger was that we would find you to be stupid."

"Well?"

"I think we've been lucky. A stupid afright would have been very dangerous."

The man spoke riddles. Kreezerast turned to black smoke and drifted south, beaten and humiliated.

Once upon a time a man had wished to be taller. Kreezerast had lengthened his bones and left the muscles and tendons alone. Over time he'd healed. A woman had wished for beauty; Kreezerast had given her an afright's beauty. Afterward men admired her eerie, abstract loveliness, but never wished her favors ... and she was one who had shied from men.

But no man had ever bested him like this!

What did the magician expect? Kreezerast had watched men evolve over the thousands of years. He had watched magicians strip the land of magic, until better species died or changed. He had no reason to love men, nor to keep his promises to a lesser breed.

The bottle beckoned ... but Kreezerast rose into the air. High, higher; three miles, ten. Was there any sign of his own kind? None at all. Patches where *mana* still glowed strong? None. Here and there were encampments, muffled men and women attended by strange misshapen beasts. Men had taken the world.

The world had changed. It would change again. Kreezerast the Frightener would wait in his refuge until something or someone dug him up. A companion would come ... and would hear the tale. Afrights didn't lie to each other.

So be it. At least he need not confess to killing the woman out of mere spite. Let her man watch her die over the next few days. Let him tend her while his water dwindled.

The key to survival was to live only through interesting times.

Here was the bottle. Now, where ...

Where was the stopper?

The stopper bore afright's magic. Sand would not hide it.

Gold would. Wild magic would hide the magic in the stopper. It was a box, a box!

The camp was untouched. The woman had not moved. Her breathing was labored.

Clubfoot lay against the next dune. He had gone for the beasts and the supplies in their saddle bags. He said nothing. The golden cube glowed at his feet.

Kreezerast said, "Very well. You can reach Xyloshan Village and I cannot stop you, if you are willing to abandon the woman. So. You win."

Clubfoot said, "Why do I want to talk to a liar?"

The answer was obvious enough. "For the

woman."

"And why will you stoop to bargaining with a mere man?"

"For the stopper. But I can make another."

"Can you? I could never make another Mirandee." The man sat up. "We feared you would twist the third wish somehow. We never dreamed you'd refuse to grant it at all."

He would have to remake stopper *and* bottle, for they were linked. And he could do that, but not here, nor anywhere on this *mana*-poor desert. Perhaps nowhere.

He said, "Give me the stopper and I will grant your third wish, or any other you care to make."

"But I don't trust you."

"Trust this, then. I can repair this Mirandee's nerves. In fact ... yes." He looked deep into her body, deep into her fine structure. This one had never been crippled. She'd never borne children either. Odd. It was humankind's only form of immortality.

Clear out the capillaries, clean the jugulars and carotids, repair the heart. Now she cannot die inconveniently. More blood flows to the brain. Myelin sheaths are becoming inert. Fix it. Nerves return to life.

She stirred, flung out an arm. Her breathing was faster now.

Kreezerast called, "So sensation has returned —"

She whispered, "Clubfoot?" She rolled over, and squeaked with pain. She saw the tremendous man-shape above her; studied it without blinking, then rolled to her knees and faced north. "Clubfoot. Stay there," she croaked. "Well done!" He couldn't have heard her.

"So her sensation has returned and her mind is active too," the Frightener called. "Now she can feel and understand pain. I will give her pain. Do you trust my word?"

"Let us see if you trust mine," the man called. "I will never give the stopper to you. Never. Mirandee must do that for me. You must persuade her to do that."

Persuade? Torture! Until she begged to do him any service he asked. But then she must go and get the stopper, where magic failed ... fool. Fool!

The Frightener shrank until he stood some seven feet tall. He said, "Woman, your paramour has wished you to be healthy. If I make you healthy, will you give me that which he holds in ransom?"

She blinked. "Yes."

"Will you also keep me company for a day?" Postpone. Delay. Wait. "Tell me stories. The world is not familiar to me any more."

Her thoughts were slow ... and careful. "I will do that, if you will give me food and water. As for keeping you company —"

"I speak of social intercourse," he said quickly. To show Clubfoot's woman that an afright was a better mate would have been entertaining. *If* they were lovers. She was far older than he was ... but there were spells to keep a woman young. Had been spells. She had been a powerful magician, he saw that. In fact (that unwinking gaze, as if he were being judged by an equal!), this whole plan might have been hers.

He had lost. He was even losing his anger. They had *known* the danger. What a gamble they had taken! And Kreezerast must even be polite to this woman, and persuade her not to break her promise after she had walked beyond his reach.

He said, "Then tell me how you almost brought the Moon to Earth. But first I will heal you. This will hurt." He set to work. She screamed a good deal; and so he kept that promise too.

Bones, joints, tendons: he healed them all. Ovaries were shrunken, but not all eggs were gone; they could be brought to life. Glands. Stomach. Gut. Kreezerast continued until she was a young woman writhing and gasping, new inside and withered outside.

Clubfoot did not run to his lady to help her in her pain.

They might still make a mistake. If nothing else thwarted them, perhaps he had one last joke to play.

She'd feel the wrinkles when she touched her face! But wrinkles do not constitute ill health. But she *must* give him the stopper. Kreezerast pulled her skin smooth, face and hands and forearms (but not where cloth covers her. Hah! She'll never notice until it's too late!) legs, belly, breasts, pectoral muscles too (She might).

The sun had gone. He set sand afire for warmth and summoned up a king's banquet. Clubfoot stayed in his place of safety and chewed dried meat. She didn't touch the wine. Mirandee and the Frightener ate together, and talked long, while Clubfoot listened at a distance.

He told her of the tinker and his family who had wished for jewels, once upon a time. He'd given them eighty pounds of jewels. They had one horse and a travois. A hundred curious villagers were swarming

to where they had seen the looming, smoky form of an afright.

But the tinker and his wife had thrown handfuls of jewels about the road and into the low bushes, and fled for a day before they stopped to hide what they kept. Forty years later their grandchildren were wealthy merchants.

Mirandee had seen the last god die, and it was a harrowing tale. She spoke of a changed world, where powerless sorcerers were becoming artists and artisans and musicians, where men learned to fish for themselves because the merpeople were gone, where war was fought with bloody blades and no magic at all.

Almost he was tempted to see more of it. But what would he see? If he ventured where the *manna* was gone, he would go mythical.

Presently he watched her sleep. Boring.

They talked the morning and afternoon away. At evening Mirandee folded the canopy and gathered the blankets and bedding and walked away with it all on her shoulders. She had been strong; she was strong again. She crossed the barrier between magic and no magic. Kreezerast could do nothing. She came back to collect food and wine left over from the banquet, and crossed again.

She and her man set up their camp. Kreezerast heard them talking and laughing. He saw Clubfoot's hands wander beneath the woman's robes, and was relieved: he had not fooled *himself*, at least. *What of the stopper?*

Neither had mentioned it at all.

He waited. He would not beg.

Mirandee took Clubfoot's golden cube. She carried it to the margin of magic. Her magical sense was gone; would she cross? No, they'd marked it. She swung the cube by the straps and hurled it several feet.

Kreezerast picked it up. The wild magic hurt his hands. There was no lid. He pulled the soft metal apart and had the stopper.

Time to sleep.

He let himself become smoke, and let the smoke thin. The humans ignored him. Perhaps they thought he had gone away; perhaps they didn't care. He hovered.

The canopy and the darkness hid their lovemaking, but it couldn't hide their surging, flashing auras. Magic was being made in that dead region. They were lovers indeed, if they had not been before. And Kreezerast grinned and turned toward his bottle.

In her youth she had chosen not to bear children.

Kreezerast had given them their health in meticulous detail. The ex-sorceress's glandular system was in fine shape now. Her natural lust to mate had already set their auras blazing again. She'd have a dozen children before time caught up with her, unless she chose abstinence, and abstinence would be a hardship on her.

Some human cultures considered many children a blessing. Some did not. Certainly their traveling days were over; they'd never get past that little village. And Kreezerast the Frightener crawled into his bottle and pulled the stopper after him. □

Editor's Notes?

Oops, looks like I goofed again. There's no room for my "Editor's Notes" column this issue, in part because of a longer than usual story and an extra column.

Don't breath a sigh of relief, though. I'll be back next issue with more tidbits to munch on or completely ignore.

In the interim, though, we are still getting questions about our non-existent July-August 1988 issue. To repeat. It doesn't exist. We skipped the date on the cover to get our distribution in line with the dates used by our distributors. Issue No. 10 had the May-June 1988 cover date and issue No. 11 had the Sept.-Oct. cover date. And we told you we would be skipping the July-August cover date in our May issue. This year, there will be a July-August issue, but we have heard that the government is thinking of canceling those two months to get them in line with our issues.

Next issue we'll announce the results of our first reader's poll and give out our first Boomerang awards. □



G. '39

Boomerangs

(Continued from page 53)

Wave the current field has to struggle with.

Cheers,
Darrell Schweitzer
Strafford, Pennsylvania

Harlan Ellison replies:

Darrell Schweitzer's truly astonishing decade-long run of missing the point continues. This is a talent Guinness has overlooked for goodness knows what reason, but genuinely amazing, withal; approached in singularity only by Darrell's ability to obsess over historical minutiae as wrongheaded as it is inconsequential.

The problem that arises in trying to unbend all the warped statements Darrell makes, is that one must not be otherwise employed. If we deal charitably with Darrell's pages-long rewriting of reality, and limit the errors *passim* his letter to, say, only one per sentence, then it becomes clear that one would have to write a 5,000 word essay to attempt to explain away all of Darrell's "have you stopped beating your wife" paralogia and non sequiturs.

Sadly, for all those who would enjoy seeing others get into a scrap, I have an already ongoing existence, and, well, shucks, I'd love to spend the next two days refuting most of Darrell's monumentally silly assertions but I see by my datebook that I have to feed the starving masses in Albania, raise the Titanic, practice for the Super Bowl, and discover penicillin ... so I know the readers will let me off the hook with just this one overall observation:

Darrell suggests that anyone foolish enough to think The New Wave was more a positive force than a waste of time, go back and re-read *all* the work published in the hundreds of books, anthologies, magazines and journals of that ten-year period. And by so doing, the gulled naif would perceive that there was just a whole lotta low-quality writing. Which process — even if one were dopey enough to do it — and even if one were able to locate all those publications — and even if one weren't smart enough to know that Sturgeon's Law applied to New Wave writing as appropriately as it does to everything else (with the exception of Darrell Schweitzer insights into the way the universe runs) — said process would prove only that the totality of New Wave writing during that long period was no nobler, in proportion, than the totality of memorable writing from the Thirties, from the "Golden Age" of the Forties, from the "breakthrough" period of the Fif-

ties, or the current run of postmodern and cyberpunk writing. The good lives on, the dreck sinks into justified obscurity.

The *point* of it all, that Darrell perceives only as a dim star on the horizon, is that the value of The New Wave was to break the hold on individual writers of the restraints that had proliferated in the genre for more than forty years. What was good was the sense of freedom, what was bad was the usual, predictable, hardly startling inability of the mass of writers — who are *always* more mediocre than the talents who rise to the top and become *causes celebres* — to take that freedom and transcend their own limited abilities. What the hell's so shattering about that?

As in every period of literary restructuring and innovation, the exemplary are remembered, the failed efforts are relegated to dusty archives, pored over only by, well, you know what sort of revisionists dote on the failures. That's called seeing the trees, but not the forest. Otherwise, Darrell is a very nice guy.

Dear Folks at *Aboriginal*,

I had planned to order early in order to save a few dollars when an unexpected event occurred. I had been on the list for a kidney transplant for only 4 months when in June I was called in to have my transplant. It happened much sooner than I had expected. I was away from home for one month and when I got back you wouldn't believe the mountain of mail I had to go through. So with so much happening I just plain forgot! (*We hope you have a full recovery.* — Ed.)

Your magazine is a joy to look forward to and a delight to read. Keep up the great work. My only complaint — 6 issues a year is not enough! Someday I'd love to look forward to 1 issue a month.

How about it? (*Patience ... we're working on it.* — Ed.)

Sincerely,
Karen Morton
Jacksonville, Oregon

Dear *Aboriginal*,

I cannot praise your magazine too highly. It has been invaluable, during a period of great stress and upheaval, to lift and sustain my flagging spirits. (I ration myself strictly: I only allow myself to read *Aboriginal* when I am feeling sufficiently low. Thus, I find myself actually impatient for bad moods!) I was in a prolonged agony of suspense wondering whether my request for back issues would be in time for me to be favored with one of the last of the now-unobtainable Nos. 4 and 5, yet fortune smiled. (*See page 19.* — Ed.)

My next impulse has been to try to share what I have found with others.

The New Jersey Library for the Blind and Handicapped provides reading material on cassettes free of charge to those that qualify. I have checked. Both *Analog* and *Isaac Asimov's* are available to the blind, but you are not! Since I have in the past done volunteer reading of books onto tape, I propose, with your permission, to rectify this omission. Do not deny these visions for mere lack of eyesight! Perhaps your artists would also be willing to supply written descriptions of their illustrations, inadequate as these must be.

Although I await your response, this time I will not be in suspense, having full confidence in the superb judgment of your editor, Charles C. Ryan. After all, it is clear from your publisher's inability to appreciate the implications inherent in the choice between garnet red and metallic gray that the alien does not perceive the visual spectrum in the same manner that we do, yet that does not impair its appreciation of literature.

(*We would very much like to make Aboriginal available to the blind, but we also legally must protect our authors' rights. If you have information on how this can be accomplished, please send it to us.* — Ed.)

Yours,
Eleanor Elizabeth Forman
Lawrence Twp., New Jersey

Dear Charles C. Ryan:

This marks the second time I was moved to take typer in hand by an editorial, and they were both your editorials! (We'll assume that's good.) I was fascinated by the cost breakdowns and circulation figures, the "a year in the life" of a struggling, growing, and, I will insist, profoundly *good SF* approach to format and, of course, SF art. Also, while I sincerely hope you take the newest piece I have submitted (re, your commitment to new writers) I can well appreciate your efforts to publish new work by big names. I'm really looking forward to the Niven stuff! (I always do.) Also, *Aboriginal* is well worth the price of a six-pack. Actually, I recommend the latest *Aboriginal* and a couple bottles of Harp for a near perfect evening.

Some of what you say, though, strikes at a larger problem I see — have seen for some time — plaguing us. I buy *Aboriginal* every two months at Waldenbooks. They have it placed, as John Fitzsimmons related in his letter, among the writers and arts magazines. Not only do I find *Aboriginal* at no other area outlets, but I see kids reading *Fangoria* and *Creem* at the rack who never notice your mag is even there. I started reading SF in the mid sixties because there was this little pharmacy on the

corner, and they carried *Galaxy* and *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and a few paperbacks, and the covers intrigued me (*Aboriginal* does well in this, by the way). Today, no drug stores, supermarkets, few mini-marts, and hardly any book stores carry SF magazines, let alone display them in a consistent manner. Is our genre's future at risk? Hardly, but a huge amount of potential is being lost. I love science fiction — don't we wish everybody did! Or, perhaps, try it, you'll like it! Or —

The idea being that in the midst of an apparent renaissance for the short story form, the SF mags, who as a group have never faltered in championing the short story cause, seem to be reaping little or none of the glory (or popularity, or income!) The sf/f/h magazine publishing community as a whole should somehow get together and promote itself to the average public, and, especially, try to get distributors to get retail outlets to give the category a specific place (or in the first place and existence) set aside on their racks. It might be an idea to get other primarily fiction publications such as *Modern Short Stories* and the crime/mystery and any other "main streamers" involved as well. Put it all together, the way they group everything else, from computer mags to women's to travel. (One book store had *The Horror Show* in with the movie mags, the SF digest-sized mags on the rotating comics rack, *Ellery Queen* up with *Newsweek* and *Time*, *Mss.* with the writing mags, no *Aboriginal* anywhere, you get the idea.)

Just a suggestion. I get the impression you're doing all you can along every line you have access to already. Just don't quit! Whatever you do.

Enough for now. I've got a brew and the last 1/3 of the new *Aboriginal* to consume, and frankly, if I may, it just doesn't get any better than this.

Most sincerely yours,
Mark Andrew Garland
Syracuse, N.Y.

(*Actually, while attending Boskone — as we contemplated the demise of The Twilight Zone magazine — I suggesting something similar to Asimov Managing Editor Sheila Williams — that all of the science fiction magazines should group forces to get better positioning in the marketplace — and not just on the newsstands. But, while I'm willing, that may be trickier than getting the Arabs and Israelis together. — Ed.*)

Dear Mr. Ryan:

On Monday last I received my first copy of my subscription to *Aboriginal SF*. Normally I do not buy subscriptions to magazines, as I have found the post office to be a cover for

magazine-shredding ogres who rarely make the convenience and price of home delivery worth wading through mauled and soaked newsprint. However, *Aboriginal SF* is not available on newsstands in my area, so I bought a subscription in the local school's fund drive.

After the momentary lapse of sanity, I resigned myself to a year's worth of beautiful artwork laid waste by postal ogres and only grudgingly looked forward to receiving my copies. Then a wonderful thing happened. The magazine arrived, unscathed, wrapped in plastic! I have not even had an opportunity to read it yet, but I had to write and tell you how appreciated this little touch is, especially in the edition in which you discuss in your editorial the financial difficulties in publishing a magazine like *Aboriginal*. Your magazine is not only worth the \$3 cover price, but that \$5 per copy figure you quoted just because you care enough about the product you put out to make sure it arrives at the reader's home in perfect condition.

Again, thank you.
Sincerely,
Barbara Robertson
Albion, In.

Dear Aborigines,

Hello, and congratulations on another fine issue. It appears that my subscription has lapsed — not that you didn't warn me! — so enclosed please find my check for another year worth of entertainment. Since I don't even drink beer, let alone purchase it, this expenditure will hardly even dent the old budget. Maybe I'll renew for two years, but being a tightwad, I'll probably keep my investments fluid.

Although I do enjoy your stories — especially the funny ones, as the length you specialize in lends itself to the light approach — I must say the single feature I appreciate the most about your magazine is the review columns. They are always timely, and informative without giving away too much and ruining their enjoyment. I also particularly appreciate the Aborigines feature by Laurel Lucas, as I find the real people behind your material very fascinating.

By the way, the quotation from Eldridge Cleaver that Janice Eisen was trying for is "The only position for women in the SNCC is prone." And I would argue that the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee was a civil-rights organization, not merely a black movement phenomenon. Ironic of course, how a rights organization could manage to discriminate against some of its most vital members, but that's those crazy humans for you.

Thank you again. I notice in your Statement of Ownership and Man-

agement that you've passed the 20,000 print run landmark. Keep it up and you will pass 100,000 — if nothing else your Hugo nomination will clue in a number of SF readers that they're missing out on something good.

Yours truly,
Connie Hirsch
Everett, Mass.

P.S. Please start my subscription with No. 13, as that's when my subscription ran out. I had to read a friend's copy, and I'd just as soon own a complete run.

Dear Mr. Ryan:

Several of my fellow subscribers have written letters to the editor, bemoaning the fact that their bimonthly issues of *Aboriginal* are shipped to them in protective, non-biodegradable, clear plastic mailing bags. I would like to also make use of the Boomerang forum in order to tell these ardent ecologists *exactly* what they can do with their non-biodegradable plastic bags. The can take their baggies and ... do what I do: *carefully* slice open the top seam of the mailing bag and *voila*, instant magazine storage slipcover! Recycling Made Easy.

Sincerely yours,
Scott Jarrett
Lakeland, Florida

Dear Mr. Ryan,

Congratulations on the start of your third year! Since this is my first "letter to the editor," allow me to apologize for what may appear to be a very fragmented letter. But if you gaze at the appendix, I am sure you will be pleased and be able to overlook such fragmentation.

I have just received the Jan-Feb 1989 issue and let me reassure Mr. Hauptmann (Boomerangs p. 62) that he is not the only person who reads the non-fiction "stuff" first. I, too, have just completed reading the non-fiction articles and do not feel the least bit strange.

I would also like to say, on an ancillary note, that I have enjoyed most of the stories in the first twelve issues, but I must say the two I have enjoyed the most were Rusch's "Sing" and Malcohn's "Arachne." — Absolutely top-notch reading.

I would love to continue at length, but I have just started a Masters program in Applied Mathematics and need to apply myself to the program.

I am enclosing an SASE for your writer's guidelines, and information germane to the purchase of artwork and renewing my subscription.

Sincerely,
Michael Armstrong
Memphis, Tenn. □



THROUGH THE LENS

By Susan Ellison

Aftermath

The writers' strike is over. For those of you interested in a body count, some results: David—1, Goliath—a helluva headache. Not a resounding victory by any scorecard, but it did show the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers that those necessary inconveniences, the writers, were a force not easily dismissed. A 22-week strike proved that. But for now, the placards are down and the studios are getting back into the rhythm of what they do best: making movies.

Discarding yesterday's rash of Christmas fluff and fun movies, the studios are already gearing up for some interesting feature film and television releases for this coming year.

Here are some previews of 1989, some snippets to whet your appetite.

Proving that television is a fickle medium, the previously announced animated *Batman* series has been dumped by ABC in favor of an animated *Beetlejuice* series to be produced by Nelvana. It has a one-season commitment.

Think Entertainment is currently developing two shows, *Nightmare Classics* for Showtime (one of the stories slated for the hour-long show is the English ghost story "Carmilla" by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu) and a science fiction series for HBO called *The Mars Run*.

Not to be outdone on the Martian front, CBS has made a pilot commitment for a series called *Mars Base One*, reportedly to be

written by Dan Aykroyd.

Returning to an ancient moneymaking idea, Warner Bros. is developing a pilot for the syndication market, continuing the alien-invasion saga *V*. Perhaps the lizards of *V* could cross over and dine on the moist Martians in *War of the Worlds*.

Joe Straczynski, story editor of the syndicated *Twilight Zone* series, has at least two upcoming projects in the pipeline. The first

favorite person.

Harlan Ellison's *Twilight Zone* script, "Crazy As A Soup Sandwich," a light, bright, amusing tale of a weasely little hustler who makes a deal with a demon of the 4th Canonic Order, started shooting on December 11 (to be shown sometime in March). Paul Lynch directed the show, with Tony Franciosa playing gangster Nino Lancaster. Though Harlan's reluctance to work in television is



From *My Lovely Monster*

is a prime-time *Ghostbusters* special called "Live From Al Capone's Tomb." The second is an original idea called *Babylon 5* which is being developed with Rattlesnake Productions (they produced *Captain Power*), in association with Straczynski's own company, Synthetic Worlds, Ltd.

Which brings me neatly to my

no less than when he made a decision more than ten years ago to pass on teleplay work, a request from his friend Joe Straczynski, and a *carte blanche* assurance that he could write whatever he wanted to write without fear of censorship,*

*This turned out to be less a reality than a pipe dream, as usual.

bemused Harlan to the extent that he acceded to Joe's request. The result is not, as many people predicted, that Harlan would write some terribly heavy, pontificating story with a deep social message, a la "Nackles." Instead, Harlan chose to amuse himself (and the viewers, he hopes) with a wry little entertainment. "Even 'Nackles,'" Harlan has said, "though it had a dark and serious message about the nastier side of the human spirit, was basically an entertaining segment. The lecture should always be hidden, never intrude on the pacing of the narrative. You cannot sell the ethical point unless you entrance the viewer. I'm in the storytelling business, not the Messiah game. That's why, when I had my option to write anything for this one TZ outing in its' syndicated format, I didn't hesitate a second before writing 'Crazy As A Soup Sandwich.' This is not to suggest that I've given up trying to change the hearts and minds of a nation so screwed-up that it offered us those two duds Bush and Dukakis, or that I've stopped trying to save the universe twice a day before breakfast. I'm incorrigible in that respect, but while I'm being semi-corrigible, I'll continue to tell what I hope are amusing fables."

Harlan's other television project, *Cutter's World*, for Roger Corman and NBC, is alive and well, having survived the strike. After a few minor changes, the script will be ready to film early this year.

Assuming that the sound of jungle drums hasn't reached your neck of the woods, Harlan has been signed as the on-camera spokesman for a new line of Japanese imports brought in by Chevrolet, called the GEO imports. The commercials for the first two GEO cars, the Metro and Tracker, can already be seen in the four Western states (California, Oregon, Washington and Nevada). At press time, the two-day shoot for the third car in the GEO line, the Prizm, was scheduled for the second week in January.

Announced, but surrounded by controversy, are a batch of



Harlan and the GM Geo import

movies renewing the heretofore less-than-successful trend of transferring comic characters from Baxter paper to glorious Technicolor. Already in preparation: *Spider-Man*, produced by the team of Golan and Globus, written by Don Michael Paul; *Sgt. Rock* with Arnold Schwarzenegger (actually, if you've seen Sgt. Rock in the DC Comics, it's a bit of inspired casting); Marvel Comics' *The Punisher* with that other muscleman, Dolph Lundgren; and *Batman* with Michael Keaton as the Caped Crusader and Jack Nicholson as The Joker. Directed by Tim Burton of *Beetlejuice* "fame" and written by Sam Hamm, latest scuttlebutt says The Joker will dominate the script, with the Darknight Detective being downplayed ... which is a smart move if you ask me. And to round out the adaptations, *Swamp Thing* makes his vegetational return with the help of Louis Jordan and Heather Locklear. One positive point concerning the film: Len Wein and Berni Wrightson have finally been acknowledged on screen as the creators of the original *Swamp Thing* by director Jim Wynorski.

For those of you whose taste runs from the sublime to the depraved, there's a hodgepodge

of movies to mark down in your calendar. Keeping it all in the family is *Ghostbusters II*, reuniting Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd, and Harold Ramis; Aykroyd and Ramis wrote the screenplay and Ivan Reitman directed. Though separated and reportedly divorcing, producer Gale Anne Hurd and writer/director James (The Terminator, Aliens) Cameron have resolutely reunited under the romantic pressures of fiscal necessity to bring us *The Abyss*.

Due to the benefits of reduced production costs, authentic locales, foreign tax-break financing, no labor unions, and even territorial imperative (where else would you film *Asterix And The Big Fight* but at the Asterix Animation Studios in Paris), more and more "runaway" films are being shot on locations abroad, with Britain, Canada and Mexico the favored sites. Italy, once the Mecca of runaway productions, is cinematically moribund. In the states, Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* was filmed in Ellsworth, Maine, but *My Lovely Monster*, with Forrest Ackerman, wrapped up production in Hamburg; *License Revoked*, the second Timothy Dalton Bond movie, ended filming recently in Mexico City and Key West, Florida; but *The*

Return Of The Musketeers brought back to Spain Michael York, Oliver Reed, and Richard Chamberlain. This "runaway" situation continues to be one of Hollywood's most distressing, ongoing nightmares.

Remember the controversy surrounding Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*? Well he's in the news again, this time with the new film *The Adventures Of Baron Munchausen*. According to *The Sunday Times* in England, the film has been plagued by major problems including an \$80 million lawsuit against Columbia and parent company, Coca-Cola, by Alan Buckhantz, who owns the remake rights of an earlier German production of the film; the loss of Sean Connery as the King of the Moon; mounting costs; script cuts and delays in shooting; and don't even ask about the stampeding elephants. All this adds up to a setback for the release date of Christmas '88. Look for the new Gilliam film in the spring of '89. But if *Munchausen* approaches the brilliance of *Brazil*, then it will be worth the wait, as well as one of the best investments you'll make for 1989.

POSTSCRIPT DECEMBER 15, 1988

We have just returned from a special showing of *The Adventures Of Baron Munchausen* at Burbank studios. This is one of the most visually breathtaking films you'll see this year. Gilliam, who directed and co-wrote the film with Charles McKeown (he also plays Adolphus, who can see farther than a telescope), has managed a spectacular retelling of Karl Friedrich Hieronymus's Baron von Munchausen stories, bringing together a wealth of talent including: John Neville (Baron Munchausen), Sarah Polley (Sally), Eric Idle (Berthold, the fastest man alive), Winston Dennis (Albrecht, the strongest man on Earth), Jack Purvis (Gustavus, who can blow harder than any hurricane), Oliver Reed (the god Vulcan), Uma Thurman (Venus), Jonathan Pryce (The Right Or-

dinary Horatio Jackson), Valentina Cortese (Queen of the Moon), and, giving yet another singular performance, Robin Williams as the King of the Moon.

As with *Roger Rabbit*, to tell you anymore about this film would spoil what will be a five-star outing to the theater. This is truly film at its finest.

And for those of you who couldn't find anything in the above to stir your cinematic juices, I might have something (heh heh) to fit the bill: November saw the start date of the Brinson-Brinson production of *Pitbulls From Hell!*

With that, and a smile, here's wishing you a happy filmgoing year. □

A Long Time Ago ...

Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, writers such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner and more.

Now, on his behalf, we'd like to give you an opportunity to see some of the best stories he collected a decade ago.

For a limited time, while copies last, you can purchase a first-edition hardcover copy of *Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* for \$10, plus \$1 postage and handling. If you would like your copy autographed by the editor, please indicate how you would like the note to read.

Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo (St. Martin's Press, 1979) features 12 stories by the following authors:



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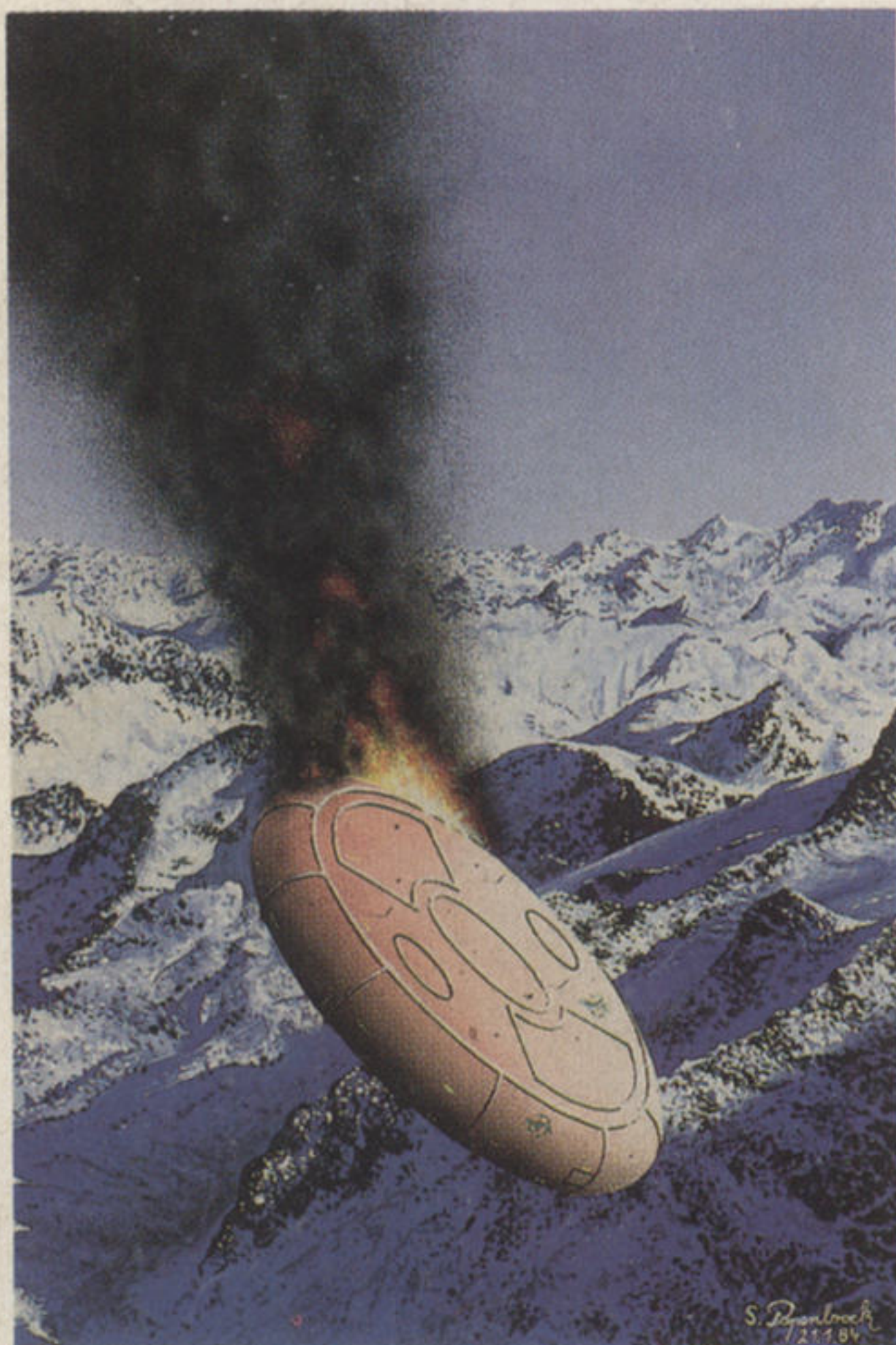
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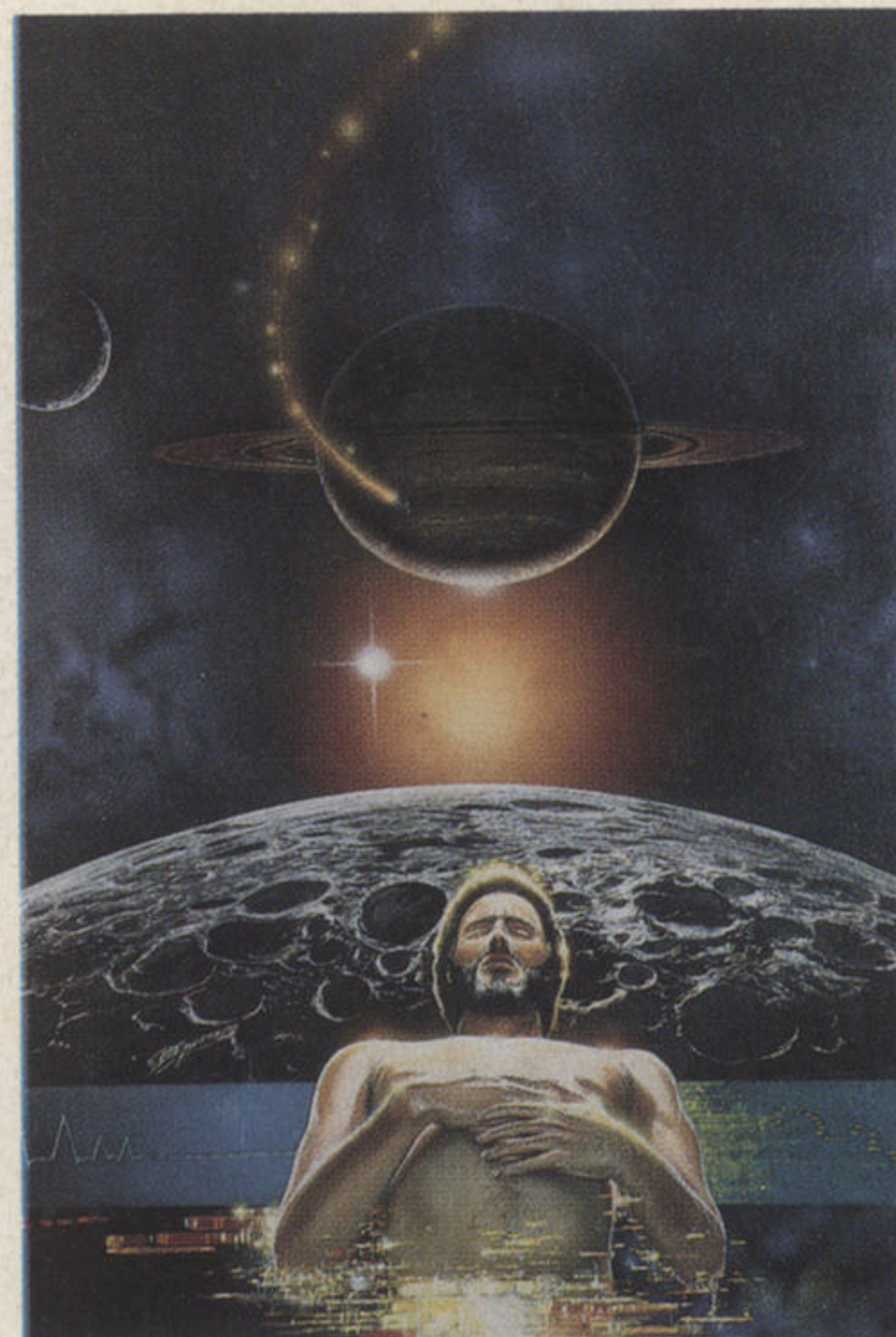
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