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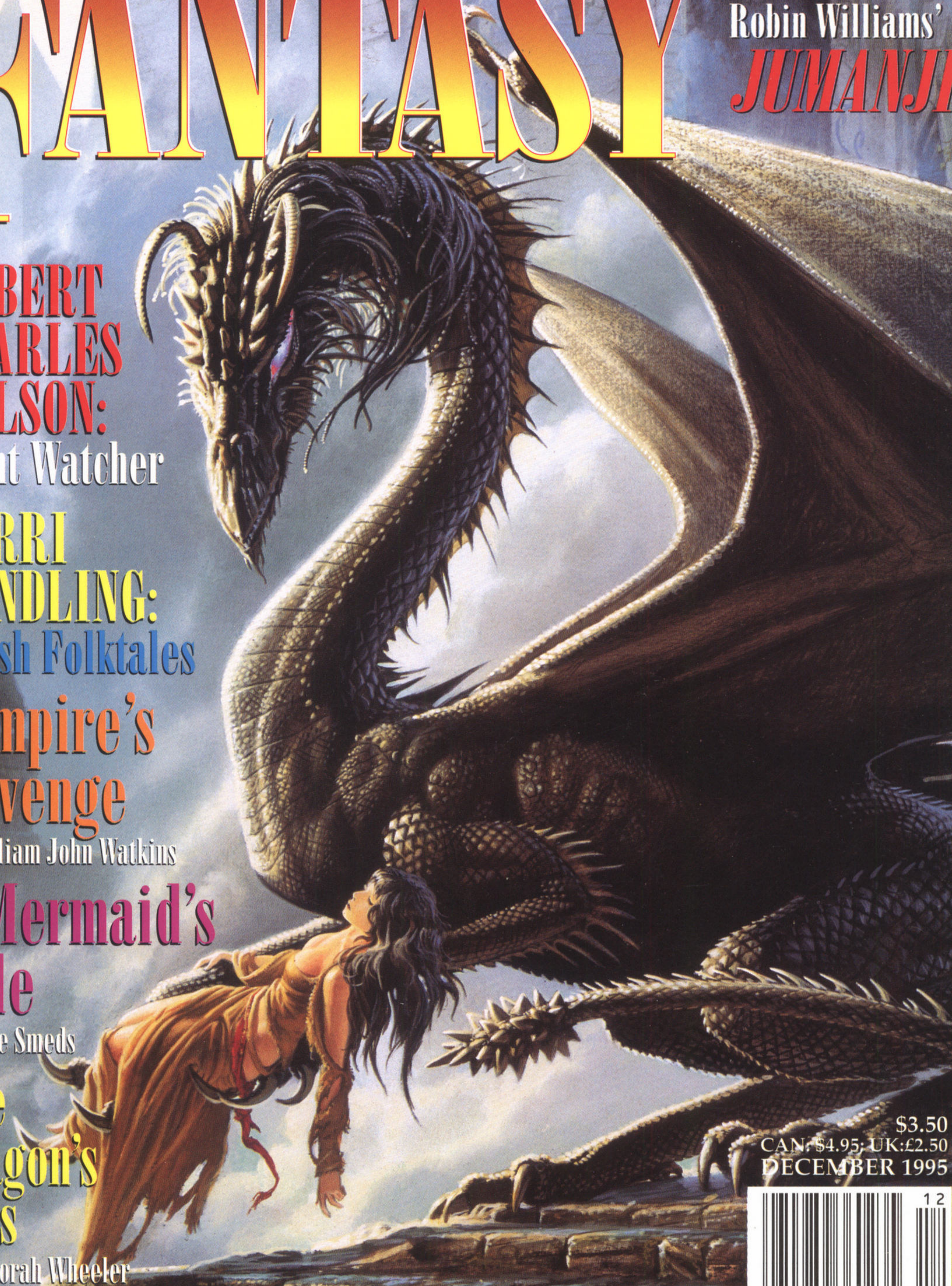
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Dragon's
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COVER:
Dragonsbane, by
Michael Whelan,
depicts a ravished
damsel in the clutches
of a fearsome dragon.
For a different slant on
the dragon tale see
Deborah Wheeler's
story on page 40.
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Some magics you just don't mess with.

Renaissance

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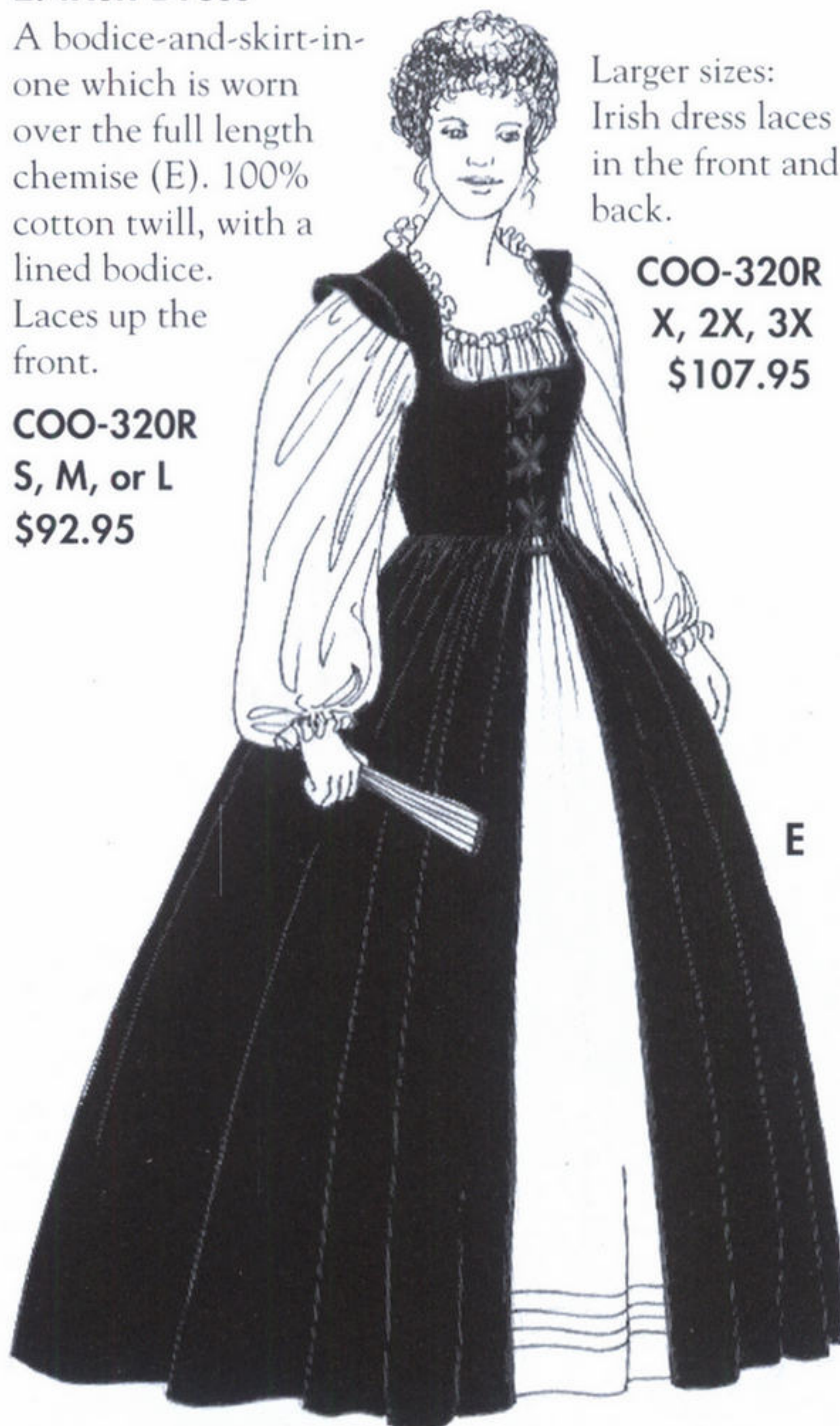
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A. Renaissance Cap

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The princess in the tower had a mighty boring life. Our advice? Take some ladder-making courses.

I'M OFTEN ASKED HOW I ACQUIRED MY INTEREST IN FANTASY, AND, FRANKLY, IT DEVELOPED so long ago, I barely remember. However, I do recall that I loved to read children's fantasies, most notably E. Nesbit and Edgar Eager. (I highly recommend them for those of you with or without offspring—you don't need to be a child to adore *Five Children and It*, for instance, or *Half Magic*.)

What these books have in common is that a child is just kicking around one boring summer day and, completely by accident, discovers something magic. (I spent many summer months carefully searching the ground for a Psammead hole or an ancient amulet.) In *Five Children and It*, the kids are spending the summer at a lovely, but otherwise fairly unexciting summer cottage in England in what I've always assumed to be the early 1900s. While poking around in a chalk quarry where they have been expressly forbidden to go, they discover a remarkable creature called a "Psammead." He's a furry beast with eyestalks and a rather grumpy disposition, but he's prevailed upon to grant the children one wish a day. Their wishes run from the mundane "I wish we were all as beautiful as the day" to the fantastic "I wish we could fly." But invariably they turn out bollixed up. When the kids are "as beautiful as the day," their parents don't recognize them and won't let them in the house. When they gain the wings of angels, they end up trapped in the upper stories of an abandoned tower. What was lovely about these books was the way another child as a reader could both identify and feel superior to the kids in the story. I always had a bet-

ter wish, one that would grant me exactly what I wanted, no more and no less; this despite the fact that I saw the kids in the book agonize for hours over their wishes, trying to frame them in exactly the right way to gain the desired result.

Half Magic was much the same. In it, a child discovers a magic talisman that will happily grant any wish made by anyone holding it. The problem is, it only grants them halfway. So if, for instance, you are at church with the talisman in your pocket and you mutter, "I wish I was at home"—presto!—You're halfway home. If your church is ten miles from your house, this can lead to difficulties. I recall that one of the kids, in a fit of pique, wished to be invisible. Being half invisible is an awkward state, but not one I'd ever thought about before. Again, this book gave me the opportunity to second guess the characters. I'd handle the talisman with much more elan, I was certain.

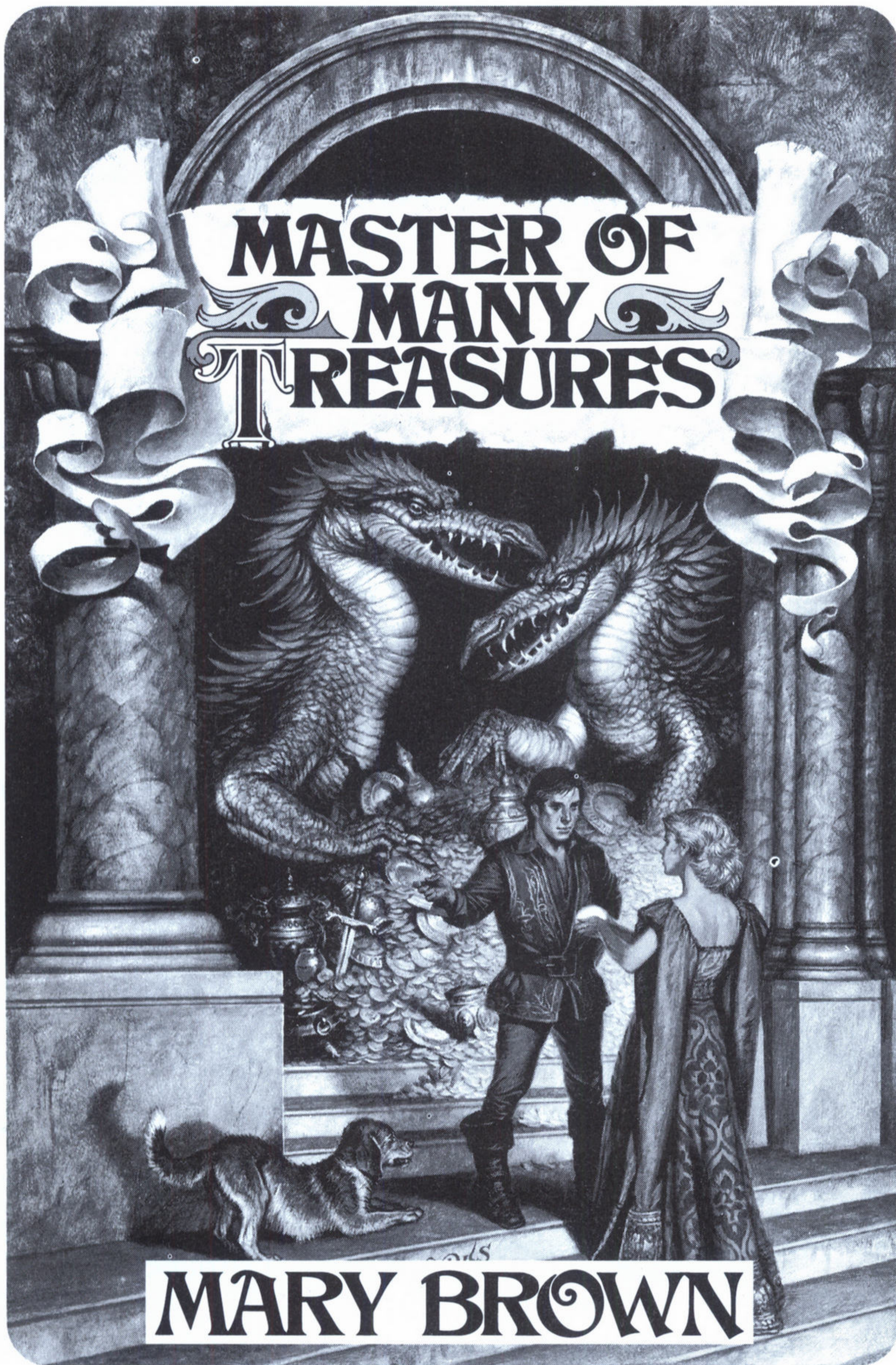
I think that's the major joy in reading—pretending to be the characters, and correcting their mistakes in your head as you go along (as an aside, one of the best books ever written for this activity is *Gone With the Wind*—at least if you're female). That's why I never cared for the damsel in distress-type books. The princess in question never had any choice in her predicament; she was always at the mercy of forces outside herself—either the wicked stepmother, the evil sorcerer, or the handsome prince who has to bumble his way to save her. With a Psammead, or a magic talisman, at least you knew where you stood—you had some control over the elements surrounding you, even if it didn't always work out the way you'd planned.

Thinking about it today, I think that the books I favored were a pretty good preparation for life as I have lived it. I found out early on that if you swan about in a tower waiting for a handsome prince to come and save you, damn little is going to happen in your life. Towers are not what they're cracked up to be, and, for that matter, neither are handsome princes. You need to get out there and look for your magic, and when you find it you need to try to make it work for you. It might not always deliver as planned, and, in fact, things might go seriously awry, but at least you're doing it for yourself. You're making your own choices, wishing your own wishes, and weaving your own enchantment. In real life, magic doesn't come any more powerful than that. ♣

Here you see a damsel confronting a handsome prince after it took him thirty years to find her in her tower. What do you think she's saying?



Summer Was a One-Dragon Girl



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FANTASY

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Pigs don't fly—but dragons do.... At the end of *Pigs Don't Fly*, Summer had just found that the heartbreakingly handsome knight she rescued was not the Great Love of Her Life, after all. No, *her* true love it turned out, was the pig, or actually the dragon that the winged pig turned out to be. Worse yet, said dragon (who can take on

human form) was last seen headed east at 5,000 feet.

But Summer had just successfully completed one quest against seemingly insurmountable odds, and the plucky lass was determined to be with the only man/dragon in the whole world for her. Even if she had to disguise herself as a young boy, escape from an

ambushed caravan, figure out what to do with a ten-year-old slave and a dancing bear that she accidentally acquired, convince a persistent professional thief that she is *not* looking for treasure, and somehow persuade her lover's fellow dragons that it is perfectly natural for a dragon to love a maiden in ways other than fried or broiled.

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

Rub ice cream and cake in my hair? Ugh. I don't think so. Even if I did have some handy at the time, which, fortunately, I didn't. I *did* feel a strange, momentary compulsion, though. You need to be careful what you say! You seem to have very compelling writing.

And I did take you seriously about the contest. I still do. Oh, I figured out it wasn't a real contest, just a metaphor. But it *is* so simple for any amateur hack to send off a story to a *contest* rather than to a *magazine* with hopes of publication.

The emotional investment is certainly smaller. After all, if Ed MacMahon doesn't come to your house bearing a \$10 million check, do you feel like less of a person? No. By their nature, contests have only one winner (or a handful). So being a "loser" just means you are in the majority.

Receiving a rejection notice, on the other hand, means that you, personally, are a failure. Your ideas, effort, and work just aren't good enough. It's a lot easier to believe somebody else was lucky and won the big contest.

But no need! Just approach every submission as a contest entry with the "Oh goody, I could win a prize!" attitude. It's so much more fun! (That, along with the philosophy that professional writers collect a lot of rejection slips, so if you start collecting them, you'll become a professional writer, making the fear of rejection that much smaller.)

Bloodsong

Well, gee. I'm not sure exactly where to start. On the one hand, I'm much relieved that there are at least a few of you out there who know a metaphor when it comes up and pinches you. On the other hand, people who have stories rejected are not losers—it isn't the writer who is being turned down, it's the story, and any writer who takes a rejection personally is going to have a very short career. Furthermore, people who get their stories rejected are far from the minority—they are the overwhelming majority. Figure it out: I receive approximately 60-70 manuscripts per week. This works out to, say, 260 a month or 3,120 per year. I can publish only seven stories or so per issue, or 42 stories per year. That means that only slightly more than one percent of the manuscripts sent to me are accepted.

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

I have just recently hooked onto the information highway. I have, however, been reading *Realms* for about a year. I saw the E-mail address in the most recent issue. I just wanted to say that I enjoy *Realms* more than life itself. Well, that may be an exaggeration, but it's close. I aspire to write for your publication soon. (But reading fiction is so much more fun!) Thanks again for a great magazine!

Jeff Pusch

I'm much relieved to hear that you value life itself slightly more highly than our magazine—we're only a bimonthly, and I'd hate to be responsible for the time between issues!

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

I can't tell you how glad I was to read Gahan Wilson's comments about Clark Ashton Smith, my favorite fantasy writer. As the proud owner of the four Smith collections assembled by Lin Carter, I can assure your readers that Smith is just as good as Gahan says he is. Every night my three-year-old daughter asks me to tell her "a story of Sothique," or "a story of Xiccarph," with her as the protagonist, of course. This morning she asked me to color Maal Dweb, the sorcerer from the Xiccarph stories.

Take heart, Smith fans! I don't think the cause is hopeless. On the contrary, I think we are destined to succeed. And I just got us a three-year-old ally.

Michael Mina
Brooklyn, OH

Classic fantasy is, alas, often the hardest to come by, but the rewards it offers can be far sweeter than those garnered from the latest slash-n-spell quest.

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

My name is Anna Laree Falls, and I am fourteen, in high school, and I love fantasy! Your magazine is a dream come true for me, and I am so lucky to have gotten in on it from the beginning. One reason I love *Realms* is because it shows me all the facets of fantasy, where before I only knew of unicorns, dragons, wizards, and castles. Also, I love the stories, and even if I didn't I'd still buy the magazine for the splendid artistry (Oh, my brother and I would love to see a good, big angel painting.). I especially enjoy the Gallery (J.K. Potter!!) and Folkroots. The magazine also introduced me to the fantasy card games: Right now I am anxiously awaiting *Heresy: Kingdom Come* at the local mall. I do have one request: Can you tell me how to pronounce "Gahan?"

Anna L. Falls

*I'm very happy that we've introduced you to fantasy that goes beyond dragons and unicorns—it's a field as large as the human imagination, and it's hardly fair to confine it to two or three creatures. Oh, and our estimable book reviewer's name is pronounced **Gay-an**. Keep enjoying the magazine!*

Your letters and comments are welcome. Make sure you mark them as letters or they're likely to get mixed in with writer's guidelines requests. Send them to: Letters to the Editor, Realms of Fantasy, P.O. Box 527, Rumson, NJ 07760. Or better yet, E-mail: s.mccarthy@genie.geis.com.

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(Bishop)

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and Yoda
(King)

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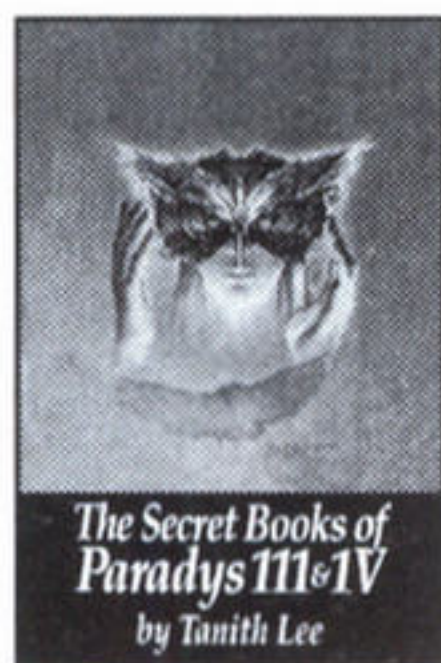
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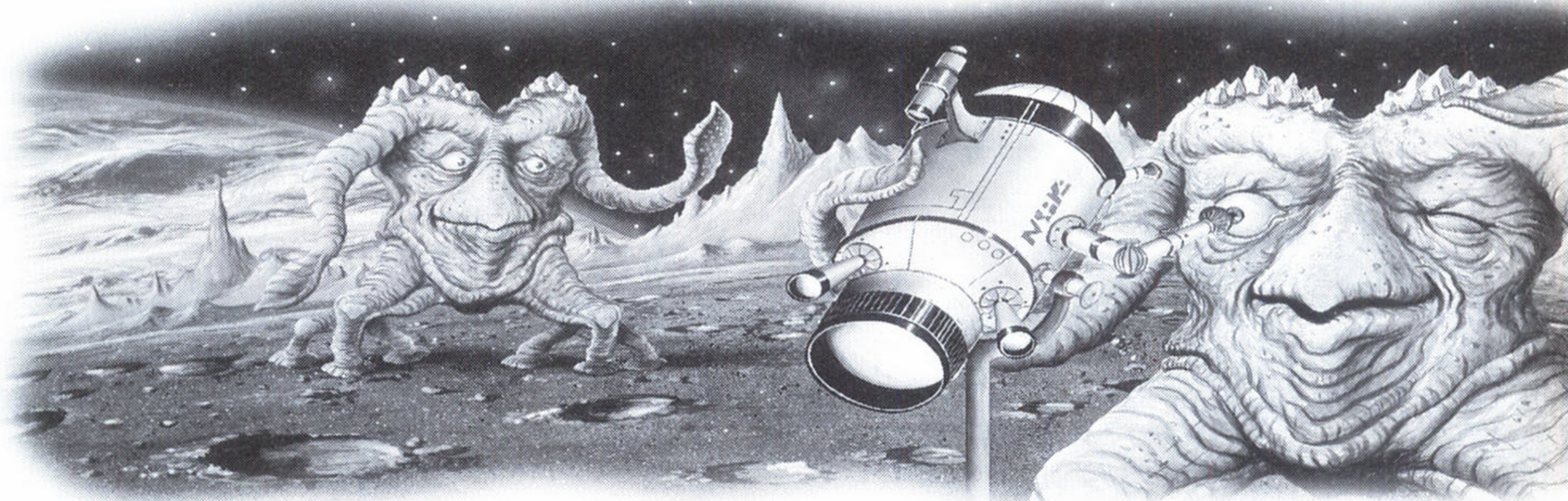
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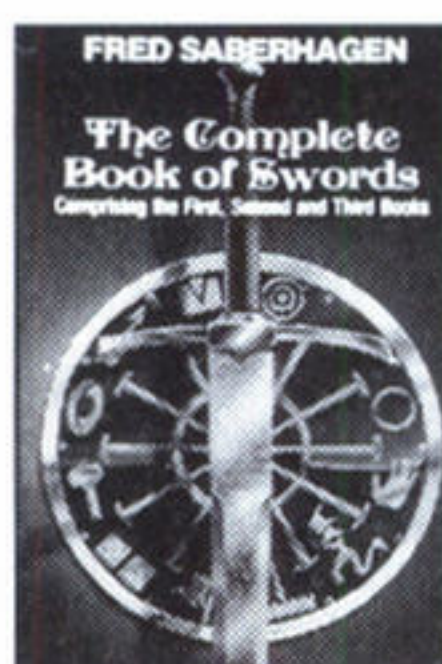
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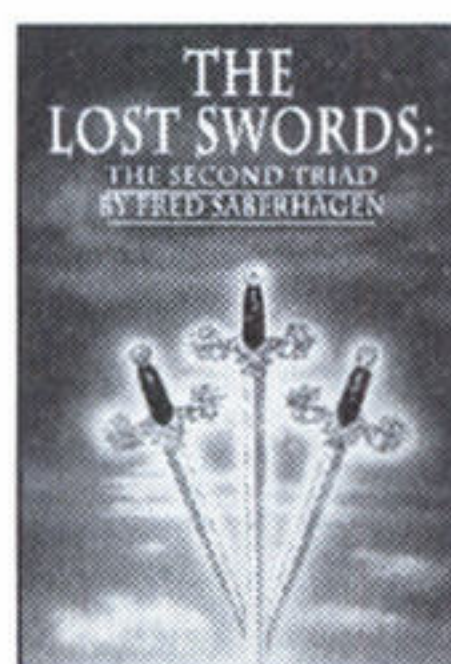
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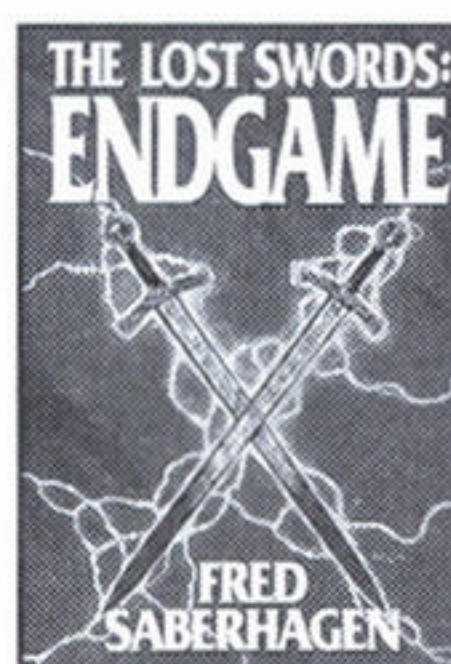
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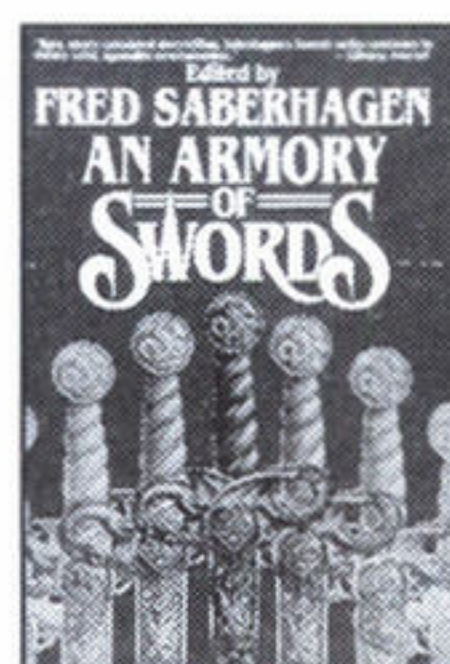
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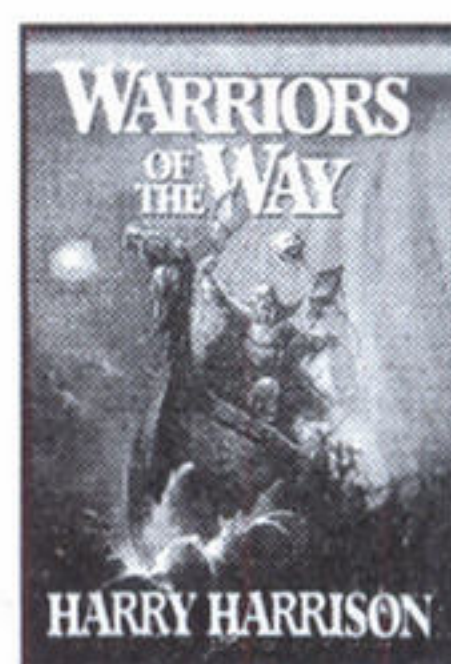
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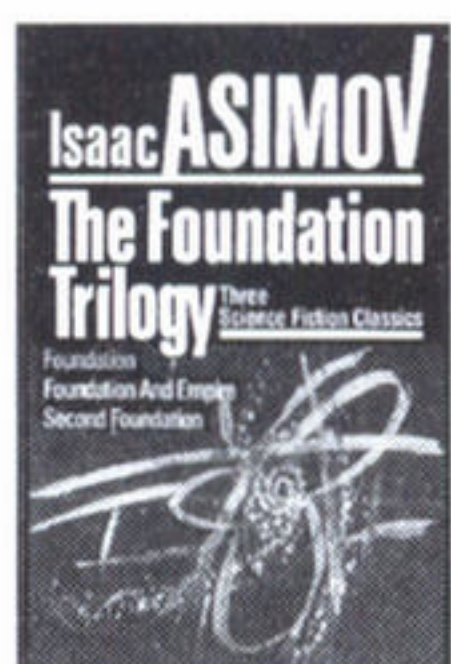
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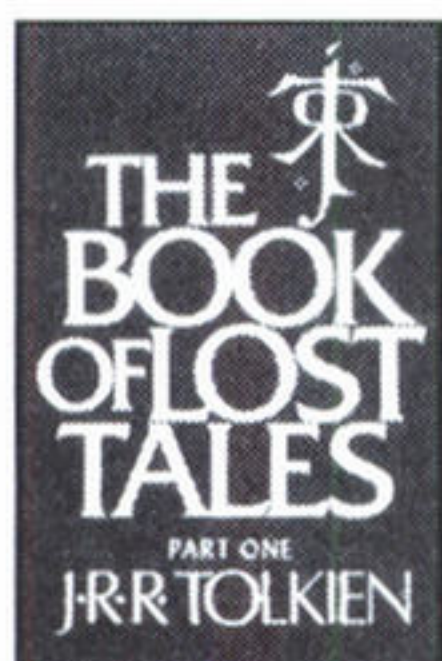
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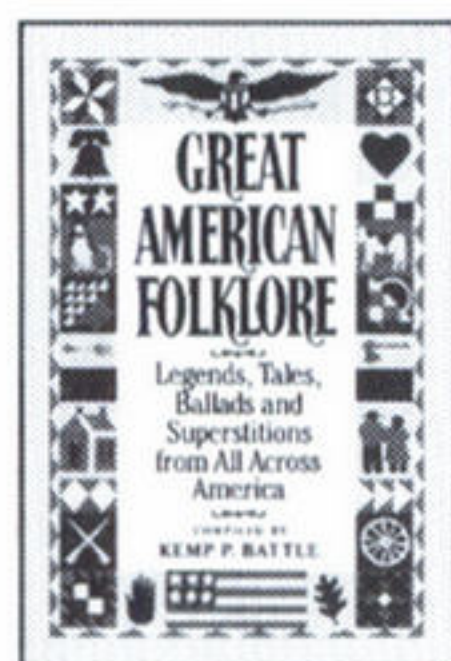
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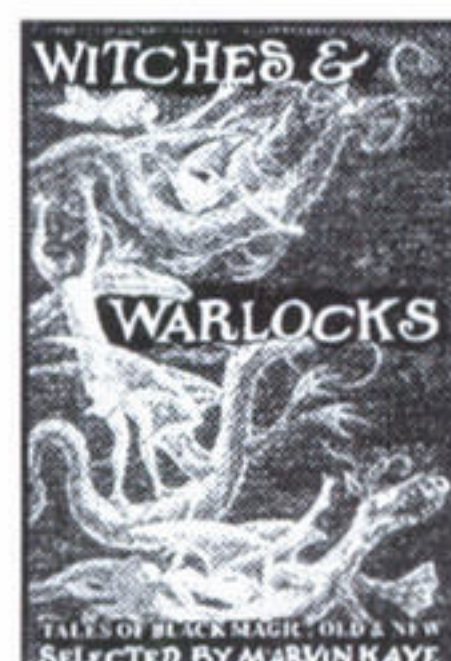
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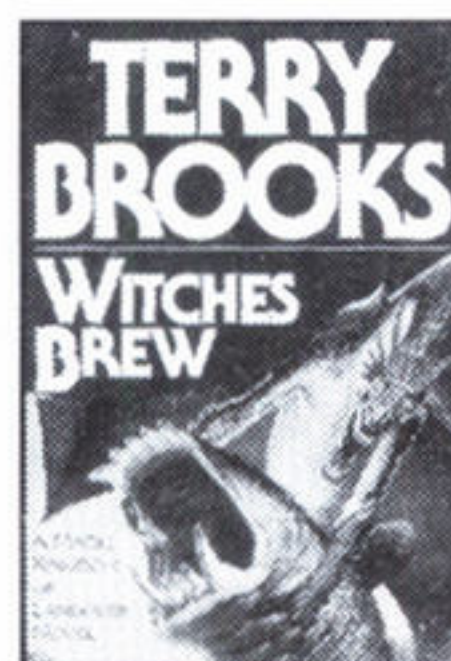
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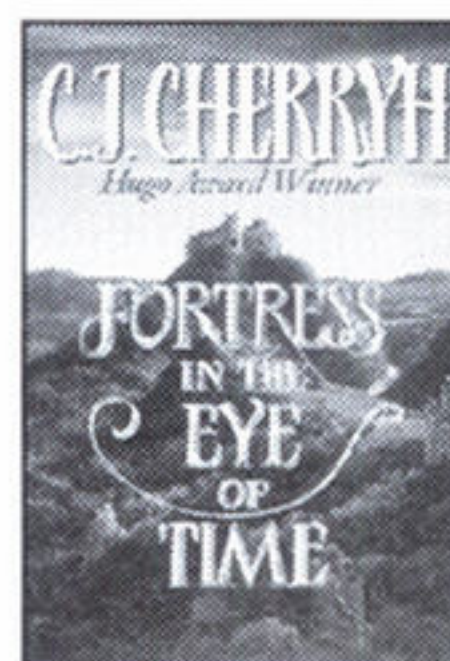
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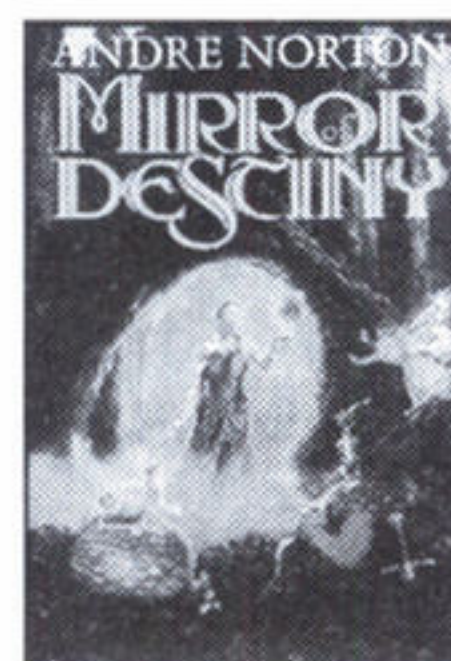
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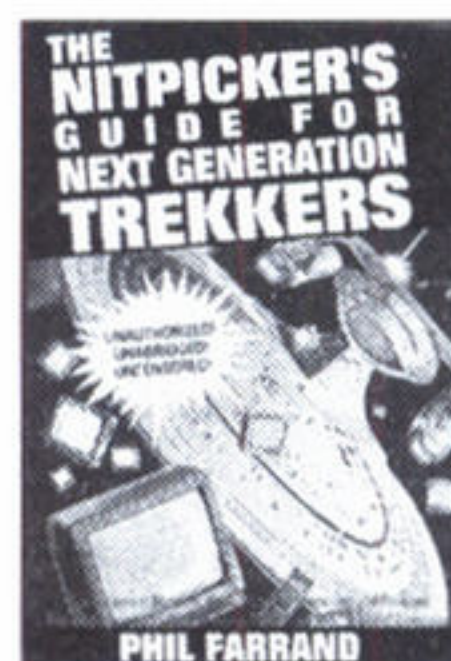
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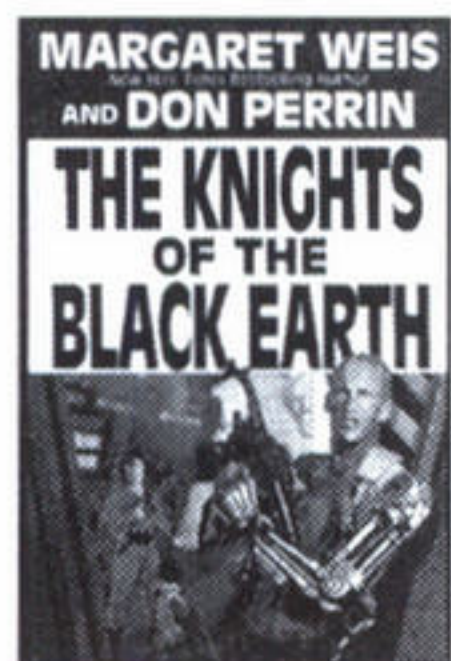
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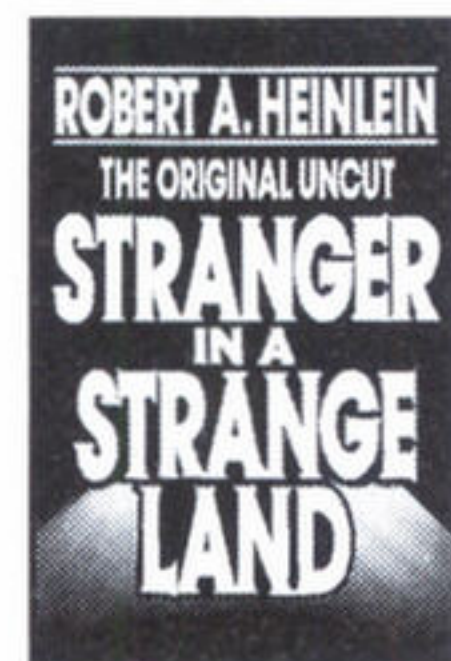
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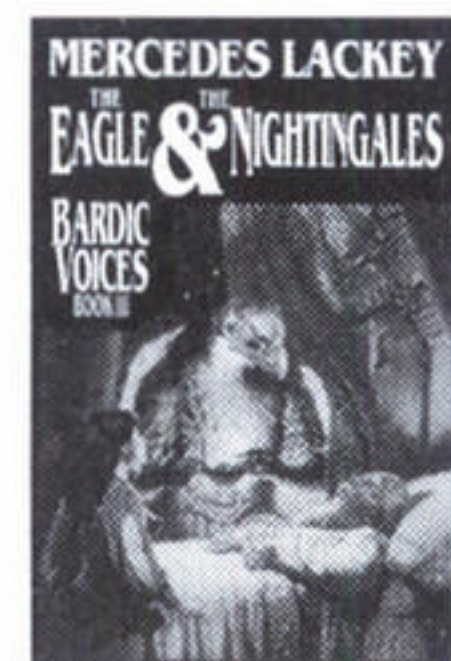
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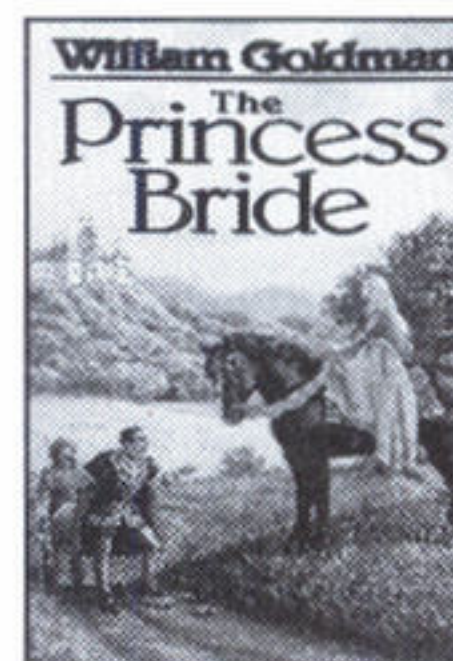
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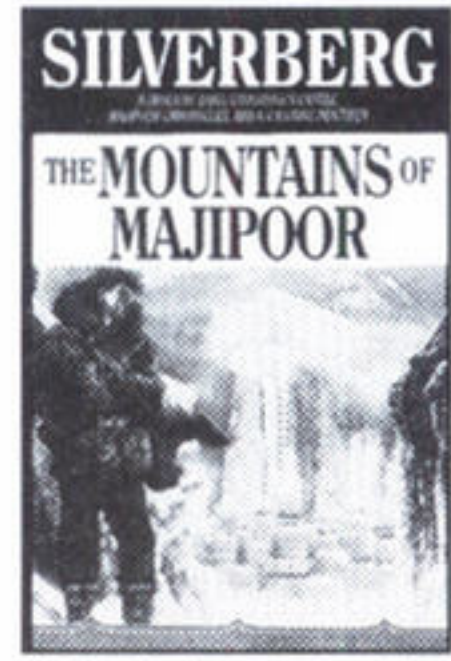
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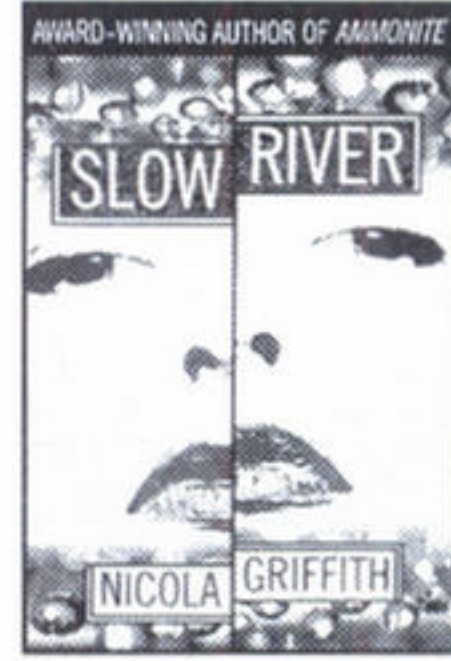
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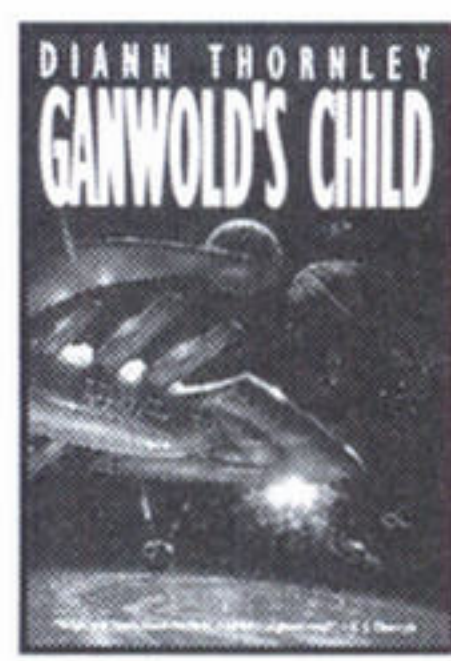
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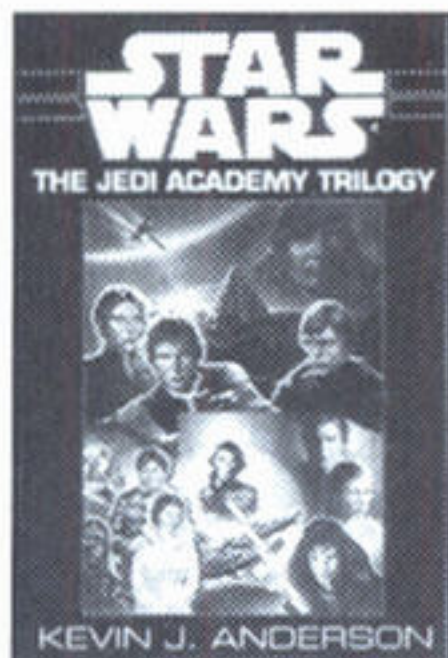
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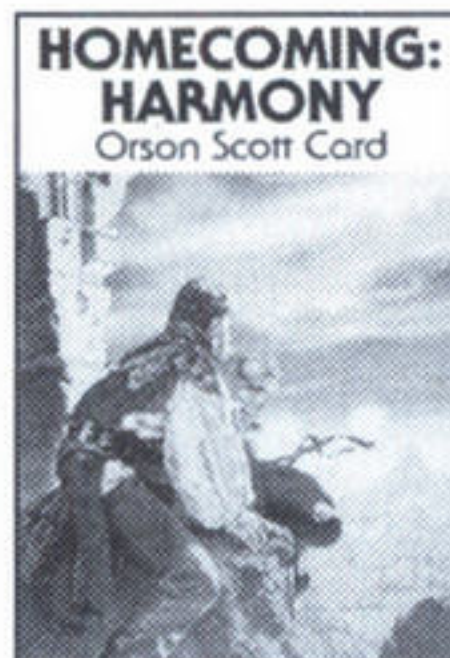
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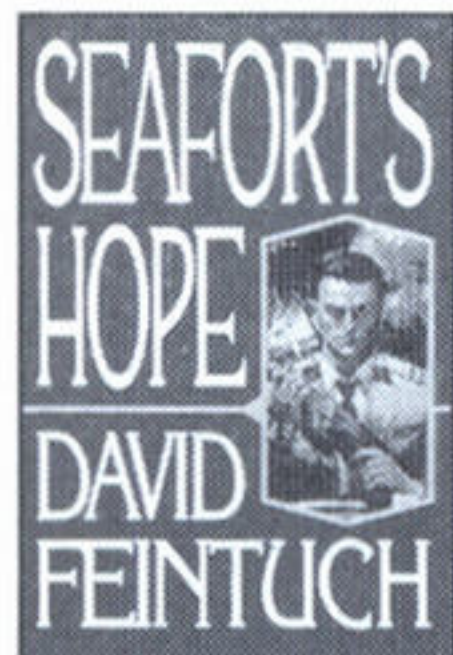
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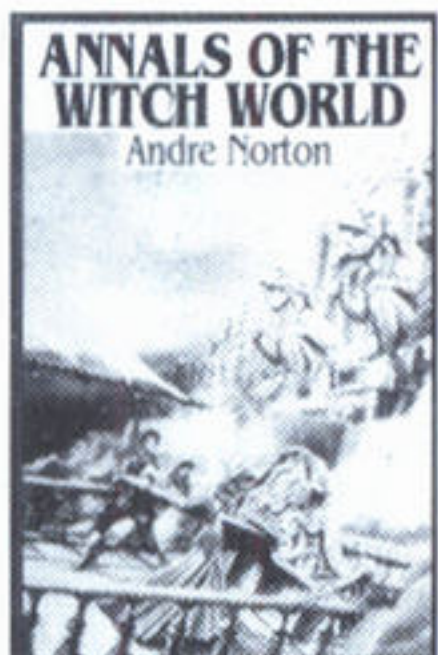
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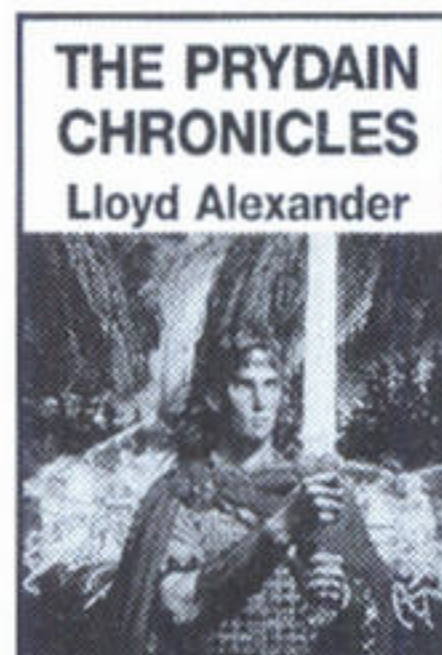
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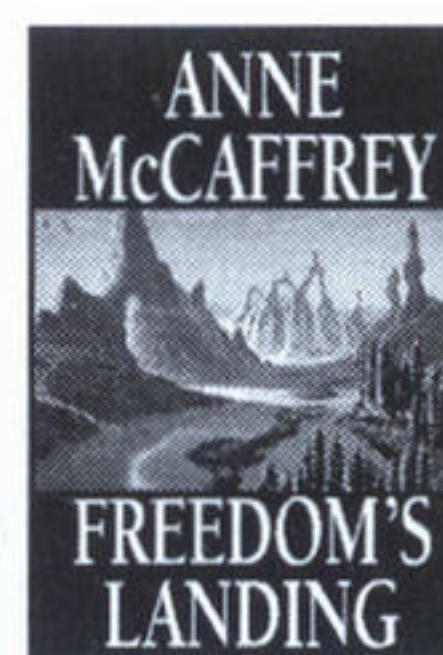
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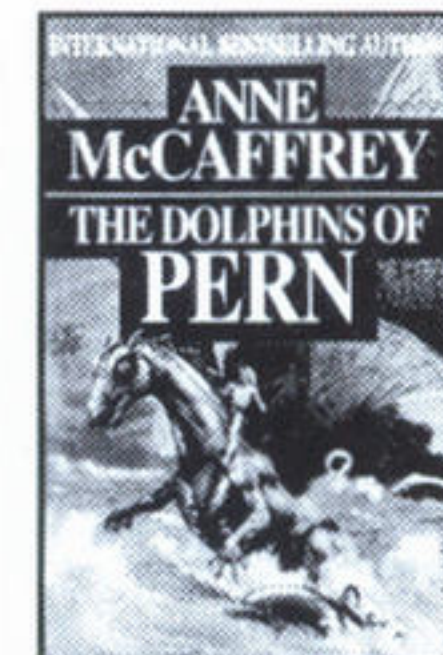
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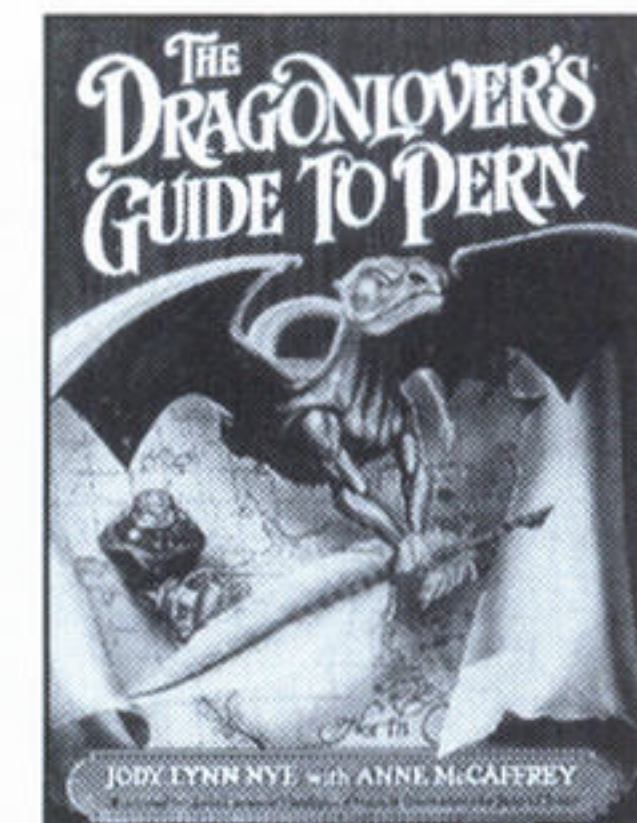
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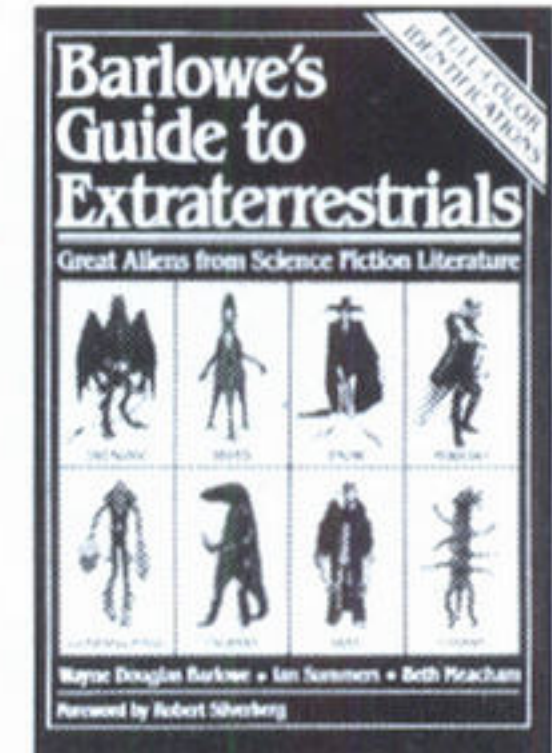
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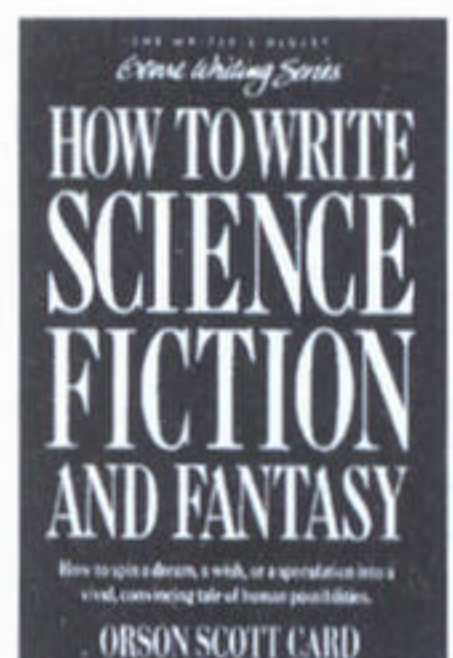
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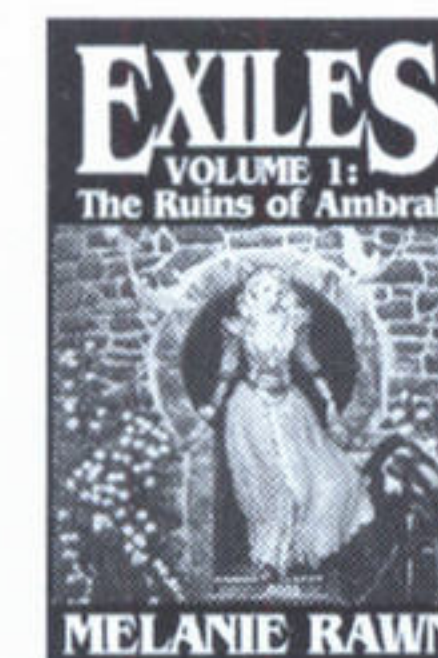
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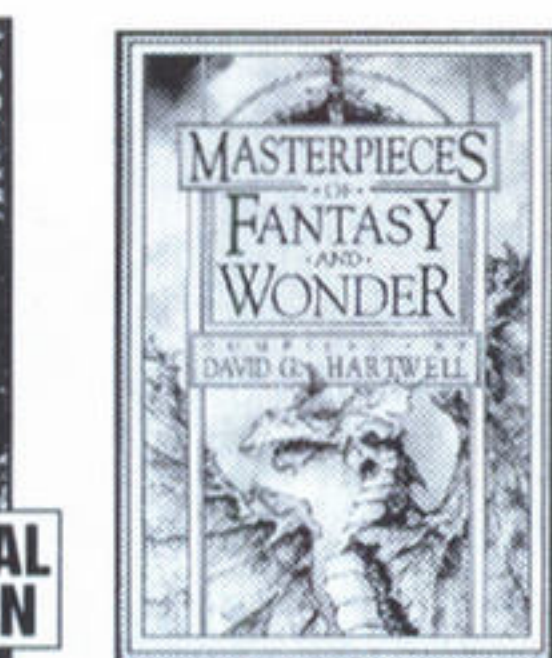
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Three tales of the dead by three rattling good storytellers.

I'VE LATELY NOTICED AN INCREASING TENDENCY IN POPULAR FANTASTIC ARTS TO BECOME FIXATED on secondary things and increasingly casual about—if not completely unaware of—the basics. This is particularly obvious in fantastic films, probably because of the astonishing and steadily increasing availability of spectacular special effects. Understand I am very happy about this marvelous abundance of brilliant technical breakthroughs—as one now and then involved in animation, I am nothing short of ecstatic about the increase of powers these new gadgets put into our hands—but they are gloss, they are sheen, they can only gussy up the fundamental creation.

Too often—far, far, *far* too often—have I gone with tremulous hope (these days it is always tremulous) to some vaunted new fantastic film only to find, once again, a shiny surface painted over a flabby, empty—usually purloined—basic notion which a writer lacks the skills to develop and a clueless director is unable to effectively present.

The only people associated with these dismal enterprises who seem to be having any fun (For the glazing audience certainly shows no particular signs of having fun!) are the builders of the wraparound sound track with their explosions and fist thuddings and usually inappropriate electronic warblings and the special effects people with their endless morphings and tiresomely repetitious

spaceships (Can't *somebody* get past *Star Wars*?) and their elaborately cable-driven, but totally unconvincing (and, alas, thoroughly unscary) rubber duck monsters.

Precisely the same sort of thing is happening in fantasy novels. The writers have studied some master of the past, or possibly writings *about* some writer of the past, and that is well and good. The problem is that far too many of these students giddily glide past the mastery of the basics which those masters worked so hard to master (hence the word "master" applied to the masters) and concentrate to the point of complete fixation on the *surface effects* of these masters' works.

One of the prime examples of this sort of thing is what happens to many of those inspired by Tolkien. Dozens, I guess by now—judging from the swelling tide of trilogies (at *least* trilogies) of fat books—or even hundreds, have very carefully and minutely studied the surface of *The Lord of the Rings* until they've got down damn near every last bit of its superficial detail. I can see in my mind's eye their analytic lists and diagrams of their complicated maps, their warring armies described down to the lowest foot orc, the finer points of etiquette amongst their various noble families, intimate details of the sexual and digestive workings of their dragons and ambulatory trees. But in their studies they've glided right by the things in Tolkien's books which really moved them as readers, which got them so interested, nay, so fascinated, that they've written books, and put together all those lists and diagrams in hopeful imitation of the J.R.R.T.'s original opus. And failed.

What sets Tolkien's art so hopelessly above theirs? In his surviving papers, Tolkien thoroughly documents the struggle to master (There's that word again!) the fundamental, underlying skills of writing. They are the usual classic ones: 1. Being able to tell a story excitingly and absorbingly, 2. Being able to transmute its fictitious characters into living beings and, 3. Being able to work the wondrous basic trick of all first-rate fantasy which is to make the unbelievable just as believable to the reader as the solidity of the book he is holding and reading with bulging eyes. Here are three books written by people who have done solid work on developing all three of these things and who are particularly skilled at the first and easiest-looking of them. They are rattling good storytellers.

Barbara Hambly's *Traveling With the Dead* explores the terrifying power unleashed when vampires become spies for foreign powers. Art by Victor Sadowski.



middle earth™

THE WIZARDS

“They first appeared in Middle-earth about the year 1000 of the Third Age, but for long they went about in simple guise, as it were of Men already old in years but hale in body, travellers and wanderers, gaining knowledge of Middle-earth and all that dwelt therein, but revealing to none their powers and purposes.”

—“The Istari”
Unfinished Tales, p. 405



Middle-earth: The Wizards™ is ICE's simple, elegant, and intriguing card game for one to five players set in Tolkien's epic fantasy world. Players design their own unique decks and compete in a fierce struggle against the forces of Sauron, the Evil One. Each plays one of the five “Istari”(Wizards) sent by the Valar to right the Balance of Things in Middle-earth:

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- Pallando the Deep-blue** Istar, servant of Mandos, the Lord of Doom.

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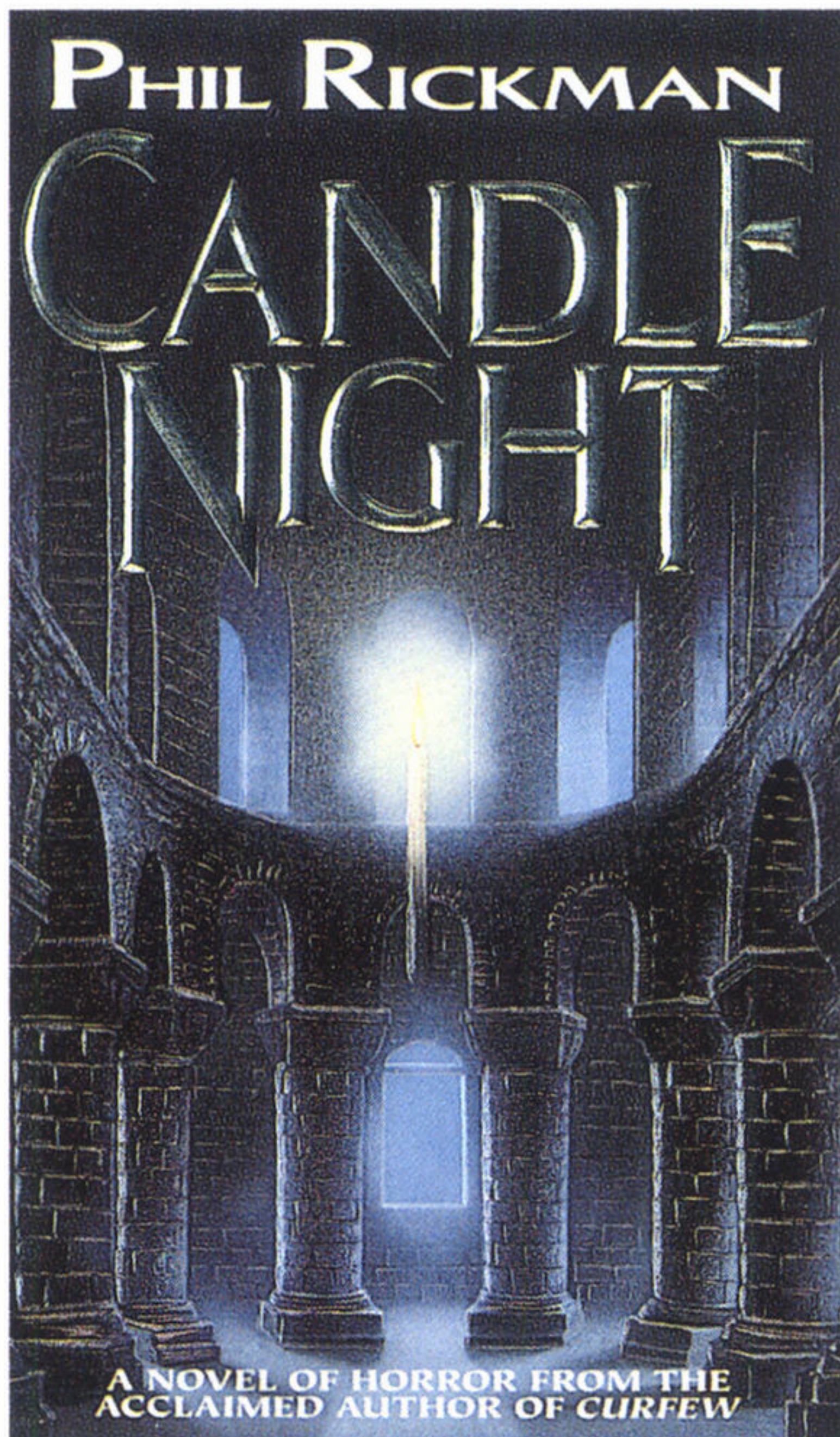


Phil Rickman is a relative newcomer. We reviewed his first book, *Curfew* (favorably), in the December 1994 issue, and now his second one, *Candle Night* (Jove Books, subsidiary of Berkley, NY, 463 pp., PB \$5.99), works essentially the same themes, but this time more skillfully and to even greater effect. Way to go, Mr. Rickman!

The tale takes place in the strangely blessed village of Y Groes—Welsh for “The Cross”—which is quite unlike all the dour, wet, and gloomy land about it in that it is perpetually sunny and bright, glowing with flowers and totally unspoiled antique country charm.

Folk of neighboring towns view it with sullen envy and plot to get a piece of it. Dai Death, the undertaker from nearby Pontmeurig, schemes constantly on how to buy one of its delightfully cozy cottages, but he finds himself mysteriously blocked at every turn. Aled Gruffydd, the landlord of the village’s comfy tavern and inn, is usually a most agreeable sort of fellow, but on the subject of possibly available real estate he turns grudging and secretive and is not helpful at all in the way of giving leads.

Among its many other charms, Y Groes is loaded with picturesquely interesting history, particularly its church and a tomb within it which contains the body of the legendary Sir Robert Meredydding and which is topped with a grim marble sculpture of the celebrated knight lying stone cold dead in all his armor. This tomb has attracted the intense interest of Professor Thomas Ingley, a brilliant but eccentric scholar of things Welsh.



He has filled a notebook with odd and dangerous facts about the tomb—and its contents!—and the very first scene of the novel establishes clearly that it might have been wiser of the good professor to have pursued some other subject to study.

Another intriguing aspect of the town is the multitude of strange and fundamentally

frightening superstitions which its inhabitants, young and old, blithely accept as simple facts of life. The beautiful and recently widowed Bethan, head of the local school, finds this irritating. She does not like it when her children, given the assignment of writing a pretend news item for the local paper, all come up with spooky little reports concerning the recent appearance of a *cannyll gorff*, or corpse candle, and the death and funeral its cold glowing in dark shadows led to.

She rashly decides to do something about cleansing her young charges’ minds of such gloomy folk notions, but finds herself firmly and effectively blocked by the townsfolk, particularly by her fellow teacher, Buddug Morgan, a large, bulky woman with popped veins in her big cheeks, thick wrists, and a mean smile. Mr. Rickman has come up with a very well-realized villainess in the person of Buddug.

In the meantime, external forces have started to stir and to exert their influence upon Y Groes. Claire Freeman, wife of journalist Giles Freeman, has come into ownership of one of its most charming cottages due to the death and unexpected generosity of her grandfather, old Rhys, the judge of the village and one of its most revered and mysteriously powerful inhabitants. Inspired by this stroke of luck, Giles has taken up a perhaps overly earnest study of Welsh and decided to quit the turmoil of London’s Fleet Street and settle down firmly into the charming serenity of the simple country life, even though his wife finds herself daily more deeply disturbed by the darkest sort of vague premonitions.

I won’t go into the plot any more except to say that it does a fine job of leading the reader ever further into the spooky and extremely nasty evil which underlies Y Groes’ picture postcard charm and beauty. Along the way many other interesting characters besides the ones already mentioned are encountered. Three of my particular favorites are the grand old journalist Winston Thorpe; the colorful and rascally Welsh politician, Guto Evans; and the brash, redheaded Miranda, who does a fine, brave job of staring down some of Wales’ creepiest bogies.

Altogether very entertaining.

I suspect Barbara Hambly may be a student of Robert Louis Stevenson as her skills in spinning tales and pulling the reader into them is highly reminiscent of that great man’s wily ways.

Be that as it may, I have long been a staunch propagandizer of her previous vampire thriller, *Those Who Haunt the Night*, as have a number of others whose opinions on the gruesome and ghastly I highly respect, and *Traveling With the Dead* (by Barbara Hambly, Del Rey, NY, 343 pp. Hardcover, \$22.00) turns out to be a very satisfying sequel to it.

The action of both books takes place in a very well-realized Victorian Era. Its hero is the redoubtable—but still very human—James Asher, who has survived seventeen

Books To Look For

Forever After, created by Roger Zelazny, with Robert Asprin, David Drake, Jane Lindskold and Mike Stackpole, Baen Books, \$5.99. The late great Roger Zelazny wondered, as do we all sometimes, what happens after the story’s over and they’ve all gone off to live happily forever after? So he created a world in which the well-known Battle Against Evil has been won, and all the heroes are setting off for retirement. Of course, nothing is that simple, as novels from the above well-known fantasy writers will show.

The Crystal Singer Trilogy, by Anne McCaffrey, Del Rey, \$16.00. Three of Anne McCaffrey’s most popular novels bound together into one volume. Sure, they’re technically science fiction, but really, do you care?

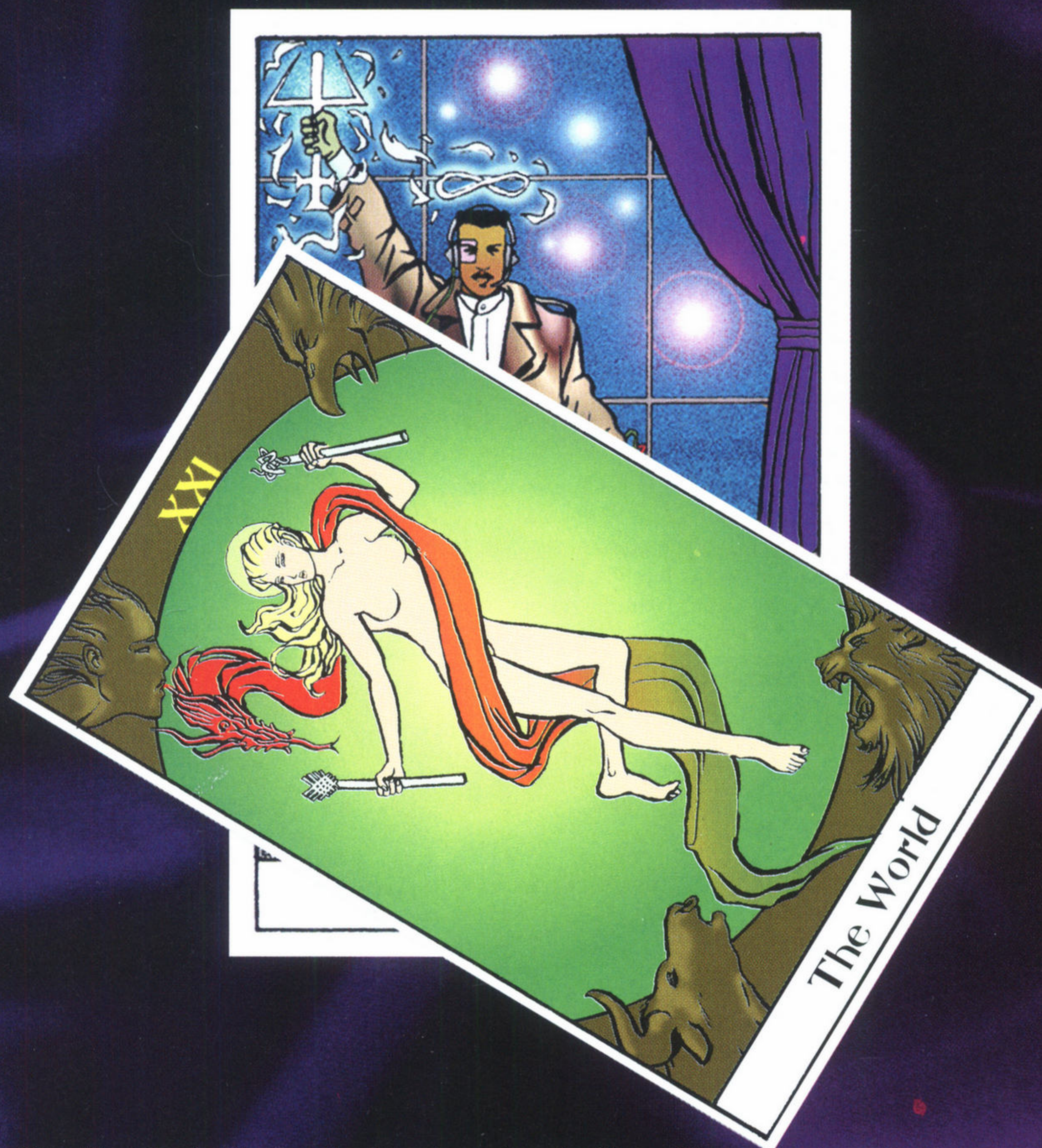
Shadow of Ashland, by Terence R. Green, Tor, \$16.95. Described by the publisher as a cross between *Bridges of Madison County* and *Time and Again*, this touching time-travel love story should appeal to fans of both books.

The Resurrectionist, by Thomas F. Monteleone, Warner Aspect, \$19.95. A conservative senator from Maryland is in a plane crash. When he crawls from the wreckage, he discovers that he has been granted the ability to heal the sick and injured. The Vatican wants a piece of him and so does everyone else. Sounds intriguing, but let’s hope his abilities don’t depend on abridging the First Amendment.

Caverns of Socrates, by Dennis McKiernan, Roc, \$14.95, trade paperback, signed limited edition \$29.95. In his first departure from his Mithgar series, McKiernan follows the adventures of a group of virtual reality gamers who find themselves trapped in a VR fantasy universe.

The Warrior Returns, by Allan Cole, Del Rey \$23.00. Rali, the legendary warrior and sorceress extraordinaire is rescued from her icy eternal sleep to undertake one more quest to save her homeland. Can she summon the energy, both magical and physical, the quest will require?

Change the World



October- Mage Tarot Deck. The Tarot has been woven into the fabric of *Mage: The Ascension* since the game blazed into existence in 1993. Fans have been able to glimpse samples of these cards in sourcebooks, but only now is the definitive *Mage Tarot Deck* available. Based on *World of Darkness* iconography, the *Mage Tarot Deck* features the art of Joshua Gabriel Timbrook, John Cobb, Larry MacDougall, and Alex Sheikman.

November — *Mage: The Ascension, Second Edition.* The long-awaited second edition for the storytelling game of reality on the brink!

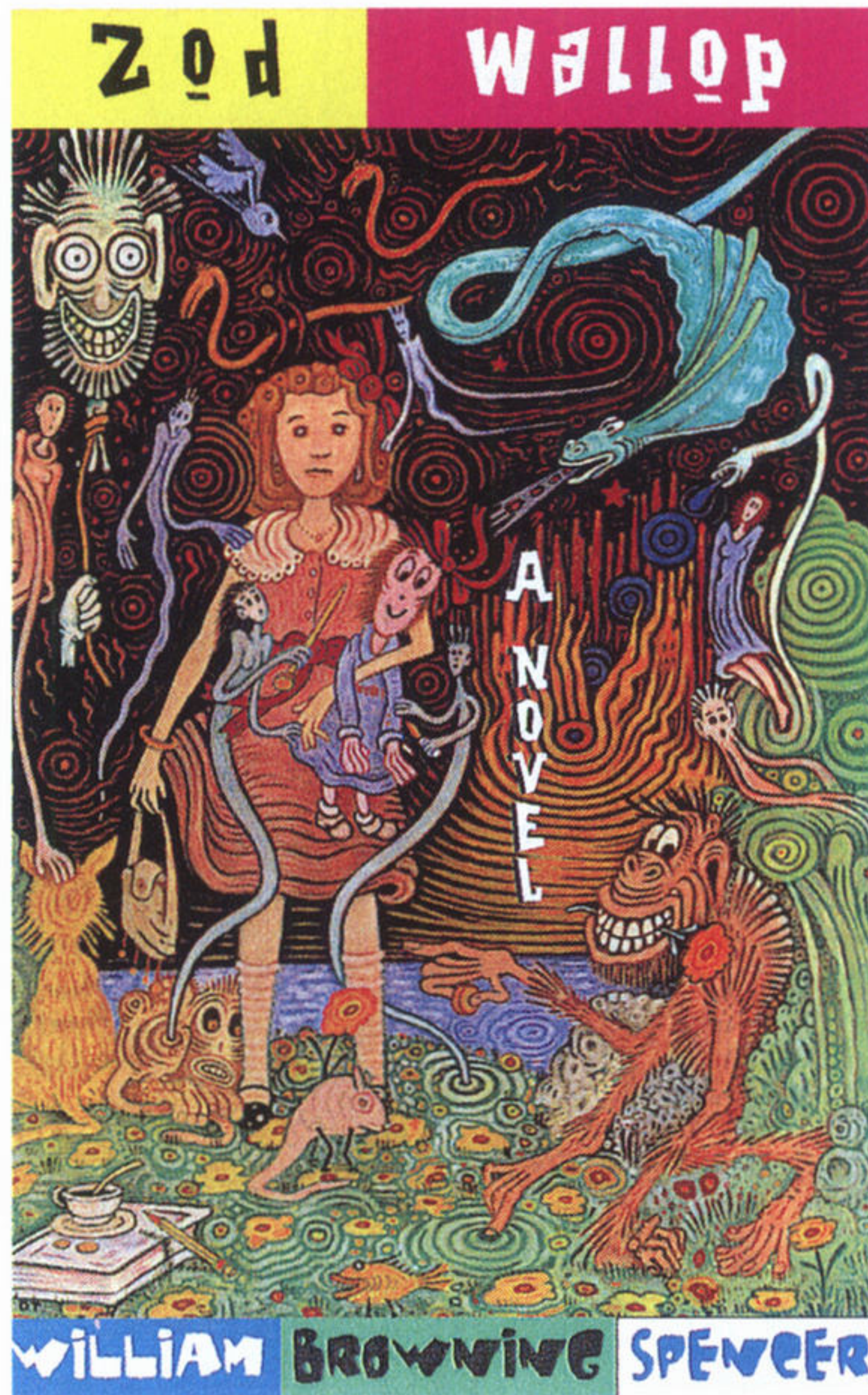
Mage: The Ascension challenges players to confront their innermost desires. As a modern-day mage with the power of magick at your fingertips, what would you do? And what would having such absolute power do to you? Breathtaking new art. Crisp organization. Expansive background information.

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grim years in His Majesty's secret service and has gone up to Oxford to become a professor at New College. Its heroine is his wife, Lydia, a red-headed beauty who is also a learned physician and every bit as gutsy as her husband when it comes to the pinch. Ms. Hambly views them both with a tender affection and a constant apprehension for their safety, which is quite contagious.

In both books the Ashers are dragged out of their tranquil academe by the doings of what I believe to be one of the best-realized batch of vampires in fiction. Very scary they are, and extremely creepy, but still decidedly possessing the remnants of the humanity they owned before their transformation, each one still driven by at least the ghosts of the same hopes and regrets, the same strengths and weaknesses which troubled their once living selves.

Hambly has done a highly inventive job of setting up the rules regarding her undead and then prognosticating what might happen were such things to actually exist. A twist I am particularly fond of is her explanation for how such creatures manage to constantly astonish us breathing, heartbeating folk with their sudden appearances and vanishments. It seems they simply have the knack of directing our attention anywhere they wish so that we find ourselves gazing rather blankly at an antimacassar on the back of a love seat just when one of them wants to tiptoe unobserved into our parlor, and we



gape foolishly upward at the flame of a gas lamp in the fog at the precise moment they feel the need of flitting off unseen into a nearby close. Pretty neat, I say.

The first book (which you really should read before *Traveling* to get the full effect of its sequel) took place essentially in London and concerned the doings of a group of interest-

ingly varied vampires ruled over by the sinister and brutal Grippen, and a number of the undead introduced to us in the original story figure in this present plot.

The most outstanding of them all is Don Simon Xavier Christian Morado de la Cadena-Ysidro; Don Ysidro for short. He is a young-looking, highly aristocratic fellow who wears the best tailoring London has to offer, but his fine features lose a little bit of their charm because of their corpse pallor. His glowing eyes have a weird champagne transparency, and his colorless hair calls to mind the wispy finesse of a spider's silken web. Like all of Hambly's vampires he tends to stonelike immobility when no activity is required and he breathes only when air is needed for speaking. As Asher comes to know him better during their association, he wonders how anyone ever mistakes him for anything human. Nevertheless, a guarded kind of mutual respect develops between the Spanish vampire and both the Archers during this first adventure, and it carries on and grows in the pages of its sequel. But it is ever clear that any human's relation with a vampire, no matter how chummy, must always be an edgy one which is deeply fraught with peril.

Two other vampires from the first book, which are especially pertinent to the second, are the Earl of Enchester and his beautiful wife Anthea. These two are—shall we say—

Continued on page 36

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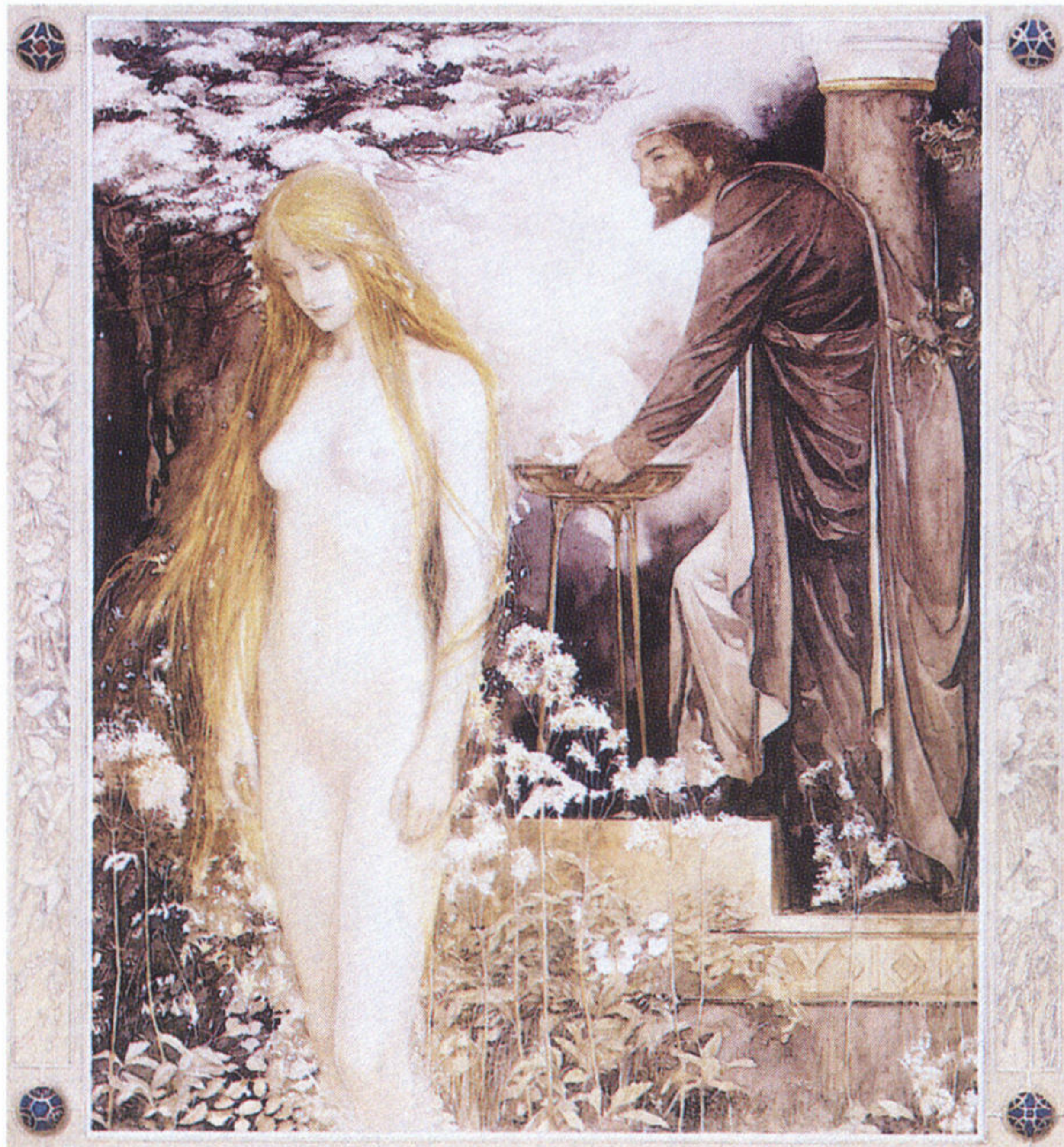
Almost two hundred years later, walking in Wordsworth's footsteps, I find myself thinking similar thoughts, reflecting on the power of this wild landscape to enchant, inspire, and restore. My own journey is a far more prosaic one than Wordsworth's romantic sojourn here—I've come merely to pick up an old car I've bought from friends with a farm in Powys. It's a five-hour trip back home to Devon, and my thoughts have been focused on road maps, traffic, and remembering to drive on the left-hand side. But as I pass through the narrow lanes, over hills, through glens, along the banks of the

River Wye, the landscape works its spell on me. It is a subtle and pervasive magic, delicate as the evening mist that settles on the dark green hills. These were the hills where the Celts retreated from the Saxon invasions of the sixth and seventh centuries. These hills held the sacred groves of the Druids, the ceremonial springs of the Triple Goddess, the caves where hermits and seers once lived. Stories of Welsh princes and kings still echo through the oaks and sycamores; the wind in the pines whispers Merlin's name, or *Myrddin*, as they know him here. Like the Celtic lands of Ireland and Scotland, the landscape of Wales is steeped in poetry. When I stop the car and walk among the stones of Tintern, I am reminded not only of the words of William Wordsworth, but of Arthur Machen, a fantasist from early in our own century. "I shall always esteem it as the greatest piece of fortune that has fallen to me that I was born in that noble,

fallen Caerleon-on-Usk in the heart of Gwent," wrote Machen in his autobiography. "The older I grow, the more firmly I am convinced that anything I may have accomplished in literature is due to the fact that when my eyes were first opened in early childhood they had before them the vision of an enchanted land."

The country of Wales has its own language, lovely to hear and strange to read, distinguished by its marked absence of vowels. It was the language of the bards, whose poems and tales (a handful of which still survive today) are at the root of fourteen centuries of Welsh literary tradition. The Celtic bards were more than poets: They were historians, genealogists, magicians, seers, and advisers to kings. Taliesin, the greatest of them all, was a shapeshifter and prophet. "I was in many shapes," he says in "The Battle of the Trees" (translated by Patrick Ford); "...I was raindrops in the air, I was stars' beam; I was a word in letters, I was a book in origin; I was lanterns of light for a year-and-a-half; I was a bridge that stretched over six estuaries; I was a path, I was an eagle, I was a coracle in seas; I was a bubble in

Alan Lee illustrates this tale from *The Mabinogion*. It was foretold that Lleu was never to marry a mortal woman. Gwydion, the magician, creates a bride named Blodeuedd from flowers for his nephew.



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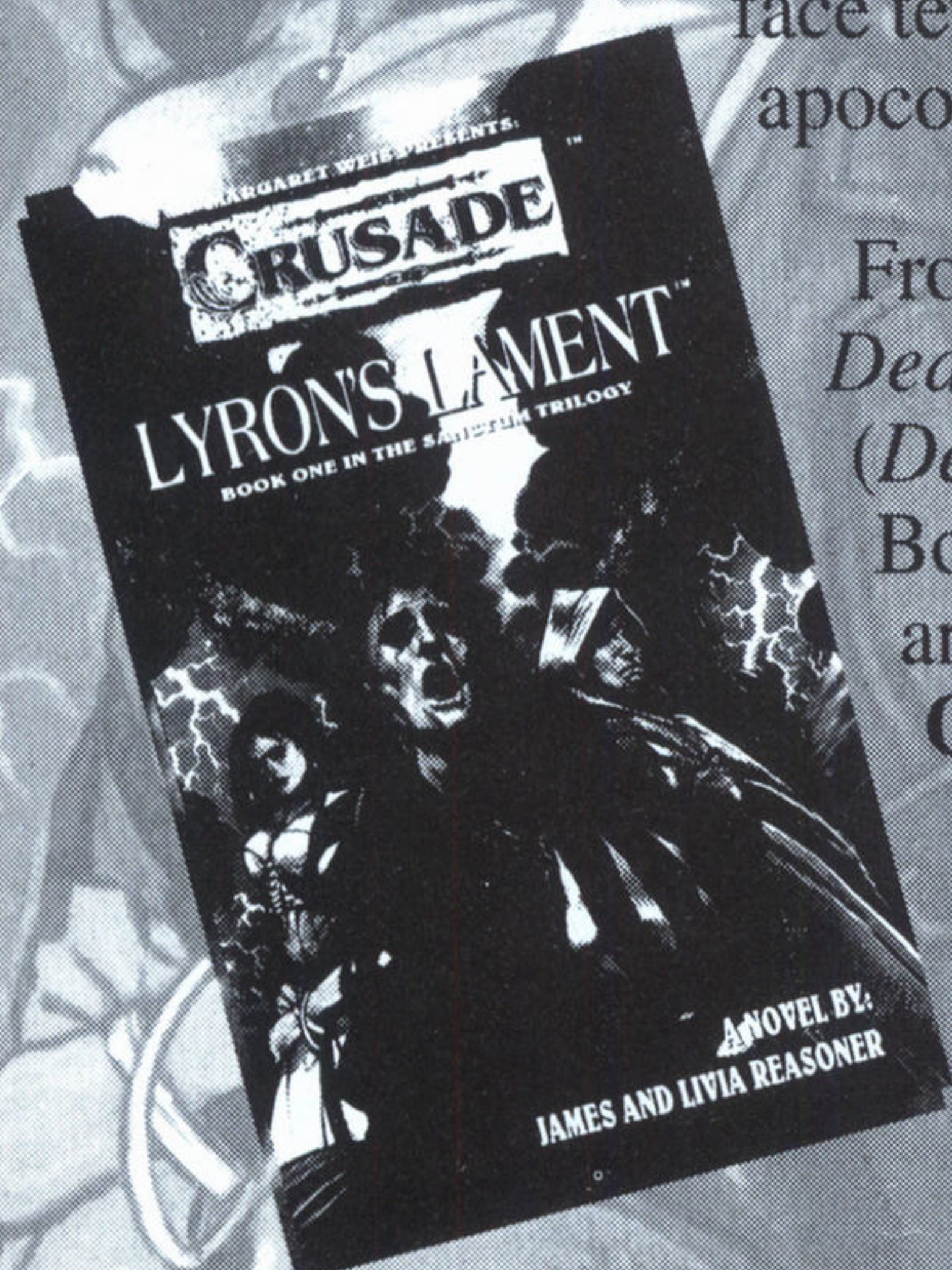
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beer, I was a drop in a shower; I was a sword in hand, I was a shield in battle; I was a string in a harp enchanted nine years...." (Those familiar with Irish mythology will notice how this poem echoes "The Song of Amergin.")

Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* lists Taliesin as one of five distinguished poets of the sixth century. Unlike the other four, a good deal of work ascribed to Taliesin remains extant, much of it from the 13th century *Book of Taliesin*. Celtic scholars view Taliesin as two distinct figures: the historical poet, and the poet-magician of Celtic myth. The story of the latter is told in *The Tale of Gwion Bach* and *The Tale of Taliesin*. These tales come to us through 16th century manuscript sources, although they are clearly much older works; together they form a continuous narrative about the Welsh bard's early life. According to this legend, the witch Ceridwen gave birth to an extremely ugly son. She determined to compensate for this by giving her hapless child the gift of wisdom and prophecy. She gathered herbs with the help of two assistants, one of whom was Gwion Bach. The witch brewed the herbs for a year and a day to distill three drops of a magical potion—but while she slept, Gwion Bach swallowed the three crucial drops himself. Ceridwen woke and the boy fled, with the furious witch in hot pursuit. He turned into a hare, she turned into a hound; he turned into a fish, she turned into an otter; he turned into a bird, she turned into a hawk and chased him across the skies. Finally he turned into a grain of wheat; the witch was a hen who gobbled him up. He lay in her belly for nine long months, and then Ceridwen gave birth to him. The witch couldn't bear to do the infant harm, so she put him into a basket and set it adrift in the sea. There he was found by Elphin, the spend-thrift son of a wealthy squire. Elphin named the child Taliesin (beautiful brow) and gave him to his wife to raise. The rest of the tale concerns Elphin's exploits, and how the young Taliesin cleverly saves him time and time again—a tale that Thomas Love Peacock has drawn upon for his charming novel, *The Misfortunes of Elphin*, published early in this century. The Arthurian scholar John Matthews has also made use of this material in *The Song of Taliesin: Stories and Poems from the Books of Broceliande*, an interesting and unusual work that is part fiction, part myth, part history, and part what he calls "mystery teaching."

Taliesin appears again in the 13th century *Black Book of Carmarthen*, in dialogue with another famous prophet: Merlin, or Myrddin (pronounced, more or less, as "Mirthen"). Wales has its own strong Arthurian tradition, and Myrddin is a prominent figure in it. The city of Carmarthen is one of the places that claims to be Myrddin's birthplace. An old oak tree is carefully preserved by the Carmarthen authorities, for legend has it that "When Myrddin's tree shall tumble down, then shall fall Carmarthen town." Some say the magician is still alive, trapped by Vivien's



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enchancements, in a cave in Bryn Myrddin (Merlin's Hill) some two miles east of the city.

The Merlin of Welsh legend is a rather shamanic figure who (like Suibhne in Irish poetry) goes mad and spends years as a wild-man in the woods, living a solitary, animal existence, before he emerges into his full power as a magician and seer. His prophecies are contained in poems said to be written by Myrddin himself from the ninth century onward; many can be found in *Llyfr Du Caer-fryddin* and *The Black Book of Carmarthen*. In the "Afallennau" and "Oineau" poems (from *The Black Book*, translated by Meirion Pennar), Myrddin portrays his life among apple trees in the forest of Celydonn: "Ten years and two score have I been moving along through twenty bouts of madness with wild ones in the wild; after not so dusty things and entertaining minstrels, only lack does now keep me company...." He despairs that he, who once lay in women's arms, now lies alone on the cold, hard ground, with only a wild piglet for company (a creature much revered by the Celts). This flight into wilderness is a common theme in shamanic initiation from cultures around the globe. Through deprivation, an elemental existence, and even madness the shaman embarks on an inward journey; when he returns to the world he is a changed man, aligned with the powers of nature, able to converse with animals and to see into the hearts of men. Mary Stewart vividly portrays this Merlin of Welsh legends in her adult novels *The Crystal Cave* and *The Hollow Hills*, books which are now considered modern classics of Arthurian fantasy literature. Peter Dickison has also drawn on Welsh Arthurian legends, among others, for his splendid book *Merlin Dreams*, illustrated by Alan Lee. (Lee's exquisite drawing of Merlin in the wild can be found reprinted in the first "Folkroots" column, *Realms of Fantasy*, Issue 1.)

As in Scotland and Cornwall, many Welshmen claim the legendary King Arthur as one of their own. One of the very oldest surviving Arthurian stories, "Culhwch and Olwen," is to be found along with later Welsh Arthurian romances among the tales of *The Mabinogion* (preserved in *The White Book of Rhydderch* and *The Red Book of Hergest*, from the 14th century). While some consider these stories to have been influenced by Norman-French literature, other scholars consider the influence to have gone quite the other way. This "is part of the wider issue between the 'Continental' and 'Welsh' schools of thought," write Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones, the men whose beautiful translation of *The Mabinogion*, published in 1949, has still never been equaled. "The former has held that Wales contributed very little or even nothing of importance to the Arthurian legend as it developed in France and Germany and then England.... On the other hand, there have been many scholars to maintain that the continental romances were derived from Welsh sources, whatever the links and transmission. There seems little room for doubt that the argument

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is now swinging to the 'Welsh' side, and that Chretien de Troyes' sources, little though we know of them, were derived from Welsh originals. The evidence of comparative folktales, of proper names and linguistics, and what might be reasonably if tentatively deduced from the methods of literary composition in the Middle Ages, is telling with increasing weight against the opposite view. The achievement of Chretien and the German poets is not affected by this; their poems stand, their influence remains; their contribution to the Arthurian legend is impressive enough, though they are denied what they themselves never claimed—its origin and fountainhead."

While the stories of King Arthur's court are the best known of all the Welsh legends and myths, this small country has also produced another cycle of magical stories which are equally fascinating and indisputably Welsh: the four primary stories of *The Mabinogion*, known as the Four Branches. I first came across these extraordinary tales in the fantasy novels of Evangline Walton, drawn directly from Mabanogi legendry: *The Prince of Annwn*, *The Children of Lyr*, *The Song of Rhiannon*, and *The Island of the Mighty*. As wonderful as these novels are (and I highly recommend them), the original old tales are well worth seeking out, particularly in the Jones and Jones translation. In my opinion, there is little in the field of myth, epic, and romance that can compare to this one cycle of

stories for sheer magic and mystery, for complex characterization and evocative descriptions of the pagan world.

The First Branch ("Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed") concerns a prince in the southwest of Wales: his adventures in the Otherworld, his marriage to the magical Rhiannon, and the birth of Pryderi, their son. Rhiannon is a wonderful character: direct, resourceful, and nobody's fool. Pwyll first sees her astride a majestic white horse, but although she seems to be riding at a stately pace, no one can catch up to her either on foot or on the fastest horse of Dyfed. At last, in despair, Pwyll cries out for her to wait. She stops immediately, telling the prince wryly, "I will wait gladly, and it had been better for your horse had you asked it long ago."

The Second Branch ("Branwen, Daughter of Llyr") is set in mid-Wales. It tells the story of the gigantic Bran the Blessed, his brothers and his tragic sister, Branwen—who is pledged to be married to a king of Ireland to strengthen bonds between that country and Wales. The ensuing story involves treachery, the magical Cauldron of Rebirth, and the famous severing of Bran's head—which continues to talk, feast, and give advice until at last it is put in its final resting place (underneath the Tower of London).

The Third Branch ("Manawydan, Son of Llyr") returns us to Rhiannon (married now to Manawydan), who becomes trapped in an enchanted fort along with her son, Pryderi.

Manawydan's subsequent effort to find his family and lift the enchantment on his land results in one of the most peculiar and funny scenes in Celtic literature as he attempts to hang a pregnant mouse on a gallow—you have to read the story to find out why!

The Fourth Branch ("Math, Son of Manthony") is the most magical of all, set in Gwynedd in the north of Wales. It concerns the magician Gwydion, his sister Aranrhod, his sister's son, Llew Llaw Gyffes and Llew's marriage to a woman made of flowers. The complexity of relationships in this tale, particularly in the interactions of men and women, make for fascinating reading and one of the most unusual sagas in mythic literature. Gwydion and his brother, for instance, are punished by Math for the rape of a young maiden in Math's court by being transformed into animals over a three-year period: first deer, then wild boars, and then wolves. In this form they must procreate, and each man takes his turn as the female of the pair; thus each experiences a female existence and the pains of childbirth.

To learn more about Welsh mythology, I recommend the following titles (in addition to *The Mabinogion* itself, as translated by Jones & Jones, Lady Charlotte Guest, or P.K. Ford): *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* by Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees; *Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx* (2 volumes) by John Rhys; *A Celtic Miscellany* by Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson; *Mysterious Wales* by Chris Bar-



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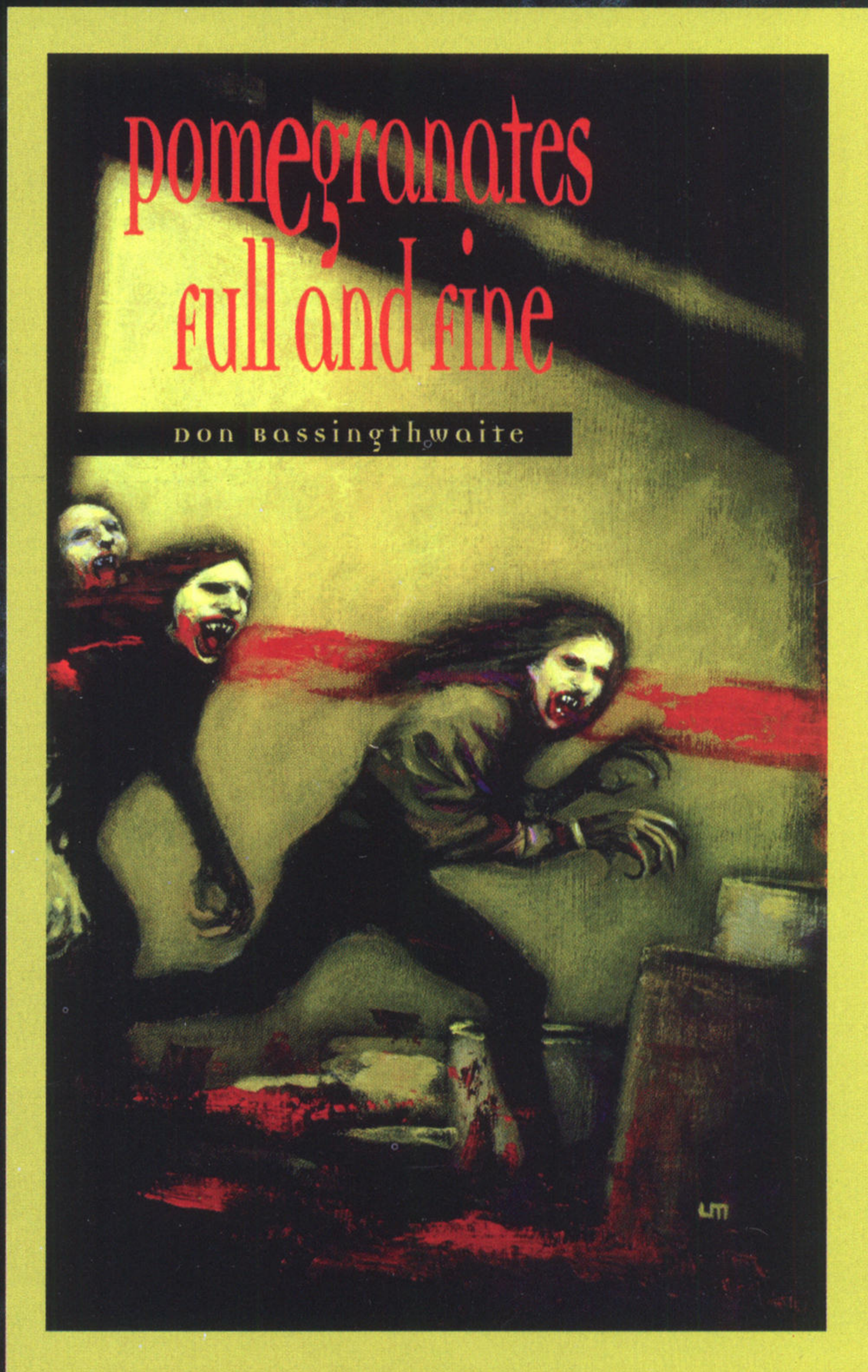
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ber; *Taliesin: Shamanism and the Bardic Mysteries in Britain and Ireland* by John Matthews; and *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves.

Evangeline Walton is not the only modern fantasy writer to have been influenced by the stories of the Mabinogi and other distinctively Welsh legends. Lloyd Alexander's "Prydain" series, Susan Cooper's "Dark is Rising" series and Alan Garner's *Owl Service* all draw heavily from this ancient material and are highly recommended. Artists and musicians have also been drawn to the mythic forests of Welsh legendry.

Some years ago Robin Williamson, the harpist, created a lovely album of Celtic music entitled *The Mabinogion*; the music was originally used for live performances of the tales. Alan Lee, one of England's foremost illustrators (his work includes *Faeries* and the recent anniversary edition of *The Lord of the Rings*) has long been a connoisseur of Welsh legends. He spent two-and-a-half years creating his sumptuously illustrated edition of *The Mabinogion* (using the Jones & Jones translation), full of richly detailed watercolor paintings bordered by intricate Celtic knotwork. This volume is, sadly, out of print now, but well worth seeking out in secondhand and specialty shops. (I have recently learned that Dreamhaven Books in Minneapolis has just discovered a large cache of copies—which is good news indeed.) Alec Lewis is a Welsh artist who now lives and works on Dartmoor. His sculpture, painting, and paper



Alec Lewis' wooden sculpture uses ancient Celtic symbols and the mythic tradition of the "Green Man." See our October 1994 Folkroots article "The Green Guardian and the Lore of the Woods."

collages are steeped in Celtic legendry—particularly "Cypher," a wooden sculpture that echoes the shapes of standing stones, etched with ancient Celtic symbols, and Lewis' potent, mysterious "Green Man."

In addition to the high mythic tradition of Wales, the country is also rich with folk and fairy lore. The Tylwyth Teg (the Fair Family) usually live underground or underwater. They love to dance, to bargain at market (with coins that inevitably turn back into

leaves), to steal cattle and human babies, or to lead drunken country folk astray. The Gwyllion are the hill fairies of Wales, great friends of the goats, whose beards they comb. The Gwraegdd Annwn are water nymphs; they row about on isolated mountain lakes in little skiffs. Wild Edric is the wild huntsman who rides, with his host and his fairy wife, along the Welsh borders by the dark of the moon. The Llamhigyn y Dwr is a monstrous toad with wings and a tail instead

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of legs, so big that it devours sheep. When fishermen hook it on the end of their line it lets out a blood-curdling scream. The Anfanc and the Water Leaper are two other creatures you don't want to meet in the Welsh wilds by night.

According to a Mr. David Williams of Carmarthen, "the Tylweth Teg were as small in stature as dwarfs, and always appeared in white. Often at night they danced in rings amid the green fields. Most of them were females, though they had a king and, as their name suggests, they were very beautiful in appearance. The king was called Gwydion ap Don. His residence was among the stones and was called Caer Gwydion. His queen was Gwenhidw. I have heard my mother call the small, fleecelike clouds which appear in fine weather the Sheep of Gwenhidw." The great folklorist Katherine Briggs includes Welsh fairy lore in her *Encyclopedia of Fairies* and *The Fairies in Literature and Tradition*. *The Welsh Fairy Book* by W. Jenkyn Thomas (with illustrations by William Pogany) is a wonderful old source for enchanting tales. Sylvia Townsend Warner draws on Welsh fairy lore for the charming, wry tale "Visitors to a Castle" in her collection of adult fairy stories, *Kingdoms of Elfin* (many of which were first published in *The New Yorker* and are highly recommended). "Visitors to a Castle" concerns a small community of fairies that live in the shadow of Mynnydd Prescelly, a Welsh mountain that has the annoying habit of randomly disappearing....

Rich with old stories and with great natural beauty, it is no wonder Arthur Machen and others have considered Wales the "Enchanted Land." Yet it is also a small country struggling hard to preserve its cultural identity while remaining, politically, a part of Great Britain. To those unfamiliar with Wales or its myths, the name tends to evoke images of coal mines, slag heaps, and gray industrial towns. But this describes only a small portion of the country; much of it is green and beautiful, dotted with ancient castles everywhere, fine old villages and small working farms, blessed with the wild mountain landscapes of Snowdon and the Brecon Beacons. The preservation of the Welsh language has done much to protect a Welsh national identity; and the country's extraordinary literary heritage, from Taliesin to Dylan Thomas, is a national treasure without price.

"Let no man despise Wales," wrote D. Lloyd George in 1906, "her language or her literature. She has survived many storms; she has survived many Empires. When the last truckload of coal reaches Cardiff, when the last black diamond is dug out of the earth at Glamorgan, there will be men then digging gems of pure brilliants from the inexhaustible mines of the literature and the language of Wales." ♣

[Correction: The writer/psychologist James Hillman was incorrectly listed as James Hillerman in the August issue of *Realms*. Apologies to all who had difficulty finding his books as a result.]

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Relic
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Relic

Crypt Kin
Minotaur
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Spell
0/0 2

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Crazed Dog
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3/0 3

Flying Card. Rider.
"When the evil creations of the Necromancer Kings took to the heavens, it was in the form of the terrible gryverns, which allowed those foul sorcerers to spread their corruption farther and farther throughout the realms."

© 1995, Susan Van Camp

Hight. Tyeer Change
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BY LISA MACCARILLO

Director Joe Johnston explores the possibilities in the fantasy adventure *Jumanji*.

BURIED DEEP IN THE EARTH NEAR HIS FATHER'S FACTORY IS A GAME WHICH WAITS FOR Alan Parrish (Adam Hann-Byrd) to find it. It's 1969, and the inscription on the inside of the ornate box that contains the magic board game *Jumanji* seems to apply perfectly to Alan—"A game for those who seek to find a way to leave their world behind."

"Anyone who hears the game calling to them is unhappy with some aspect of their life," says Joe Johnston, director of the new TriStar fantasy adventure *Jumanji*. "They don't feel good about some relationship in their life, or the way things have turned out for them. Alan gets beat up a lot and thinks his father is ashamed of him and that his parents are trying to get rid of him by sending him off to boarding school."

An unexpected visit from his friend Sarah prompts Alan to at last roll the dice. Suddenly, before Sarah's terrified eyes, gigantic bats appear out of nowhere and the 13-year-old boy disappears into this mysterious game, leaving no trace behind.

Twenty-six years later, two children move into what was once Alan Parrish's family house. Peter and Judy Shepherd have lost their parents and are living with their aunt, who got a deal on the stately old house and wants to turn it into a bed and breakfast. Peter and Judy, played by Bradley Pierce and Kirsten Dunst, soon hear the call of *Jumanji*.

"It may not be obvious in the beginning, but Judy has a problem with lying and telling tall tales because she feels insecure and inadequate, and Peter doesn't talk to

anyone," Johnston remarks. "He has nothing to say since their parents were killed. Instead, he gets in fights and bites people."

It is when Peter and Judy open the game and begin to play that the beauty of *Jumanji* escapes from its box in the form of monkeys, lions, elephants, and a 42-year-old Alan Parrish, played by mercurial actor Robin Williams. Johnston explains: "Alan has been forced to survive on his own, through his own skill and daring and courage, for 26 years. The kid that he was going into the game is afraid of confrontations and not very good at anything, so the game presents him with 26 years of survival, basically. He comes out as something close to Tarzan. His clothes have disintegrated. The only thing he has left is a watch and a pocketknife and some change. And he's gone from being this weak, timid kid into a total survivalist jungle man."

Johnston emphasizes that is how the game works: "In the process of playing the game, you are given what you need to overcome the problems you had in the first place. The game shows you things that you need to see and tells you things that you need to know."

When Johnston was presented with the idea of transforming Chris Van Allsburg's Caldecott Medal Award-winning book into a movie, his imagination immediately began to run wild. Van Allsburg's book tells a simple, yet meaningful tale of two children who learn from *Jumanji* that they must finish what they start and always read directions. Though the filmmakers incorporated these elements, Johnston felt that adding a more mature dimension could only support and broaden the story's themes.

"The big problem was taking a 22-page children's book and adding enough layers and enough levels to sustain anyone's interest for two hours," he explains. "That was the big thing. In his first draft of the script, Van Allsburg himself had succeeded in adding a device to the story in which the main kid becomes trapped inside the game for 26 years and comes out as Robin Williams, and that time jump is really the key to our translation. But that element alone isn't what makes the screenplay work. The story is really about coming to terms with who you are and the contribution you make to the world, and about confronting your problems, rather than escaping from them."

Sarah (Bonnie Hunt) attempts to help Alan (Robin Williams), who has become trapped in the attic floor, while giant spiders approach in Jumanji.



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The end result "has elements of a lot of different genres of film," he notes. "I would describe it as an adventure fantasy with romantic comedy and some time travel. There's no escaping that it's a fantasy. I won't say it's a children's fantasy, but there are elements of that in there as well."

Johnston's next challenge was to conceptualize the creatures which rampage out of *Jumanji*'s runaway jungle. He turned to effects pioneers Industrial Light and Magic, the company that had given Johnston his start nearly two decades ago when he worked as a special effects designer on the *Star Wars* films. "My primary interest was getting the design of the animals established," he says. "I didn't want the audience to see animals that they can go down and see at Lion Country Safari. I wanted something that was just a little bit different, a little more strange, a little more ferocious. I don't think the audience is going to say, 'Hey, those aren't real animals.' They're just going to say, 'Wow, I didn't know animals were that big'; or, 'I didn't know lions were that ferocious.' I wanted it to be bigger than real without being unreal."

Though he has contributed to some of the most dramatic and beautiful images ever brought to the screen through his Academy Award-winning work with ILM and created a mythical Los Angeles of the '30s with *Rockeeter*, Johnston kept himself deliberately removed from the day-to-day technical



Peter (Bradley Pierce), Judy (Kirsten Dunst), Sarah, and Alan face the game *Jumanji* one more time in order to outwit the outlandish forces it unleashes in an effort to save their homes and loved ones.

aspects of the digital imagery seen in *Jumanji*.

"I came from an art background," he says. "Despite a nasty rumor that I've been trying to distill for years, I don't really have any kind of technical knowledge about effects at all. I was a designer and I worked for George

Lucas on three *Star Wars* films, and so I picked up enough knowledge about special effects to know the difference between a blue screen and a garbage matte, but I'm not an effects technician, and I really don't understand that much about it."

Poetry Contest

\$24,000 in Prizes

The National Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes

Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that \$24,000 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry, "we have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in one original poem,

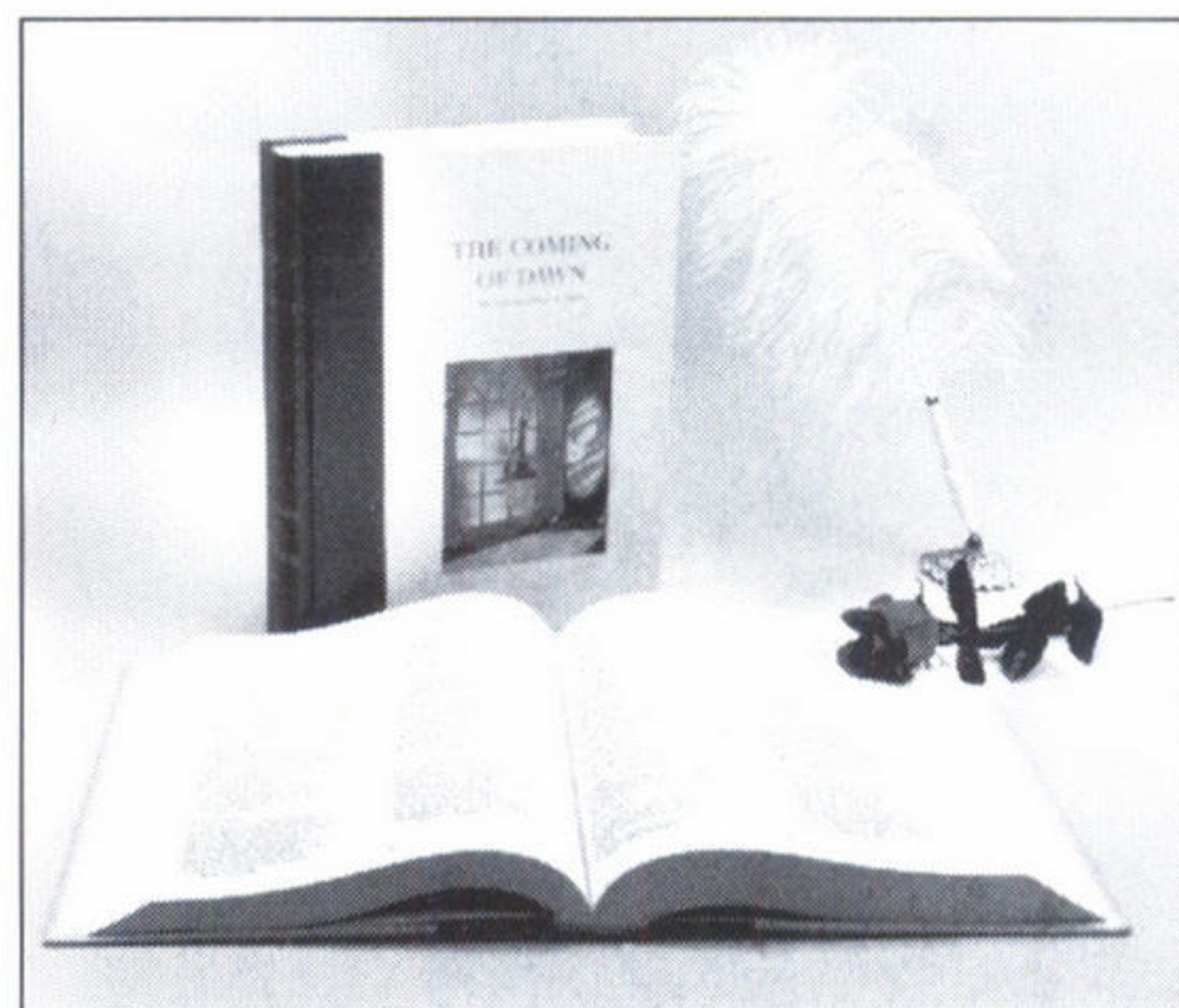
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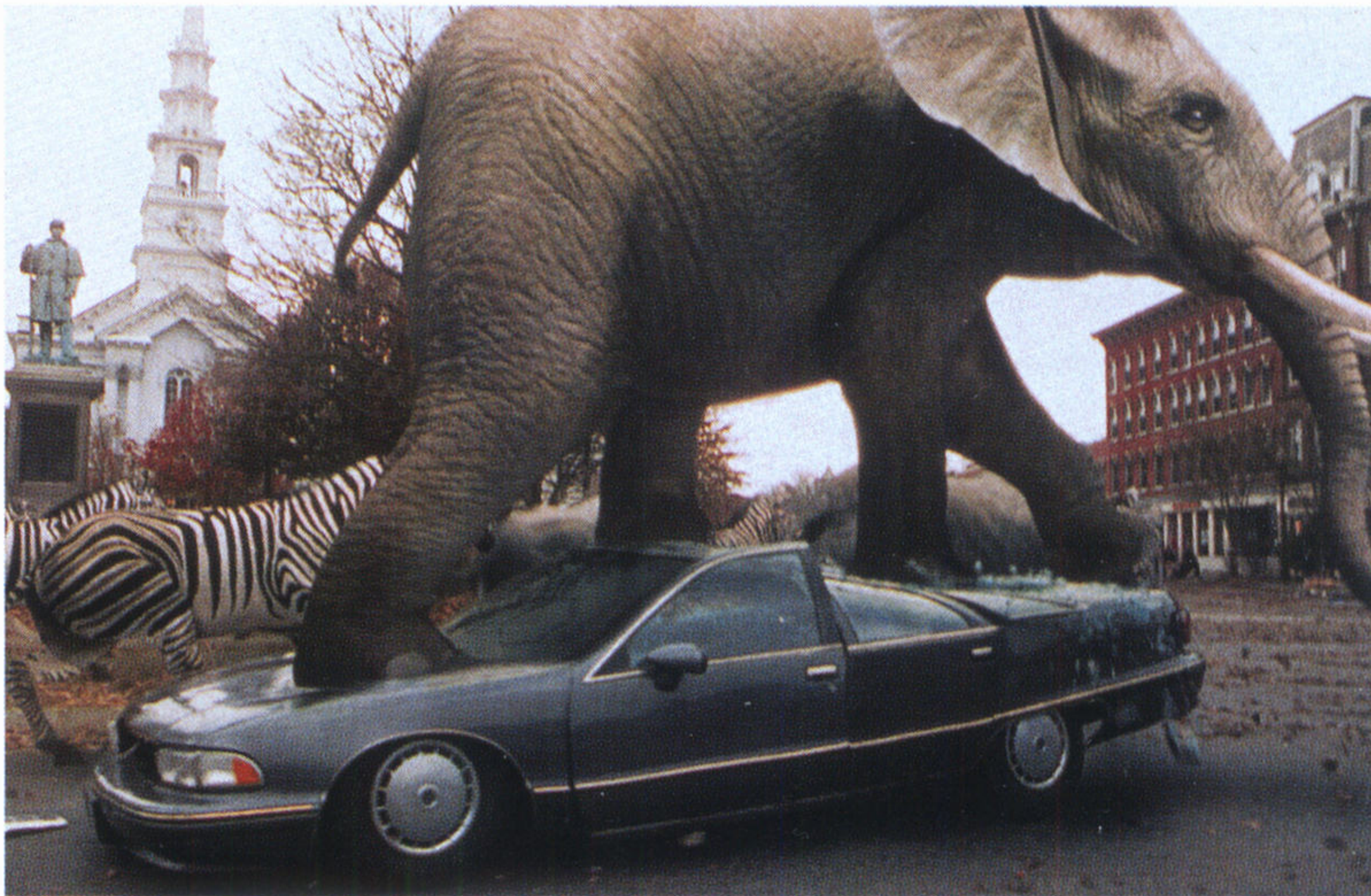
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Fortunately, the leaps made in digital imagery since *Jurassic Park* left Johnston with enough room to concentrate most on the story and the actors, and the result is a strong buzz that Robin Williams gives a stand-out performance unlike anything he's done in the past.

"Robin and I had a lot of discussion before he agreed to take this movie, and he insisted that almost everything be on the page," Johnston remembers. "Very often in his movies, he comes in and takes an idea and creates a character out of something that wasn't on the page from the beginning. He was very conscious of wanting a fairly exact blueprint of who this character was and then he would experiment with shadings and nuances. Also, because of the effects demands, we didn't have the luxury of saying, 'Let's just go out here and you can just do something funny and we'll match it with effects later,' because we were holding ourselves to a very tight budget. So, Robin was very conscious of that, too."

Johnston also enjoyed the experience of working with young actors Bradley Pierce, whose impressive credits include providing the voice for Chip the Teacup in *Beauty and the Beast*, and Kirsten Dunst, who has already established a reputation as a talented and charismatic actress from her performances in *Interview with the Vampire* and *Little Women*. "Kids are very honest," the director notes. "They also don't question as



A stampede of elephants, rhinos and zebras released by the magical game of Jumanji thunders downtown, demolishing everything in their path. ILM created the larger-than-life destructive creatures.

much some of the bizarre aspects of movies. When you say there are going to be three mosquitoes that come flying through the frame and attack you, they're like 'Oh, of course, I know what to do.' They really let their imagination take over and it's always a lot of fun to work with them."

When he was a child, Johnston learned to draw before he learned to walk. "My father was an artist, is still an artist, and I

remember him teaching me about perspective in the third grade," he remembers. "So, I would draw a ship and the kids in my class all thought I was drawing a sinking ship because it was getting smaller at one end. They thought it was going under water and I'd try to explain to them that it only appeared to be going under because it was farther away. That's when I decided that artists work best alone—out

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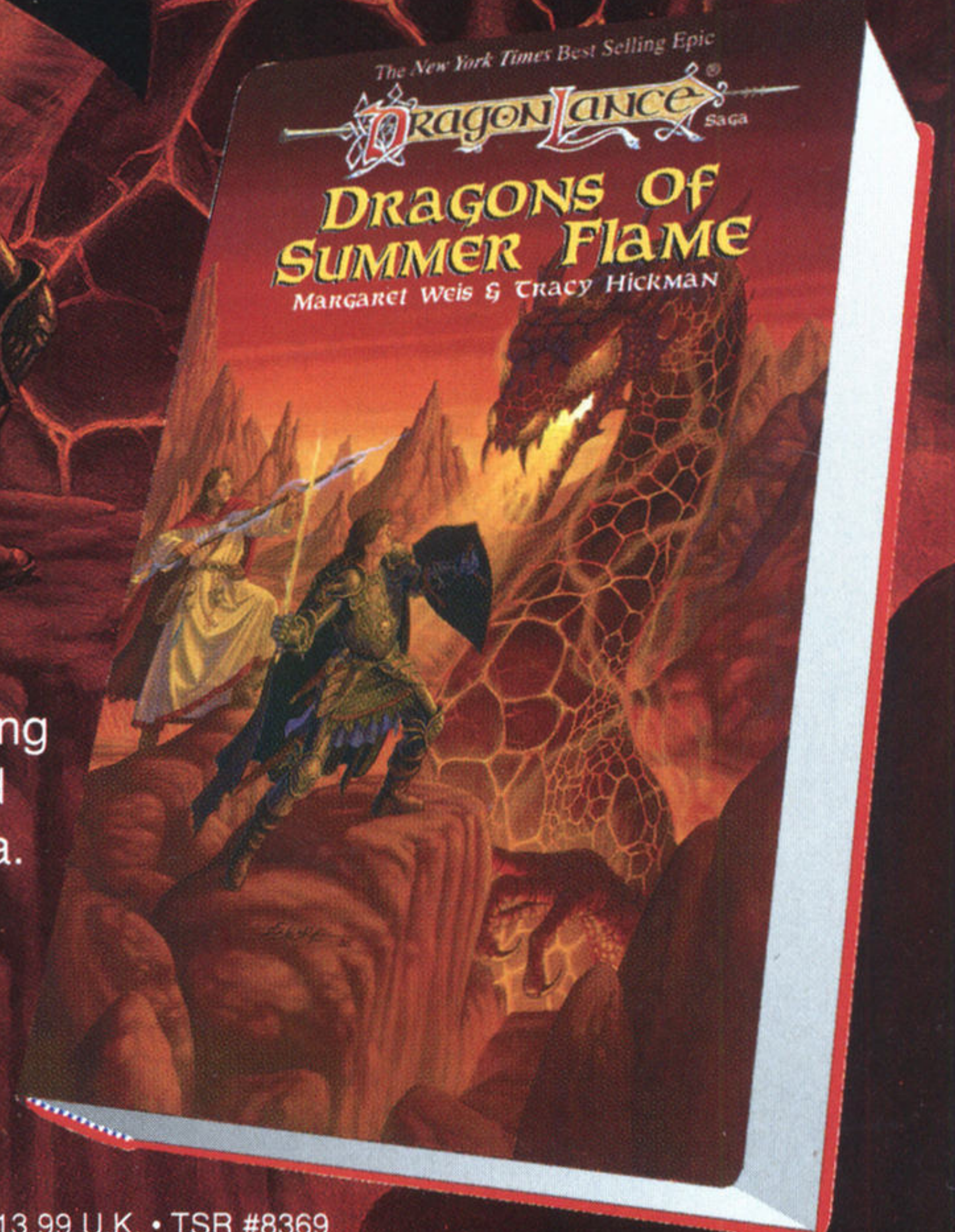
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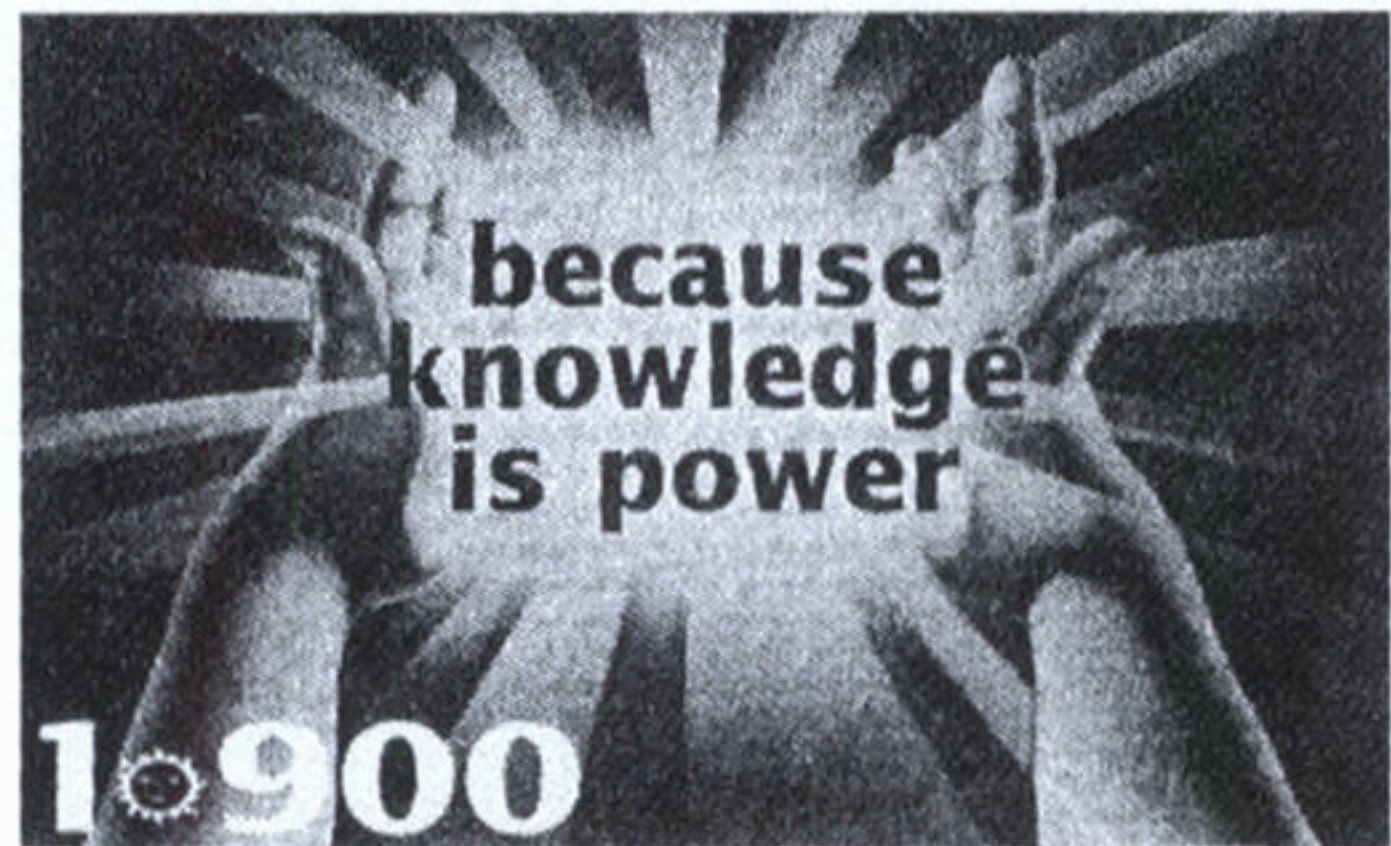
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of the danger of ridicule."

A native of Austin, Texas, Johnston relocated to California and began a career as a graphic designer. An offer came in to "work on some space movie in the Valley," launching Johnston's multifaceted motion picture career.

Following his work on *Star Wars*, he went on to share an Oscar for special visual effects for his work on *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. He subsequently served as second unit director on *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Batteries Not Included*, as well as working as effects illustrator on the TV series *Battlestar Galactica*. Johnston moved into production design with the television films *The Ewok Adventure* and *Ewoks: The Battle For Endor* (on which he also served as second unit director) and became associate producer on Ron Howard's fantasy film *Willow*.

Johnston's first venture into feature film direction was the box office hit, *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*. The international success of that film led to his directing *Rocketeer*, an adaptation of Dave Stevens' popular comic, which was praised for its bold vision of 1930s-era Los Angeles.

"The challenge of *Rocketeer* was to describe Los Angeles in the '30s without doing all of the stereotypical things, and to not hit the audience over the head with it," he says. "We just let it be there, as if you went out and shot a movie in Southern California in the '30s. I have very good memories of *Rocketeer*. I liked being able to play with all those cars and airplanes; it was really a kick to be able to assemble a fleet of vintage aircraft like that and actually have them flown in front of the camera. It was like the biggest box of toys in the world."

As an artist, Johnston draws inspiration from the plain air (landscape) painters of the late 1800s and early 1900s. "To me, they illustrated America to some degree, but more specifically the California at the beginning of the 20th century when there was really practically wilderness outside Los

Angeles and Pasadena," he reflects. "You can go to these places, look at the line of mountains, and find where these paintings were painted. You can actually put yourself almost in the exact spot that this painter stood seventy-five, eighty years ago. But more often than not you're standing in some bank parking lot and you're looking at a skyline of Glendale or Pasadena and you realize that it will never exist again. For me, it's like a time capsule of what we had once but we don't have anymore."

Recreating an era that no longer exists is a stitch in the fabric of both *Rocketeer* and *Jumanji*, the latter which explores the world that is, the world that was, and the world that might be.

"When I first began developing the script, what started coming to the surface for me was an element of *It's A Wonderful Life*, which is one of my favorite films—probably one of everybody's favorite films," he explains. "The whole notion that you are given the opportunity to see what happened to the world because you weren't there is something that I found inspiration in. I didn't copy or borrow from *It's A Wonderful Life*, but I took that element and put it in a different setting and tried to illustrate that. I think it's a great idea and we tried to do it differently and interestingly."

Perhaps this fascination drives his efforts to make the movie he's wanted to make for the past five years, an adaptation of Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, the book which inspired the formation of the group Earth First.

"It's about a group of people who care about the rape of the American West, and in their frustration, they decide that the only thing they can do is fight back against the machine, i.e., the military industrial complex. So, they start a form of guerrilla warfare against what they consider the enemy. It's a little bit *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, a little bit *Bonnie and Clyde*, and a little bit *Robin Hood*, even." ☛

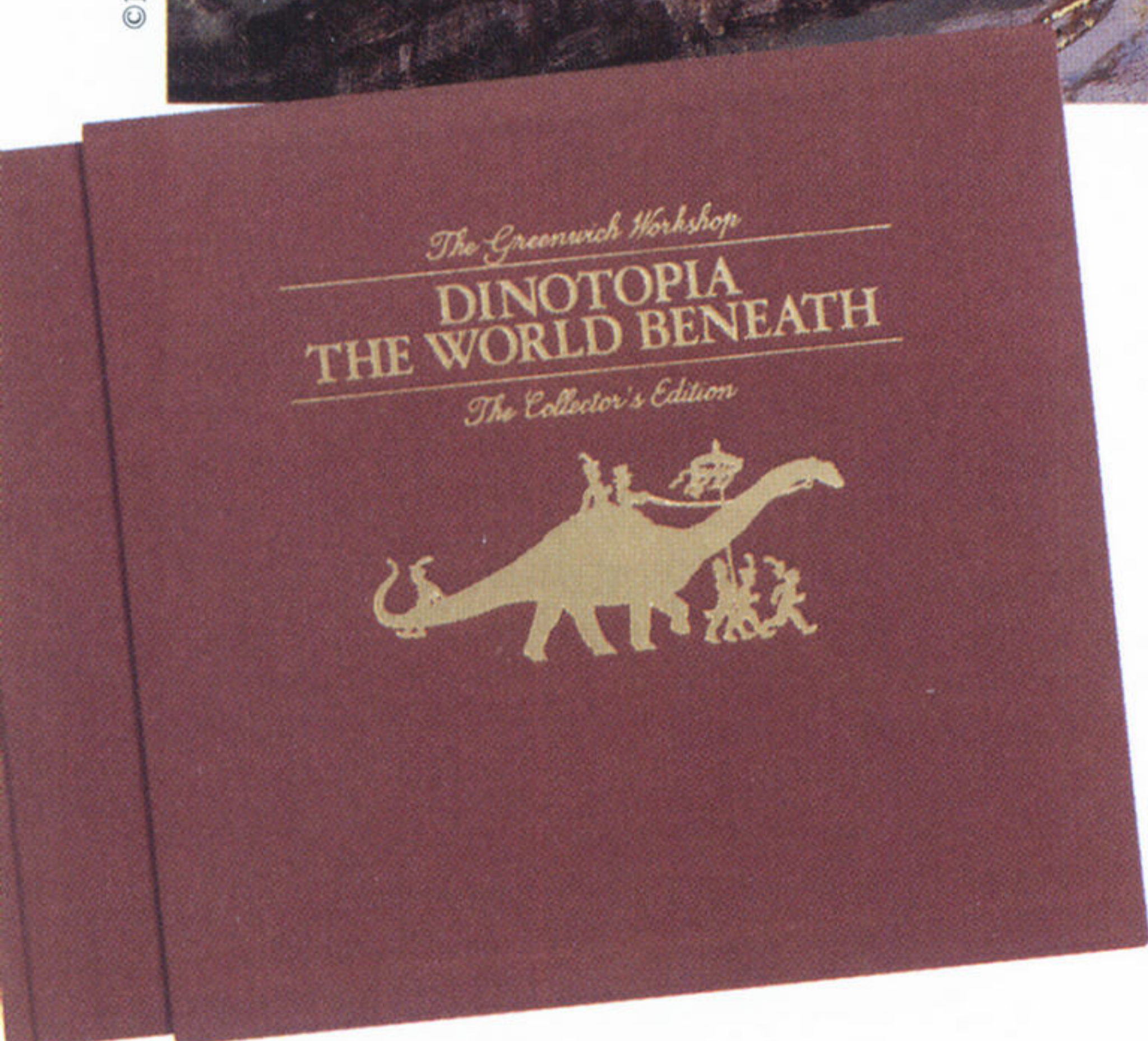
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BOOKS

Continued from page 16

"afflicted" by more humanity than any of the other vampires because their love and passion for one another have somehow managed to survive their transformation from living flesh and blood into their present semi-cadaveric condition. Lady Encheater was a remarkably strong living female and continues to be one as a living dead, but the earl has considerable difficulty with the obvious conflicts involved and is prone to Hamletian ponderings.

The action in *Traveling* takes place on a much vaster stage than that of its predecessor, moving from Great Britain through Paris and Vienna, then on to Turkey and the arcane complexities of Constantinople. Asher learns that a dreadful complication of spy-riddled Europe is near when it occurs to the marvelously sinister and thoroughly merciless Ignace Karolyi that vampires with their superb powers of misdirection and manipulation would make marvelous agents of espionage. Though they have never seen one another in the flesh, Archer and Karolyi have been in deadly conflict before when Karolyi almost tracked Archer down with dogs in the high reaches of the Dinaric Alps in order to kill him.

Of course there are local vampires at every turn, culminating with a positively spectacular group of them ruled by Olumsiz Bey, otherwise known as El-Malik or Wafat Sahib or the Deathless Lord who has a secret, hidden horror brewing in a terrible, dark place. Hambly's slow, hint by hint revelation of what this final horror is cannot be faulted for its thorough creepiness, and the reader will not be disappointed when it finally crawls into view.

There are many lovely side tales involved, including that of poor Margaret Potton, who is surely one of the most touchingly pathetic victims of a vampire's attention yet imagined. You really must read about poor Miss Potton.

I am not ordinarily all that fond of the notion of multitudes of sequels, but in this case—if she can manage to keep up the high quality of the doughty Archers' wild encounters with the living dead—I confess freely I would be delighted if Ms. Hambly continues to bring out book after book about 'em.

Zod Wallop (by William Browning Spencer, St. Martin, NY, 278 pp., Hardcover, \$21.95) is a fine novel about writers of children's books, and about people other people put away in crazy houses and hospitals because they scare those other people, and about greedy bastards who would swallow the world whole if they could, and about dreamers, of which the last category, of course, includes all those that went before.

Its hero is Harry Gainsborough, who writes a lot of books, not for "children" but for his beloved daughter Amy. The books turn out to be enormously successful, but when Amy abruptly dies he stops all writing

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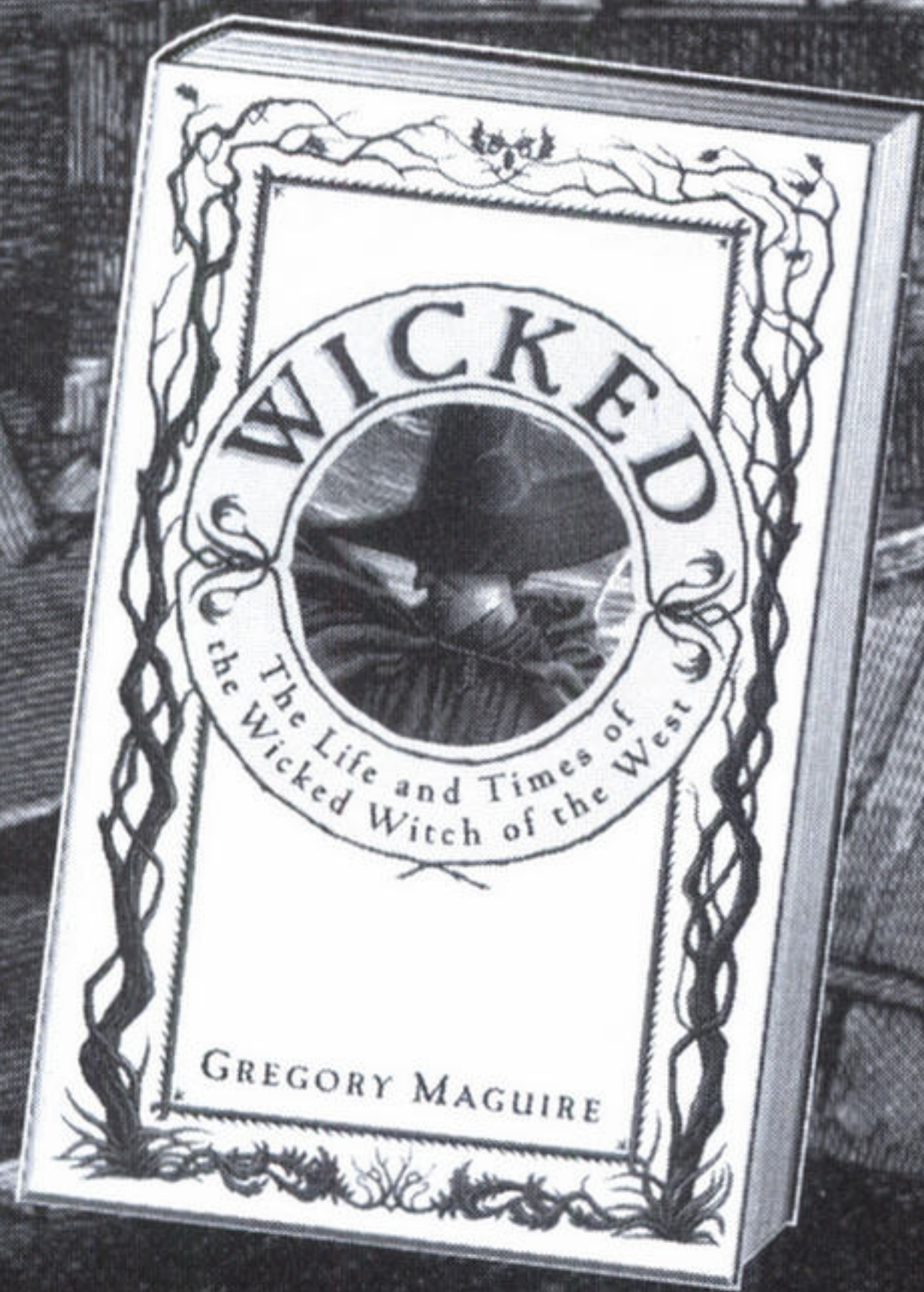
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and most other forms of communication and lets himself drift into a terrible quiet so deep he scares people (see above) so that they put him in a crazy house in hopes those in charge of it will turn him back into someone at least something like the original, unscary Harry.

While in the crazy house Harry writes an illustrated manuscript of another childrens' book, but this one is dark and horrible and hopeless—because it is by a man who no longer has his beloved daughter because she died and there was nothing he could do about it. When it's read by a very large fellow patient named Raymond it drives the poor man even crazier, and Harry, because he really is a kind man, rewrites it.

"I rewrote it because Raymond cried so," Harry said. "He cried like a child that has just lost his mother and father in some disaster. He cried like his heart was broken. It shook me up. I decided it wasn't worth it to tell the truth. What the hell? I thought. Give the lunatic his fairy tale."

The rewritten book becomes the center of Raymond's life, his guiding star, his Bible, the map showing him the way to his—and everybody else's—salvation. Others follow his mad lead and all of this is immensely complicated and enlarged by the devious and highly sinister experiments and manipulations of greedy bastards (see above).

The novel takes place simultaneously here on Earth and in *Zod Wallop*. The overlappings are sometimes hilarious and sometimes sinister and sometimes both at once, and they are always superbly handled. The plotting, though lunatic, could not be more solid. As with the locales, all the characters are both real live people here and now, and imaginary and fantastic beings in the book. Roald Peake, for instance, is simultaneously a superb villain in the story taking place on Earth and Lord Draining, a ghastly vampire monster in *Zod Wallop*. And of course—tension upon tension—it is important to always remember that there are *two* versions of *Zod Wallop*, both the dark one full of grief and doom, and the bright and sunny one full of hopes and possibilities, and they are in fierce contention.

This is a very kindly book, if somewhat stern, and I think it has a lot of helpful truth in it.

Gahan Wilson

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Continued on page 87

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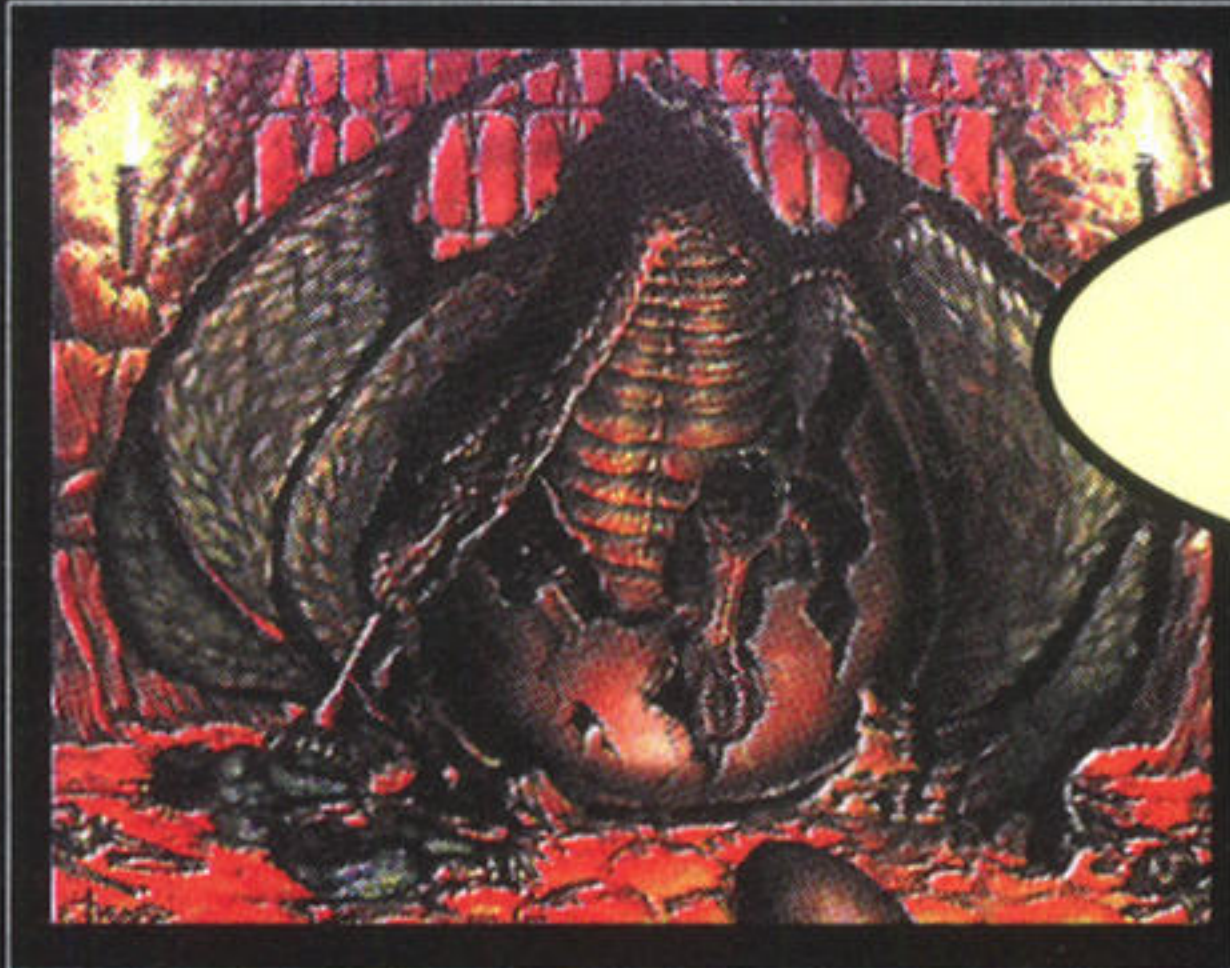


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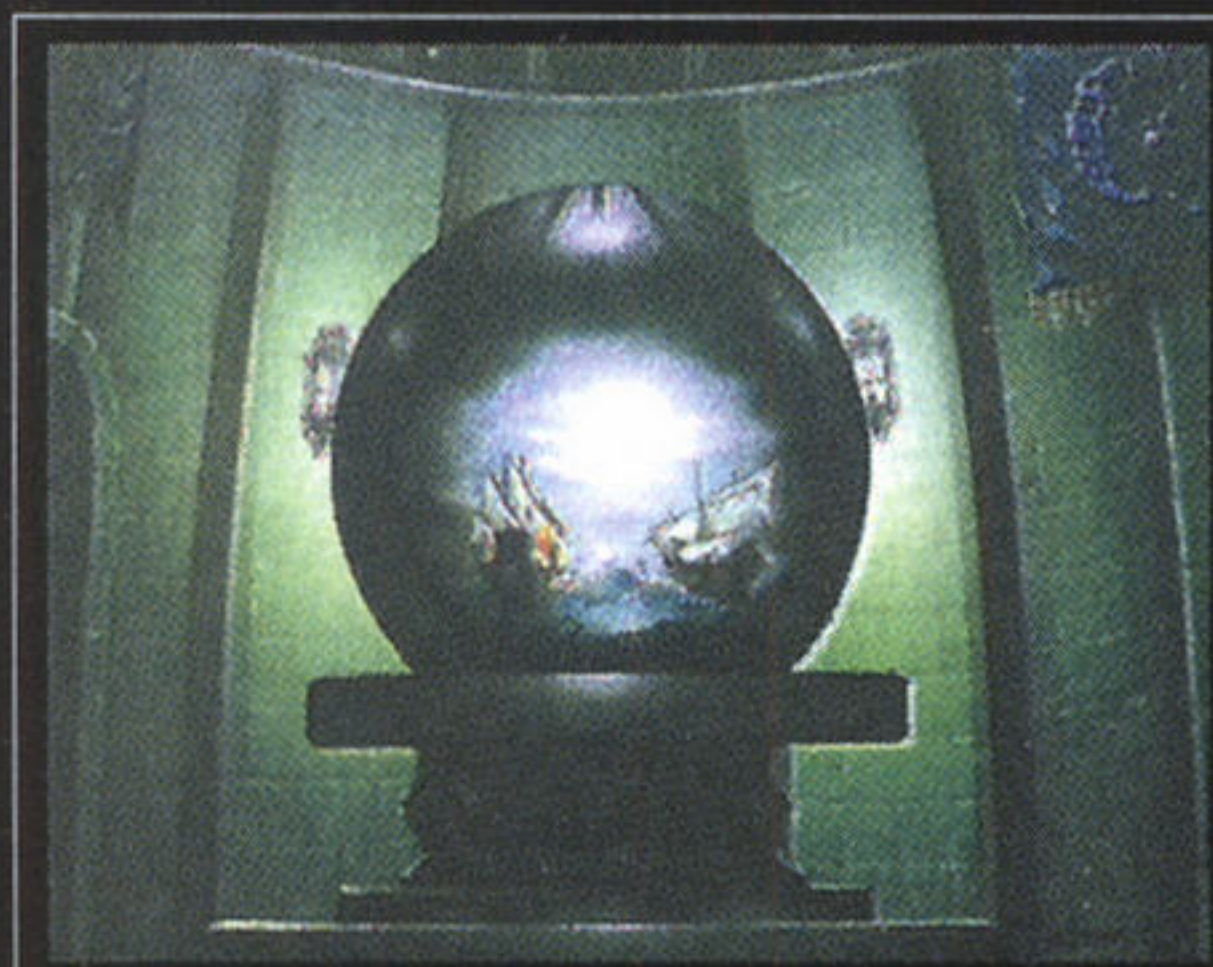
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EAGLE'S BEAK AND WINGS OF BRONZE

Usually the prince slays the dragon and rescues the maiden. Sometimes, however, the story plays out a bit differently.

BY DEBORAH WHEELER
Illustration by Carl Lundgren

O

NE SUMMER AFTERNOON, LADY Caroline hitched up her skirts, rolled two vinegar barrels into the corner of the cool, stone-floored herbarium, and sat down for a private chat with her daughter, Allis. "You're almost a woman, my dear, and it's time you learned the family secret. The truth is, we're were."

Alis' soft hazel eyes wandered to the hanging bundles of rosemary and feverfew. "Where?"

"Not *where*. *Were!*" Lady Caroline sighed. Her sons were small and lean, as black-eyed and quick-tongued as she, while her only daughter...

"Were," she repeated, speaking slowly so Allis could



CARL
LUND
GREN
1991

A dragon landed on the path in front of her. His breath hinted of the liquid hearts of volcanoes...

understand, "as in were-wolves. But not until your woman's cycles come, and almost certainly not a wolf. I'm not, and neither is your aunt Jessie. Our family tradition has always been far more imaginative."

Allis heard the sigh and the patience in her mother's voice. Drifting on the patter of words, she guessed that something was going to happen to her, something that involved turning into an animal. Not a wolf, for she wasn't nearly clever enough to be a wolf. Something slow and sleepy, like she felt right now. A lizard dozing in the sun? A turtle on a log?

Oh, dear. Suppose she became a were-turtle and nibbled on ants' eggs? When she turned back into a girl, would the eggs still be inside her stomach?

"Just come to me when something unusual happens," Lady Caroline said.

Unusual? Like being able to read Latin? Allis sighed. With her wits, she would probably end up as a cockroach.

FOR THE NEXT TWO YEARS NOTHING WENT RIGHT AT THE MANOR. After a terrible wheat harvest, the duke conscripted half the field men for his latest campaign. The oldest brother married, and Allis never knew what to say in those all-too-frequent occasions when his new wife, Ivy, would jab her with an elbow and say, "So what does the dummy think about *that*?"

The next spring, the duke died and his younger brother became regent and promptly started another campaign, so there were more conscriptions. It took three more years for Allis to begin her woman's cycles, and when she finally did, nothing happened.

"Sometimes it skips a generation," Lady Caroline murmured as she went off to deal with the holes in the bedsheets before Ivy could order new linens.

Allis didn't mind not becoming a were-geese or a were-sheep. Life was complicated enough once her sister-in-law started having babies, one every year. "Let the dummy look after them," Ivy said. So Allis did, and discovered she liked babies. Human babies, calves, foals, goslings, it didn't matter. They all ran to her when they were hurt or needed comforting.

It soon became obvious that the manor was too small to be divided among the three sons, especially if they were as prolific as the oldest. The youngest brother went off to college in Oxford, much to everyone's relief, but the middle one showed no sign of going anywhere and every sign of courting the neighbor's buxom, dowerless daughter.

It was time for another talk in the herbarium. "Lord Talbert has made an offer for you for his third son." Lady Caroline tucked back a few newly gray hairs. "They've got plenty of lands."

Allis gathered that she was being sent away. "I'll miss the babies."

"Only until you start having some of your own."

Allis brightened. "That would be nice."

"It's settled, then."

ALLIS WAS PACKED OFF ON A WHITE MULE, accompanied by two men-at-arms, the cook's assistant for a chaperon, and a donkey to carry her two small trunks. She enjoyed ambling through the countryside, along fields of ripening millet. Gradually the country became wilder as they climbed through pine-wooded hills. The men touched their sword-hilts and looked nervous as the sun sank lower.

Allis wrapped herself tighter in her cloak. Now that they were past the sunlit fields, she began to feel dreadfully homesick. Although the sky was not yet fully dark, a full moon had risen.

If only, she thought, she were beautiful like the upstairs parlor-maid, or were smart enough to go to college like her brother...

Lost in thought, Allis had wandered far from the others. She noticed now how quiet the forest was. The night birds had disappeared and her mule came to a halt, head up and long ears quivering. Then she heard it, too.

A noise. A very strange noise. A burbling, boiling noise. And it was coming straight toward her.

The mule leapt into the air, reversed fore and rear quarters, and took off at an astonishing pace, leaving Allis on her back in a particularly thorny clump of brush. She managed, at the cost of some nasty scratches and considerable damage to her clothing, to sit up. The next moment, the crashing, roaring noise was directly above her.

Everything went sweet and dreamy and vivid, all at once. For the first time, Allis noticed the intricate arrangement of the tree branches and felt their slow green thoughts. She wondered what marvelous things they'd dreamed over the centuries.

A dragon landed on the path in front of her. The warmth which radiated from his shimmering red-gold scales was like sunshine on pearls, his breath hinted of the liquid hearts of volcanoes, and his tourmaline eyes glittered with tantalizing mysteries.

"The virgin!" he rumbled. "What have you done with the virgin?"

Allis arranged her bronze wings gracefully along her back and coiled her tail three times so the tuft made an attractive design next to her muscular haunches.

"A civilized conversation is usually initiated by a greeting such as 'Salutations of the evening,'" she remarked. "Or perhaps, if you were in a poetic mood, you might present me with an extemporaneously composed sonnet."

The dragon blinked, steam issuing from its nostrils. "I—want—the—virgin."

"There's no person of such singular chastity—of either gender—present. Only the two of us, and I assume you exclude yourself from nomination. My own sexual experience—or lack thereof—is not a suitable topic for public discussion."

As she spoke, Allis extended her fore-claws, which were as sharp as the dragon's. The dragon outweighed her, being as large as two cart-horses, while she was only the size of a pony, but she was equally agile on the ground and in the air.

The dragon arched its sinuous neck. "Your pardon, my Lady Griffin. My discourtesy comes from a predicament of a personal nature

and not from any distaste for your company. No insult was intended."

"And none was taken," Allis replied graciously. With her eagle's beak, she couldn't manage a normal smile.

He curled the corners of his mouth in a dragonish grin. "Nothing would delight me more than to regale you with 'How the Dragon Prince Stole Wisdom From the Sun,' or 'The Singing Rubies of Kasimire.' In iambic pentameter."

"Iambic pentameter? Really? How exquisite!"

"Alas, I have an urgent task elsewhere."

Moonlight glimmered on the dragon's scales as with one bound he hurled himself into the starry sky. Allis watched the intricately veined wings spread wide to catch the thermal currents. She sighed, for the rabbits cowering behind the nearby thickets would make poor conversation. What marvels this dragon must have seen and what wonderful stories it could tell! She itched all over with curiosity.

She got to her feet and padded along the forest floor, distracting herself with the rich scents and textures. When the moon set, she curled up, wings furled and tail coiled neatly, and fell asleep.

ALLIS AWOKE WITH STICKERS IN HER HAIR AND DEW ON HER CLOTHES. In the distance she heard voices calling her name. She got up, brushed off the twigs, and headed in that direction.

The cook's assistant chattered so, Allis could hardly understand her, but she slowly realized that the more she stood there with a blank expression on her face, the more the cook's assistant fussed. It had never occurred to Allis that she might have any influence over other people. For her entire life, everyone else had been smarter and more confident than she. Certainly they all talked faster.

Allis said, totally untruthfully, "I'm so glad you found me."

The cook's assistant gave her a tearful hug and a hot breakfast. "We were that worried for you, miss. All alone in these terrible woods. And that dragon—I was sure you'd be eaten alive!"

Dragon? Allis envisioned a sinuous creature, all red and gold. Wondrous, mysterious, and yet oddly preoccupied...but she couldn't imagine being frightened of it.

LORD TALBERT LIVED IN A REAL CASTLE, NOT A MANOR HOUSE LIKE Alis' family. It was covered with turrets and towers and decorative things whose names she didn't know. She felt homesick just looking at it. A succession of impatient-looking maids moved her from one room to another until she was thoroughly disoriented.

Finally, they reached her own chamber. Left alone, Allis perched on the edge of the canopied bed, trying hard not to cry. Her two small trunks, scuffed and trail-worn, sat in the center of the Turkoman rug. Besides the bed, there was an intricately carved armoire, three dressers, five chairs, and two desks. They all looked expensive and breakable.

Just about the time Allis was sure they'd forgotten about her, she heard shouting. She tiptoed to the door and opened it a crack. Striding down the hall was the most beautiful young man she'd ever seen. He had coppery hair and deep blue eyes. At his heels stormed an older man, richly dressed in silver and black.

"You'll do as I say—" bellowed the older man, "—or I swear I'll disinherit you!"

"So be it, Father! Hang me from the parapets. Boil me in oil. Cut off my allowance. Do whatever you like. I *cannot* marry her!" The young man hurried off, leaving his father standing, chest heaving, in front of Alis' door.

"Um," she said.

"Who are you, my child?" the old man asked.

"Allis."

"By all the saints! Rannen! Come back here and greet your bride!"

Allis closed the door and burst into tears.

THE NEXT DAY ALLIS JOINED LORD TALBERT AND HIS FAMILY AT breakfast. Everyone welcomed her politely, except for Rannen, he of the red hair and startling blue eyes. Rannen stared miserably out

the nearest window, hardly eating anything, and Allis stared equally miserably out the opposite window, hardly eating anything either.

Allis spent mornings in the ladies' bower, listening to gossip about people she'd never met and trying to hide the condition of her embroidery. During the afternoons, the ladies rested from their exertions, so Allis explored. She got lost three times before she found the kitchen gardens. She'd put on her oldest clothes and spend the afternoon with the chickens and geese, the milk cows, and the litter of new piglets. Her wanderings took her to the stables where she found Rannen dressed in clothes almost as patched as hers, trying to bottle-feed an orphan foal. Straw liberally sprinkled his hair, and the front of his shirt was drenched with milk.

"Oh, you poor thing," said Allis. She put her arms around the struggling filly and pulled her into her lap, where she settled down to nursing. "She misses her mama."

"I guess I'm a pretty poor substitute." Rannen laughed as the filly pulled hard on the sheep's gut nipple. He glanced at Allis, seeing her for the first time. "Oh, it's you."

Allis bit her lip. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be, it's not your fault. In fact, you're being a rather good sport about the whole thing."

Allis thought that Rannen looked much nicer smiling and with hay in his hair than scowling at the big table. She hated the meal-times here. At dinner last night, Lord Talbert had done nothing but rant about the dragon. Three young women had been carried off and later found, unharmed but badly frightened. "The duke wants that dragon caught, or killed!" he said, and put Rannen in charge of the hunt. Rannen had looked twice as miserable as he usually did.

"You know," Allis said, stroking the foal's mane, "I think I saw that dragon the night before I came here."

"You did?" Rannen jerked the bottle, and the filly kicked in protest. "He didn't...hurt you or anything?"

"Oh no, he was rather nice. At least I think so. It's all rather muzzy. What do you suppose he wanted the girls for, since he let them go?"

Rannen stammered, "You know the old legend about the...the kiss of a virgin breaking the most fearsome curse."

"No, Ivy never read me that story. I'm not very good at things like that, but it doesn't sound like it would work."

"You don't know anything about it."

"No," she sighed. "I suppose not."

AFTER THAT, LIFE SETTLED INTO A ROUTINE. EVERY MORNING AT breakfast, Lord Talbert demanded that Rannen marry Allis, and every morning he refused. Then Rannen hunted the dragon, while Allis ruined her embroidery. In the afternoon, they nursed foals and puppies, chatted with the farmer about the breeding of pigs, chased the goats, and groomed the cows. Sometimes Rannen showed her a little swordplay, but she wasn't very interested in it.

In the evenings, Allis slipped outside the castle walls. She felt as if she were looking for something in the darkened sky, but she didn't know what. As the moon grew fuller, she noticed that everything smelled wilder and sharper—grasses, flowers, the moist tang from the moat. On the night of the full moon, she sat alone in the fields, breathing in the richness of the night. Just then, the dragon flew past, silhouetted for an instant against the brightness. Her heart filled with wordless longing, to follow him through the sky and learn all there was to know.

The world came alive to her eagle's eyes—the fields and copses, the palace with its shining moat, even the piglets asleep in their open pen. The next moment she was in the air, her wings singing as she soared toward the moon.

SHE FOUND THE DRAGON TEN LEAGUES TO THE NORTH, HALFWAY TO Oxford, hunkered down in a little clear space along a river and holding a woman dressed in red satin. When she landed beside him, the dragon looked up with a snort. The woman squirmed free and dashed for the nearest thicket.

"Oh, it's you," said the dragon.

"You weren't trying to kiss her, were you?"

"None of your business."

She was glad she couldn't laugh aloud. The poor dragon looked discomfited enough. "I might be able to render some assistance, given the opportunity."

"You can—can free me?"

"Pray be seated and attempt to enlarge your intellect to concepts previously unimagined." She arranged her tail in three coils with the tuft decoratively displayed. "I conclude that you believe yourself cursed in assuming a nonhuman morphology in the fullest phase of the moon."

It took him a moment to digest what she'd said. "Of course—How could anyone—God forbid there should be some other soul as wretched as this—You don't believe that turning into a dragon—and scourging the countryside—is a *good* thing?"

"Do you engage in *scourging*? It seems to me a lamentable waste of time, when there is but a single night each month to explore the mysteries of the—"

"You don't understand! All I can think of—night and day—is how to get rid of this awful curse. I'm hideous, unholy. A menace to maidens everywhere!"

"I suspect you have yet to encounter a maiden to validate that hypothesis," Allis replied dryly. "They're generally locked up at this hour." Exasperated, she leapt to her feet and spread her wings for flight. "Instead of bemoaning your fate, Rannen, you should learn to appreciate its opportunities!"

"Wait!" he called as she sped away. "How do you know my name?"

ON A HIGH CRAG OVERLOOKING A WIDE MOON-WASHED VALLEY SAT a magnificent two-headed bird known to legend as a roc. Allis spiraled down to land gracefully beside it.

"Good evening, Mother," she said. "You're looking resplendent tonight."

One of the roc heads swiveled around on a neck as supple as a snake's. Feathers gleamed purple-black in the pearly light. "How delightful to see you."

"Don't state the obvious," hissed the second head. "Allis, you're looking well yourself."

"Except that I'm in the most appalling predicament."

"Don't you like your new husband?" asked the first head.

"*What* new husband?" Allis cried. "You've promised me to a were-dragon, and he's so obsessed by his 'curse'—Yes, that's how he thinks of it—a *curse!*—that he won't even consider marriage!"

"Surely there's some mistake—"

"Ha!" Allis snapped her eagle's beak in one of her mother's faces. "I can't stay on indefinitely as an unwed bride, and I lack even the most remote qualifications for a lady's maid. I'd be quite happy working in the stables, but that's not an option, either."

"You couldn't persuade them to send you home?"

"What a stupid idea," snapped the other head. "My dear, just tell the boy the truth and get him to marry you after all."

"I don't see why I should have to marry anyone, let alone someone who doesn't want me," Allis grumbled. "But, intellectually limited as I am in my human form, I don't seem to have any other choice. Much as I'd like to, I can't very well attend Oxford as a griffin."

They sat, looking at the moonlight over the valley for several long minutes. Lady Caroline stroked Alis' feathered neck with one pale yellow beak. "You'll think of something, dear."

"What the child wants is action, not words," said the other head.

"Tonight, I'm flying to Oxford to see your brother. Exams are next week and he needs cheering. Why not come, too?"

Allis thought that if she were studying for exams, a visit from a contentiously two-headed roc would fall somewhat short of *cheering*. Perhaps later she could strike up a friendship with one of the professors....

ALLIS AWOKE IN THE FIELD BEYOND THE MOAT, WITH BIRDS CHIRPING in her ears and sunshine filling the sky. She hurried around to

the servant's entrance, went up to her room, and fell into bed. She was roused for the second time by the upstairs maid.

"Oh, miss, do get up! His Lordship's all of a pother, and what will he do if you're late for breakfast? Hurry now, wash and put on your best gown!"

Allis rubbed her eyes. She'd been having the most lovely dream—flying through a sky filled with stars which sang to her in a thousand different languages, and she could understand every word.

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

"Matter?" The maid threw back the covers and shoved a sopping bath sponge in Alis' face. "It's only the duke! Arrived out of nowhere an hour ago, he did. Fancy breakfast in the big hall and everything, didn't I tell you? Get *up*, you big lazy girl!"

"I'm not lazy!" Allis snapped, handing the sponge back to the maid. "And—and even if I were, you have no right to say so!"

The maid blinked, bobbed a curtsy, and went on with her duties without another word.

THE REGENT DUKE HAD ARRIVED WITH TWO SCORE MEN-AT-ARMS, A professional dragon-killer, and his dragon-hound. He was the coldest looking man Allis had ever seen. "Talbert," he said, "I will have this dragon's head before the month is out, or I will have yours."

Lord Talbert assured him that everything possible was being done to catch the dragon.

"Not everything," said the duke.

The ladies of the palace were kept inside all day, for Lady Talbert was taking no chances with the duke's men. Allis missed Rannen and the animals terribly. There was no one else she could talk to, and for the first time she could remember, she had things to say. The duke frightened her, for he wanted the power and prestige that killing the dragon would give him, although she didn't understand how she knew this.

She also felt it was unfair to the dragon, who was a wise and magical creature, something to be preserved and appreciated, not destroyed to further the duke's political ambitions. She couldn't say those things to Rannen at the dinner table, and between the ladies and the daily hunts, she never met him anywhere else. She could see how unhappy he was by the shadows under his eyes, which deepened as the month wore on.

ALLIS STOOD AT HER WINDOW, SHUTTERS THROWN WIDE. THE MOON seemed to have seeped into every part of the room. She began to pace up and down, as restless as the animals in the barnyard below, forcing herself to wait.

Suddenly there was a great uproar—horns, men shouting, the great alarm bell ringing. Allis nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Dragon! Dragon ho!"

Allis leaned out the window and saw the magnificent, sinuous shape silhouetted against the full moon. She heard the duke and Lord Talbert shouting orders, the dragon-hound's frantic baying, the clatter of spurs and iron-shod hooves. A deafening *thwop!* echoed from the parapets, and she caught a glimpse of a huge black-iron quarrel catapulting through the night. The dragon plummeted earthward and was lost to view.

SHE REACHED THE DRAGON SHORTLY AFTER THE DUKE'S MEN SURROUNDED him. One wing dragging, the red-gold beast reared on his hind legs and blew steam at the attackers. The dragon-hound, its nose streaming blood, whimpered as its master set another quarrel in his deadly looking crossbow. The duke sat on his highbred stallion, his sword poised to give the attack signal.

Allis set down directly in front of the dragon, facing the duke. She beat her wings, clawed the ground, and gnashed her eagle's beak. The men cried out and pointed at her.

"What in God's name is *that*?"

"The first man that draws steel on yonder griffin will be the first man to lose his head!" the duke said. He bent to ask the dragon-killer, "Is it true they possess the wisdom of the ages?"

"Don't arsk me, Yer Grace. Hit's dragons wot's me business, not flyin' lions."

"Duke!" Allis flared her wings and lashed her tail for appropriate theatrical effect. "What is your justification for persecuting this dragon? By what law, statute, or municipal ordinance do you pursue him with harmful intent?"

"It's a *dragon*, Lord Griffin, and I've caught it on the very lands I've sworn to protect. This one's already carried off dozens of innocent maidens! I'll have its head on my lance, and neither you nor all of Hell's demons can stop me!"

"Men have slaughtered the innocent before," she answered coolly, "yet they are usually accorded certain judicial rights, such as the opportunity to confront witnesses and refute their testimony."

"Huh?"

Allis seated herself and arranged her tail in three neat coils. "To begin with, how do you know it's the *same* dragon?"

"There couldn't be two such monsters!"

"But has anyone actually *seen* this dragon commit an atrocity, other than to defend itself?"

"That's because we cornered it before it had the chance. All those maidens—"

"Who, as I understand it, suffered no more harm than a walk home in the moonlight and a few palpitations. Can you swear that *you yourself* have never caused similar distress?"

"It's a dragon, damn you, I can't let it live—"

"Why not?"

"I'd be the laughing stock of the county—the man who let such a prize slip away!"

"But what if you were the man who had a dragon *to do his bidding*?" Allis said in her silkiest voice. "Nothing unlawful, of course, and not too frequently, for over-familiarity generates disrespect. Who would dare to challenge you when a dragon might come at your call?"

The duke lowered his sword. The dragon-killer disarmed his crossbow with a look of disgust.

"To enhance the bargain," said Allis, "I could add a service of my own. Anything you want to know. One question, once a year."

"Done! You have my word on it!"

Allis turned back to the dragon, who was sitting on his haunches, eyes wide with astonishment. "Let's depart posthaste," she whispered, "before he changes his mind."

THE DRAGON, TAKING ALIS' ADVICE, MADE FOR THE MOSSY RIVERBANK where it had brought the unfortunate woman in red. She landed beside him and examined the injured wing. The leathery membrane was torn and one slender bone broken, but the bleeding had stopped. She wished she knew which herbs would be most suitable for a reptilian metabolism or how to properly suture the laceration.

"You saved my life," the dragon said.

"If you hadn't been so determined to divest yourself of your dragonish gifts by means of a maiden's kiss, you wouldn't have been in such a predicament to begin with!"

The dragon hung his head. "You tried to warn me, but I just wouldn't listen. Now you've indebted yourself to that foul duke for my sake. How can I ever repay you?"

"Don't worry about the duke. He won't be able to understand what I tell him, anyway. As for repayment... Do you know that charming Frankish poem, 'Chanson de Reynard'?"

ALLIS OPENED HER EYES TO SEE RANNEN'S FACE, NOT FOUR INCHES from her own. He lay on his back, his face open and relaxed in the

I t's a dragon, Lord Griffin... I'll have its head on my lance, and neither you nor all of Hell's demons can stop me!"

morning sunshine. His tourmaline eyes twinkled as he rolled over and kissed her tenderly.

"I knew it was you," he whispered. "Allis, my heart's sweet treasure, I owe you my life and my happiness. Will you marry me?"

Allis rubbed her eyes, wishing it were as easy to sweep the cobwebs from her brain. There—everything was coming clear at last. How simple it all was. The answer had been right in front of her all these weeks.

"I won't need to take much," she murmured, ticking off the items on her fingers, "books, pens, paper, a study lamp. After a few more turns as a griffin I'll have no trouble passing the exams, and my dowry ought to cover the tuition...." Absently, she patted Rannen's arm and got to her feet.

"Allis!" Rannen's face bore an expression of mixed astonishment and hurt feelings. Favoring his injured arm, he rose to his knees and took her hand. "I want to marry you!"

"That's very sweet." She removed her hand and continued on her way. "Yes, by all means, let's do that when I get back."

Rannen scrambled to his feet and rushed after her. "Back? Back from where?"

"Veterinary college at Oxford." She gave him a radiant smile. "I can't imagine why I didn't think of it before. I like helping things that are hurt or lost, you see, and I'm good with animals. It all makes such perfect sense—"

"You can't leave me, now that we've found each other! The stables just won't be the same. I don't want to lose you."

She frowned. "Who said anything about losing me?"

"Well, what else would you call it—you going off to Oxford alone?"

Allis stamped her foot. "Honestly, Rannen, as a dragon you're marvelous good company, but as a man you're more than somewhat tiresome. Now that I've found a dragon to talk to, I have no intention of losing him. Every month, on our special night, I'll wait for you at the river. It's halfway between here and Oxford, an easy flight for each of us."

Understanding slowly crossed Rannen's face and one corner of his mouth curved upward in a dragonish grin.

"After all," he said, tucking her hand through his elbow as they strolled back toward the castle, "I never did have time to recite 'The Singing Rubies of Kasimire' for you."

"In iambic pentameter." With a blissful sigh, she rested her head against his shoulder. ♣

When Icarus took flight, we learned to soar beyond our abilities. But the stars show us a far more important lesson.

WINGS

BY PATRICIA DUFFY NOVAK
Illustration by Carol Heyer

HE WALKED SLOWLY TOWARD me, his dark head bowed against his chest, his hands clasped tightly together. He did not look up or call my name as he approached, but I held out my arms anyway, willing him to come to me. The sun had set, and twilight filled the tower, but it was not yet dark.

The king stood in the doorway of my tower room, watching dispassionately, as if this scene of reunion held no interest for him. The armored soldier standing next to the king held a torch; its light glinted on the king's crown and fell on the harsh features of his majesty's face. "Here is your





CAROL HEYER

son," the king said. His heavily shadowed lips pulled back from bone white teeth. There was no beauty or grace in the man; he was a carnivore, a flesh-eater, a monster—worse, even, than the unholy child his wife had borne.

I said nothing. I continued to wait, my arms extended to my son, the child who had been taken from me a half a dozen years before. He had been a small boy then. Now he was half-grown. But I knew him still. The cast of his features, the fine black curls. My son.

At last the boy stood before me, and I saw that he was crying. His tears quivered on his lashes, barely visible in the gloom. But his expression was blank and closed, so that I could not divine the reason for the tears. Relief? Sorrow? He gave no sign.

I heard laughter from the doorway and, looking up, I caught a glimpse of the jeering face of the young soldier as the king turned to leave.

When I heard their footsteps echoing from the bottom of the deep stairwell, I brushed the black curls from my son's brow. He did not flinch under my touch, but neither did he seem to welcome it. "Now you are a prisoner, too," I said.

He looked at me, and in the near darkness I could make out only his eyes and the merest outline of his face. An alien intelligence flickered in those dark eyes, making him seem much changed, older than his years. "I have long been a prisoner, Father," he said. There was nothing of the timber of youth in his tone, but rather his voice quavered with the thin reediness of an ancient man's. He stared past me as he continued to speak, fixing his gaze upon the tower wall. "The king kept me locked in the castle," he said. "Where did you think I have been?"

I had no answer for his question. The king had assured me that the boy was well, and in my captivity I had been able to do nothing more than pray that the king spoke truth.

"Ah, well," I said at last. "Here it is not so bad. We have the run of the tower—and its grounds in the daytime. The king keeps me supplied with tools for my work. We will keep busy, you and I."

I moved to the room's solitary lamp and poured a tiny quantity of precious oil into its chamber. I lit the wick and a small flame spluttered into existence. "There," I said. "See what luxuries are provided to us—an oil lamp to keep the night at bay."

The boy shrugged, but said nothing.

"Come, my son," I said after a long moment of silence. "You will find that the king has not been remiss with regard to our comfort. There are good beds and clean sheets." With a great show of cheerfulness that I did not feel, I led my son to his bed. He shed his sandals and crawled wordlessly between the sheets. I stood for several minutes, watching the play of light and shadow across his closed, quiet face. Then I blew out the lamp and sought my own slumber.

WHEN I AWOKE IN THE MORNING, SUNLIGHT WAS ALREADY STREAMING through the long windows of the tower, and my son was awake. I found him standing at a window, looking toward the harbor where the king's ships bobbed on the blue-green waves. In his hand, he held a bunch of feathers—gray with a sprinkling of black—that sea birds, nesting along the nooks of the tower, had shed. He twisted the feathers this way and that in the sun, but his gaze was stretched to the horizon, to the ships and sea.

I stood beside my son, and my own gaze swept over the city that sprawled below on either side of our tower. To my left, I could make out the ruins of the Labyrinth, and I wondered if the queen still mourned her monstrous child. My son, following the direction of my eyes, must have gleaned my thoughts, for he said, "She has not forgotten. She will not forgive."

Then to my wonder, the thin mouth stretched open in a smile. "But, Father," my son said. "I have had such a dream. The king controls the land and the sea, but the air is free." He waved the drooping bunch of feathers. "You must make us wings, and we will soar like the sea birds away from this place."

There was such a light in his eyes, such conviction in his tone, that I had not the will to smash his hopes. I knew what he envisioned to be impossible; the human body is not designed for flight;

our bones are too solid, our muscles too weak. We could sail the wind, perhaps, for a short span of paces, but we would, inevitably, crash into the sea.

I took one of the feathers from his hand and ran it along my chin, as I pretended to consider. "Let me think on this," I said.

He grabbed my arm, the light in his eyes turning to a blazing fire. "No, Father. You must begin at once. The gods will aid us; I know it."

What could I say to my son? He was not yet thirteen, and nearly half his years had been as a hostage to the king, a prisoner for his father's deeds. What I had done, I had done. And I had paid the price for a heroism I had never wanted. In honesty, I knew there had been little heroism in my decision and much weakness instead. When I first looked into the eyes of that foreign prince, it was as if I had lost my own will. I could do nothing else but aid him. And where was he now, the young hero? In the first year of my imprisonment, I had clung to the belief that he would return to rescue me, but that hope had long since died. He had used and abandoned me, leaving me to the mercy of the heartless lord of Crete.

I looked upon my son, consumed by the guilty knowledge of what my moment of weakness had cost him—six years of precious childhood lost. Six years. I could not find it in my heart to raise my voice against his plan. I would build wings to sustain his hope, though I had long since lost my own. "All right," I said, forcing my lips to smile. "I will make wings, but you must be patient. Such work will be delicate and may take some time."

"I am content, Father," said my son. Then he turned again to the window, his eyes focused on the horizon once more.

THAT NIGHT I DREAMED OF THE ICARI, THE SOUL-DRINKERS, THE demon children of Hecate. Twelve dark angels rode the winds, screaming their awful song of rage and blood. I waited on a mountain peak below them, unable to run or cry out as the demon horde circled lower and lower, coming toward me. As I stood helpless, no more capable of movement than a frightened rabbit mesmerized by the gliding of hawks, a thirteenth winged form rose from the bowels of the earth to join its twelve brothers. As this new Icarus swooped and darted above me, I saw, with a cold and numbing dread, that the creature bore my son's face.

IN THE MORNING I BEGAN TO BUILD THE WINGS. THE FRAMES I MADE were crude structures, pieced together from uneven lengths of lumber and odd pieces of bamboo, scraps from other projects that the king had commanded. My heart was not in the work, but each day, when my other duties allowed, I returned to the task, to please my son.

The king, I am certain, was aware of my latest endeavor—I took no pains to hide it—but nothing was done to impede my work. My liege, who had been well-schooled in the sciences, would have known the impossibility of my taking flight. I wondered at the time if the king believed a madness had possessed me, or if, perhaps, he thought that the project was a game I played with my son. But although the king came often to the tower to command this work or that, he never spoke of the wings.

Once the frames were finished, my son began to work at my side. He would sit for hours, patiently melting the scraps of our candles over the thin flame of the lamp, setting feathers in orderly rows on the frames, and binding everything carefully together with the melted wax. Knowing as I did the futility of his efforts, I could hardly bear to see him at this task. And yet, I let him continue, because I saw that when he worked on the wings he was happy. At other times, he was remote and withdrawn, and I felt, at those times, that he was a stranger to me, and not my son at all.

The better part of a year went into this task. Outside our tower, we saw the seasons of the island pass and fade. And when it was spring again, and the sharp breezes blew across the land, I could no longer deny that the work was complete. We had built our wings—structures of wood and feathers—functional, perhaps, for lighter creatures, but useless for men.

My son picked up the smaller pair, put them on his shoulders,

As I stared, my eyes saw what my mind could not believe, the wooden structure had begun to mold itself into his flesh.

and buckled them in place with the leather straps I had fashioned from a pair of worn sandals. He smiled, but there was no mirth or humor on his face. "Well done," he said to me. "You are the best of craftsmen, just as the queen told me."

I felt a light prickling on my skin. "The queen?" I said, straining to keep my voice level. "When did you speak with her?"

My son laughed, throwing his head back to expose the pale skin of his neck. "When did I speak with the queen?" he repeated when his laughter finally died. "Better to ask when I heard the wind blow. For she was always there, Father, when you yourself had abandoned me. How did you think I was raised?"

I bowed my head. Useless to explain the choice that had brought me to this tower, the moment that had led me to favor a foreigner over my liege lord and my true-born son. I should have known that the queen would claim my son when she lost her own. And yet I shuddered at the thought of my son in communion with that woman. The king was dreadful, monstrous, a man of raw appetites and thirsts. But the queen was evil in a way that reached beyond the flesh all the way to the soul. And in that moment I must have realized that my son was all but dead to me, but I did not let the discovery touch my heart.

I heard the clatter of wood upon stone and looked up at my son. He had shed the wing constructions, and as he stood before me, clad only in a light tunic and sandals, I could see he was no longer a boy. He had grown tall in the last year, nearly as tall as I, and his face had hardened into strong lines, much like my own. But there was nothing of me in his eyes. I saw only the queen's long shadow when I looked into their Stygian depths.

"Go," he said. "And rest. Tonight your labors will be rewarded."

I shook my head, facing at last the moment when I must speak the truth. "It is all in vain," I answered. "A man is too heavy to fly. I built the wings to humor you, to give you hope."

I expected rage and disappointment to flash across his face, but instead he laughed again, a hollow sound that echoed against the stones. "Do not doubt your work, Father," he said, and then he turned away and walked from the room, down the long staircase, and into the walled yard. Through the window, I could see him staring at the sky, hands on his hips and head thrown back in defiance.

THAT NIGHT THE MOON WAS FULL AND THE SKY WAS EMPTY OF clouds. The heavens were so bright with moonlight that there was no need to light a lamp or candle. My son and I ate our evening meal in silence, the day's tensions still heavy between us. "Father," he said at last, as he put down his empty goblet. "Tonight I will take flight and leave this tower."

"You will kill yourself on the water," I answered. "The wind will bear you so far and then you will tumble like a stone into the sea."

"No." He shook his head. "I will ride the wind like a hawk, and I will be free."

I knew in my soul that only his death could lie at the end of his delusions, but I had lost the will to stop him. Perhaps the long years in the tower had robbed me of strength, or perhaps I have always been a weak man, a vessel for the greater courage of a true conqueror. The gods alone know why I did not wrestle my son to the floor and pin him, helpless, until the madness had passed. But I did

not. A fog seemed to wrap itself around my will, and I watched in numb helplessness as he fastened upon himself the pair of wings I had made for him.

He stood by the window, staring at the moon. "Hecate, my mother," he said in a soft voice. "I am coming to you." Then he spread his arms, and the wings seemed to take on a life of their own as the feathers fluttered in the wind.

I rose from my chair, frightened at last into action. I grabbed him from behind, pulling him back from the ledge. "Father," he said sharply, "you must let go. I do not want to hurt you, for you have been kind to me, but I will if I must." He pushed me away, with more strength than I could have imagined he possessed. I fell to the floor and he stood over me, bathed in the moonlight.

He started to speak in a strange tongue, rhythmic words I had never heard, and he raised those clumsy wings. As I stared at him, my eyes saw what my mind could not believe, that the wooden structure had begun to change, to mold itself into his flesh. His face, too, began to change, to transform into a bloodless mask.

I called out the name I had given him at birth, but he did not answer me. Instead, his voice rose higher and higher as he spoke his incantation. I lay on the floor, helpless with dread, watching the once-loved features lose their humanity, watching the unwieldy wings I had made take on a life and grace.

"Icarus," I whispered, and I made, without conscious thought, a sign against evil.

The creature who had been my son strode to the window ledge and lifted his wings as if for flight. "Wait," I cried, raising myself from the floor and taking a hesitant step toward him. He turned his head and looked at me over his shoulder. His once-dark eyes now glistened a soft yellow-gold.

"Daedalus," he said, in a flat voice, devoid of human emotion. "The queen was right. There is a magic in your handicraft that goes beyond the simple sciences you profess to believe. She sent me to you for this one purpose, to receive the wings that only you could build. With her spell and your wings, I have become immortal, as powerful as a god. Will you not rejoice in your son's good fortune?"

Whether there was mockery in his words or not, I could not tell, so flat was his tone and lifeless his expression. He was like a thing of wax. But I seized on his words, hoping to stall him, as my intellect, dead and calm as an alien presence, sought a solution to a problem too deep for my heart to fathom.

"The queen," I said. "What will she gain from this? She cannot love you as I do. Undo the spell, my son, and I will ransom your life somehow. I swear it."

He shook his head. "You made your choices, Daedalus, and I played no part in your decisions. Why should your wishes play a part in mine? The queen raised me; the queen taught me. Now I will repay her. For I was born human, and your blood, bearing your genius, flows in my veins. I will command the Icari for the queen, and she will conquer the worlds of men." The cold voice was no longer empty of emotion, but full of a deadly pride; I sensed then what the queen had used to bait her trap.

Angry tears rose unchecked in my eyes, as I remembered how I had come to this island. Pride was a sin I knew only too well. "By all

Continued on page 89

*When you work nights you really appreciate your peace and quiet during the day.
Constant disruptions can make you—well—cranky.*

THEY KEEP DROPPING US," SHE SAYS. SHE always rises angry when the chase has forced us out of some hiding place she has almost turned into a home, and put us on the run. Left to her own devices, she would make a stand at every way station, just stake out her ground and die on it before she would let herself be forced off it. I tell her it is the mammal in her, defending its territory. Sometimes she

laughs. Sometimes she just shakes her head in exasperation.

Travel annoys her; the accommodations are always substandard, the service wretched, the trip itself long and uncomfortable. She never sleeps well in a new place, not when she was human, not now. Some things even transformation does not change.

"They do it on purpose, you know," she says. "Petty revenges."

The old earth is not as old for her as it is to me. For her it is a necessity, not a comfort. It does not seal out for her the din of the surroundings. And for her, the surroundings are everything. She cannot block them out. It takes her time to adjust to them, and when we are uprooted, when we are forced to flee to our second sanctuary and sometimes our third, with the accommodations getting less desirable with each flight, she finds it difficult to adjust. Every little sound disturbs her, snaps her upright, her fangs flared and ready to fight for her life. It has not been easy on her all these years.

"They throw us around like luggage," she says, "Don't they know who you are!"

Of course they *know*; they are my minions. I have broken them to my will myself. She knows that. But she is right nevertheless. They are always dropping us. Every time we

wake up, I have something else wrong with me, some new bruise or strain or lump on my head, or some pain in a place I don't ever remember injuring. You get a couple hundred years old and everything hurts anyway, but these are new hurts. You don't go this long in a combative life without some injuries, some ligament damage, some scars, even if you do heal over in hours. You rust in those overstressed places, not as quickly as a human, but just as inevitably, and the rust creaks and has to be banged and levered and broken free for the hinge of the knee or the elbow to swing freely. You have to work that iron grit out of the joint so that the ball of the shoulder or the hip can turn freely in its socket, or the neck can swivel freely on itself. But these are beyond the aches of age, and we are really not *that* old. We could live a half dozen centuries yet. If we keep our heads.

Not that we haven't aged at all. It's true the sunlight has leathered us a bit. Those careless moments when you are young and you think nothing can harm you, not even sunrise. And those times when the night seems to end so abruptly, just exploding into morning, or when bad planning or an extensive chase has left you far from a safe place to sleep. Or those times when you become so engrossed in the feeding, you don't feel the sun until you start to burn and the strange stench, which is so familiar yet beyond identification, suddenly makes itself known as your own flesh curling like bacon fat in the heat. And now that the sun is so much brighter, it's worse. Even humans are beginning to feel the malevolence of their sun. We will all be alive in the night in a few decades.

"They're going to *pay* for this," she says, rubbing her knee as if someone had kicked her.

She is always like this when the pursuit has been intense, and the villagers of whatever place you are

GOOD
HELP
IS HARD
TO FIND

BY WILLIAM JOHN WATKINS
Illustration by Mark Harrison



in, because there are villagers in even the biggest city, have been so close on your heels you can smell the torches, and hear the clack of the stakes beating together to break your nerve as they run after you.

And your nerve *does* get frayed at times, because it's only the professionals who do that, because they want you to know they have hides on their cellar walls where the sun never shines, safe from the shriveling, stretched taut on special frames and fixed with a final curing of blood, and they want yours as well. And they think they are going to get it. And sometimes they almost do.

That kind of stress leaves its mark. She is always worse when we have been the prey in a hunt as well-organized as our own. When they have driven you like an animal, clacking their stakes, into the woods they have hung with crucifixes, where they have tainted the bark with holy water any place you might lay a hand to rest, not knowing it is their wretched belief that harms you and not some supernatural force. Into woods where they have planted their booby

corrected, or because they are so irremediably clumsy. "They even drop *me*," I say by way of commiseration.

"Then they *must* be punished!" There is that anger in her voice as if they are one with the pursuers. And there is a sadness, as if all my hurts are hers. "When they drop *you*, it is unforgivable."

I know it is not the minions that anger her. Any more than it is the minions who have hurt the shoulder she rubs, or the minions who have raised the welt over her eye that turns the pale skin blood black. It is the pursuers, the relentless professionals. I have no fear of them myself. Fear clouds the intellect. I have escaped better. But *her* focus is not on escape. She will double back after they have lost our trail just to rip one straggler from their ranks and nail him to some tainted tree with his own stakes. I indulge her in it. She knows what strikes terror into them almost as well as I do, perhaps better in some ways. But there is a difference. I would do it to weaken their resolve, to make them jittery and enhance their natural clumsiness.

They will always be individuals
containers. Empty, they are of no
still a fascination to her. She will
at it until sunrise if I do not prod

traps under the leaves, and hung from the upper branches over the path those tight woven nets made of fabrics concocted from chemicals, on which your powers have little effect. Where they have hung garlic, and sometimes on strings, dangling by one leg, the half gutted bodies of bats. It's all I can do in times like that to keep her from turning on the pursuers and putting herself at risk.

"One *threw* my crate against the wall," she says. "Actually threw it. With malice."

It's having been mortal gives her that death wish, that rage to retaliate at any cost. But you don't live long by bearing a grudge. Flight survives longer than confrontation. When you will live forever, *unless* you are destroyed, you must, at all costs, not be destroyed. I cannot impress that on her sufficiently. She thinks we should annihilate all my enemies. But they are not *my* enemies. They are my cows. I do not hate them. How can I hate them? They are my sustenance.

My bride hates them. For what they would do to me. For what they would do to her. She takes it all so personally. I cannot make her understand. We do what *we* must. They do what *they* must. They are dangerous prey. But they *are* prey. You cannot personalize them. She can't do anything else. Some things even transformation does not change. They will always be individuals to her. To me they are containers. Empty, they are of no interest. Bloodless, they are still a fascination to her. She will crouch beside one and stare at it until sunrise if I do not prod her on our way. And she will talk to them, when they are long past hearing. Exulting. Mocking. Denouncing them.

"They must be disciplined," she says finally. She is very emphatic. Not commanding. Just impassioned. "I am yours. They should show me more respect. When they drop me it is an insult to you."

"How can the food insult you?" I ask her.

"Minions are not food," she says. She is a master of nuance. Considering how few centuries she has lived, it is truly remarkable. It's hard to believe she was ever human. Except for her anger.

The ineptitude is a minor inconvenience, and it is hard to determine whether they drop us because of carelessness, which can be

business. She does it out of fear.

"Why aren't they here?" she says. "Don't they feel the night? Don't they know you *must* be served!"

At the base of that rage is fear. Fear the minions will betray us. Fear they will lead the pursuers to us. Fear they have cornered us already, put our backs to the wall and wait only the next sunrise to deliver us to be skinned. *I* know that if they lead the pursuers to us, it is out of stupidity not out of treachery. Terrorizing them as she wishes does not make them serve us better; it only confuses them and makes them more prone to error. I have explained that to her a thousand times. "You will be the death of us," I tell her.

I don't believe we will die, but if we did, it would be her doing. It's so hard to restrain her. In the woods, so recently, pursuit all around us, closing in, she wanted to put our backs against a tree and wait for them. It was so foolish, but she was so determined.

"You should not be driven!" she said. There were tears in her eyes. She was so afraid and so angry all at the same time. I tried to laugh it off.

"I am not driven," I said, "I am pursued."

I took her hand and pulled her along with me. We could outdistance them. They have no stamina. The longer the chase goes, the more certain they are to wear out. I don't know why she can't see it that way. I will prolong the chase, simply to weaken them. But for her, the chase is a torment. The longer it goes on, the more certain she is that it will end in disaster. And she is more afraid for me than for herself. It is impossible not to love her for it. But it's so dangerous!

Deep in the woods, we stopped to listen, to hear where the pursuit was flowing. I burned my hand resting it against a tree they had smeared with their belief. A minor burn. The palm and three of the fingers blistered. A simple reminder not to get careless. Nothing more. I was grateful for it. She took it in her hands and wept, and then she went mad. "Flee!" she said, "Flee. I'll hold them off." And she ran back toward them headlong. I was stunned. It was such a foolhardy thing to do. I ran after her. What else could I do? She was no match for them. They were all professionals, men with enough

pelts to wear some, hoping the scent will put fear into me. It only makes me cautious.

But my bride knows no caution. They were not that far behind. She rushed right into them, a wildcat tossed among startled dogs. Only surprise kept her from being impaled. She did not even see them. She crashed blindly right into the main body. Hit one man, bounced off, hit another, ran into a tree shoulder first. Got her balance. Grabbed the nearest and ripped him. Ripped him again, like he was a piece of cheap cloth. Threw the pieces at the others. Grabbed for another. Went off balance. One of them came down with a stick on the side of her knee, caved it in, knocked her down. I could not get to her in time.

It was suicidal to rush in among them like that. It would have been suicidal to follow. But I had no other choice. One struck her with a mallet he had brought along to pound in the stakes. It was a terrible blow. Human, it would have killed her. Now, it knocked her

and return for their dead.

But she would have none of it. I tried to plead that her wounds would slow us, make us vulnerable. But she would not hear of it. If I would not go with her, she would go alone, and she struggled free of my grasp and went down, lightly, floating like a leaf. But she hit the ground running and her pursuit was terrible. Before I caught up with her she had taken the rearmost of them. I was afraid she would raise the alarm and they would turn on her again before I could get to her. But she was not out of control any more. Her fury was relentless, but it was not overwhelming. She snatched the rearmost man without a sound. Bit him. Broke him. Took him by the shoulders and stuck him on a low branch like a paper on a billspike and left him there wriggling and screaming.

She knew exactly what she was about. The rest came running. We went up again and watched them from above. You could see the horror in their eyes as they pulled him off the branch. One let go of the arm he held and turned away and vomited. The two hardiest tugged at him. He had to be worked off, shimmied from side to side, the branch dipping and cracking the whole time, the leaves rattling, and the screams battering against the trees. When they laid him on the ground, it was clear to them that he would not live and yet they did not leave him. He lay there writhing and twitching, thrashing in the leaves. The one who had vomited had begun to cry. One of the others, an older man, weathered, grim faced, shook him, slapped him, slapped him again. Knocked him down and left him there sobbing on the ground.

They tried to pick him up by the arms, but he was dead weight, and they were all afraid

now. She had turned them from pursuers to prey and they knew it. They finally let him sink back down into the leaves, and broke and ran. But it was useless. We pursued them. My bride was already beginning to heal and the chase returned her strength. We caught them both before they had gone a hundred yards. We made them scream a long time so that the man lying in the leaves would remember it, wake screaming himself all his life to the sound of those screams. And then she impaled the bodies, stuck them on branches like the first, but spaced them out so that whoever came into the forest looking for them would find horror after horror.

And then we returned to the sobbing man and stood over him. And he looked up, certain he would die. I thought she would rend him as well, but she didn't. She only took his eyes, but before she did, she said, "Remember..."

It was masterful really. She wanted to send his terror back amongst the others, knowing it was infectious. She wanted him around as a reminder to every pursuer who caught our trail. She wanted his blind, eyeless face in their minds when they came for us, if they ever did.

The rest was simple. Just a matter of finding the minions, making arrangements, chartering passage, setting up the baggage, being crated and shipped and uncrated at a new home, far from the first, but not so far that the story of what she had left in the forest would not reach the ears of professionals even there. We are, I think, safer than we have been in years. As long as we are discreet. We must remain unobtrusive for a while. Let our hunger grow a bit. Feed on the fly.

As long as we keep our heads, we should be fine. The minions came in cringing as always, anxious to please, fearful of displeasing. Terrified, yet drawing strength from serving what they feared most. It was easy to see which of them avoided my wife's eyes.

"I know which of them dropped me," she said.

"We'll make an example of them," I said. "Or should I destroy them all?"

She raised an eyebrow. It made her wince slightly. "Certainly not," she said. "Even poor help is hard to find." 🐞

to her. To me they are interest. Bloodless, they are crouch beside one and stare her on our way.

head to the side and left her stunned. Her eye was all but closed when she looked up at him from her knees. He raised the stake, her back was exposed, her head drooped forward. He meant to plunge it into her.

For an instant I felt genuine fear. Not for myself. I could have torn them all to shreds with no more than minor wounds an hour would close again. But for her. The dreadful possibility of loss flooded through me. I thought of the ages without her. And I became all rage. I leapt, utterly without thought, without a plan. With no intent but to stop that arm before it could descend. Only when I grabbed it did my sense return. He could not move it down. I landed on my feet, standing behind him. The rest closed in, cold emotionless men, practiced in the kill. Had I been alone, escape would have been easy. But my bride could not regain her feet, and I was forced to concede them position to protect her as well as myself.

I ripped the arm free. The stake dropped at my feet. The man staggered. I hit him with it and he fell. I picked him up by the back and threw him among the others. Only one of them wavered. The rest were steadfast. They did not give ground. They did not hurry. They fired their weapons all at the same time. Useless things. I took wounds, but the deepest was superficial. It bought me time. Time enough to lift her, to back myself against a large tree. The rest was easy.

A feint toward them. A roar. They startled back, and I slipped around the tree out of their sight. The route of escape was obvious. I went up. By the time they came around the tree, we were far above them. They never looked up, but plunged straight ahead into the forest, certain we were in full flight ahead of them.

I waited on the branch, holding my bride, whispering to her not to talk. But she was thrashing against me. It was not enough for her that they were gone. She wanted to pursue them. She was frantic with rage and fear. She was adamant, "They must not live!" she said. "They must not live!" I tried to tell her we had only to go down the other side of the tree and make our way through the forest and out into the fields. There was still time before dawn to find a place of cover. We were far afield, but they would abandon their search soon

You may think you know this story already—but, trust us, you don't.

FOAM

BY DAVE SMEDS

Illustration by Gary Lippincott

CORAL SWAM SLOWLY, WITH trepidation, into the reception hall of her father, the Sea King. The lord of the ocean, clad in the visage of a giant turtle, rested on the sands, quiet save for the pensive shifting of a flipper.

Gone were the dolphins who had swum and sung across the vaulted chamber. Gone were the crabs who danced on the tables of rock, leaving behind their gifts of shells and jade. Gone were Coral's brothers and sisters, come to congratulate her on the anniversary of her birth.



There was only the Sea King, dimming the sanctuary with cold green melancholy.

"Father?" she asked, setting her fluke timidly upon the sand beside his beak, wishing she could cure his mood.

"Today you are fifteen years old," he said. "Today you venture into the world for the first time."

Her brows drew together. Hours earlier, he had celebrated this same fact.

"I feel her," he said. "She is waiting for you."

The current streaming off his shell carried the sting of an Arctic floe. Coral shuddered in the chill. "The Sea Witch?" she asked.

"She has always thwarted me. I am Life. She is Death. I tell the amoeba to divide, I make fertile the eggs of the marlin, I anchor the roots of the kelp. She brings to them age, rot, and dissipation. She and I may never share the same place and moment, but I feel her presence. I know her desires."

The Sea King turned his turtle eyes toward his offspring. Massive and opaque, the pupils dwarfed her, capturing her reflection like an insect in amber. Her long, red tresses flowed rich and full around her human half, down to the dorsal fin on her long, whale-like fluke.

"She hates you most of all," the king said. "You are beautiful, you

the sun had set. Holds full of trade goods, they anticipated the wealth and welcome awaiting them in the morning.

All this the mermaid gleaned from their minds, but the facts meant little to her compared to the feelings associated with them. Such fire, such a cacophony of hope, schemes, and relief.

Her father had often told her of humanity, of how the Earth Mother had sent him the ape, and how he had stripped the creature's hair from its skin and aligned its pelvis with its spine until, streamlined, it could swim and dive with ease. Her father had heightened its sense of hearing, prompting its first use of vocal language. He taught it to use tools, with which it battered open shellfish to eat.

But the Earth Mother, seeing what he had fashioned, called her gift back. The new species took its language, tools, and erect posture back to the land, forsaking the Sea King.

At last, Coral understood why her father spoke of man with such wistfulness, and why he had shaped her upper body like them. Never had she encountered so many consciousnesses, gathered so closely together, burbling with such keenly felt desires. Their passions tugged her like spawning beds drew the salmon.

One human stood out. Dark-haired and tall, he seemed quite young, and yet every other man on the ship deferred to him. Was

In front of Coral loomed a horrific creature. Its carapace supported a humanlike head. Its jaws snapped incessantly

brim with young life, and because you are made from my essence, you will not succumb to the decay she has let loose upon the rest of my world. To kill you, she must actively break the magic which formed you, with your consent."

Coral lay a hand gently on her sire's beak. "Why would I give her my consent?"

The turtle closed his eyes, as if in pain, shutting out the reflected vision of her. "I cannot protect you, once you leave these walls. You must dare Death alone, if you are to overcome her. If you are my true child, and if you make the right choices, you will prevail. If not..."

One of his fins moved, spawning a surge of water that sent Coral back into the central portion of the grotto. The quivering of his great eyelids betrayed that he would rather have cupped her form beneath him, and guarded her forever.

"Go, my daughter. Show the world your beauty. Be all that you can."

The currents lifted her up, gently buoying her through the long passageway to the open ocean. Her father's grief followed her, as he wept for older children who had never returned to his side.

TWILIGHT SILVERED THE OCEAN AS CORAL EMERGED FROM THE depths. Vestiges of the day blessed the clouds with hues of rose and gold, and up in the pale pink sky the evening star held court. A large three-masted ship idled in the calm sea, sails hoisted as offerings to a fickle trade wind. Sailors hung like monkeys from the rigging and from the yards. They sang, made music, and lit hundreds of lanterns that, with their different colors, looked as if the flags of all nations had been borrowed for display.

Coral floated just beyond the range of the lantern light, drawn by the jubilation frothing in the hearts of the crew. They were near the end of a long voyage; the coast of their country had come in sight as

he a prince? Yes. A prince of merchants. Within his awareness flashed images of lively negotiations, careful intimidation, and a paternal concern for his crew. She saw why they looked to him with loyalty and respect.

Yet, overriding his satisfaction at a job well done, he brimmed with another urge. He gazed toward the night-shrouded coast. A woman waited for him there. Body aching, he dreamed of their reunion.

Coral surged up, until she rose waist high in a wreath of foam. Eyes closed, she drank in the prince's hunger. Her skin, exposed to the air, rose with fine prickles.

Her eyes came open. She had wandered into the lantern light. At the gunwale, the prince stared. He lifted his flagon, as if to accuse its contents of addling his senses, but he never looked away from her.

His dream woman transformed. Her plain brown hair became Coral's luxuriant, scarlet tresses. Her breasts rode higher, her waist shrank, and the bones of her clavicle grew more distinct. Like Coral.

Her exclamation rode across the water. The prince blinked. He called to his companions.

Coral submerged. The other sailors glimpsed her white skin so briefly that, moments later, they joked at being so foolish as to mistake sea foam for a mermaid. The prince scowled, laughing only to give them less to tease him about. Agitated, he scanned the waves.

Coral remained below. But not from fright. She could not banish the image she had seen in the prince's mind, an instant before her cry shattered it. It was she, re-envisioned by the prince's fervor.

Her face, her arms—and below that, her legs.

When Coral finally nudged above the surface, she was far from the lantern light. She could still distinguish the silhouettes of the men—and of the prince—but a gulf yawned between her and the ship, as awesome as the deepest trench of her father's domain.

A crab hair was santly.

She floated listlessly, drifting away from the ship. The scales of her lower extremity flashed in the moonlight, and the glare hurt her eyes as it had never done before.

The moonlight faded. Swells deepened and the wind rose. Coral scarcely noticed. Storms were no threat to her. But at some point she realized that the sounds of revelry had died out, replaced by harsh, barked orders to furl the sails and secure the ship.

Weather's fury arrived in a wall of turbulence and hard rain. Waves loomed black and mountainous. The ship dived like a swan into the troughs of the swells and rode up again on their towering crests, masts creaking. The young mermaid might have enjoyed the spectacle, but she was still attuned to the humans, and felt their fear.

The vessel groaned, the stout planks yielding to the heavy pounding. A spur of reef suddenly appeared in the trough ahead. As sailors screamed, the craft struck.

The mainmast snapped. The ship gave a lurch to one side. Water gushed through the ruptured hull.

Coral plunged forward. Wreckage threatened to slam into her at the whim of the gale. She sought and found the familiar essence of the prince. He was underwater, caught in a morass of rigging, losing consciousness.

She dived, reaching the man as his lungs gave out. The ropes and tackle clutched him like a lover. She yanked and bit at the hemp. No good. Deprived of quicker choices, she worked a knot free and fed the line through the pulley that held it. Success. She rushed the prince to the surface.

As her father had taught her, the mermaid created an islet of calm within the tempest.

Floating on her back, she cradled the prince on her belly. She squeezed his midsection. Salt water burbled from his mouth. He coughed, heaved, and collapsed against her. His breath returned,

ragged, but continuous.

The depths took three, five, and then seven of the prince's sailors. Coral resolved that he would not join them. She kept the storm's violence at bay, ferrying the prince gently to the shore.

She swam so carefully that, by the time sand brushed against her back, the worst of the gale had passed. Though awkward on land, she dragged herself and her charge high above the reach of the breakers, into the lee of a grassy dune.

He shivered. She removed and wrung out his drenched garments, curled around him, and draped them both with the fabric. He stopped shaking, though he still twisted restlessly.

The sensation of his body against her brought a puzzling weakness to her muscles. Pleased and curious, she huddled closer.

He moaned. She wiped beads of feverish sweat from his forehead and the bridge of his nose. He rolled over, facing her. His eyes opened.

Even with thick clouds and rain shrouding the moon, he recognized her. He caressed her cheek. Coral read his confusion. He believed himself delirious. He trembled to find warm, tangible flesh beneath his fingers.

In answer to his unspoken question, Coral leaned in and placed her mouth against his. He pressed up, into her kiss.

She played with the hairs on his chest. His lips teased the lobes of her ears. She wallowed in the sensations like a fish suddenly given the gift of breathing air. His hand found one of her breasts, cupped it, treasured it.

Coral writhed, tingles crawling over her skin. Was it this way for humans all the time? No, it couldn't be. A human woman could not look inside the prince's mind and see how much he cared that his touch gave her pleasure. He gave himself to her, totally.

Coral absorbed his love and was claimed.

His hand drifted lower, brushing past her skin and onto the scales of her lower body.

He jerked. He stared down with wide, disbelieving eyes, willing the night's gloom to vanish and show him that she was not half fish after all.

She reached for him. He retreated. She cast back the passion he had sent into her, hoping that he could sense it.

He shook his head, as if in pain. But as she stroked his shoulder, and massaged the firm muscles of his belly, he sighed, tears welling, and sagged back on the sand.

At last she could read through the tangle of his thoughts. Her mermaid features were proof to him that he was dreaming. He cried because he did not want her to be a dream.

He draped his arms around her. "Stay with me," he murmured.

She answered him as best she could. She snuggled close and held him tightly.

But he, believing himself asleep, gave into the fever and exhaustion, and sank into true slumber.

SHE LEFT HIM IN THE MORNING, LINGERING IN THE SHALLOWS AS search parties from the town arrived on the debris-ridden beach. The prince babbled feverish sentences as they placed him on the litter.

Coral swam away with the listlessness of a minnow who had met with the nettles of a jellyfish.

She wished she possessed the human ability to sleep. She wanted desperately to purge the stream of thought and emotion from her consciousness. Below, life on the sea bottom continued as ever—anemones captured their diminutive prey, a hermit crab hunted for a new shell, a manta ray patrolled its territory—but not one aspect of that drama mattered. She knew the cycle too well; none of it could surprise her.

What she had felt when the merchant prince had touched her was new. It was outside the knowledge passed down to her as a daughter of the Sea King. Suddenly this food she had never tasted before had become the only thing she could eat.

Coral wandered. For three days, she fluttered through the currents. She was not aware of choosing a direction, but in the end she arrived at the harbor of the port where the young prince lived.

She could sense him. The connection remained. She wriggled along the shallows of the coast until she reached a small beach past the edge of the town. A cottage rose atop the dunes. He was there.

She glided back into deep water. The few yards of sand that separated her from him might as well have been an entire continent.

As Coral drifted out to sea, the water turned brown and murky. Dead fish hung before her eyes. Strange polyps wriggled on the sea floor, feeding on the sewage carried from the port by the river.

Coral turned to avoid the zone of putrescence, only to be stopped by a voice.

Why are you sad?

In front of Coral loomed a horrific creature. A crab carapace supported a humanlike head. Its legs writhed like those of an octopus, suckers withered and discolored, the extremities tipped with pincers. Its hair was made of thin eels whose jaws snapped incessantly.

Who are you? asked the little mermaid.

I am the Sea Witch, said the apparition.

Coral darted backward. *Be gone,* she demanded. *You will not have me.*

I can give the prince to you.

The water suddenly chilled her. *No one can do that,* Coral responded. *We belong to different worlds.* She stopped short of asking how the goddess knew of him.

I can.

Coral swam in a slow, tight circuit, eyebrows drawn together. She knew she should leave, but she could not keep from listening further.

How? Coral demanded.

I cannot bring him to the sea, but I can send you to the land. I can give you legs.

Coral touched her scaled hips, on the very spot the prince had

touched. *Many of my brothers and sisters have died at your hand. Why should I trust you?*

I am the embodiment of Death, said the Sea Witch. I have no need to lie—I always win, given time. I will help you because it will serve my ends. She raised a pincer toward her heart, as if to say, ‘Here I am, my nature undisguised.’ Coral knew that the witch could have worn the beauty of a siren had she chosen it.

How?

I can create nothing. My tools are death and decay. If I change you from an immortal mermaid into a mortal human, I will have moved you in the direction of death. The act is its own reward.

Coral tensed her fluke, trying to imagine what it would be like to have two limbs there instead of one. Vividly she recalled the soft, tapered legs of the woman in the young merchant’s vision, and his pleasure at the consideration of them.

It cannot be so simple, Coral stated. There must be other prices to be paid. Tell me, and leave nothing out.

The Sea Witch laughed. *Indeed there are. And I am happy to tell you, for they please me.* Her tentacles stroked the sea floor, stirring up decayed polyps and fermenting sediment.

First, it will be painful, as if I had cut your fluke down the middle with my claws. This suffering will fade as the legs dry, but then, whenever you walk, your feet will feel as if you are treading on knives or pricking gimlets. Given time, this too will ease, but time is the thing you may not have.

Why not?

My powers have their limits. I can only make you human for three days. In order to complete the spell, and achieve a normal human lifespan, your prince must lie with you. Only his love, given in passion, will finish the transformation.

Only three days. The little mermaid knew she should be frightened, but the prince’s desire had been unmistakable. Were she to don legs, and come to him in the light of day, would it truly be so difficult to consummate their attraction?

If you do not succeed, continued the death goddess, you will wither to dust. And there is no turning back. Should you enter the sea during the three days, you will dissolve into foam. Only if your man proves his love will you have the years a human normally has. You will also regain the ability to visit the ocean, but you will swim only as people do. The water will tire you out as it does them. You can never be a mermaid again. Even if I should wish it, my power cannot restore a being to immortality.

My prince will want me, Coral asserted. I have seen his soul’s longing. Yet you wear the smile of one who owns the better side of a wager. What have you not told me? Why would this man not help me, should I ask it of him?

The Sea Witch laughed until her crustacean belly disintegrated into a spongy, gelatinous mass. A foul, inky substance extruded from her pores.

How will you tell him? Unless you can learn human speech in three days, you will be mute among them. But ‘tis true, you have your pretty form, your graceful movements, your desire. Perhaps these will be enough. But I think you will fail, and that gives me great joy.

The little mermaid refused to let so foul a creature taunt her. What she had seen in the prince’s mind was a pure and true emotion, and she knew her own heart. To reach the fulfillment of that bond, she would risk anything.

Very well, said Coral. If you speak the truth, my fluke will split. If you lie, the magic of my blood will know it, and preserve me.

I speak the truth, stated the witch. She raked the front of her bilious form, opening a gash. Black, viscous blood spumed out and snaked languorously toward Coral like strands of molten tar. Drink of my essence. One draught, no more. Then flee to the shore, for soon your father’s realm will spurn you.

Coral grimaced, drawing her hands and body away from the fluid. Arching her neck, she sucked in a mouthful. It tasted as evil as it looked. She swallowed, if only to drive it away from her teeth and tongue. It seared her throat and tore at her stomach as if she had swallowed a harpoon.

Coral surged up, broke into the air, and raced along the surface, barely within the water. Even the laughter of the Sea Witch could not keep up with her. The beach reached for her. She struck it at a fright-

ening velocity and skidded up the embankment onto dry sand.

The impact grated skin off her arms and breasts, but she hardly noticed. That discomfort was lost within the agony welling up from her lower body. Phantom pincers closed, snipping her fluke down the center.

She cried out. Salt tears streamed from her eyes. She grasped handfuls of sand and tightened her fists until the knuckles threatened to explode. Far too slowly, skin closed in around the exposed tissue. Knees, ankles, and toes took vague shape.

She endured until she could sense the bones hardening and joints meshing, then mercifully, consciousness failed her.

CORAL FELT EYES UPON HER AS SHE WOKE.

She lay on the sand beside a jumble of driftwood. A gull perched there, gazing at her intently. Its dark eyes sparkled with intelligence. It opened its pure white wings and hissed softly, as if to tell her something. Groggy, Coral could only shake her head.

Abruptly the gull took flight. Coral turned to see what had startled it.

Two boys stood a few steps away. If she had been a giant kraken, they could not have stared with more awe.

She tried to move. Her body squirmed strangely, and abruptly, she was gazing at herself with as much astonishment as the children. Two shapely legs, as fine as the pair in the prince’s dream, extended from her equally human pelvis.

She rolled over. The boys, startled, pranced backward. Suddenly they burst into a run, straight toward the cottage on the dune. She ignored them, mesmerized by the sensation of knees bending and toes wriggling.

When she looked up, the boys were leading two men down from the cottage.

One of the men carried a blanket. She recognized him instantly as her merchant prince. Her eyes locked upon his, and did not shift until he leaned over her. She reached up, not quite believing it as her fingers brushed the firm, warm flesh of his neck.

He spoke to her. In his mind, she read the meaning of his words, but when she tried to reply, only a meaningless squeak emerged from her throat.

“It’s her, Tane,” he told the other adult. “I told you there was a girl on the beach with me the night of the gale.”

“She’s real enough,” Tane replied. “But if you think a little thing like her could have pulled you from the waves, your fever must have returned. She’s nothing but a cast-off waif herself. Cover her, Adan, before she withers away.”

Adan wrapped her carefully, yet his hands betrayed a certain reluctance to hide her beauty. “It’s her, I tell you. I couldn’t forget a face like this.”

Coral smiled.

“Then where’s she been the past three days?” Tane argued. “Where was she when we salvaged the wreck and scoured the coast for the dead? You’ve never seen this man before, have you, girl?”

As Tane spoke, doubt took root in Adan’s mind. He remembered the touch of fish scales against his hips.

Coral shook her head, willing him to believe his instincts, but to her dismay, both men took her gesture as a reply to Tane’s question.

“There’s your answer, Adan. Here, let’s help this poor lass inside and send the boys to fetch Lara. You know, it’s just as well your new ship will have that bridal cabin. You’re too young a trader to ply this strait without a wife aboard. It leaves your imagination without an anchor.”

Coral struggled to think of a way to communicate. The more Adan analyzed his memories, the more he attributed the night on the beach to delirium. Tane was his mother’s brother, his mentor and financier. Adan had obeyed the man’s advice all his life.

*“She’s
think a
from the*

While the men lifted her upright, Coral started to gesture—anything to get their attention. But as weight settled onto her feet, pain blotted out her attempt. She doubled over, gasping.

“She’s ill, Adan, or hurt. Perhaps we’d better take her to the healer.”

Thinking quickly, Coral shook her head again. She wouldn’t let herself be shut up some place away from her prince, now that she’d found him. She steadied herself, and stepped forward.

Her innate grace maintained her for the first two paces. By then, she was reading in the minds of Adan, Tane, and the boys how she should walk. She forced her legs to obey that mental model, though each grain of sand beneath her soles seemed to penetrate to the bone.

The men shrugged and followed her, dispatching the boys to a nearby cluster of houses.

“LARA WILL SEE TO YOU,” ADAN SAID AS HE HELPED CORAL INTO A chair. “Perhaps some of her younger sister’s clothing would fit you.”

He hovered near her. Coral gazed at him longingly, resentful of Tane’s presence.

“Don’t you speak at all?” Adan asked.

She touched her lips, and shook her head. Then she pulled his hand within the blanket to the center of her chest, and let her heart beat against it. She nodded.

blanket. “Some broth will warm you up. Do you have a fever, child?”

Coral resisted the urge to fling Lara’s hand from her brow. She wanted to rise, to follow her prince. But as she placed a foot on the floor, the knife-sharp twinges stunned her back into place.

By the time Lara had returned with a fresh blanket and a washcloth, Coral’s anger at the woman had faded. Her body prickled with so many strange needs. Lara seemed to understand what she required, though she herself did not. Broth, what was that? She looked in Lara’s mind, and all at once understood the meaning of the pangs in her abdomen.

Mer did not eat. They drank only salt water. The Sea King had made his children so that they would not need to take life in order to preserve their own. But Coral’s new body had no such magic. She had much to learn.

Coral had already lost half of the first day lying unconscious on the beach. She would not waste the rest of it. As Lara mothered her, the former mermaid gleaned the information necessary to behave as a human being.

Eating, walking, bodily functions, customs of attire, roles of parent and child, male and female—all the mundane aspects of living that any resident of the kingdom took for granted were prey to Coral’s thirst for knowledge. When at last Adan appeared out of the

real enough,” Tane replied. “But if you little thing like her could have pulled you waves, your fever must have returned.”

Once again, the connection was made. She could tell he was reliving the vision that had first drawn her near his ship. But to her frustration, the recollection only made him recall the ridicule of his crew, and he retreated from it.

Tane cleared his throat. Adan pulled his hand back.

“Mute as a fish,” Tane said.

“She’s obviously had a terrible experience,” Adan replied. “Do not be so harsh.”

Coral beamed at his defense of her. He smiled back. Just then, the door opened.

A young woman entered, with the boys. She looked at Coral and smiled. The Sea King’s daughter read concern and empathy in the newcomer’s mind, but she ignored it. What she saw in Adan’s mind consumed her full attention.

Betrothed. This woman was his intended mate. And he was devoted to her.

This could not be, Coral insisted to herself. Lara’s prettiness was quiet, unimposing—and yet the affection in the prince’s heart could not be denied. Coral began to shake, caught in a wave of betrayal mitigated only by her sudden fear for her existence.

A sudden, warm wetness drenched the blanket beneath her. She glanced down, startled. The liquid spread darkly across the cloth, heading for the floor.

“Oh, you poor dear,” Lara said, hurrying forward. “Out, all of you. She needs privacy.”

Coral had only to glance in the mind of anyone present to understand why she was suddenly being treated like an invalid. In the sea, she’d never had to be concerned about emptying her bladder. She watched forlornly as her prince exited with the others, leaving her with a nurse she could not have resented more.

“Let me take this,” Lara murmured soothingly as she tugged at the

darkness of early evening, she was well-prepared for him.

She stood in front of him in a plain, but well-fitting singlet. She had chosen a sash that emphasized the sea green of her eyes.

“Our little piece of driftwood has become a lady,” Lara said cordially.

“You work miracles,” Adan said. Coral would have resented the way he credited her transformation to Lara, had she not been able to read behind the words. When his glance lingered on her hair, it was its natural sheen that captured his approval, not how well Lara had combed it. When he looked lower, the way she filled the weave mattered far more to him than the choice of garment.

He gave no sign to Lara, but Coral knew Adan regretted that his betrothed was not equally lovely.

Coral tried her best to keep his attention that evening, using the wiles she had stolen from Lara. She held her implements with dainty finesse, she smiled and made eye contact at carefully selected moments and, most of all, she hid her jealousy of Lara. The latter proved difficult, for she saw that Lara, as was often the custom in this realm between promised mates, intended to stay the night.

As the moon, in its waning quarter, slipped below the horizon, Lara set up a bed on a divan in the common room for Coral. As Lara allowed her privacy to disrobe, and Adan was busy outside splitting a few extra pieces of firewood, Coral sensed an opportunity. She hurried beneath the covers and feigned immediate sleep.

Lara soon checked on her and, believing the ruse, tiptoed back into Adan’s bedroom. Moments later, Adan passed through on his way to join her. He paused to gaze in the direction of the divan.

Coral sat up, peeling the blankets off her naked body. She rose with a sinuous motion. Ignoring the agony in her feet, she crossed over to Adan and nudged against him before he could gather his wits.

Reluctantly, he pressed her back to arm’s length. “Lord of the sea,

what I wouldn't have done to have met you a year ago."

From the deep recesses of his being, she read the scroll of confession that he kept sealed to all but his view. He did not love Lara. Fondness, yes. Devotion, yes. But not love.

Coral tugged his wrist urgently.

He loosened her grip. "I cannot. My lady awaits."

He turned away from her silent protests, and vanished into the bedroom. Coral sank back on her pillow, stricken.

He wanted her. His heart said it, no matter what his spoken words declared. That promise alone gave her the strength of will to remain where she was.

She lay there, tossing, feeling death swimming nearer. What was she to do? Oh, how smug the Sea Witch's laugh seemed now.

UNTIL THE SEA WITCH HAD SPLIT HER LEGS, CORAL HAD NEVER known unconsciousness. She understood that humans slept, but she also knew that they often went without it for a night or more. She remained awake until the pre-dawn, and was caught unaware when her body asserted its needs. As a result, she then did not rouse until the sun broke through the fog late in the morning.

Crusts on her eyelashes, she stumbled to the window, disbelieving her senses. She willed the sunshine away, back to the previous

tage of any avenue she could find into the prince's heart.

Finally, legs wobbling, she rested. She wanted to be steady when the time came to perform for Adan. As afternoon waned, she sequestered herself on a dune and worked on the greatest obstacle to her goal—her lack of human speech.

She could not glean the knowledge of how to speak from Netta or any other human. Use of their voices came so naturally to them that they gave the process no conscious thought. Trial and error was the only way Coral could teach her throat, tongue, and lips what they had to know.

Toward sunset, she could grunt and hum. "Nnnnnn," she said as she observed the prince's ketch approach its dock. She could not even correctly transfer her excitement into the utterance.

She sighed. Given a few weeks, she might manage a sentence. But left with only two nights and a day, she would be fortunate to form a single word.

She brushed the sand off her skirts and hobbled toward the docks.

"YOU SHOULD SEE HOW SHE DANCES!" NETTA CHIRPED AS SOON AS her prospective son-in-law appeared.

Adan glanced at Coral, intrigued. To her delight it was arranged that, as soon as the evening meal ended, the Sea King's daughter

*She did not know why it should matter....
merely to stay and die, on the very spot
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night. Her three days were nearly half gone.

Wooden clogs scuffed the floor. Coral turned to see a matronly woman emerge from the pantry. Her memories of Adan's mind told her this was Lara's mother, Netta.

"Here, now, you can't run around the house naked," the woman scolded. "Didn't my daughter provide you with night clothes?"

Coral let herself be led back to the divan, too distracted by the shooting pain in her feet to protest, and too amazed that she had not felt the pain until then. Netta introduced herself, adding, "Adan and my daughter went sailing in his ketch. They'll be back at dusk. Are you hungry?"

Coral blinked until tears came. There was no way she dared follow Adan. The sea was death to her. And to her annoyance, this human body of hers *was* hungry.

At least that was one need she could assuage.

While she ate, Coral tried to think of a plan—anything to keep the panic at bay. Netta was a resource, just as Lara had been. Among other things, in her youth Netta had been a dancer.

To use legs so fully—it was so human an activity that Coral immediately claimed a section of porch, extracted the choreography from Netta's mind, and attempted the movements. Phantom slivers sprang up from the planks into her heels, but she did not stop.

The matron laughed with delight. Memories bubbled into her consciousness, where Coral could read them all the better, and use them to refine her cadence, posture, and tension.

"You've got the gift, child," Netta declared. "Show it to Adan. He so loves dancing."

When Coral heard this, her practice could not be stopped, especially when Netta's reminiscences shifted toward her long-held disappointment that her daughter had proven so uncoordinated in the art. The pain never left, but Coral endured it. She would take advan-

would demonstrate what she had learned.

Adan's eyes gleamed as he watched. His mouth hung open until Lara, annoyed, closed it for him.

Coral could not have danced better had she been born a human. She raised her arms above her head and spun on the tips of her toes, she pranced, she swam through the air. She continued until the throb in her feet overwhelmed her. Her audience applauded as she swayed into a chair.

"Our little foundling seems to have completed her recovery," Adan said.

"Perhaps tomorrow we can arrange a permanent home for her," Lara suggested.

Adan pursed his lips. "Perhaps we can," he said equably.

His annoyance at Lara was matched only by his approval of Coral. The former mermaid smiled into her cup. Dizzy and exhausted from the dancing, Coral bided her time for the rest of the evening, until at last, as Lara and her mother talked, she saw a chance to act. Grasping Adan, she tugged him out to the porch.

"What are you doing?" he whispered.

Her lips came up to meet his. He kissed her back fiercely.

But he pulled away much too soon. "We must go back. Lara must not find us here."

She pulled him toward the steps, toward the beach. When he anchored himself, she brushed her thigh along his.

"No," he said.

His interest in her coursed through him like a rushing mountain stream fueled by an unstoppable snow melt. But as she watched, he placed a dam across it.

"I'm promised, and that's all there is to it," he said. He turned toward the door.

She clutched at him, dragging him back. Just then, Lara called for

Adan. Bitterly, he flung himself free. Coral, poised awkwardly on her tender, exhausted legs, nearly tumbled over. Adan disappeared without looking back.

Coral blinked through tears. She couldn't go back in. She didn't understand how any human could sequester his feelings as Adan had. He wanted Coral, more than any woman he'd ever seen, certainly more than the plain bride he'd settled for. But his determination was undeniable. He had come to his harbor, and would not weigh anchor.

A flutter of wings startled her out of her despair. A white gull perched on the porch rail beside her.

She knew instinctively that it was the same bird that had kept watch over her on the beach the previous day. It opened its wings and held them wide. Its sentient eyes gazed at her.

Impulsively she reached out to contact its mind. Blue fog retreated from her probe. The gull dwelled in the realm of the air, and its language rested just across the border of her understanding.

The bird flew off. Coral turned and stared forlornly at the door. Head down, she left the porch and vanished into the dunes.

THE THIRD DAY PASSED SWIFTLY, AS TIME DOES WHEN A PERSON wants it to linger. Coral wandered the heath and the dunes just out-

side of the town, avoiding passersby, sharing the thoughts of the populace during those rare times when she could block out the image of Adan. The richness of those thoughts told her she would have liked living in that town, among its people, until she grew old.

As the lamplighters strolled down the streets on their rounds, Coral inevitably turned in the direction of the cottage.

The Sea Witch's magic seemed to be weakening already. Coral's bones creaked. Every joint in her

new legs and hips gave her pain. She was stumbling by the time she arrived at Adan's dwelling.

Dark windows confronted her. He was not there.

She sank to her knees on the porch. She did not know why it should matter whether she saw him again or not. Best merely to stay and die, on the very spot where she had first acknowledged the Sea Witch's victory.

But there was little enough to do with what remained of her life. Finding Adan was a goal to stave off the bleakness of her reveries.

She probed randomly until she detected the pattern of Adan's consciousness. It came from the direction of the docks. She dragged herself toward the source.

ADAN WAS ON HIS KETCH. CORAL GLIMPSED HIM THROUGH A PORTHOLE, just before a forgotten candle guttered out in its holder. He and Lara were wrapped around each other, asleep in the bunk of the tiny master cabin.

Coral walked unsteadily out to the end of the pier. Deadly as the water might be, it was no more threatening now than the land.

She had not been there long when shapes appeared beneath her dangling legs.

Her sisters.

We have learned of your pact with the Sea Witch, announced the eldest. We have made a new pact. Your life may be saved.

How? asked Coral.

Our father has agreed that if you live out your proper mortal span, he will not fashion a new mermaid for a thousand years after your death.

But the Sea Witch said her power could only grant me three days and nights.

Not if you give her a death. She can give you a human lifetime if it is taken from another. The eldest threw a coral spike onto the end of the pier.

Kill your prince's lover. Cast her body into the ocean. Her lifeless blood will fuel the magic.

Coral shrank away from the spike in horror. *I cannot do this!*

You must, or your own life is forfeited.

Her sisters submerged, leaving Coral to stare at the weapon they had left.

ENTERING THE CABIN PROVED SURPRISINGLY EASY. CORAL'S NATURAL grace served the cause of stealth well. A few long minutes after her sisters had departed, she held the spike over Lara's heart.

Coral dreamed that she was in the woman's place, there beside her sleeping Adan. In her vision, he did not wake during the murder. He and Coral met months later, when she had learned human speech, and he had overcome his grief. Unimpeded by a rival, Coral won his love.

At their marriage ceremony, he reached for her hand. He held it up and turned it over, ready to place a ring on her finger.

A pool of blood, lying in her palm, rolled out of her hand and splattered her wedding gown.

Coral lowered the weapon without striking.

She could not kill. However close to human she might be, however desperate, she was still the daughter of the Sea King, and the Sea King acted only in the interests of life.

She crept out as stealthily as she had entered. She stood at the gunwale and frowned down at the spike.

At once, a glamour lifted from her. She understood how she had been duped. Her sisters had never come to the pier. They had been an illusion. Greedy for one more death, the Sea Witch had tried to trick her. Spilling another's blood would not save her life; it would merely increase the witch's victory.

All that remained was for dawn to come and change her to dust. So be it.

With a subtle whisper of wings, the white gull landed on the deck beside her.

Impulsively, she reached out. It nodded three times. As her eyes widened in surprise, the bird launched off and skimmed the waves beside the boat, webbed feet grazing a strangely thick layer of sea foam.

Suddenly sure of herself, Coral leaped overboard, into the foam. Her body popped to the surface, boiling. She began to dissolve.

Yet, strangely, no sense of death overtook her, no lapse of consciousness. She heard the raucous screeching of the gull as it dived toward her. The bird caught a wisp of the froth that had been her heart, and ascended.

And suddenly, Coral was high over the ketch. Adan and Lara, awakened by the loud splash, rushed on deck.

Coral looked beside her, and found herself in the midst of hundreds of ethereal creatures, winged and garbed in every shade of the rainbow, even in the starlight. The brightest and most beautiful of all sailed forward, forsaking the gull's shape, and smiled at her.

Who are you? asked Coral.

I am the Queen of the Air, said the entity. I am to the sky what your father is to the sea and the Earth Mother is to the land. Welcome.

How did I come here? I thought I would die.

You are the child of a god, replied the Queen of the Air. You cannot die, unless you betray your nature. By remaining true, you have merely transformed yourself. Your father dared not reveal this ability to you earlier, for fear the Sea Witch would steal the knowledge from you. She does not realize the joke we play on her. She thinks me powerless, because no life is born of me. She does not realize her own magic is the catalyst that sends me offspring.

The goddess glided upward. *Come, daughter. Let us travel over the world and celebrate its life, and provide solace to the mortals in our care.*

Coral nodded eagerly, but spared one last glance below. In the ketch, her prince and his lady gazed out at the foam on the water with solemn faces, as if comprehending her sacrifice, and mourning her.

Coral descended. With her breathy, invisible form, she touched Lara on the cheek, and kissed Adan on the lips. They looked up, startled, and confused smiles brightened their faces.

And the merchant prince, until the end of his long life, was known as the captain who the wind treated with unusual kindness. Always, his sails were filled. ♣

Best where she victory.

James Gurney's world beneath is so real it's fantastic.

RETURN TO DINOTOPIA

BY RIC MEYERS

The first thing you notice, of course, is the dinosaur. Like an elephant in the living room, its sheer size makes it the center of attention, eliminating all concerns of detail. Perhaps, once you get over the incongruity of its presence, you may start noticing what a great-looking elephant, I mean, dinosaur, it is. And once you get by that, you might start noticing how ingeniously (and ingeniously) it was placed in the rest of the image.

Once you start looking, it's hard to stop. There's one amazing aspect after another in there. Then maybe you start to realize what this artist has truly done. He has placed a dinosaur in a recognizably human environment, in a place designed—in extraordinary detail—for both. It's a people-friendly *and* dinosaur-friendly world. That's not easy to accomplish, especially on our own, often user-deadly, planet. And to top it off, James Gurney has accomplished this with an artistry not seen since the glory days of Norman Rockwell.

Take an excursion into a remarkable civilization where humans and dinosaurs gloriously coexist, sharing the city and even the exotic Steep Street.

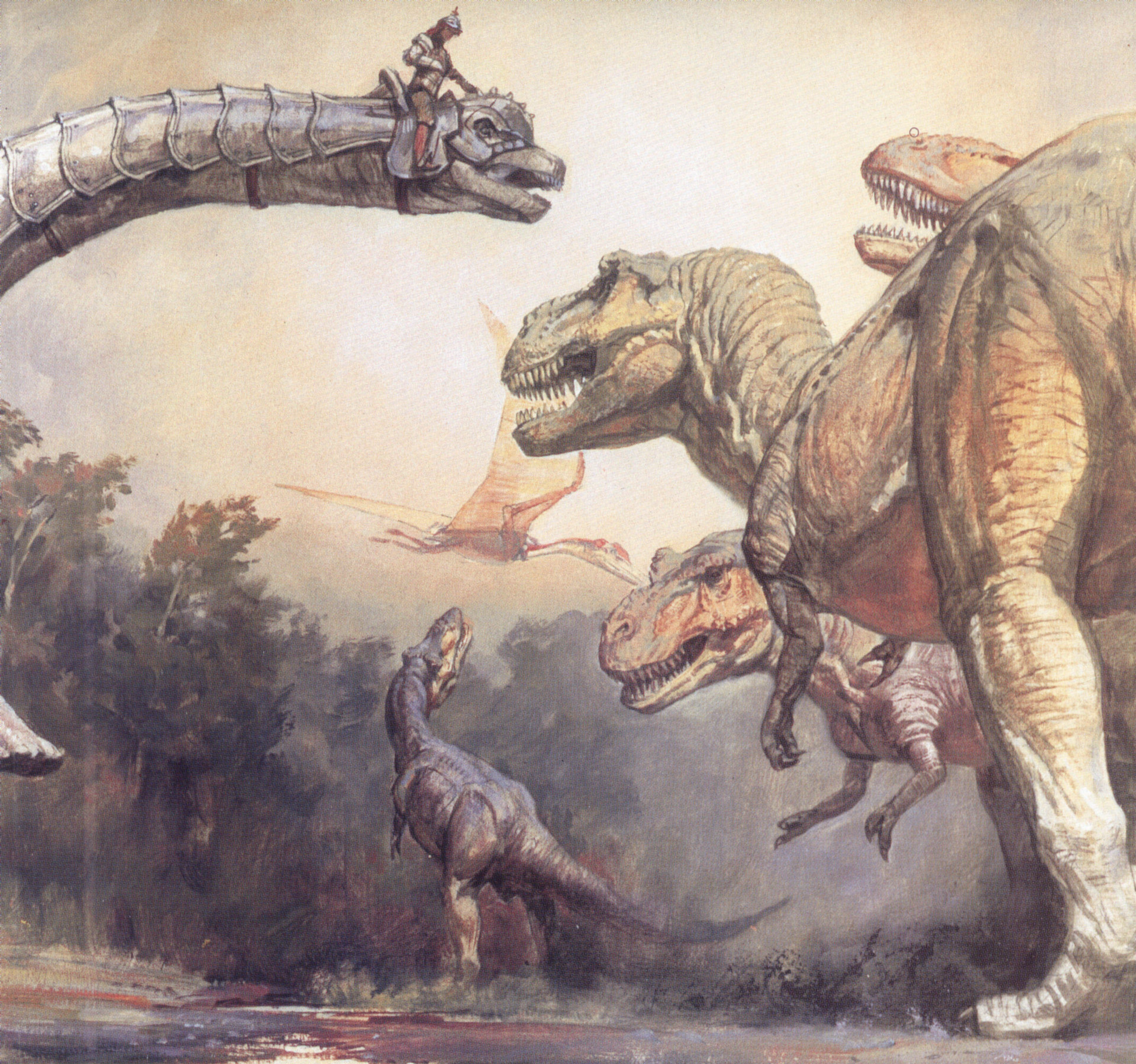






Beyond the palette and technique, his artwork is not only proof of a great painter, but of a scientist and engineer as well. From the artist's point of view, the images are designed. From a builder's point of view, they are *constructed*. The problem: creating a world that is comfortable for both tiny humans and gigantic dinosaurs. The solution: Dinotopia.

There's not much I need to tell you about the original book *Dinotopia*: award-winning, million-copy, international best seller, foundation for many products of scrupulous quality, inspiration for an upcoming multi-million-dollar movie, etc. The *Los Angeles Daily News* called this tale of "a land apart from time," where humans and dinosaurs live in mutual interdependence, a "triumph of the imagination." My favorite review



remains the one Larry Niven wrote for *The New York Review of Science Fiction*: "The scientists of tomorrow will have read this book as children."

James Gurney had his work cut out for him when he decided to continue the saga. In an age where the word "sequel" could be defined as a casually inferior follow-up, created only to milk the original's popularity for a quick buck, how do you create a worthy successor? At the risk of revealing the punchline to the Carnegie Hall joke: Practice, my boy, practice. Gurney did not rest on his many laurels. He plunged into *The World Beneath* with renewed passion and commitment. He was dedicated to making everything about the second adventure better: the excitement, the characters, and, especially, the art.

"What I set out to accomplish with *The World Beneath* was to capture the realism, romance, and spirit of Golden Age adventure classics in a story that is told primarily with pictures," Gurney said. "I wanted to develop a form for illustrated books that would attract adults at least as much as children. To do that meant giving novel-length scope to the story, and feature-film-level graphics to the visuals. I wanted to create a movie for your hands."

To accomplish this, Gurney went on research trips to locations as diverse as the canals of Venice and the caves and coral reefs of Puerto Rico. Inspiration and influence for the "...topia" may have come from this, but for the "dino..." Gurney turned to friends and associates he had made during the creation of the original book. Paleontologists

Above: On the expedition to the caverns of the World Beneath, the convoy is surrounded and Spooked. Inset: Barely surviving his flight on a Dragoncopter, Will gratefully returns to his friends and makes this Gesture of Thanks.

and Ph.D.s from Manhattan to Melbourne contributed information so that Gurney could realize the latest Jurassic creatures. *The World Beneath* features no less than a half-dozen recently discovered dinosaurs—including the first visualization ever of the *Giganotosaurus*, discovered only last summer by Rodolfo Coria.

"Jim Gurney's portraits of dinosaurs are so accurate you could teach a course with them," said Dr. Robert Bakker of the Tate Museum. "He is truly a paleontological Jules Verne." Just as important to the artist as scientific accuracy, however, was to give his

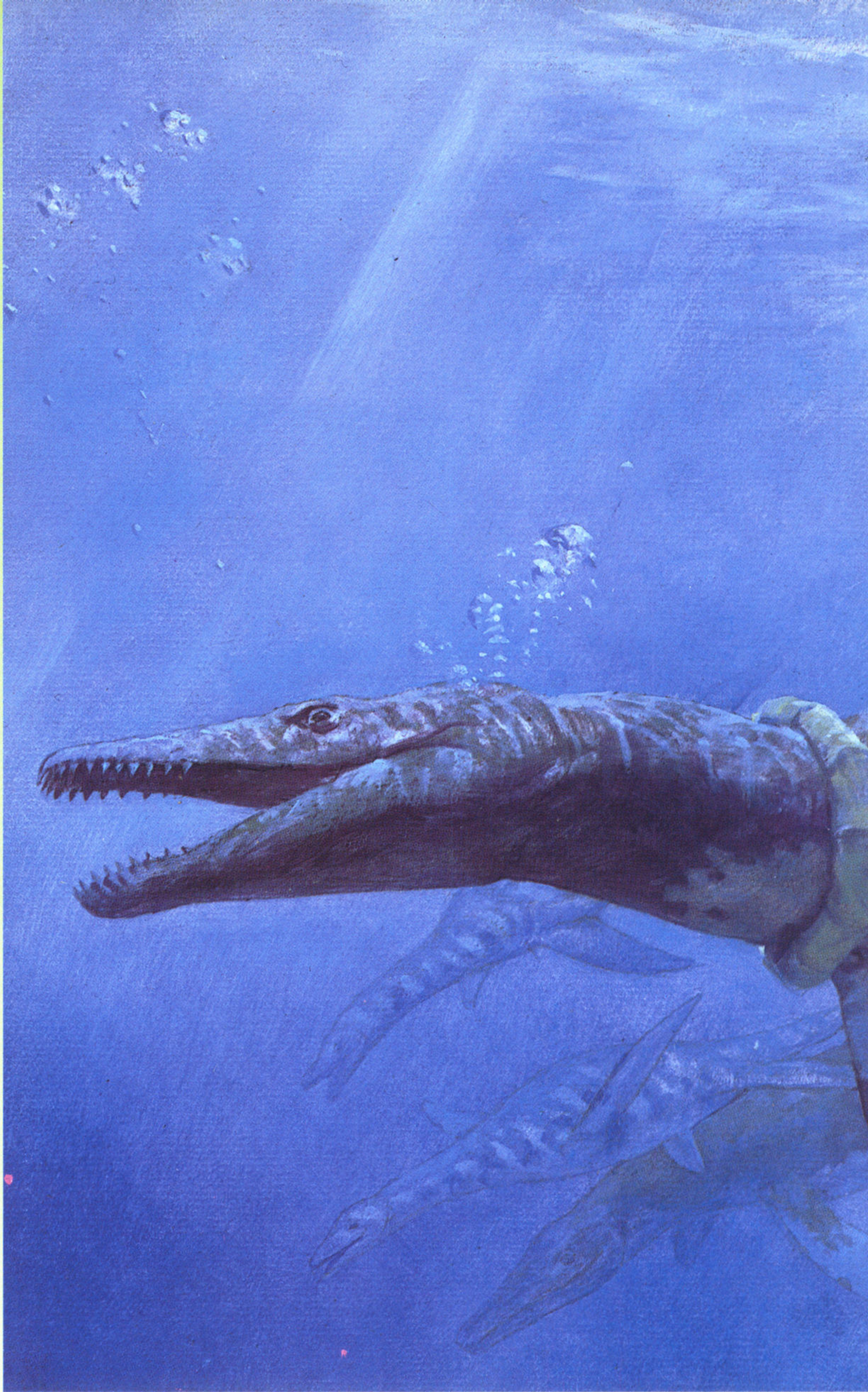
Clockwise, Right: The giant marine reptile Kronosaurus tows the vessel Remora in Underway Undersea. Below Right: Oriana bids farewell to the moon on Dragon Flute. Below: The Forecaster, Uncle Doodle and his companion Pipsqueak predict fortunes and weather with equal success. © Greenwich Workshop, Inc. For information on limited edition fine art prints call 1-800-243-4246.



creatures life as characters. Dr. Kenneth Carpenter, of the Denver Museum of Natural History, thinks he succeeded. "He has an uncanny way of giving the dinosaurs expressions that I find believable, and this has probably affected my own view of them, at some level, as a scientist."

Beyond praise from the scientific community, the art lover is left with many other levels upon which to admire Gurney's accomplishment. The artwork for *The World Beneath* has movement and energy that is arguably superior to that of the original work, while remaining a daunting exercise in architecture and engineering. But what really fuels the work—and allows it to touch everyone from schoolchildren to scientists—is the emotion that drives its creator.

In Gurney's vision, the real danger for his characters is not from emotional conflicts and natural disasters. As originally conceived, there were no villains in the work at all. The distant, but central conflict was not between good guys and bad guys, but rather



the juxtaposition of logic, common sense, and intelligence versus greed, shortsightedness, and fear. At the heart of *Dinotopia* is the greatest adventure of all: to create a society that works.

To do this, Gurney has looked inward and let his light shine outward. On page 73 of the new book is an image, which also has been published as a fine art print called *Small Wonder*, that has special significance for Gurney. It is a deceptively simple portrait, showing a boy in festival clothing preparing to play the recorder, a little girl carrying a *Triceratops* hatchling, and two kindly dinosaurs—an

Ovinutrix and a *Maiasaura*.

"This was an attempt to sum up the *Dinotopia* spirit in a single image," Gurney explained. "I dug down to the most basic feelings: the nurturing of a new life, companionship, the celebration of music and the out-of-doors, and, most of all, the feeling of wonder that was the daily bread of our youth." It is this sort of constructive influence that is the ultimate importance of the *Dinotopia* phenomenon. All the rest is a happy bonus.

Ultimately, the magic of *Dinotopia*, *The World Beneath*, and the rest of the realm James



Gurney has devised comes from his artistic soul, not just his engineering skills. It is the wedding of those two sensibilities that has created art that transcends its genre—a wondrous land scrupulously created. It is as Gurney has always maintained: “I think of my work as ‘Imaginative Realism.’ I want to make it as realistic as possible. It has been my dream to create a world complete in every detail...so real that I could disappear into it.”

With *Dinotopia* and *The World Beneath*, Gurney has made his dream real. But one look at any of his paintings will tell you why it and he will never disappear. 🐉



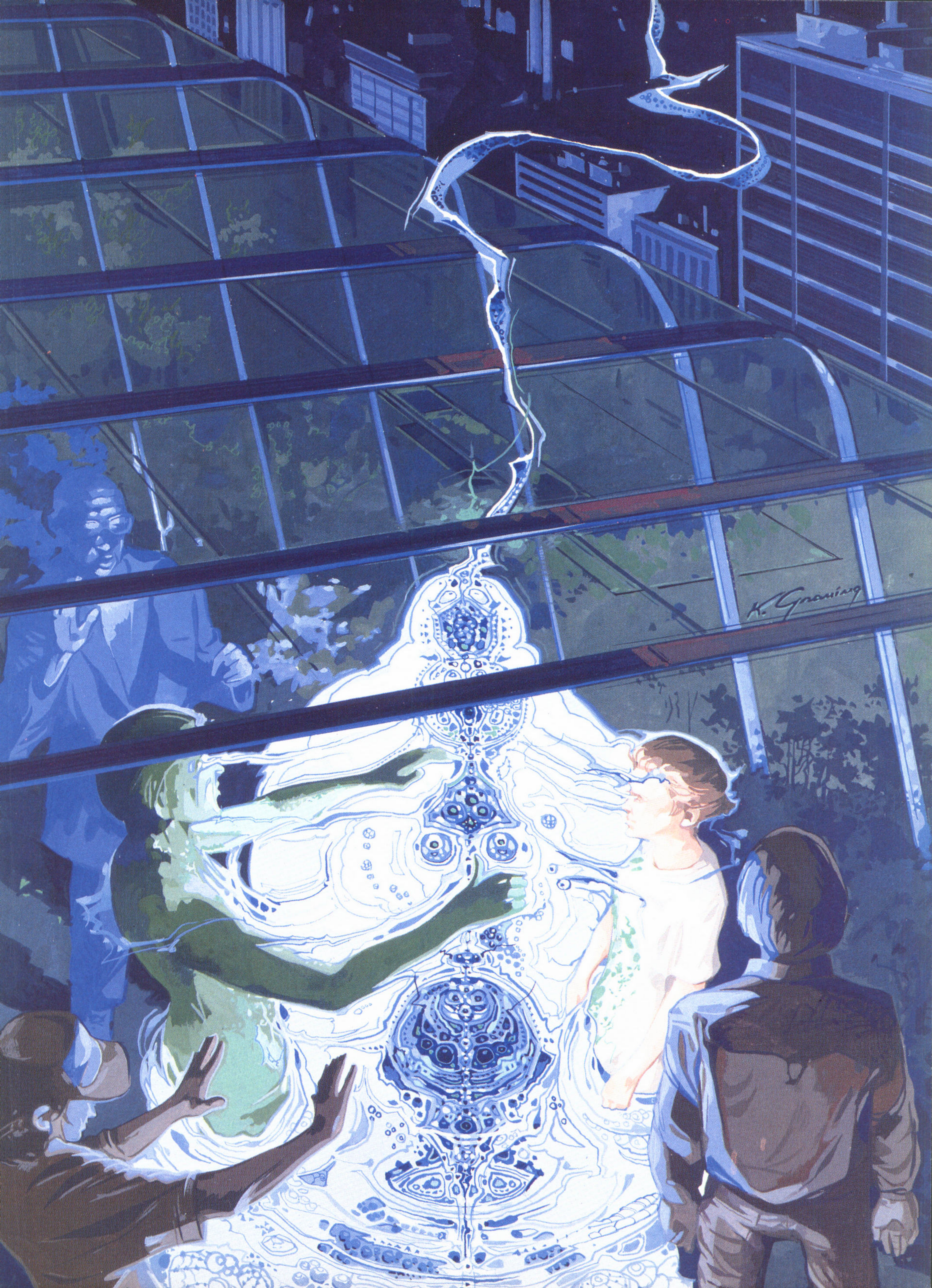
*A bit of H.P. Lovecraft, a bit of Arthur C. Clarke,
and a dose of modern day paranoia add up to an
intriguing tale from the Philip K. Dick
Award-winning author.*

THE DIVORCE WAS FINALIZED
in the spring; I was alone
that summer.

I took an apartment over
a *roti* shop on Bathurst
Street in Toronto. My land-
lords were a pair of ebul-
lient Jamaican immigrants,
husband and wife, who charged a reasonable rent and
periodically offered to sell me grams of resinous, potent
ganja. The shop closed at nine, but most summer nights
the couple joined friends on a patio off the alley behind
the store, and the sound of music and *patois*, cadences

THE PERSEIDS

BY ROBERT CHARLES WILSON
Illustration by Ken Graning



smooth as river pebbles, would drift up through my kitchen window. The apartment consisted of a living room facing the street, a bedroom, and kitchen at the rear; there were wooden floors and plaster ceilings with rusting metal caps where the gas fixtures had been removed. There was not much natural light, and the smell of goat curry from the kitchen downstairs was sometimes overwhelming. But taken all in all, it suited my means and needs.

I worked days at a second-hand book shop, sorting and shelving stock, operating the antiquated cash register, and brewing cups of *yerba mate* for the owner, a myopic aesthete of some sixty years who subsisted on whatever dribble of profit he squeezed from the business. I was his only employee. It was not the work I had ever imagined myself doing, but such is the fortune of a blithe thirty-something who stumbles into the recession with a B.A. and negligible computer skills. I had inherited a little money from my parents, dead five years ago in a collision with a lumber truck on Vancouver Island; I hoarded the principal and supplemented my income with the interest.

I was alone and nearly friendless, and my free time seemed to stretch to the horizon, as daunting and inviting as a desert highway. One day in the bookshop I opened a copy of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* to the passage where de Quincey talks about his isolation from his fellow students at Manchester Grammar School: "for, whilst liking the society of some amongst them, I also had a deadly liking (perhaps a morbid liking) for solitude." Me, too, Thomas, I thought. Is it that the Devil finds work for idle hands, or that idle hands seek out the Devil's work? But I don't think the Devil had anything to do with it. (Other invisible entities, perhaps.) Alone, de Quincy discovered opium. I discovered Robin Slattery, and the stars.

W

WE MET PROSAICALLY enough: She sold me a telescope.

Amateur astronomy had been my teenage passion. When I lived with my parents on their country property north of Port Moody I had fallen in love with the night sky. City people don't understand.

The city sky is as gray and blank as slate, faintly luminous, like a smoldering trash fire. The few celestial bodies that glisten through the pollution are about as inspiring as beached fish. But travel far enough from the city and you can still see the sky the way our ancestors saw it, as a chasm beyond the end of the world in which the stars move as implacably and unapproachably as the souls of the ancient dead.

I found Robin working the show floor at a retail shop called *Scopes & Lenses* in the suburban flatlands north of the city. If you're like me, you often have a powerful reaction to people even before you speak to them: like or dislike, trust or fear. Robin was in the *like* column as soon as she spotted me and smiled. Her smile seemed genuine, though there was no earthly reason it should be: we were strangers, after all; I was a customer; we had these roles to play. She wore her hair short. Long, retro paisley skirt and two earrings in each ear. Sort of an art-school look. Her face was narrow, elfin, Mediterranean-dark. I guessed she was about twenty-five.

Of course the only thing to talk about was telescopes. I wanted to buy one, a good one, something substantial, not a toy. I lived frugally, but every couple of years I would squeeze a little money out of my investments and buy myself an expensive present. Last year, my van. This year, I had decided, a telescope. (The divorce had been expensive but that was a necessity, not a luxury.)

There was plenty to talk about. 'Scopes had changed since I was a teenager. Bewilderingly. It was all Dobsonians, CCD imagers, object-acquisition software.... I took a handful of literature and told

her I'd think about it. She smiled and said, "But you're serious, right? I mean, some people come in and look around and then do mail order from the States...." And then laughed at her own presumption, as if it were a joke, between us.

I said, "You'll get your commission. Promise."

"Oh, God, I wasn't *angling*...but here's my card...I'm in the store most afternoons."

That was how I learned her name.

Next week I put a 10-inch Meade Starfinder on my Visa card. I was back two days later for accessory eyepieces and a camera adapter. That was when I asked her out for coffee.

She didn't even blink. "Store closes in ten minutes," she said, "but I have to do some paperwork and make a deposit. I could meet you in an hour or so."

"Fine. I'll buy dinner."

"No, let me buy. You already paid for it. The commission—remember?"

She was like that.

SOMETIME DURING OUR DINNER CONVERSATION SHE TOLD ME SHE had never looked through a telescope.

"You have to be kidding."

"Really!"

"But you know more about these things than I do, and I've looked through a lot of lenses."

She poked her fork at a plate of goat cheese torta as if wondering how much to say. "Well, I know *telescopes*. I don't know much astronomy. See, my father was into telescopes. He took photographs, 35mm long exposures, deep-sky stuff. I looked at the pictures; the pictures were great. But never, you know, through the eyepiece."

"Why not?" I imagined a jealous parent guarding his investment from curious fingers.

But Robin frowned as if I had asked a difficult question. "It's hard to explain. I just didn't want to. Refused to, really. Mmm...have you ever been alone somewhere on a windy night, maybe a dark night in winter? And you kind of get spooked? And you want to look out a window and see how bad the snow is but you get this idea in your head that if you open the curtain something truly horrible is going to be out there staring right back at you? And you know it's childish, but you still don't open the curtain. Just can't bring yourself to do it. You know that feeling?"

I said I'd had similar experiences.

"I think it's a primate thing," Robin meditated. "Stay close to the fire or the leopard'll get you. Anyway, that's the way I feel about telescopes. Irrational, I know. But there it is. Here we are on this cozy planet, and out there are *all kinds* of things—vast, blazing suns and frigid planets and the dust of dead stars and whole galaxies dying. I always had this feeling that if you looked too close, something might look back. Like, don't open the curtain. Don't look through the 'scope. Because something might look back."

A

ALMOST CERTAINLY SOMEONE OR something *was* looking back. The arithmetic is plain: A hundred billion stars in the galaxy alone, many times that number of planets, and even if life is uncommon and intelligence an evolutionary trick shot, odds are that when you gaze at the stars, somewhere in that horizonless infinity another eye is turned back at you.

But that wasn't what Robin meant.

I knew what she meant. Set against the scale of even a single galaxy, a human life is brief and human beings less than microscopic. Small things survive because, taken singly, they're inconsequential. They escape notice. The ant is invisible in the shadow of a spruce bud or a clover leaf. Insects survive because, by and large, we only

kill what we can see. The insect prayer: *Don't see me!*

Now consider those wide roads between the stars, where the only wind is a few dry grains of hydrogen and the dust of exploded suns. What if something walked there? Something unseen, invisible, immaterial—vaster than planets?

I think that's what Robin felt: her own frailty against the abysses of distance and time. *Don't look. Don't see me. Don't look.*

IT WAS A FRIEND OF ROBIN'S, A MAN WHO HAD BEEN her lover, who first explained to me the concept of "domains."

By mid-September Robin and I were a couple. It was a relationship we walked into blindly, hypnotized by the sheer unlikeliness of it. I was ten years older, divorced, drifting like a swamped canoe toward the rapids of midlife; she was a tattooed Gen-Xer (the Worm Oroborous circling her left ankle in blue repose) for whom the death of Kurt Cobain had been a meaningful event. I think we aroused each other's exogamous instincts. We liked to marvel at the chasm between us, that deep and defining gulf: Wynona Ryder vs. Humbert Humbert.

She threw a party to introduce me to her friends. The prospect was daunting, but I knew this was one of those hurdles every relationship has to jump or kick the traces. So I came early and helped her clean and cook. Her apartment was located at the top of a subdivided house in Parkdale, off Queen Street. Not the fashionable end of Queen Street; the hooker and junkie turf east of Roncesvalles Avenue. Rent was cheap. She had decorated the rambling attic space with religious bric-a-brac from Goodwill thrift shops and the East Indian dollar store around the corner: ankhs, crosses, bleeding hearts, gaudy Hindu iconography. "Cultural stew," she said. "Artifacts from the new domain. You can ask Roger about that."

I thought: Roger?

Her friends arrived by ones and twos. Lots of students, a few musicians, the creatively unemployed. Many of them thought black was a party color. I wondered when the tonsure and the goatee had come back into style and felt set apart in jeans and sweatshirt, the wardrobe-for-all-occasions of another generation. But the people (beneath these appurtenances: people) were mostly friendly. Robin put on a CD of *bhangra* music and brought out a tall, blue plastic water pipe, which circulated with that conspiratorial grace the cannabis culture inherits from its ancestors in Kennedy-era prehistory. This, at least, I recognized. Like Kennedy (they say), unlike Bill Clinton, I inhaled. But only a little. I wanted a clear head to get through the evening.

Robin covered a trestle table with bowls of *kasha*, rice cooked in *miso* (her own invention), a curry of beef, curry of eggplant, curry of chicken, chutneys from Kensington Market, loaves of sourdough and French bread and *chapatis*, and cheap red wine. There was a collective murmur of appreciation and Robin gave me more credit than I deserved—all I had done was stir the pots.

For an hour after dinner I was cornered by a University of Toronto poli-sci student from Ethiopia who wanted me to understand how Mao had been betrayed by the revisionists who inherited his empire. He was, of course, the son of a well-to-do bureaucrat, and brutally earnest. I played vague until he gave up on me. Then, cut loose, I trawled through the room picking up fragments of conversation, names dropped: Alice in Chains, Kate Moss, Michelangelo Signorile. Robin took me by the elbow. "I'm making tea. Talk to Roger!"

Roger was tall and pale, with a shock of bleached hair threatening to obscure the vision in his right eye. He had the emaciated frame of a heroin addict, but it was willful, an aesthetic statement, and he dressed expensively.

Roger. "Domains." Fortunately I didn't have to ask; he was already explaining it to a pair of globe-eyed identical twins.

"It's McLuhanesque," one twin said; the other: "No, *ecological*..."

Roger smiled, a little condescendingly, I thought, but I was already wondering what he meant to Robin, or Robin to him. He put out his

hand, "You must be Michael. Robin told me about you."

But not me about Roger. At least not much. I said, "She mentioned something about 'domains'—"

"Well, Robin just likes to hear me bullshit."

"No!" (The twins.) "Roger is *original*."

It didn't take much coaxing. I can't reproduce his voice—cool, fluid, slightly—but what he said, basically, was this: Life, the biological phenomenon, colonizes domains and turns them into ecologies. In the domain of the ocean, the first ecologies evolved. The dry surface of the continents was a dead domain until the first plants (lichens or molds, I suppose) took root. The air was an empty domain until the evolution of the wing.

But domain theory, Roger said, wasn't just a matter of biology versus geology. A living system could *itself* become a domain. In fact, once the geological domains were fully colonized, living systems became the last terrestrial domain and a kind of intensive recomplication followed: treetops, colonizing the air, were colonized in turn by insects, by birds; animal life by bacteria, viruses, parasites; each new array creating its own new domain, and so *ad infinitum*.

What made Roger's notion original was that he believed human beings had—for the first time in millennia—begun to colonize a wholly new domain, which he called the *gnososphere*: the domain of culture, art, religion, language. Because we were the first aboard, the *gnososphere* felt more like geology than ecology: a body of artifacts, lifeless as a brick. But that appearance was already beginning to change. We had seen in the last decade the first glimmerings of competition, specifically from the kind of computer program called "artificial life," entities that live—and evolve—entirely in the logarithms of computers, the high alps of the *gnososphere*. Not competing for *our* ground, obviously, but that time might come (consider computer "viruses"), and—who knows?—the *gnososphere* might eventually evolve its own independent entities. Maybe already had. When the *gnososphere* was "made of" campfire stories and cave paintings, it was clearly not complex enough to support life. But the *gnososphere* at the end of the twentieth century had grown vast and intricate, a landscape both cerebral and electronic, born at the juncture of technology and human population, in which crude self-replicating structures (Nazism, say; Communism) had already proven their ability to grow, feed, reproduce, and die. Ideologies were like primitive DNA floating in a nutrient soup of radio waves, television images, words. Who could say what a more highly evolved creature—with protein coat, nucleus, mitochondria; with eyes and genitals—might be like? We might not be able to experience it at all, since no single human being could be its host; it would live through our collectivity, as immense as it was unknowable.

"Amazing," the twins said, when Roger finished. "Awesome."

And suddenly Robin was beside me, handing out tea, taking my arm in a proprietary gesture meant, I hoped, for Roger, who smiled tolerantly. "He is amazing, isn't he? Or else completely insane."

"Not for me to say," Roger obliged. (The twins laughed.)

"Roger used to be a Fine Arts T.A. at the University," Robin said, "until he dropped out. Now he builds things."

"Sculpture?" I asked.

"Things. Maybe he'll show you sometime."

Roger nodded, but I doubted he'd extend the invitation. We were circling each other like wary animals. I read him as bright, smug, and subtly hostile. He obviously felt a powerful need to impress an audience. Probably he had once impressed Robin—she confirmed this later—and I imagined him abandoning her because, as audience, she had grown a little cynical. The twins (young, female) clearly delighted him. Just as clearly, I didn't.

But we were polite. We talked a little more. He knew the book store where I worked. "Been there often," he said. And it was easy to imagine him posed against the philosophy shelves, long fingers opening Kierkegaard, the critical frown fixed in place. After a while I left him to the twins, who waved me goodbye: "Nice meeting you!" "Really!"

WHEN I WAS YOUNGER I READ A LOT OF SCIENCE FICTION. THROUGH my interest in astronomy I came to SF, and through both I happened across an astronomer's puzzle, a cosmological version of Pascal's wager. It goes like this: If life *can* spread through the galaxy, then, logically, it already has. Our neighbors should be here. Should have been here for millennia. Where are they?

I discussed it, while the party ran down, with the only guest older than I was, a graying science fiction writer who had been hitting the pipe with a certain bleak determination. "The Oort cloud," he declared, "*that's* where they are. I mean, why bother with planets? For dedicated space technologies—and I assume they would send machines, not something as short-lived and finicky as a biological organism—a planet's not a really attractive place. Planets are heavy, corrosive, too hot for superconductors. Interesting places, maybe, because planets are where cultures grow, and why slog across all those light-years unless you're looking for something as complex and unpredictable as a sentient culture? But you don't, for God's sake, fill up their sky with spaceships. You stick around the Oort cloud, where it's nice and cold and there are cometary bodies to draw resources from. You hang out, you listen. If you want to talk, you pick your own time."

The Oort cloud is that nebulous ring around the solar system, well beyond the orbit of Pluto, composed of small bodies of dust and water ice. Gravitational perturbation periodically knocks a few of these bodies into elliptical orbits; traversing the inner solar system, they become comets. Our annual meteor showers—the Perseids, the Geminids, the Quadrantids—are the remnants of ancient, fractured comets. Oort cloud visitors, old beyond memory.

But in light of Roger's thesis I wondered if the question was too narrowly posed, the science fiction writer's answer too pat. Maybe our neighbors had already arrived, not in silver ships but in metaphysics, informing the very construction and representation of our lives. The cave paintings at Lascaux, Chartres Cathedral, the Fox Broadcasting System—not their physicality (and they become less physical as our technology advances) but their intangible *grammar*, maybe this is the evidence they left us, a ruined archeology of cognition, invisible because pervasive, inescapable: they are both here, in other words, and not here; They are us and not-us.

WHEN THE LAST GUEST was gone, the last dish stacked, Robin pulled off her shirt and walked through the apartment, coolly unselfconscious, turning off lights. The heat of the party lingered. She opened the bedroom window to let in a breeze from the lakeshore. It was past two in the morning and the city was relatively quiet. I paid attention to the sounds she made, the rustle as she stepped out of her skirt, the easing of springs in the thrift-shop bed. She wore a ring through each nipple, delicate turquoise rings that gave back glimmers of ambient light. I remembered how unfamiliar her piercings had seemed the first time I encountered them with my tongue, the polished circles, their chilly, perfect geometry set against the warmer and more complex terrain of breast and aureole.

We made love in that distracted after-a-party way, while the room was still alive with the musk of the crowd, feeling like exhibitionists (I think she felt that way too) even though we were alone.

It was afterward, in a round of sleepy pillow talk, that she told me Roger had been her lover. I put a finger gently through one of her rings and she said Roger had piercings, too: one nipple and under the scrotum, penetrating the area between the testicles and the anus. Some men had the head of the penis pierced (a "Prince Albert") but

Roger hadn't gone for that.

I was jealous. Jealous, I suppose, of this extra dimension of intimacy from which I was excluded. I had no wounds to show her.

She said, "You never talk about your divorce."

"It's not much fun to talk about."

"You left Carolyn, or she left you?"

"It's not that simple. But, ultimately, I guess she left me."

"Lots of fighting?"

"No fighting."

"What, then?"

I thought about it. "Continental drift."

"What was her problem?"

"I'm not so sure it *was* her problem."

"She must have had a reason, though—or thought she did."

"She said I was never there." Robin waited patiently. I went on, "Even when I was with her, I was never *there*—or so she claimed. I'm not sure I know what she meant. I suppose, that I wasn't completely engaged. That I was apart. Held back. With her, with her friends, with her family—with anybody."

"Do you think that's true?"

It was a question I'd asked myself too often.

Sure, in a sense it *was* true. I'm one of those people who are often called loners. Crowds don't have much allure for me. I don't confide easily and I don't have many friends.

That much I would admit to. The idea (which had come to obsess Carolyn during our divorce) that I was congenitally, hopelessly *set apart*, a kind of pariah dog, incapable of real intimacy...that was a whole 'nother thing.

We talked it around. Robin was solemn in the dark, propped on one elbow. Through the window, past the halo of her hair, I could see the setting moon. Far away down the dark street someone laughed.

Robin, who had studied a little anthropology, liked to see things in evolutionary terms. "You have a night watch personality," she decided, closing her eyes.

"Night watch?"

"Mm-hm. Primates...you know...proto-hominids...it's where all our personality styles come from. We're social animals, basically, but the group is more versatile if you have maybe a couple of hyper-thymic types for cheerleaders, some dysthymics to sit home and mumble, and the one guy—*you*—who edges away from the crowd, who sits up when everybody else is asleep, who basically keeps the watches of the night. The one who sees the lions coming. Good night vision and lousy social skills. Every tribe should have one."

"Is that what I am?"

"It's reassuring, actually." She patted my ass and said, "Keep watch for me, OK?"

I kept the watch a few minutes more.

IN THE MORNING, ON THE WAY TO LUNCH, WE VISITED one of those East Indian/West Indian shops, the kind with the impossibly gaudy portraits of Shiva and Ganesh in chrome-flash plastic frames, a cooler full of ginger beer and coconut pop, shelves of sandalwood incense and patchouli oil and bottles of magic potions (Robin pointed them out): St. John Conqueror Root, Ghost Away, Luck Finder, with labels claiming the contents were an Excellent Floor Polish, which I suppose made them legal to sell. Robin was delighted: "Flotsam from the gnosphere," she laughed, and it was easy to imagine one of Roger's gnostic creatures made manifest in this shop—for that matter, in this city, this English-speaking, Cantonese-speaking, Urdu-speaking, Farsi-speaking city—a slouching, ethereal beast of which one cell might be Ganesh, the Elephant-Headed Boy, and another Madonna, the Cone-Breasted Woman.

A CITY, FOR OBVIOUS REASONS, IS A LOUSY PLACE TO DO ASTRONOMY. I worked the 'scope from the back deck of my apartment, shielded

from streetlights, and Robin gave me a selection of broadband lens filters to cut the urban scatter. But I was interested in deep-sky observing and I knew I wasn't getting everything I'd paid for. In October I arranged to truck the 'scope up north for a weekend. I rented a van, and Robin reserved us a cabin at a private campground near Algonquin Park. It was way past tourist season, but Robin knew the woman who owned the property; we would have the place virtually to ourselves and we could cancel, no problem, if the weather didn't look right.

But the weather cooperated. It was the end of the month—coincidentally, the weekend of the Orionid meteor shower—and we were in the middle of a clean high-pressure cell that stretched from Alberta to Labrador. The air was brisk but cloudless, transparent as creek water. We arrived at the campsite Friday afternoon, and I spent a couple of hours setting up the 'scope, calibrating it, and running an extension cord out to the automatic guider. I attached a 35mm SLR camera loaded with hypersensitized Tech Pan film, and I did all this despite the accompaniment of the owner's five yarking Yorkshire terrier pups. The ground under my feet was glacier-scarred Laurentian Shield rock; the meadow I set up in was broad and flat; highway lights were pale and distant. Perfect. By the time I finished setting up it was dusk. Robin had started a fire in the pit outside our cabin and was roasting chicken and bell peppers. The cabin overlooked a marshy lake thick with duckweed; the air was cool and moist, and I fretted about ground mist.

But the night was clear. After dinner Robin smoked marijuana in a tiny carved soapstone pipe (I didn't), and then we went out to the meadow, bundled in winter jackets.

I worked the 'scope. Robin wouldn't look through the eyepiece—her old phobia—but took a great, grinning pleasure in the Orionids, exclaiming at each brief etching of the cave-dark, star-scattered sky. Her laughter was almost giddy.

After a time, though, she complained of the cold, and I sent her back to the cabin (we had borrowed a space heater from the owner) and told her to get some sleep. I was cold, too, but intoxicated by the sky. It was my first attempt at deep-sky photography and surprisingly successful: When the photos were developed later that week I had a clean, hard shot of M100 in Coma Berenices, a spiral galaxy in full disk, arms sweeping toward the bright center; a city of stars beyond counting, alive, perhaps, with civilizations, so impossibly distant that the photons hoarded by the lens of the telescope were already millions of years old.

When I finally came to bed, Robin was asleep under two quilted blankets. She stirred at my pressure on the mattress and turned to me, opened her eyes briefly, then folded her cinnamon-scented warmth against my chest, and I lay awake smelling the hot coils of the space heater and the faint pungency of the marijuana she had smoked and the pine-resinous air that had swept in behind me, these night odors mysteriously familiar, intimate as memory.

We made love in the morning, lazy and a little tired, and I thought there was something new in the way she looked at me, a certain calculating distance, but I wasn't sure; it might just be the slant of light through the dusty window. In the afternoon we hiked out to a wild blueberry patch she knew about, but the season was over; frost had shrivelled the last of the berries. (The Yorkshire terriers were at our heels, there and back.)

That night was much the same as the first except that Robin decided to stay back at the cabin reading an Anne Rice novel. I remembered that her father was an amateur astronomer and wondered if the parallel wasn't a little unsettling for her: There are limits to the pleasures of symbolic incest. I photographed M33 in Triangulum, another elliptical galaxy, its arms luminous with stars, and in the morning we packed up the telescope and began the long drive south.

She was moodier than usual. In the cabin of the van, huddled by the passenger door with her knees against her chest, she said, "We never talk about relationship things."

"Relationship things?"

"For instance, monogamy."

That hung in the air for a while.

Then she said, "Do you believe in it?"

I said it didn't really matter whether I "believed in" it; it just seemed to be something I did. I had never been unfaithful to Carolyn, unless you counted Robin; I had never been unfaithful to Robin.

But she was twenty-five years old and hadn't taken the measure of these things. "I think it's a sexual preference," she said. "Some people are, some people aren't."

I said—carefully neutral—"Where do you stand?"

"I don't know." She gazed out the window at October farms, brown fields, wind-canted barns. "I haven't decided."

We left it at that.

SHE THREW A HALLOWEEN PARTY, COSTUMES optional. I wore street clothes, but most of her crowd welcomed the opportunity to dress up. Strange hair and body paint, mainly. Roger (I had learned that his last name was Russo) showed up wearing a feathered headdress, green dye, kohl circles around his eyes. He said he was Sacha Runa, the jungle spirit of the Peruvian *ayahuasqueros*. Robin said he had been investigating the idea of shamanic spirit creatures as the first entities cohabiting the gnosphere: she thought the costume was perfect for him. She hugged him carefully, pecked his green-dyed cheek, merely friendly, but he glanced reflexively at me and quickly away, as if to confirm that I had seen her touch him.

I HAD ONE OF MY PHOTOGRAPHS, THE GALAXY M33, ENLARGED AND framed; I gave it to Robin as a gift. She hung it in her bedroom. I remember—it might have been November, maybe as late as the Leonids, mid-month—a night when she stared at it while we made love: she on her knees on the bed, head upturned, raw-cut hair darkly stubbled on her scalp, and me behind her, gripping her thin, almost fragile hips, knowing she was looking at the stars.

THREE OPTICAL ILLUSIONS:

1) Retinal floaters. Those delicate, crystalline motes, like rainbow-hued diatoms, that swim through the field of vision.

Some nights, when I've been too long at the 'scope, I see them drifting up from the horizon, a terrestrial commerce with the sky.

2) In 1877, Giovanni Schiaparelli mapped what he believed were the canals of Mars. Mars has no canals; it is an airless desert. But for decades the educated world believed in a decadent Martian civilization, doomed to extinction when its water evaporated to the frigid poles.

It was Schiaparelli who first suggested that meteor showers represent the remains of ancient, shattered comets.

3) Computer-generated three-dimensional pictures—they were everywhere that summer, a fad. You know the kind? The picture looks like so much visual hash, until you focus your eyes well beyond it; then the image lofts out, a hidden *bas-relief*: ether sculpture.

Robin believed TV worked the same way. "If you turn to a blank channel," she told me (December: first snow outside the window), "you can see pictures in the static, 3-D. And they move."

"What kind of pictures?"

"Strange." She was clearly uncomfortable talking about it. "Kind of like animals. Or bugs. Lots of arms. The eyes are very...strange." She gave me a shy look. "Am I crazy?"

"No." Everyone has a soft spot or two. "You look at these pictures often?"

"Hardly ever. Frankly, it's kind of scary. But it's also..."

"What?"

"Tempting."

I don't own a television set. One summer Carolyn and I had taken

a trip to Mexico and we had seen the famous murals at Teotihuacan. Disembodied eyes everywhere: plants with eyes for flowers, flowers exuding eyes, eyes floating through the convolute images like lost balloons. Whenever people talk about television, I'm reminded of Teotihuacan.

Like Robin, I was afraid to look through certain lenses for fear of what might be looking back.

THAT WINTER, I LEARNED MORE ABOUT ROGER RUSSO.

He was wealthy. At least, his family was wealthy. The family owned Russo Precision Parts, an electronics distributor with a near-monopoly of the Canadian manufacturing market. Roger's older brother was the corporate heir-designate; Roger himself, I gather, was considered "creative" (i.e. unemployable) and allowed a generous annual remittance to do with as he pleased.

Early in January (the Quadrantids, but they were disappointing that year), Robin took me to Roger's place. He lived in a house off Queen West—leased it from a cousin—a three-story brick Edwardian bastion in a Chinese neighborhood where the houses on each side had been painted cherry red. We trekked from the streetcar through fresh, ankle-high snow; the snow was still falling, cold and granular. Robin had made the date: We were supposed to have lunch, the three of us. I think she liked bringing Roger and me together, liked those faint proprietary sparks that passed between us; I think it flattered her. Myself, I didn't enjoy it. I doubted Roger took much pleasure in it, either.

He answered the door wearing nothing but jogging pants. His solitary silver nipple ring dangled on his hairless chest; it reminded me—sorry—of a pull-tab on a soft drink can. He shooed us in and latched the door. Inside, the air was warm and moist.

The house was a shrine to his eccentricity: books everywhere, not only shelved but stacked in corners, an assortment too random to categorize, but I spotted early editions of William James (*Psychology*, the complete work) and Karl Jung; a ponderous hardcover *Phenomenology of the Mind*; and Heidegger's *Being and Time*. We adjourned to a big wood-and-tile kitchen and made conversation while Roger chopped kohlrabi at a butcher-block counter. He had seen *Natural Born Killers* at a review theatre and was impressed by it: "It's completely post-post—a deconstruction of *itself*—very image-intensive and, you know, florid, like early church iconography...."

The talk went on like this. High-toned media gossip, basically. After lunch, I excused myself and hunted down the bathroom.

On the way back I paused at the kitchen door when I heard Roger mention my name.

"Michael's not much of a watcher, is he?"

Robin: "Well, he is, actually—a certain *kind* of watcher."

"Oh—the astronomy...."

"Yes."

"That photograph you showed me."

"Yes, right."

That photograph, I thought. The one on her bedroom wall.

LATER, IN THE WINTER-AFTERNOON LULL THAT SOFTENS OUTDOOR sounds and amplifies the rumble of the furnace, Robin asked Roger to show me around the house. "The upstairs," she said, and to me: "It's so weird!"

"Thanks," Roger said.

"You know what I mean! Don't pretend to be insulted. Weird is your middle name."

I followed Roger's pale back up the narrow stairway, creaking risers lined with faded red carpet. Then, suddenly, we were in another world: a cavernous space—walls must have been knocked out—crowded with electronic kibble. Video screens, raw circuit boards, ribbon wire snaking through the clutter like eels through a gloomy reef. He threw a wall switch, and it all came to life.

"A dozen cathode ray tubes," Roger said, "mostly yard sale and electronic-jobber trash." Some were black and white, some crenelated with noise bars. "Each one cycles through every channel

you can get from cable. I wired in my own decoder for the scrambled channels. The cycles are staggered, so mostly you get chaos, but every so often they fall into sync, and for a split second the same image is all around you. I meant to install a satellite dish, feed in another hundred channels, but the mixer would have been...complex. Anyway, I lost interest."

"Not to sound like a Philistine," I said, "but what is it—a work of art?"

Roger smiled loftily. "In a way. Actually, it was meant to be a ghost trap."

"Ghost trap?"

"In the Hegelian sense. The *weltgeist*."

"Summoned from the gnosphere," Robin added.

I asked about the music. The music had commenced when he threw the switch: a strange nasal melody, sometimes hummed, sometimes chanted. It filled the air like incense. The words, when I could make them out, were foreign and punctuated with thick glottal stops. There were insect sounds in the background; I supposed it was a field recording, the kind of anthropological oddity a company called Nonesuch used to release on vinyl, years ago.

"It's called an *icaro*," Roger said. "A supernatural melody. Certain Peruvian Indians drink *ayahuasca* and produce these songs. *Icaros*. They learn them from the spirit world."

Ayahuasca is a hallucinogenic potion made from a mixture of *Banisteriopsis caapi* vines and the leaves of *Psychotria viridis*, both rain-forest plants. (I spent a day at the Robarts looking it up.) Apparently it can be made from a variety of more common plant sources, and *ayahuasca* churches like the *Uniao do Vegetal* have popularized its use in the urban centers of Brazil.

"And the third floor," Robin said, waving at the stairs dimly visible across the room, "that's amazing, too. Roger built an addition over what used to be the roof of the building. There's a greenhouse, an actual greenhouse! You can't see it from the street because the facade hides it, but it's huge. And there's a big open-air deck. Show him, Roger."

Roger shook his head, "I don't think it's necessary."

We were about to leave the room when three of the video screens suddenly radiated the same image: waterfall and ferns in soft focus, and a pale woman in a white skirt standing beside a Datsun that matched her blue green eyes. It snagged Roger's attention. He stopped in his tracks.

"*Rainha da Floresta*," he murmured, looking from Robin to me and back again, his face obscure in the flickering light. "The lunar aspect."

T

HE WINTER SKY PERFORMED ITS LONG procession. One clear night in February, hungry for starlight, I zipped myself into my parka and drove a little distance west of the city—not with the telescope but with a pair of 10x50 Zeiss binoculars. Hardly Mount Palomar, but not far removed from the simple optics Galileo ground for himself some few centuries ago.

I parked off an access road along the ridge-top of Rattlesnake Point, with a clear view to the frozen rim of Lake Ontario. Sirius hung above the dark water, a little obscured by rising mist. Capella was high overhead, and to the west I was able to distinguish the faint oval of the Andromeda galaxy, two-million-odd light-years away. East, the sky was vague with city glare and etched by the running lights of airliners orbiting Pearson International.

Alone in the van, breathing steam and balancing the binoculars on the rim of a half-open window, I found myself thinking about the E.T. paradox. They ought to be here...where are they?

The science fiction writer at Robin's party had said they wouldn't come in person. Organic life is too brief and too fragile for the eons-long journeys between stars. They would send machines. Maybe

self-replicating machines. Maybe sentient machines.

But, I thought, why machines at all? If the thing that travels most efficiently between stars is light (and all its avatars: X-rays, radio waves), then why not send *light itself*? Light *modulated*, of course; light alive with information. Light as medium. Sentient light.

Light as domain, perhaps put in place by organic civilizations, but inherited by—something else.

And if human beings are truly latecomers to the galaxy, then the network must already be ancient, a web of modulated signals stitching together the stars. A domain in which things—entities—creatures perhaps as diffuse and large as the galaxy itself, creatures made solely of information—live and compete and maybe even hunt.

An ecology of starlight, or better: a *jungle* of starlight.

The next day I called up Robin's SF-writer friend and tried out the idea on him. He said, "Well, it's interesting..."

"But is it possible?"

"Sure it's possible. Anything's possible. Possible is my line of work. But you have to keep in mind the difference between a possibility and a likelihood." He hesitated. "Are you thinking of becoming a writer, or just a career paranoid?"

I laughed. "Neither one." Though the laughter was a little forced.

"Well, then, since we're only playing, here's another notion for you. Living things—species capable of evolving—don't just live. They eat." (*Hunt*, I thought.) "They die. And most important of all: they reproduce."

YOU'VE PROBABLY HEARD OF THE hunting wasp. The hunting wasp paralyzes insects (the tarantula is a popular choice) and uses the still-living bodies to incubate and feed its young.

It's everybody's favorite Hymenoptera horror story. You can't help imagining how the tarantula must feel, immobilized but for its frantic heartbeat, the wasp larvae beginning to stir inside it...stir, and feed.

But maybe the tarantula isn't only paralyzed. Maybe it's entranced. Maybe wasp venom is a kind of insect ambrosia—*soma*, *amrta*, *kykeon*. Maybe the tarantula sees God, feels God turning in hungry spirals deep inside it.

I think that would be worse—don't you?

WAS I IN LOVE WITH ROBIN SLATTERY? I THINK THIS NARRATIVE doesn't make that absolutely clear—too many second thoughts since—but yes, I was in love with Robin. In love with the way she looked at me (that mix of deference and pity), the way she moved, her strange blend of erudition and ignorance (the only Shakespeare she had read was *The Tempest*, but she had read it five times and attended a performance at Stratford), her skinny legs, her pyrotechnic fashion sense (one day black Goth, next day tartan miniskirt and knee socks).

I paid her the close attention of a lover, and because I did, I knew by spring (the Eta Aquarids...early May) that things had changed.

She spent a night at my place, something she had been doing less often lately. We went into the bedroom with the sound of *soca* tapes pulsing like a heartbeat from the shop downstairs. I had covered one wall with astronomical photographs, stuck to the plaster with push pins. She looked at the wall and said, "This is why men shouldn't be allowed to live alone—they do things like this."

"Is that a proposition?" I was feeling, I guess, reckless.

"No," she said, looking worried, "I only meant..."

"I know."

"I mean, it's not exactly *Good Housekeeping*."

"Right."

We went to bed troubled. We made love, but tentatively, and later, when she had turned on her side and her breathing was night-quiet,

I left the bed and walked naked to the kitchen.

I didn't need to turn on lights. The moon cast a gray radiance through the rippled glass of the kitchen window. I only wanted to sit a while in the cool of an empty room.

But I guess Robin hadn't been sleeping after all, because she came to the kitchen wrapped in my bathrobe, standing in the silver light like a quizzical, barefoot monk.

"Keeping the night watch," I said.

She leaned against a wall. "It's lonely, isn't it?"

I just looked at her. Wished I could see her eyes.

"Lonely," she said, "out here on the African plains."

I wondered if her intuition was right, if there was a gene, a defective sequence of DNA, that marked me and set me apart from everyone else. The image of the watchman-hominid was a powerful one. I pictured that theoretical ancestor of mine. Our hominid ancestors were small, vulnerable, as much animal as human. The tribe sleeps. The watchman doesn't. I imagine him awake in the long exile of the night, rump against a rock in a sea of wild grasses, shivering when the wind blows, watching the horizon for danger. The horizon and the sky.

What does he see?

The stars in their silent migrations. The annual meteor showers. A comet, perhaps, falling sunward from the far reefs of the solar system.

What does he feel?

Yes: lonely.

And often afraid.

IN THE MORNING, ROBIN SAID, "AS A RELATIONSHIP, I DON'T THINK we're working. There's this *distance*...I mean, it's lonely for *me*, too..."

But she didn't really want to talk about it and I didn't really want to press her. The dynamic was clear enough.

She was kinder than Carolyn had been, and for that I was grateful.

I WON'T CHRONICLE THE HISTORY OF OUR BREAK-UP. You know how this goes. Phone calls less often, fewer visits; then times when the messages I left on her machine went unreturned, and a penultimate moment of drawing-room comedy when Roger picked up her phone and kindly summoned her from the shower for me. (I pictured her in a towel, hair dripping while she made her vague apologies—and Roger watching.)

No hostility, just drift; and finally silence.

Another spring, another summer—the Eta Aquarids, the Delta Aquarids, at last the Perseids in the sweltering heat of a humid, cicada-buzzing August, two and half months since the last time we talked.

I was on the back deck of my apartment when the phone rang. It was still too hot to sleep, but *mirabile dictu*, the air was clear, and I kept the night watch in a lawn chair with my binoculars beside me. I heard the ring but ignored it—most of my phone calls lately had been sales pitches or marketing surveys; and the sky, even in the city (if you knew how to look), was alive with meteors, the best display in years. I thought about rock fragments old as the solar system, incinerated in the high atmosphere. The ash, I supposed, must eventually sift down through the air; we must breathe it, in some part; molecules of ancient carbon lodging in the soft tissue of the lung.

Two hours after midnight I went inside, brushed my teeth, thought about bed—then played the message on my answering machine.

It was from Robin.

"MIKE? ARE YOU THERE? IF YOU CAN HEAR ME, PICK UP...COME ON, *pick up!* [Pause.] Well, OK. I guess it's not really important. Shit. It's only that...there's something I'm not sure about. I just wanted to talk about it with someone. With you. [Pause.] You were always so

solid. It thought it would be good to hear your voice again. Not tonight, huh? I guess not. Hey, don't worry about me. I'll be OK. But if you—"

The machine cut her off.

I tried calling back, but nobody answered the phone.

I KNEW HER WELL ENOUGH TO HEAR THE ANXIETY IN HER VOICE. And she wouldn't have called me unless she was in some kind of trouble.

Robin, I thought, what lens did you look through? And what looked back?

I drove through the empty city to Parkdale, where there was no traffic but cabs and a few bad-tempered hookers; parked and pounded on Robin's door until her downstairs neighbors complained. She wasn't home, she'd gone out earlier, and I should get the hell out and die.

I drove to Roger's.

The tall brick house was full of light.

WHEN I KNOCKED, THE twins answered. They had shaved their heads since the last time I saw them. The effect was to make them even less distinguishable. Both were naked, their skin glistening with a light sheen of sweat and something else: spatters of green paint. Drops of it hung in their wiry, short pubic hair.

They blinked at me a moment before recognition set in. I couldn't recall their names (I thought of them as Alpha and Beta)—but they remembered mine.

"Michael!"

"Robin's friend!"

"What are *you* doing here?"

I told them I wanted to talk to Robin.

"She's real busy right now—"

"I'd like to come in."

They looked at each other as if in mute consultation. Then (one a fraction of a second after the other) they smiled and nodded.

Every downstairs light had been turned on, but the rooms I could see from the foyer were empty. One of Roger's *icaros* was playing somewhere; the chanting coiled through the air like the winding of a spring. I heard other voices, faintly, elsewhere in the house—upstairs.

Alpha and Beta looked alarmed when I headed for the stairs. "Maybe you shouldn't go up there, Michael."

"You weren't invited."

I ignored them and took the steps two at a time. The twins hurried up behind me.

Roger's gnostic ghost trap was switched on, its video screens flashing faster than the last time I had seen it. No image lingered long enough to resolve, but the flickering light was more than random; I felt presences in it, the kind of motion that alerts the peripheral vision. The *icaro* was louder and more insinuating in this warehouselike space, a sound that invaded the body through the pores.

But the room was empty.

The twins regarded me, smiling blandly, pupils big as half-dollars. "Of course, all this isn't *necessary*—"

"You don't have to *summon* something that's already *inside you*...."

"BUT IT'S OUT THERE, TOO—"

"In the images—"

"In the *gnososphere*...."

"Everywhere..."

The third floor: more stairs at the opposite end of the room. I moved that way with the maddening sensation that time itself had slowed, that I was embedded in some invisible, congealed substance that made every footstep a labor. The twins were right behind me, still performing their mad Baedeker.

"The greenhouse!" (Alpha.)

"Yes, you should see it." (Beta.)

The stairs led to a door; the door opened into a jungle humidity lit by ranks of fluorescent bars. Plants were everywhere; I had to blink before I could make sense of it.

"*Psychotria viridis*," Alpha said.

"And other plants—"

"Common grasses—"

"*Desmanthus illinoensis*—"

"*Phalaris arundinacea*—"

It was as Robin had described it, a greenhouse built over an expansion of the house, concealed from the street by an attic riser. The ceiling and the far walls were of glass, dripping with moisture. The air was thick and hard to breathe.

"Plants that contain DMT." (The twins, still babbling.)

"It's a drug—"

"And a *neurotransmitter*."

"N, N-dimethyltryptamine..."

"It's what dreams are made of, Michael."

"Dreams and imagination."

"Culture."

"Religion!"

"It's the *opening*—"

I said, "Is she drugged? For Christ's sake, where is she?"

But the twins didn't answer.

I saw motion through the glass. The deck extended beyond the greenhouse, but there was no obvious door. I stumbled down a corridor of slim-leaved potted plants and put my hands against the dripping glass.

People out there.

"She's the *Rainha da Floresta*—"

"And Roger is *Santo Daime*!"

"All the archetypes, really..."

"Male and female, sun and moon..."

I swiped away the condensation with my sleeve. A group of maybe a dozen people had gathered on the wooden decking outside, night wind tugging at their hair. I recognized faces from Robin's parties, dimly illuminated by the emerald glow of the greenhouse. They formed a semicircle with Robin at the center of it—Robin and Roger.

She wore a white T-shirt but was naked below the waist. Roger was entirely naked and covered with glistening green dye. They held each other at arm's length, as if performing some elaborate dance, but they were motionless, eyes fixed on one another.

Sometime earlier the embrace must have been more intimate; his paint was smeared on Robin's shirt and thighs. She was thinner than I remembered, almost anorexic.

Alpha said, "It's sort of a wedding—"

"An *alchemical* wedding."

"And sort of a birth."

There had to be a door. I kicked over a brick and board platform, spilling plants and potting soil as I followed the wall. The door, when I found it, was glass in a metal frame, and there was a padlock across the clasp.

I rattled it, banged my palm against it. Where my hand had been I could see through the smear of humidity. A few heads turned at the noise—including, I recognized, the science fiction writer I had talked to long ago. But there was no curiosity in his gaze, only a desultory puzzlement. Roger and Robin remained locked in their peculiar trance, touching but apart, as if making room between them for...what?

No, something *had* changed: now their eyes were closed. Robin was breathing in short, stertorous gasps that made me think of a

woman in labor. (*A birth*, the twins had said.)

I looked for something to break the glass—a brick, a pot.

Alpha stepped forward, shaking her head. “Too late for that, Michael.”

And I knew—with a flood of grief that seemed to well up from some neglected, swollen wound—that she was right.

I turned back. To watch.

PAST UNDERSTANDING, THERE IS ONLY OBSERVATION. ALL I KNOW IS what I saw. What I saw, with the glass between myself and Robin. With my cheek against the dripping glass.

Something came out of her.

Something came out of her.

Something came out of her and Roger, like ectoplasm; but especially from their eyes, flowing like hot blue smoke.

I thought their heads were on fire.

Then the smoke condensed between them, took on a solid form, suspended weightless in the space between their tensed bodies.

The shape it took was complex, barbed, hard-edged, luminous, with the infolded symmetries of a star coral and the thousand facets of a geode. Suddenly translucent, it seemed made of frozen light. Strange as it was, it looked almost obscenely organic. I thought of a seed, an *achene*, the dense nucleus of something potentially enormous: a foetal god.

I don't know how long it hovered between their two tensed bodies. I was distantly aware of my own breathing. Of the hot moisture of my skin against the greenhouse glass. The *icaro* had stopped. I thought the world itself had fallen silent.

Then the thing that had appeared between them, the bright impossibility they had given birth to, began to rise, at first almost imperceptibly, then accelerating until it was suddenly gone, transiting the sky at, I guessed, the speed of light.

Commerce with the stars.

Then Robin collapsed.

I kicked at the door until, finally, the clasp gave way; then there were hands on me, restraining me, and I closed my eyes and let them carry me away.

S

HE WAS ALIVE.

I had seen her led down the stairs, groggy and emaciated but moving under her own volition. She needed sleep, the twins said. That was all.

They brought me to a room and left me alone with my friend, the science fiction writer.

He poured a drink.

“Do you know,” he asked, “can you even begin to grasp what you saw here tonight?”

I shook my head.

“But you’ve thought about it,” he said. “We talked. You’ve drawn some conclusions. And, as a matter of fact, in this territory, we’re all ignorant. In the gnosphere, Michael, intuition counts for more than knowledge. My intuition is that what you’ve seen here won’t be at all uncommon in the next few years. It may become a daily event—a part, maybe even the central part, of the human experience.”

I stared at him.

He said, “Your best move, Michael, and I mean this quite sincerely, would be to just get over it and get on with your life.”

“Or else?”

“No ‘or else.’ No threats. It doesn’t matter what you do. One human being...we amount to nothing, you know. Maybe we dive into the future, like Roger, or we hang back, dig in our heels, but it doesn’t matter. It really doesn’t. In the end you’ll do what you want.”

“I want to leave.”

“Then leave. I don’t have an explanation to offer. Only a few ideas of my own, if you care to hear them.”

I stayed a while longer.

THE ORIONIDS, THE LEONIDS: THE STARS GO ON FALLING WITH THEIR serene implacability, but I confess, it’s hard to look at them now. Bitter and hard.

CONSIDER, HE SAID, LIVING THINGS AS LARGE AS THE GALAXY ITSELF. Consider their slow ecology, their evolution across spans of time in which history counts for much less than a heartbeat.

Consider spores that lie dormant, perhaps for millennia, in the planetary clouds of newborn stars. Spores carried by cometary impact into the fresh biosphere (the *domain*) of a life-bearing world.

Consider our own evolution, human evolution, as one stage in a reproductive process in which *human culture itself* is the flower: literally, a flower, gaudy and fertile, from which fresh seed is generated and broadcast.

“Robin is a flower,” he said, “but there’s nothing special about that. Roger hastened the process with his drugs and paraphernalia and symbolic magic. So he could be among the first. The *avant-garde*. But the time is coming for all of us, Michael, and soon we won’t need props. The thing that’s haunted us as a species, the thing we painted on our cave walls and carved into our pillars and cornices and worshiped on our bloody altars and movie screens, it’s almost here. We’ll all be flowers, I think, before long.”

UNLESS THE FLOWER IS STERILE—SET APART, FUNCTIONALLY ALONE, a genetic fluke.

BUT IN ANOTHER SENSE THE FLOWER IS OUR CULTURE ITSELF, AND I can’t help wondering what happens to that flower after it broadcasts its seed. Maybe it wilts. Maybe it dies.

Maybe that’s already happening. Have you looked at a newspaper lately?

Or maybe, like every other process in the slow ecology of the stars, it’ll take a few centuries more.

I

CASHED IN MY INVESTMENTS AND BOUGHT A HOUSE in rural British Columbia. Fled the city for reasons I preferred not to consider.

The night sky is dark here, the stars as close as the rooftop and the tall pines—but I seldom look at the sky.

When I do, I focus my telescope on the moon. It seems to me that sparks of light are gathering and moving in the Reiner Gamma area of Oceanus Procellarum. Faintly, almost furtively. Look for yourself. But there’s been nothing in the journals about it. So it might be an optical illusion. Or my imagination.

The imagination is also a place where things live.

I’M ALONE.

It gets cold here in winter.

Robin called once. She said she’d tracked down my new number, that she wanted to talk. She had broken up with Roger. Whatever had happened that night in the city, she said, it was finished now. Life goes on.

Life goes on.

She said she got lonely these days and maybe she understood how it was for me, out there looking at the sky while everyone else sleeps.

(And maybe the watchman sees something coming, Robin. Something large and terrible and indistinct in the darkness, but he knows he can’t stop it and he can’t wake anyone up....)

She said we weren’t finished. She said she wanted to see me. She had a little money, she said, and she wanted to fly out. Please, she said. Please, Michael. Please.

GOD HELP ME, I HUNG UP THE PHONE. ☹️

Some magics you just don't mess with.

A

FTER NOBODY HERE IN Estacado saw Rudy for a couple of days, his family asked a healer to search for him. You know the old woman that lives near the graveyard? That's the

one. She looked in Rudy's house and saw some brown goo under his pillow, like cockroach shit. She looked in his garden and saw his plants growing too good to be normal. She looked at the anthill in the backyard and she saw traces of a coral snake's magic.

She told us all then that somebody'd been using the old people's secrets, trying to get rich. That's very bad, man. You want to know who this enemy is who lets his greed harm our town?

I know him. I know who he is and I know what he is.

Lucky for you I'm not afraid of him like some people around here. You come in and have a beer and I'll tell you.

FIRST OFF, THERE'S THINGS the old people know that are dangerous. You never

mess with the old shit, man. Not if you want to stay alive. Don't listen to those assholes that say different.

Also, you need to know that fire ants are ruled by coral snakes. I don't mean those skinny little brown ants they brought up from South America. I meant the big red ones that are shiny and look like walking pieces of candy.

The truth, man. If you dig down into one of those red ant mounds, you'll find a coral snake at the bottom, right next to the mother ant. It's always a woman coral snake. The queen snake next to the mother ant. Black and red and yellow, with poison that kills the nerves in your body so quick that you don't even know you're dying.

What do you mean, why would a snake want to live with a bunch of ants?

Because of the gold, man. Those ants pick up all the little bits of gold they find while they're out running around, and they bring it all back to the queen coral snake.

And that's how the greedy ones are using people; they can see that gold fever shining in your

Continued on next page

STEALING FROM THE WOMAN SNAKE

BY FRED ASKEW

Illustration by Joel Naprstek



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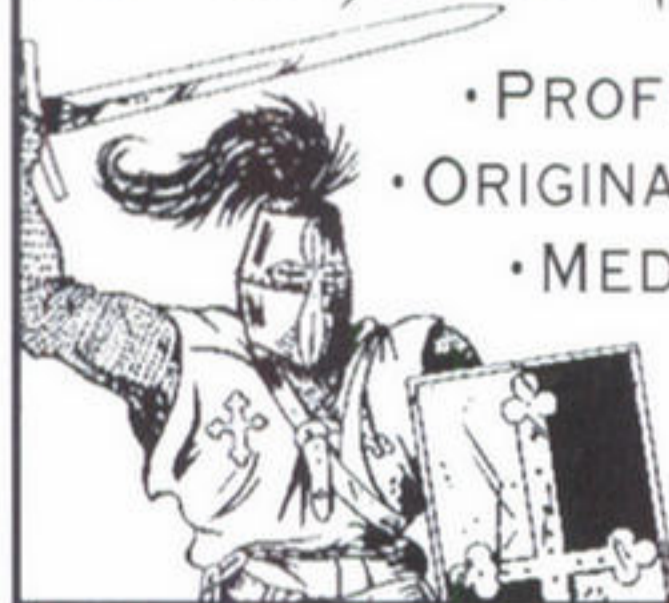
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Continued from previous page

eyes. You better not take no gold from the ants. Once they get it down in the ground, you better just forget about it. Those bastards want someone else to take the risks and then they'll cut in and take the gold.

That's what happened to Rudy.

Rudy was a really good boxer until he busted up his fist bones and had to quit. After that, he just sat around the house and lived off his boxing money. He made a garden out back of his house and that was about all he did, except drink beer.

One time his tomatoes looked kind of bad so he thought maybe he needed some fertilizer or some such. But the stuff in the store cost too much, so he decided to take some dirt from the red ants. Everybody knows that dirt from ant mounds has more life force than ordinary dirt. The deeper down it comes from, the more power it has. The plants just suck it in and grow real big.

So Rudy wanted some of that good dirt, but he knew that if the queen coral snake found out about it, she would do some magic and get a bad revenge on him.

Those snakes live way down deep where the earth power is strong, and they got the ants carrying gold to them all day. See it, man. That's why snakes live with the ants in the first place. You got deep earth power and gold together, you got a snake brain maybe a thousand years old because that's how long some of them live, and now you got everything you need to make the most kick-ass magic that ever was.

The truth. But Rudy boxed a lot before he retired, and maybe his brains was rattled in his head like gravel or broken glass. For why or for what, he thought he could fool that coral queen. Rudy he waited until the part of the month when there is no moon, because snakes are always weaker at that time. Then he went out to the anthill at midnight.

You know how snakes can't see to the front? They got eyes on both sides so they can see to the left and see to the right, but they can't never see straight ahead. Well, any snakes that are awake at night watch the new day coming in one way and the old day going out the other way, but at midnight, when the day changes, the snakes get cross-eyed trying to see the middle. For a few minutes they can't think right. So Rudy he came out to that anthill right at twelve on a night with no moon and he scooped up all that good dirt and put it in a wheelbarrow as fast as he could before that queen snake could catch him.

It was my wheelbarrow that he borrowed to carry the dirt; that's how I know about it. Anyway, he scraped the ground flat over the ant mound, then he rolled that good dirt over to his garden and spread it under his tomatoes. He carried a big can of water to the garden and he wet down all the dirt he just dumped. He washed off his shovel and my wheelbarrow, and went to bed.

The next morning the red ants came out of

their hole and their mound was gone. They ran back down and told the coral snake and she had a fit. She wanted her dirt back but didn't know where it went.

First that snake tried to find the dirt by smell. The ants made two holes into the main ant bed. They started running into one hole and out the other. They went faster and faster until they looked like a stream of wiggly red water. There was such a rush of them going in that they sucked the air in with them and soon they had a steady breeze going down into the hole. You remember the day when

*His ears
felt like they
were full of
crawling bugs
scratching
with their
claws and he
couldn't hear.*

nobody could tell which way the wind was blowing? That's because it was being sucked from every direction into that ant bed. The old queen snake coiled herself down there flicking her black tongue and tasting the air as it passed. She smelled all day for that good dirt, but she couldn't find it.

Why not? Because Rudy put some salt in the water he used to wet the dirt with. Not enough to hurt the tomatoes, just a flavor. You put salt on stuff and magic can't see it or smell it. Everybody knows that. Well the snake queen, she was really pissed. The next day she sent all the little ants out looking for the good dirt. They scattered far around and each one picked up a tiny bit of soil in its pinchers and carried it back to the queen. She lay deep in the cool dark and tongued every grain of soil they brought to her. But she couldn't taste the good dirt.

Rudy, he was acting cool. He got up every day and went over to the bar just like noth-

ing happened. It was those assholes at the bar who told Rudy about how to use ant dirt in the first place.

Well, Rudy saw the ants running all over but he pretended not to notice them. He kept doing his drinking and loafing like always. This went on for a couple of days and the snake queen don't know what to do next. Nothing like this never happened to her before.

A week or two passed and Rudy's tomatoes looked good. He thought, man, what a great idea those guys gave me. He noticed that his squash plants was kind of puny. In fact, they looked a lot like the tomatoes before they were fixed with the good dirt. Since it was so easy the first time, Rudy figured that he could trick that dumb coral snake as often as he desired.

But he forgot about the thousand years of brain beneath those dry scales. The snake queen knew that her ants couldn't help her like she wanted, so she made a spell and called up a night wind.

You never know what kind of evil a night wind will do. That's why decent people stay away from them.

Well, the snake prayed for a night wind to help her, and when the sun was gone away, one flowed down into the ant mound like syrup made from burnt wood. All the way down till it reached the queen snake. That woman snake offered to let the night wind lick her horde of gold if it would do what she asked. They really love to lick gold, the night winds. That's why you should never wear gold after sunset. You ever hear the old people sing that song about "silver in the moon and gold in the sun"? That song's a warning about night winds.

This creature agreed to help the snake queen. Every night after sundown it came to Rudy's backyard and watched the anthill. And sure enough, about a month after the first theft, Rudy saw that the moon was shrinking and decided that it was time to get some more of that good dirt. On the first night that the moon was gone, he was out there stealing dirt. Only this time the night wind watched him. It watched everything he did. When Rudy finished, the night wind slipped down the ant hole and whispered to the snake.

Then that queen was happy because at last she knew who her enemy was and she knew what to do about him.

You know that coral snakes don't have fangs like other snakes? They have these small teeth instead. Their poison is in their mouth juice and they got to chew on you to get it through your skin. Well this queen snake could use her little teeth better than most snakes. She mashed up some of that deep, powerful soil with some specks of her gold and a few rose petals. It was all held together by her snake spit. Then she used her cold black tongue to shape that gooey stuff and she made a little man about as big as the end of your finger.

Yes, mister. She made those red ants carry that man-thing out of the ant bed and into Rudy's house. It took them two days to get it there and a whole bunch of the ants died from touching the snake spit, but eventually they got it inside and put it under Rudy's pillow. Rudy came home that night, drank some beer, and went to bed like always. He wasn't worried about nothing.

While he slept, vapors from that man-thing floated up and went into his lungs and got all in his body. After a couple of hours he woke up. His ears felt like they were full of crawling bugs scratching with their claws and he couldn't hear. He swallowed and he felt cactus thorns slicing his throat as they went down. There was liquid coming from his eyes and when he turned on the light and looked in a mirror, he saw that it was blood. He knew somebody had put some magic on him and he'd better fix it fast. He grabbed his pants and shoes and ran out to go to a healer.

One lived near Rudy, and he was running to her house for help. He couldn't see good because of the blood coming from his eyes and he kept getting caught in rose bushes. There are no roses anywhere near his house, but he kept stepping into them.

How could that be? That coral snake was using her power to herd Rudy away from help. Every time he tried to go toward the healer, he stepped on invisible roses instead of a road. They cut him real bad. Pretty soon he had blood all over his body from the thorns and finally he quit trying to get to the healer. He just ran where the roses let him go.

You know where the old bridge crosses the creek near the gas station? That's where the snake queen sent Rudy. The station was already closed that night, and the roses drove Rudy down the road until he got to the bridge. Then they pushed him off the bank. There's never much water in that creek so he landed on the mud. He wasn't hurt by the fall and he probably thought he was safe for a while.

But the night wind was waiting in that creek.

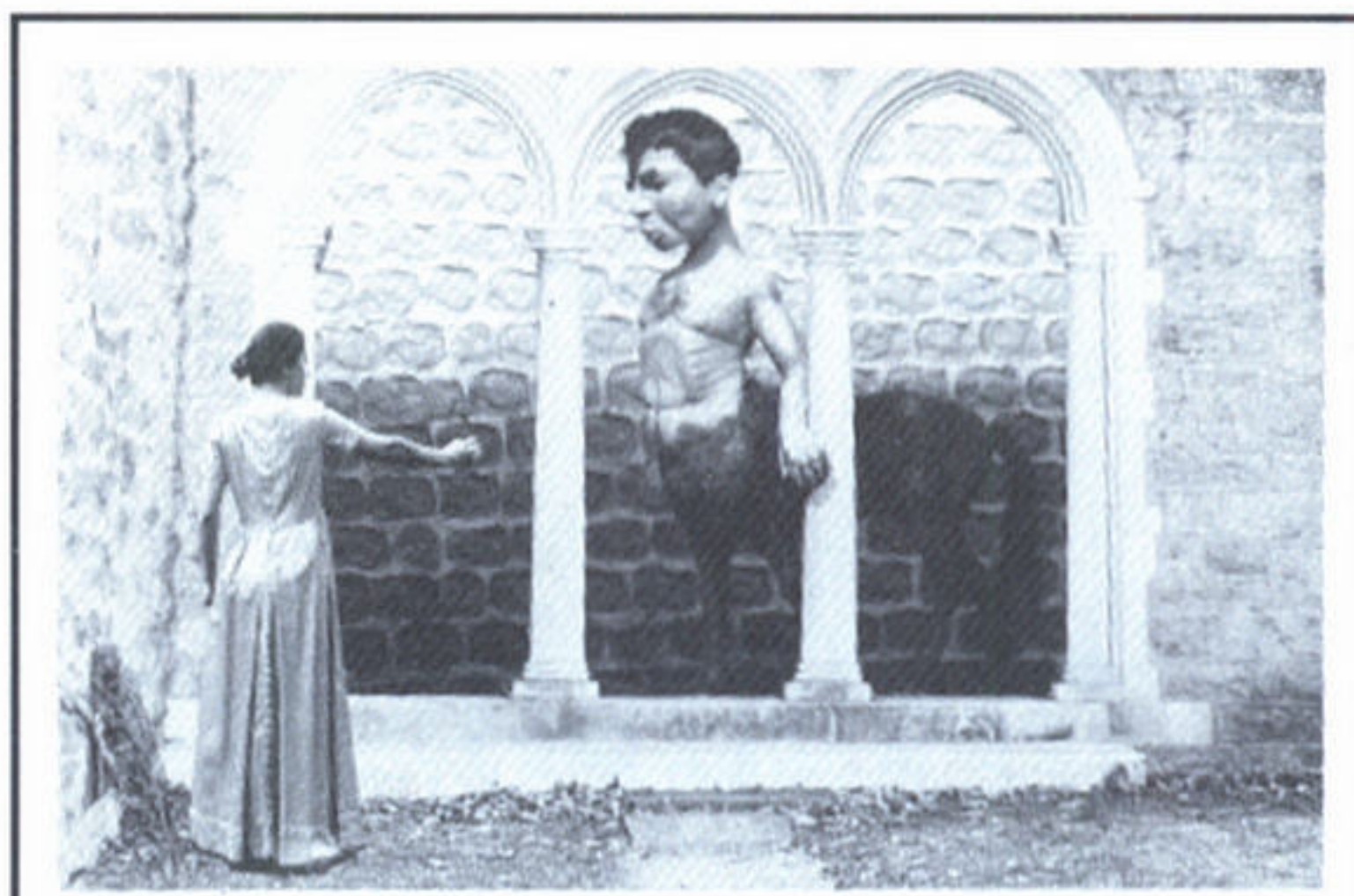
NO ONE EVER SAW RUDY AGAIN. AFTER A few days, Rudy's father and his two brothers called the healer and she trailed the magic over to the creek. They found the body there.

What did his family do? They didn't do nothing, man. It was a night wind. It happens.

And the police. The police said that Rudy was drunk and he fell in the creek. The police said that coyotes had been at him. The police said that it looked like some kids had been screwing with the remains. The police said all sorts of shit.

But I tell you this. When they found his body there was nothing left but bones. Those bones were laid in a circle with the skull in the middle, and they were stained. Black and red and yellow.

The truth, man. ♣



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BY MARK C. SUMNER

With Pitfall, Activision goes back to its roots and looks to the future.

EVERY NOW AND THEN, A RIVER OCCUPIES A NEW CHANNEL. THE COURSE THAT IT'S BEEN following becomes filled with silt and sand, some new route offers a better way to the sea, and before you know it the Corps of Engineers is crying.

In the ongoing war between dedicated gaming consoles and personal computers, the river flows both ways. For years, the current moved only from game consoles to PCs as action games went from the old Atari 2600 to machines like the Apple II, TI 99/4, and Commodore 64. More complex games, like strategy war games and role-playing games, remained the exclusive property of PCs.

Then as both PCs and video games recovered from the crash of the early '80s, trickles began to move the other way. Role-playing games started to appear on the game consoles. Cross currents appeared, and games started to migrate back and forth. Though the currents were tricky, there were still clearly defined areas: PCs lacked the ability to pump enough colorful graphics to beat the platforms at the action games, platforms lacked the memory to support the most complex role-playing games.

Now the stream is really muddy. New PCs have the graphics and speed to handle most recent action games with aplomb. Game consoles have become so powerful that they can perform astounding tricks, and the CD-based platforms are capable of supporting intricate, complex role-playing games. Both sides in the undeclared war have enjoyed first crack at whole new genres of games. Fighting games came first to the platforms and only now are starting to make the transition. *Doom*-style play originated on the PCs, but is now one of the most popular types of games on the consoles.

Harry Jr., son of the character from the original *Pitfall*, must search for his pop, who has been kidnapped by Mayan baddies. He faces crocodile pits and other dangers.

So now what? With a half-dozen "next generation" game consoles bobbing around in the torrent and PCs growing ever more powerful, which way will the stream of original games flow? Both ways. But Activision offers some clues about the future of gaming with its new title, *Pitfall: The Mayan Adventure*.

The original *Pitfall* appeared on the Atari 2600. Though it seems very simple today, it was innovative for the time. It offered varied gameplay, elements that mixed action and adventure, and pushed the chunky pixels of the 2600 as far as they could go. It was also one of the biggest selling games of the time and a fond memory for many gamers. If you have a real desire to see blocky old *Pitfall* Harry, don't worry. The first *Pitfall* game is hidden within this sequel and is a big beefy pixel-for-pixel clone of the original.

For this updated version, the graphics and sound have been totally revamped. The simple pixels and monotonous background of the old game have been replaced by images in 256 gorgeous colors and sterling animation. You'll want to have a good sound card, as this game features not just music spooled from the CD, but digitized

jungle sounds recorded on site in Central America.

Activision has provided a touch of plot to go with the action. Harry Jr., son of the character from the original game, must search for his pop, who has been kidnapped by a Mayan baddie. To do so, Junior must swing on the same vines that pop once used and leap over the same pits of crocodiles. There are plenty of new obstacles, too, with swooping birds, rolling stones, and runaway mine cars straight out of *Temple of Doom*.

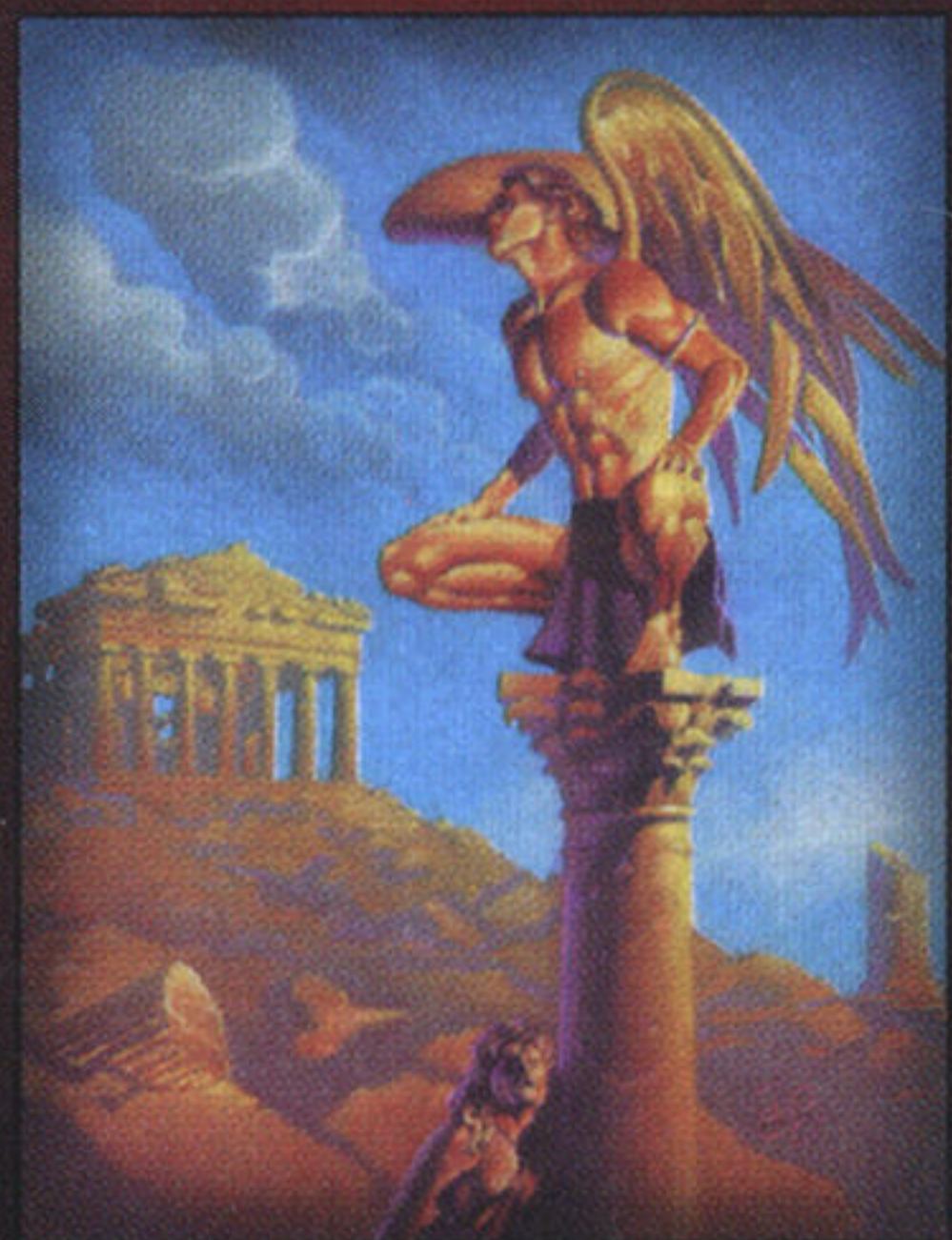
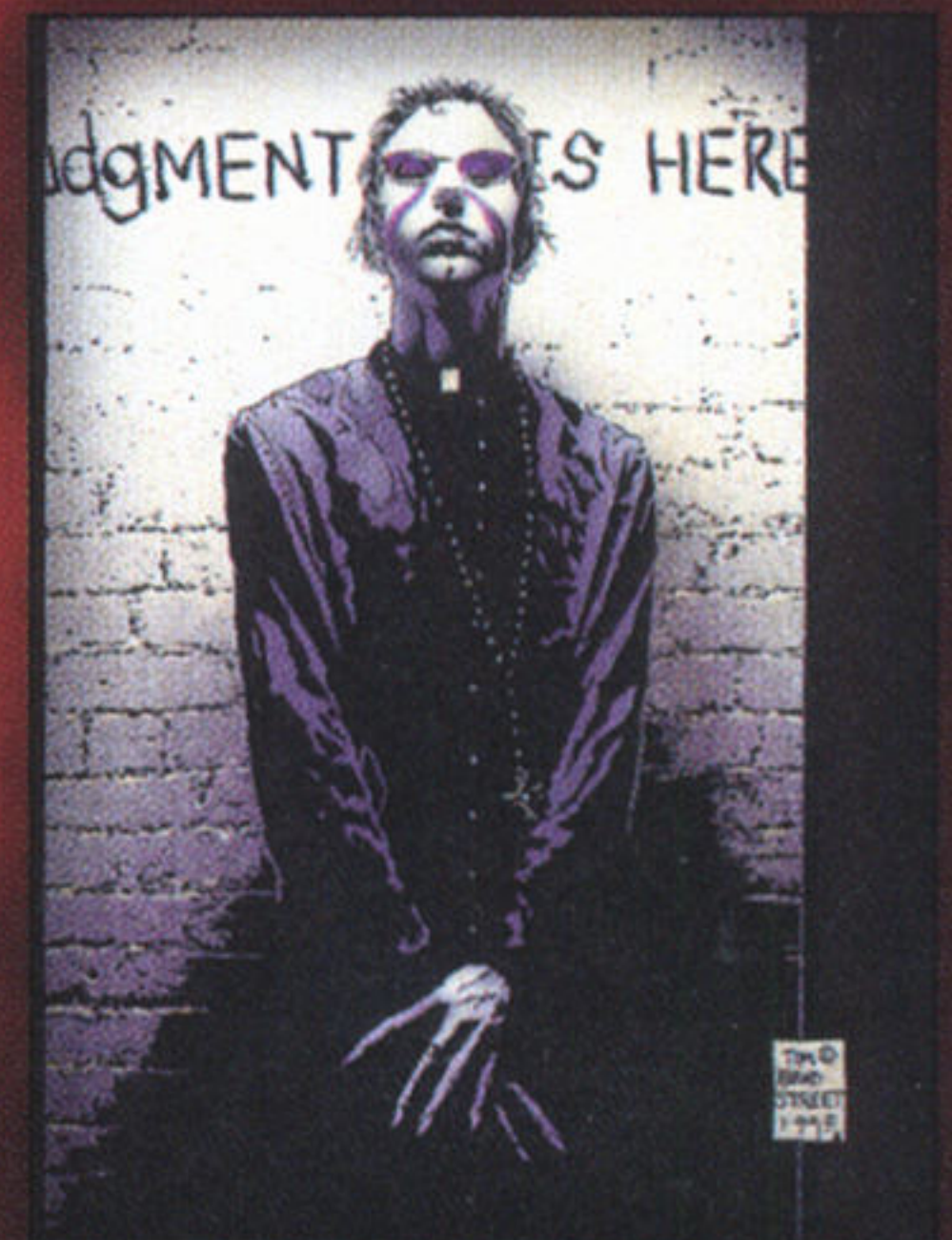
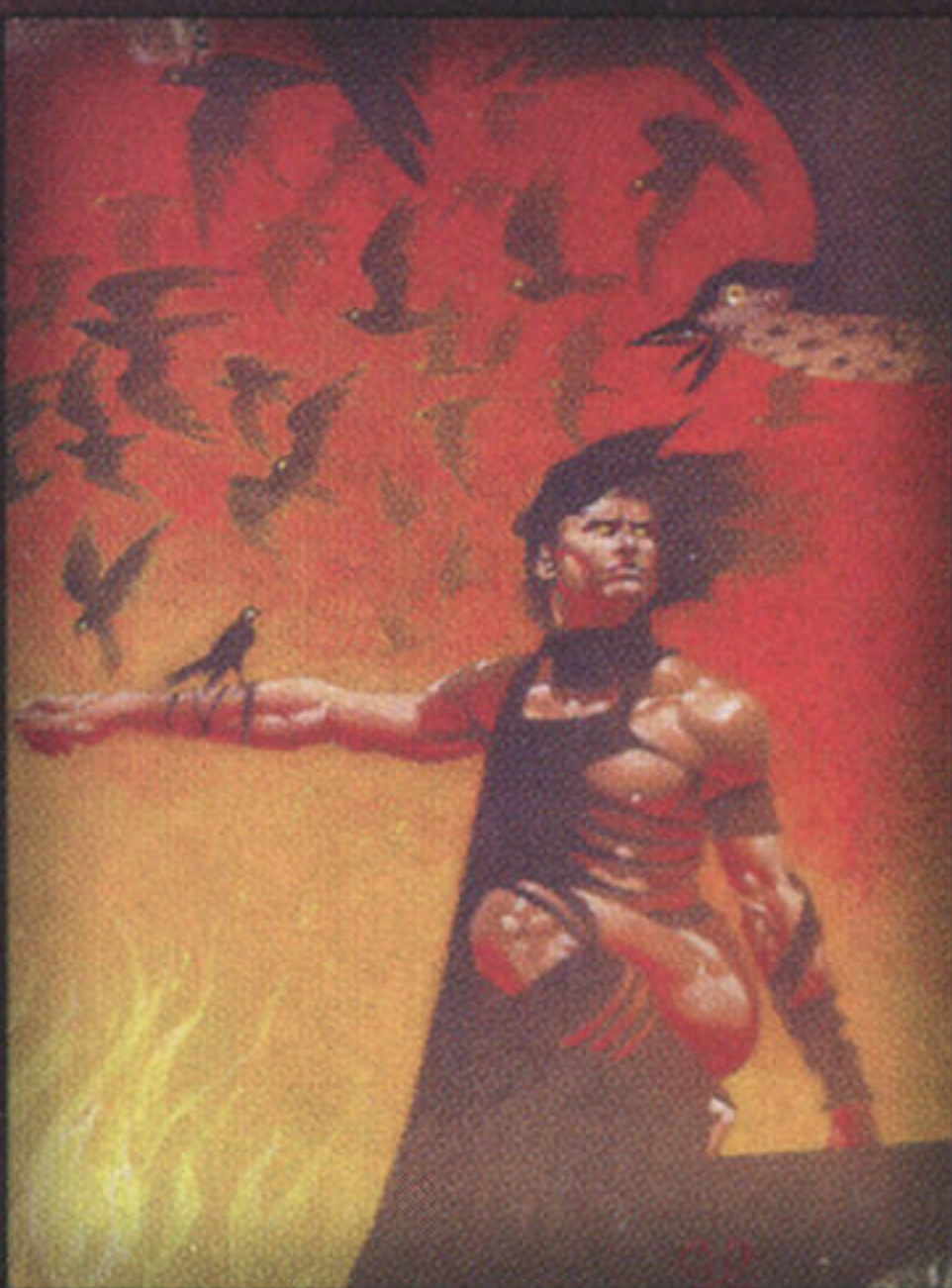
If you ignore the flashy graphics, this game is fairly typical platform fare. Jump, run, jump, whip, jump. If you've played a *Mario* game on a Nintendo system, or dashed with *Sonic* on a Sega, you'll be familiar with the mechanics here.

The innovation lies more in where you can play this game than in what you do. Of all the games that have moved from console to PC, run and jump platform games have been least successful. They've generally suffered from bland, flickering graphics and poor control. *Pitfall: The Mayan Adventure* stands out as an exception



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Summer 1995

to this rule. While this game would be no more than a fair to middling program on the game consoles, on the PC it's remarkable.

The most remarkable feature of *Pitfall: The Mayan Adventure* is the operating system it runs under. This is one of the first programs to be designed exclusively for the Windows 95 operating system. As such, it showcases Win95's new abilities for running games.

When it first boots up, *Pitfall* will appear in a small window, with a resolution equivalent to a 320 by 200 screen. While it's fairly spiff to see a game running on top of your word processor, the small images can make play difficult. Fortunately, the game can be expanded to full screen.

Almost every game to come out recently has required some version of this caveat: Plan on a Pentium and plenty of memory. You'll probably want a Pentium system to run Windows 95, anyway. Though a 486/33 with 8 meg of RAM is described as the minimum configuration for *Pitfall*, this setup is not likely to leave you too happy with the game. Expanding the screen on a 486 will bring you jerky, unresponsive play. Those of us with older systems are going to have to face it: The day of the 486 has passed for action games.

When it comes to games, Win95 offers a number of advantages over both DOS and previous versions of Windows. With Win95 keeping track of information about your sound card and joystick, it becomes simple to install a Win95 game. You do not have to

know anything about ports, memory addresses or system interrupts to get this game moving. Improved graphics speed also makes this version of Windows more suited for gaming than its predecessors.

Pitfall: The Mayan Adventure is an enjoyable game. It's simplistic and doesn't test much mental ability beyond your capacity for finding the "jump" button. But it's still fun. Over the next few months we're going to see the last generation of DOS games. If you want a peek at what the gaming experience will be like over the next few years, *Pitfall* can show you the future—and maybe dredge up a few fond memories at the same time.

Maybe you missed it. Maybe you don't even care. But there's a major war raging in malls worldwide—the war of the 32-bit game machines.

The first shots in this war were fired by 3DO almost two years ago when it introduced its Multiplayer. But with the price of the system in the stratosphere and 99.9 percent of new games still targeted at the hugely successful Sega and Nintendo 16-bit platforms, consumers didn't exactly rush to embrace the newcomer.

This summer the skirmish turned into a real brawl. Sega introduced not one, but two 32-bit platforms—the 32x upgrade for the 16-bit Genesis, and the CD-based Sega Saturn. Then just as you thought the kids were safely back in school, Sony rolled out its PSX plat-

form. As these new systems have appeared, the older 3DO (which is really a hardware standard used by several companies including Panasonic and Goldstar) has fought back with decreased prices and a hefty lineup of titles. The dark horse Atari Jaguar has been warming store shelves for almost as long as the 3DO, but a recent increase in available games makes it a potential contender.

For parents trying to scope out the best buy, the decision can be a tough one. The Sony PSX seems to have the best "specs." The 3DO has an unmatched library of titles. The Atari is cheapest—if you can live without the CD.

What the Sega Saturn has going for it is mostly Sega. Sega has long had a reputation for creating fast furious action games and complex accurate sports simulations. As they carry this reputation into the 32-bit arena, it will be titles like *Panzer Dragoon* that lead the way.

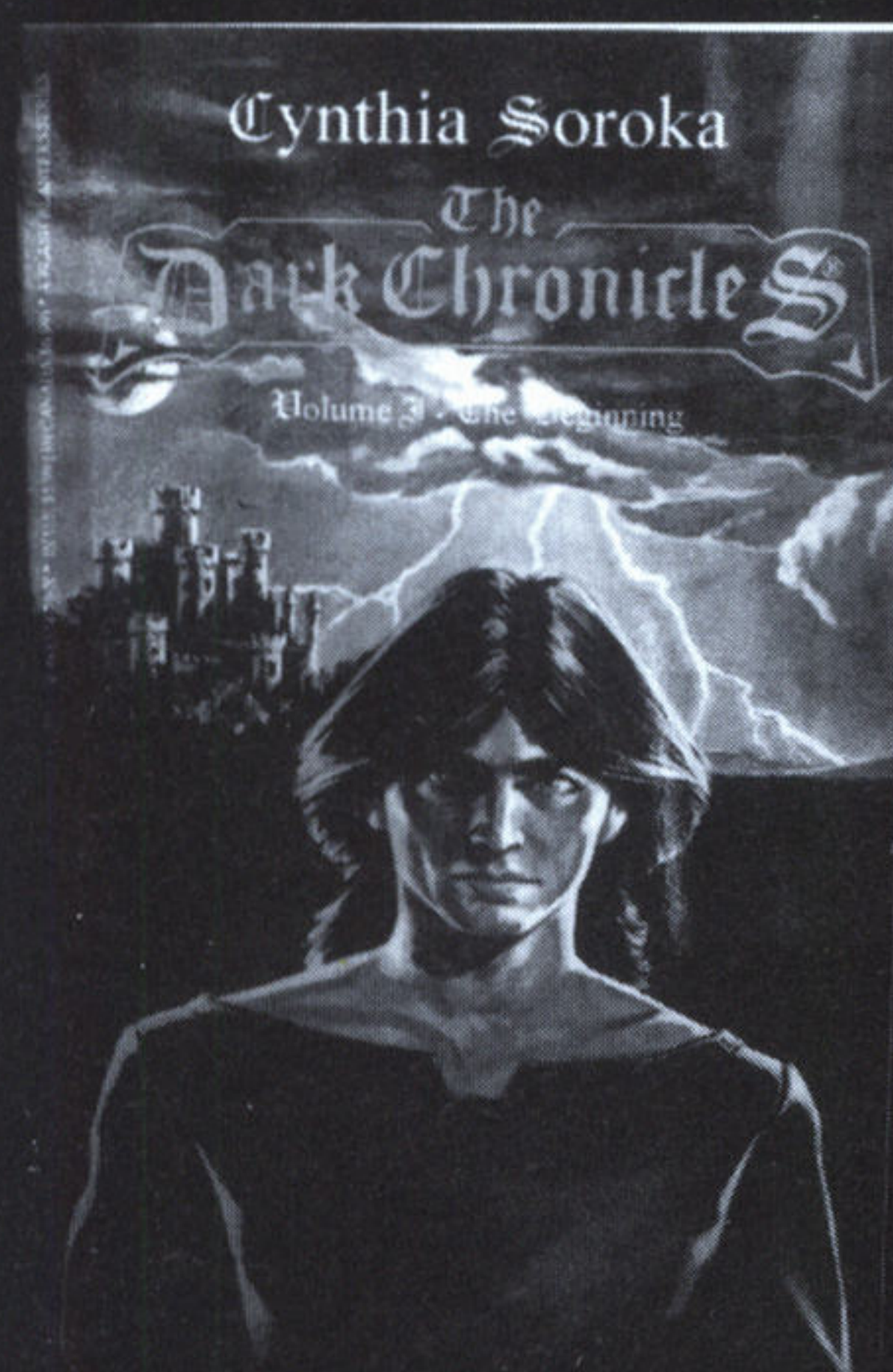
At its heart, *Panzer Dragoon* is a shooter. Shooters are one of the oldest of videogame genres, going all the way back to the venerable *Space Invaders*. More than fifteen years later, the object hasn't changed much: Shoot everything that moves. If it doesn't move, shoot it anyway. What has changed is everything else.

Panzer Dragoon may be flat out the prettiest shooter of all time. Your point of view is an "over the shoulder" look at a character mounted on a flying dragon. The dragon, all the enemies, and the backgrounds are composed of thousands of polygons. These poly-

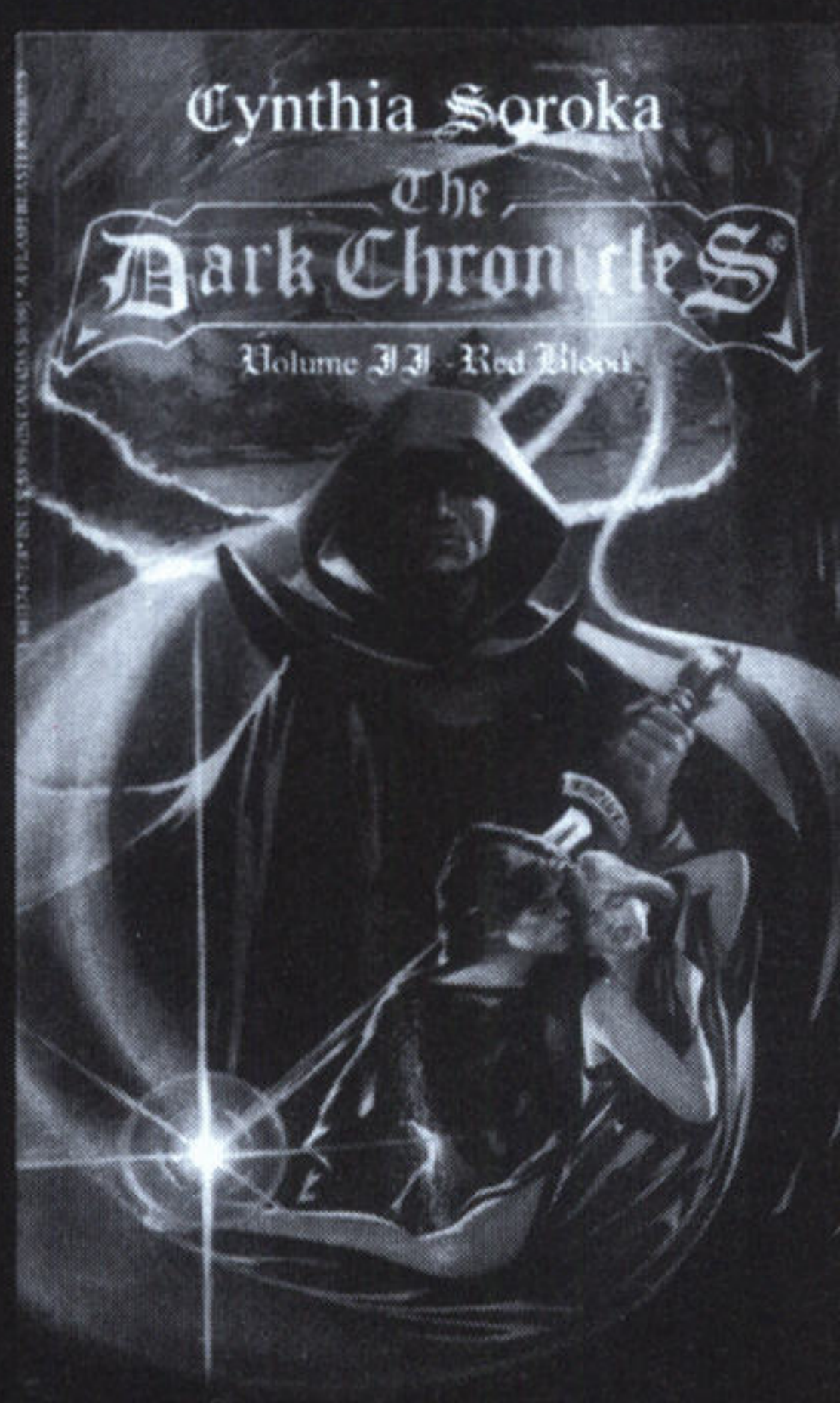
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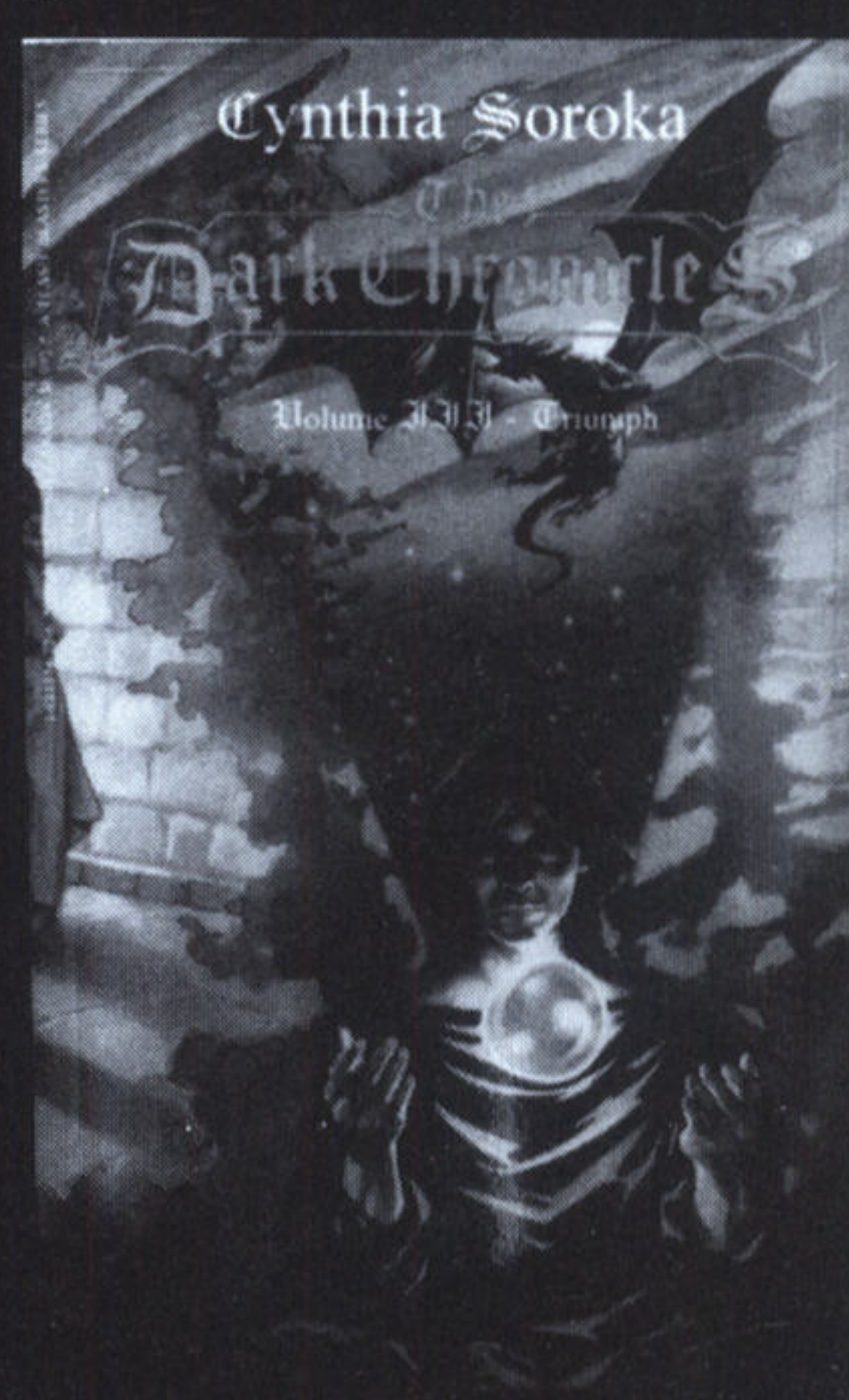
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gons are painted using a technique called "texture mapping," which can give an object the look of stone or hair or scaly dragon hide. The result is a beautiful 3-D world through which your dragon can swoop and turn and glide.

The feeling of reality is enhanced by a number of special effects. The dragon's wings stir sand from a desert floor. Enemies shot over water fall into the sea with a mighty splash. Leaning pillars topple to the ground. Speedy crablike opponents climb the walls of a cave while others shaped like manta rays undulate smoothly through a landscape of tall buttes and mesas.

All of this is backed by not only great sound effects, but a soundtrack of original music. The tunes change with the situation, ranging from a rapid dangerous beat as you confront an enemy, to a gentle New Age melody as the dragon skims through the interior of an abandoned temple.

Panzer Dragoon is not a perfect game. It's in the category of shooters known as "forced forward." No matter how much you would like to buzz around and look at the current area, you can't. The dragon moves ever onward as if pulled by an invisible string, and your control of its position is limited to moving up-down or left-right within a small range.

Still, you can get a pretty good view of the world, thanks to controls which let you look left, right, or even back over the dragon's tail. These other views are more than just window dressing.

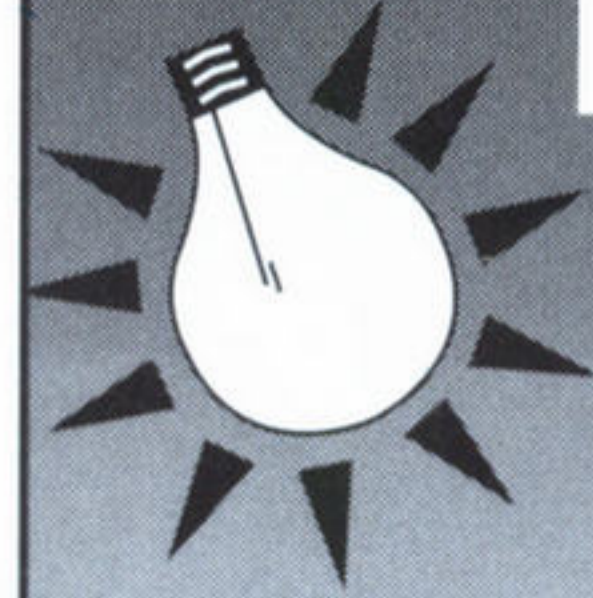
To play the game successfully, you'll have to watch out for enemies on all sides. Giant sandworms—looking like an ugly relative of those in *Dune*—leap from the ground at your back, arc completely over the dragon, and dive into the sand in front of you. Smaller worms may emerge and run parallel to the dragon, laying down fire until you take them out.

One of the features of CD-based consoles is full-motion video. Many gamers cringe at these words. The first Sega CD add-on for the Genesis has a cartload of games that are nothing but long stretches of FMV with little chance for player interaction. But there is a place for FMV. In *Panzer Dragoon*, lengthy video clips provide atmosphere and background.

Like the rest of the game, the video clips are gorgeous. The introduction, which shows you something of this strange world and how your character comes to be astride a dragon, is little short of amazing. Using computer graphics only a few steps down from *Jurassic Park*, this sequence relays emotions and a real sense of wonder while using very few words.

The sequences shown in the game are shorter. They give you oblique glimpses of obstacles ahead and of the ultimate bad guy waiting at the end of the road. Don't count on them for strategy tips—just enjoy.

As the 32-bit war rages, we can expect more and better graphics as the programmers get more familiar with these new machines. No matter which machine ultimately cap-



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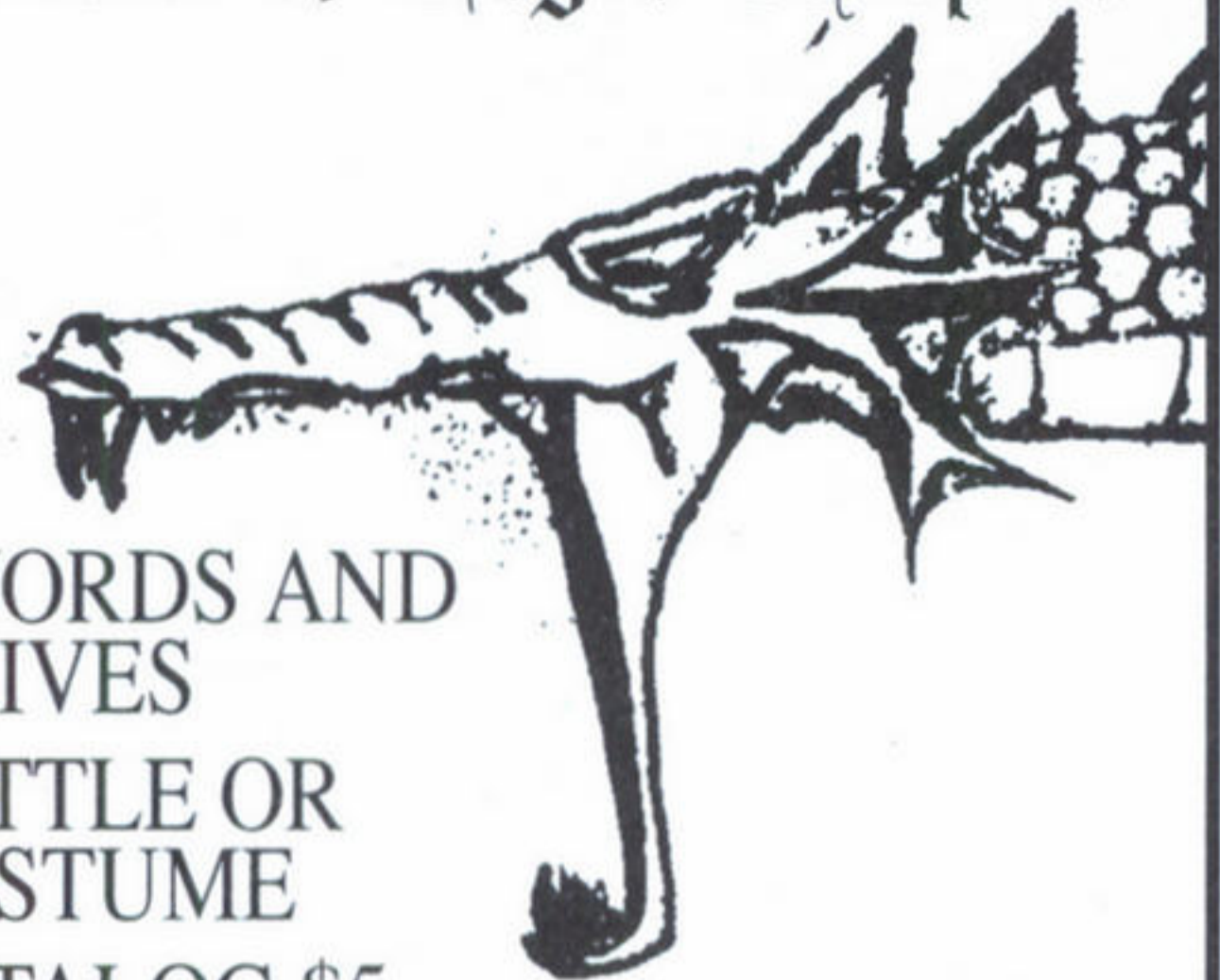
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tures the biggest chunk of the market, the real winner will be the gaming public.

The bar for what makes a good game is going way, way up. A PC that can match the performance of any of these new consoles will cost you a whole lot more than \$300. If you consider it from that angle, and if games are really important to you, then all of these machines are bargains.

Miniatures is one of those areas of gaming that has always eluded me. Back when I first got involved with role-playing, I found a stubby little lead knight with a squared off helmet and a large shield in one hand. I purchased the tiny warrior and, using the same paints that had served me well on dozens of plastic models, set up to paint him to match my current gaming character.

Most of the paint wouldn't stick at all. What did stick didn't look good, and it soon flaked off. The glue that I used to put the shield in the knight's hand didn't work any better than the paint. The whole thing was so pitiful that I never hauled it to a gaming session.

I gave it another try when miniatures for Steve Jackson's original *Ogre* game appeared. But all my war machines looked like they had already come out on the wrong end of a Mk V.

I had to face it—I was miniature-impaired. I could only sit back and watch those folks shove their robots around at *BattleTech* tournaments or gawk at elaborate dragons in someone else's *D&D* game.

But there is hope for folks like me. Chessex, maker of a popular line of miniature paints and accessories, has come out with *The Chessex Magic Wand Beginner Paint Gift Set*.

The set includes five bottles of paint, a good general purpose brush, three pre-primed lead miniatures, a nice plastic case, and instructions. The range of colors provided is small, but you are given tips on how to mix them to create more variety. The miniatures are nothing too elaborate, but they seem well-made and there are no visible rough edges.

The instructions provided are very brief, no more than a page on the basics of mixing colors, blocking, shading, and dry brushing. Yet, following this one page, I was able to produce miniatures of surprising quality. My suspicion is that the proper paints and a good brush go a long way toward making a good miniature. If you're already into miniatures, then you probably have no need for this set. If you've long been jealous of other folks' tiny alter-egos, snatch this up and you'll be up to speed in no time.

While you're at it, you might want to consider a few more colors of Chessex's Magic Wand paints. Names like Annihilator Red, Purple Haze, and Blood Stain attracted my attention. There are eight shades of flesh tones, and that's not counting Orc Highlight.

Next time I'm at the store, I think I'll buy another little knight. This time I'm going to use it—no matter how it turns out. 🐉

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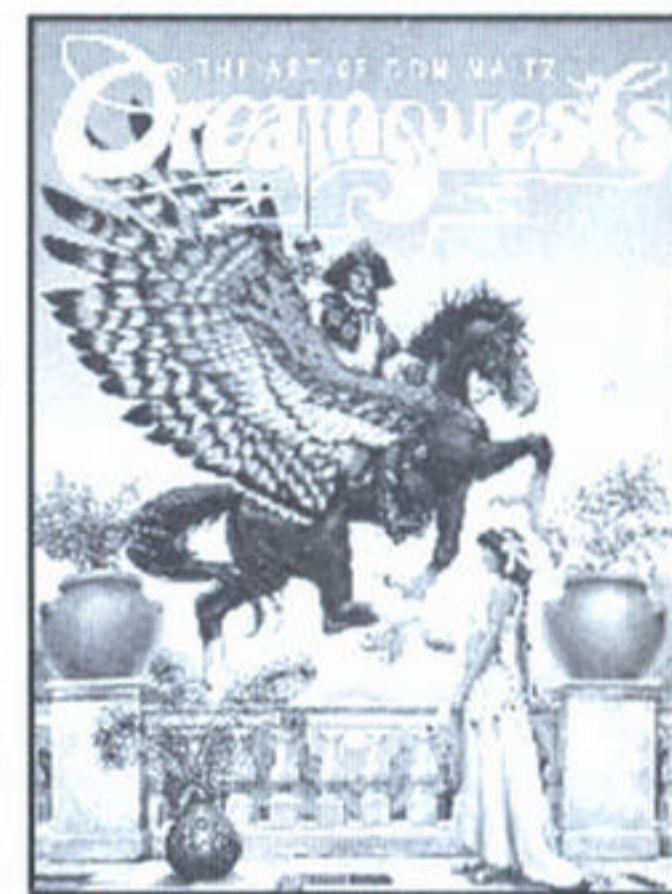
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BOOKS

Continued from page 38

can easily be filled with stories that offer little variety and less originality.

Great Writers and Kids Write Spooky Stories, I was surprised to find, contains quite a few fresh, energetic stories. When I first heard about the idea, I thought that having writers collaborate with their children might just be a gimmick to sell books. But as I read these stories, I could sense the energizing influence of the "kids" (some of whom are adults themselves) on their parents. Many of the stories carry those rare feelings of awe and terror that are very much a part of a child's everyday life. And I believe the input of the children urged the writers into new territories. This freshness not only fulfills the second criterion of a good anthology theme, but the first as well. The stories, for the most part, are a pleasure to read.

F. Paul Wilson and Meggan C. Wilson's "Itsy Bitsy Spider" has a wonderfully inventive, creepy, fun premise that infuses the story with energy. Anne McCaffrey and Georgeanne Kennedy's "Zeus: The Howling" mixes fantasy, melancholy, and some strong animal characters to enchant the reader. Joe R. Lansdale, son Keith, and daughter Kasey Jo; Ramsey Campbell, daughter Tammy, and son Matt; Peter Straub and son Benjamin; and Jane Yolen and daughter Heidi E.Y. Stemple all make chilling, entertaining contributions. The dark side of the Wilsons' story is provided by Melanie Tem and her son Joseph, who in "House Full of Hearts" introduce a haunting note of gravity and realism in this largely fun, escapist collection. Their portrait of childhood is at once uncompromisingly honest and ultimately uplifting.

I of course can pick a few nits, as one can with almost any anthology. In a book of thirteen stories with children as the central characters, only three of the central characters are girls. Reading about one ingenious boy after the next gets a bit repetitive. In addition, while the stories are great at setting up suspenseful situations, a number of them seem to resolve themselves too easily. This is a criticism I have of much of the young adult horror I've read.

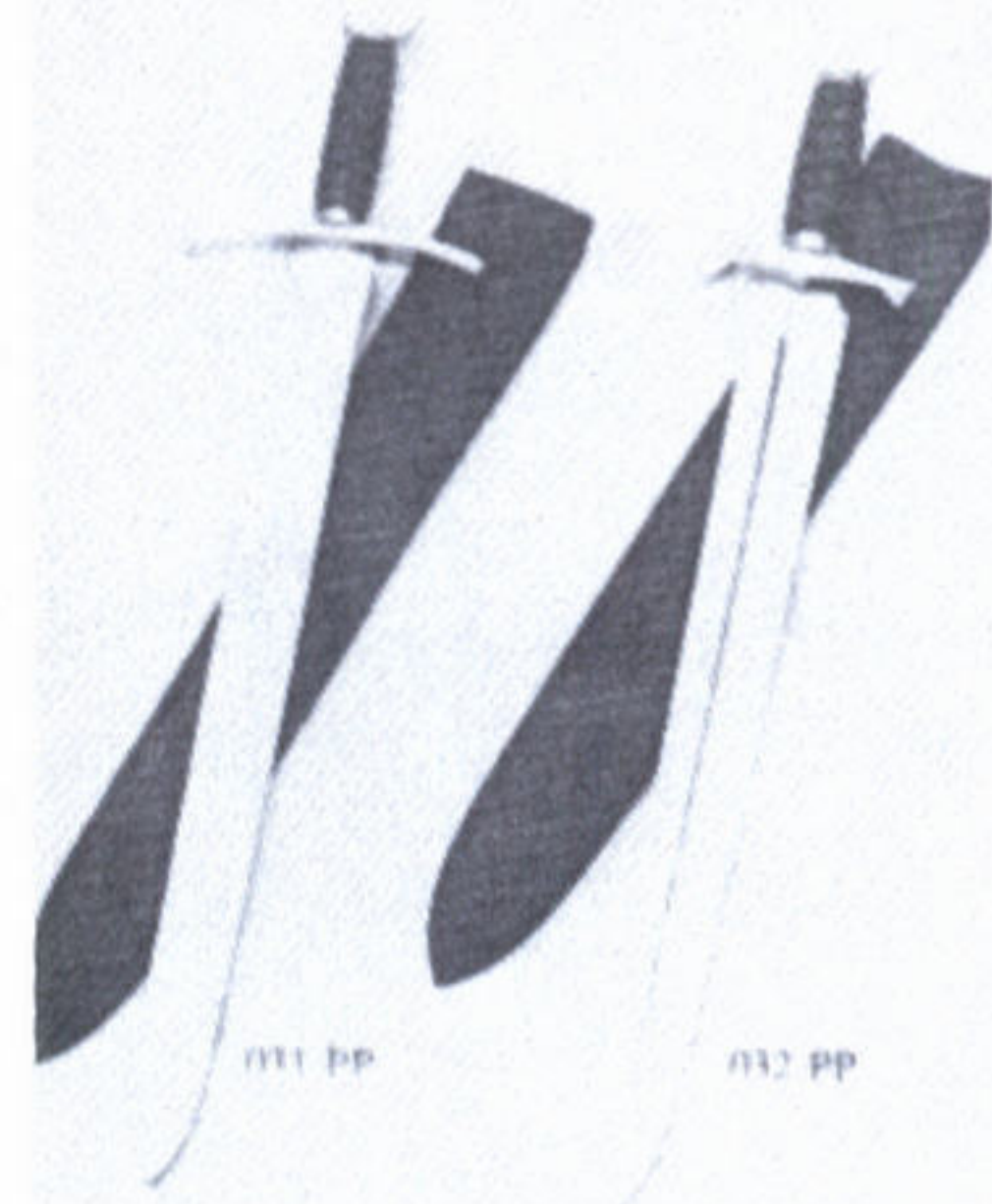
But these are minor weaknesses in an anthology that overall is quite strong and entertaining. The illustrations by our very own Gahan Wilson set the perfect tone of creepy fun. While kids can read and enjoy the book, adults shouldn't overlook it.

At its best moments, this book reminded me why I'd first been drawn to horror, and it took me back to my own childhood fear—a mummy who lived in the toilet, if you must know.

Isaac Asimov's Ghosts, edited by Gardner Dozois and Sheila Williams, Ace Books, NY, 240 pp., paperback, \$5.50.

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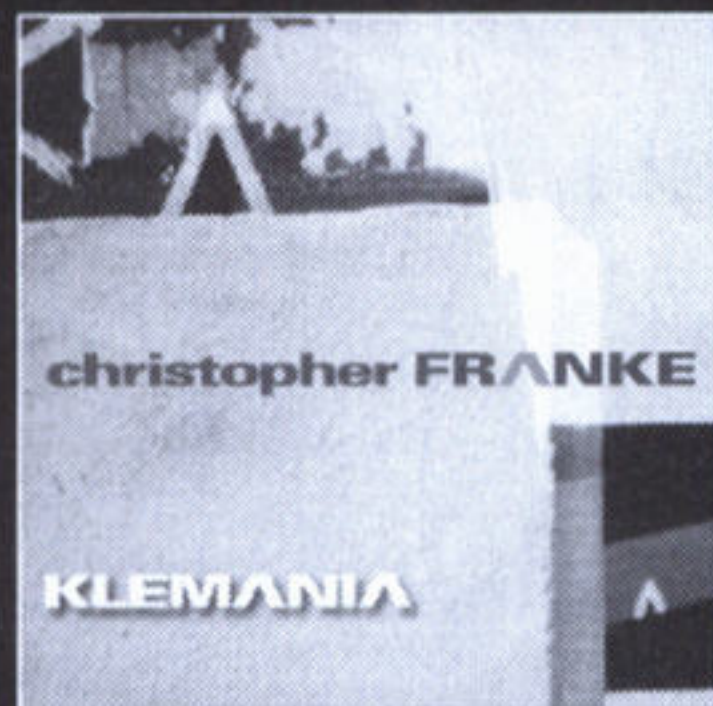
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I began reading this collection, then you're in for a wonderful surprise.

Now that I've finished reading *Isaac Asimov's Ghosts*, I actually believe that ghosts are the most exciting of the horror archetypes, more flexible and intriguing than zombies, monsters, and even, yes, vampires. Stories about ghosts can examine some of our deepest fears and most fundamental beliefs. What happens to us after death? Is there an after-life? What is it like? In what form, if any, do we survive?

If the connection to Isaac Asimov or science fiction puts any of you fantasy fans off, put aside those reservations. The book, an anthology of stories that originally appeared in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, actually has only a few hints of science fiction. The stories embody fantasy at its best: original, involving, and thought-provoking.

The book opens with an outstanding story, the Hugo Award-winning "Death on the Nile" by Connie Willis. Willis takes the fascinating idea that "to the ancient Egyptians...Death was a separate country to the west...to which the deceased person journeyed" and overlays this on the journey of three vacationing couples to Egypt.

During the turbulent, surreal airplane flight from Athens to Cairo, the narrator observes her husband flirting with another woman in their group, Lissa. In order to frighten Lissa, the narrator suggests they may already be dead and on their way to the afterworld. Instead of a copy of *The Book of the Dead*, which was put in the tombs of the ancient Egyptians to guide them on their journey to judgment, they have a guidebook called *Egypt Made Easy*, out of which one of their party, Zoe, reads constantly.

Things get stranger with their arrival at the Cairo Airport. Zoe suggests that instead of walking across the tarmac to the terminal to get their luggage and going through customs, they walk directly to the pyramids to beat the crowds. Although the narrator has read that the pyramids are nine miles away, they are actually just beyond the runway and the group walks to them.

More and more, the narrator begins to believe her own story, that they are dead and on their way to judgment. She plays over in her head various possible ways in which they might have died. Terrorists might have planted a bomb on the plane; she might have shot her husband, Lissa, and herself in a jealous rage; her husband and Lissa might have shot her. As the Egyptians believed that, after death, they must reach the Hall of Judgment before monsters destroyed them, the narrator becomes convinced she must enter King Tut's tomb and find the Hall of Judgment within.

This story is extremely effective: emotionally entertaining, intellectually fascinating, and ultimately, morally haunting. For as the narrator ponders, though she may not have killed anyone, or committed adultery, she has sinned, as have we all. And who of us

can face judgment, alone, without fear?

A lighter yet also intriguing story is Terry Bisson's "Dead Man's Curve." Community college student Hal discovers that if he goes around the infamous Dead Man's Curve in his '85 Chevy Cavalier at night at exactly 42 miles per hour, he is sucked for a few moments into a "pocket universe" (a bit of science fiction here), which looks like a waiting room. In it he finds Wascomb, the guy from high school who'd taken Dead Man's Curve at 59 miles per hour and survived, only to die a few years later in the Navy. Wascomb, too, had found the pocket universe in his drives along Dead Man's Curve, and had been brought back to it after death. He is alone there, disoriented, with nothing to do. He asks Hal to bring his old high school girlfriend, Ruth Ann, to the pocket universe and Hal does so.

Although Wascomb barely remembers Ruth Ann, Ruth Ann is deeply moved by the brief encounter. She's unhappily married to a state senator and claims Wascomb was her true love. She wants to see him again. While the climax of the story was a bit disappointing, I found this image of the afterlife, especially juxtaposed with others in this anthology, thought provoking. Where do we go when we die? And how much do we remember of our lives?

The anthology closes with one of its strongest stories, Cherry Wilder's "The House on Cemetery Street." Two children, Jo and Lucy, whose parents sent them out of Germany before World War II because they were half-Jewish, lived in California for eight years with relatives.

Now they return to a country and a family ravaged by war. Jo and Lucy learn of several deaths that occurred in the family house while they were gone: their uncle killed himself and a man fell off the roof. Images of these men still haunt the house.

Jo and Lucy also learn that their parents and aunt hid a Jewish woman and her three children in the house during part of the war. While their aunt tells Lucy and Jo that the mother and children successfully escaped to Palestine, their stepbrother reveals that the mother and children were all arrested. Later, Jo and Lucy learn that only the mother was arrested and the children met with a much different fate. This is the kind of story that we play back over and over in our heads, searching for understanding and easy answers when there are none. It is simultaneously disturbing and fascinating, a strong end to a very strong anthology.

So if you aren't a regular reader of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* where these stories first appeared, I strongly suggest you pick up this anthology. While its cover makes it appear rather average and uninspiring, its stories will haunt you and make you re-examine your own beliefs.

And it's better to think about these things now before it's too late....

Jeanne Cavelos

WINGS

Continued from page 49

that's holy, stay with me," I said to the dark angel, but the sound of my voice was lost in the roar of beating wings. My son took flight, riding the winds, and he let forth a great screeching wail. And just as in my dream, they came, the twelve dreadful children of night, to engulf my son in their midst.

They followed behind him, six to a side, like a flock of geese in winter, as he beat his wings and led them toward the radiant moon. But I saw, as he flew, that he turned his head to look once more at me.

I called out to him then, his birth name. "Damion! Wait! You are weak, not strong. Apollo's touch can burn you to ashes. How do you hope to conquer the world if you cannot conquer the gentlest light of day?"

He must have heard me, for he stopped in his flight, hovering like a huge, dark bird. "Show me," I cried. "Show me your power. Stay and brave the dawn."

He screeched again, defiance flaring in every line of his form. The gods forgive me, I knew what I asked, but I could not let a thing like that loose on the world. And in his youth and arrogance, he stayed, circling the tower, long after the other dark angels had vanished beyond the empty horizon, seeking their unearthly home.

I stood at the window, like a man made of stone, and watched unblinking as the God of Day touched the lone dark angel with a shaft of clear white light. And as the monster that had once been my son burned like a cinder on the wind, I felt my heart and hands turn from flesh into lead.

When at last I could move again, I took myself across the room and picked up the second pair of wings, the ones I had fashioned for myself, and fastened them to my arms. The wind blew strong and hard that morning, and I calculated that I could be miles from Crete before I crashed to my watery grave. And, in truth, that was all I sought that morning, a clean death far away from my island prison.

But the gods are not kind to desperate men. The East Wind, Hecate's oldest and cruellest child, caught me. I struggled to free myself from its grip, but I could not.

The wind bore me to another island, a gentle place, far from Crete. As I fell, exhausted, to the ground, the wind spoke to me. "Tell them, Daedalus," it said. "Tell them about your son."

And when they came—the princes and holy men, the slaves and the fools—to gawk at me and ask me to relate the glories of my escape, I did as the East Wind commanded. "Icarus is dead," I told them, giving my son the name of the demon-form he had taken, a name unknown in this quieter country. "He flew too near the sun." Then I would turn away in silence, and they would ask me nothing more. ♣

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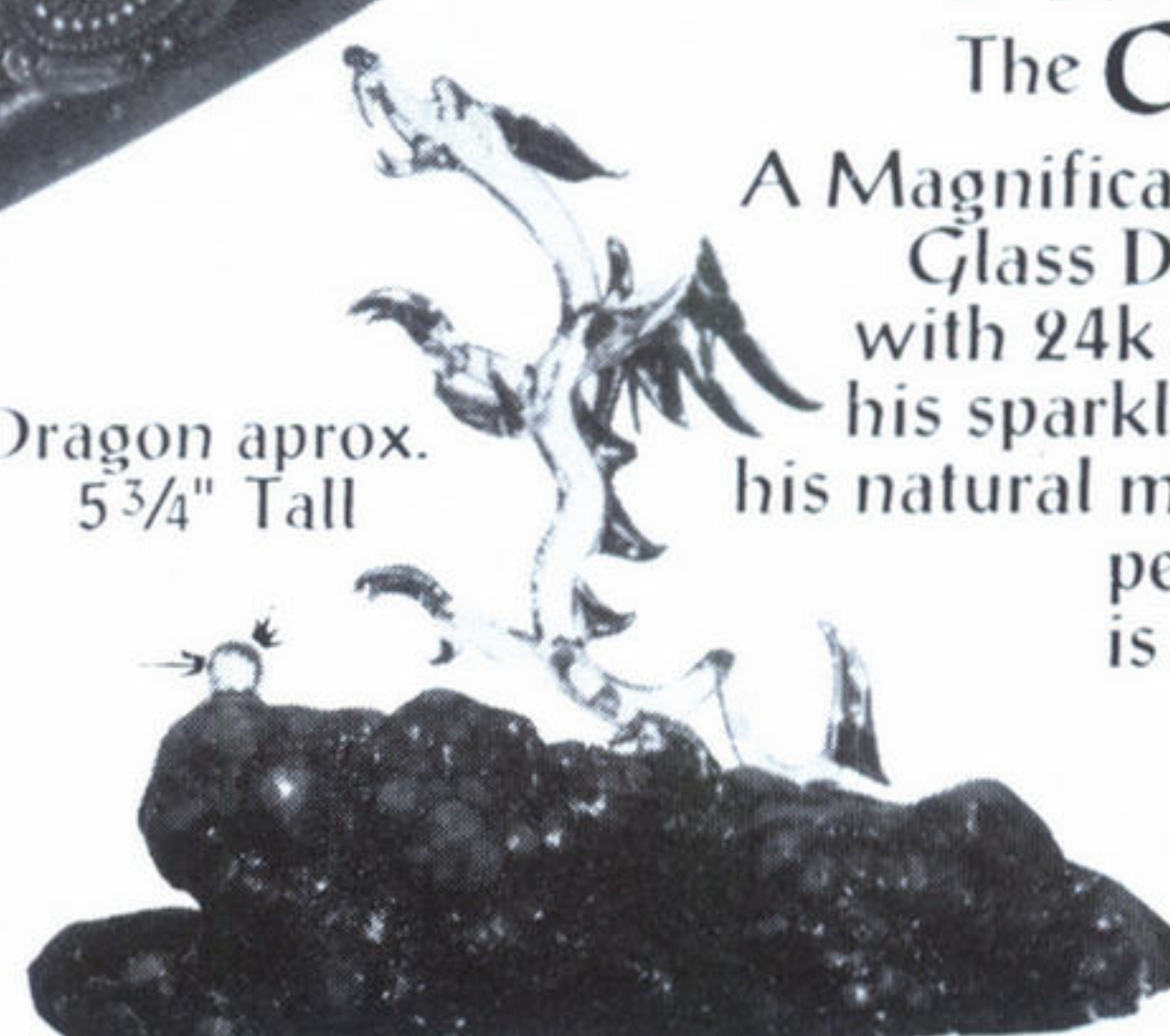
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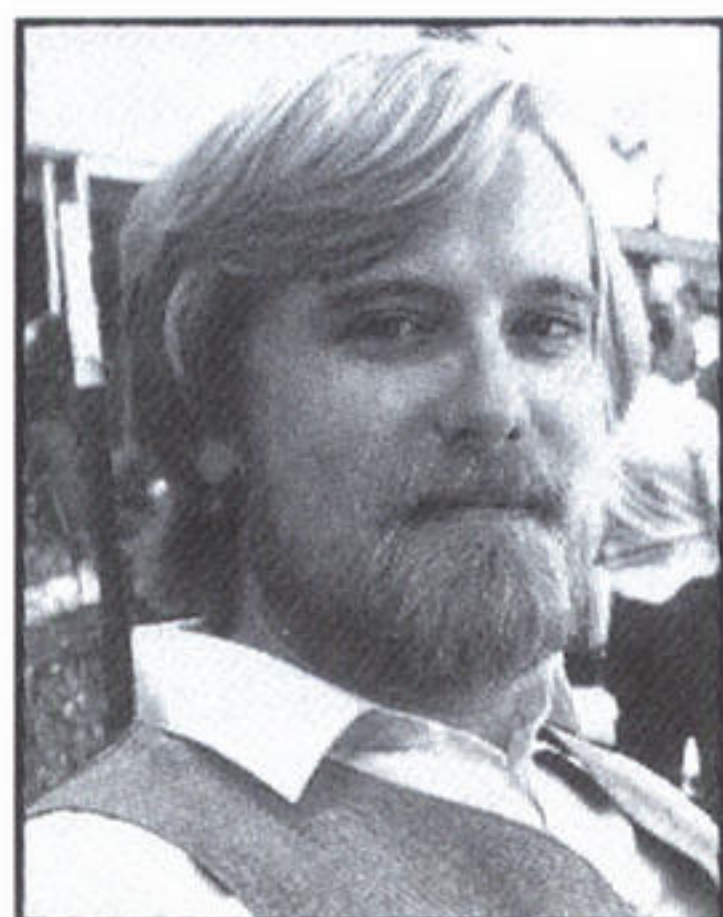
Contributors

WILLIAM JOHN WATKINS IS A professor of humanities at Brookdale Community College in Lincroft, NJ, where he teaches early American literature. He has published over three hundred poems, more than fifty short stories and articles, and fourteen books, including *Centrifugal Rickshaw Dancer*, *Clickwhistle*, and *The Last Deathship Off Antares*. His short story "Beggar in the Living Room" made the final 1993 Nebula ballot, and several of his short stories and poems have placed in the top ten in *Asimov's* annual readers poll. His novel *Kosmic Thunder* is due out from Avon Books.

Robert Charles Wilson is the Philip K. Dick Award-winning author of books: *A Hidden Place*, *Memory Wire*, *Gypsies*, *Bridge of Years*, *The Harvest*, *Mysterium*, *The Divide*, and he is working on *Darwinnia*, forthcoming from Tor. **Dave Smeds** is the author of the fantasy novel *The Sorcery Within* and its sequel *The Schemes of Dragons*. He has sold short fiction to anthologies, magazines, and to Faeron Education's series of booklets for remedial reading classes. He was also the English-language rewriter of *Justy*, a Japanese "manga" SF miniseries. He holds a third-degree black belt in Goju-ryu karate and teaches classes in that art.

Carl Lundgren was recently presented with a Chesley Award for his painting *Promise*, a monochromatic picture depicting an angel in a leather jacket. He resides in Florida with his wife Michele, where together they run Gator Press, an independent art and book publishing company. After a ten-year absence from commercial illustration, this interior piece for *Realms* marks Carl's return to the field. He is actively seeking more illustration opportunities. **Gary Lippincott** illustrates children's books. He recently completed a young adult fantasy for Harcourt Brace and is working on fantasy covers for two publishers, both involving wizards. He lives on a horse farm in Central Massachusetts with his wife and children.

Deborah Wheeler's first novel, *Jaydium*, came out from DAW in 1993 and her second, *Northlight*, in February 1995. She just finished her third novel *Collaborators*. Her novelette,



Dave Smeds

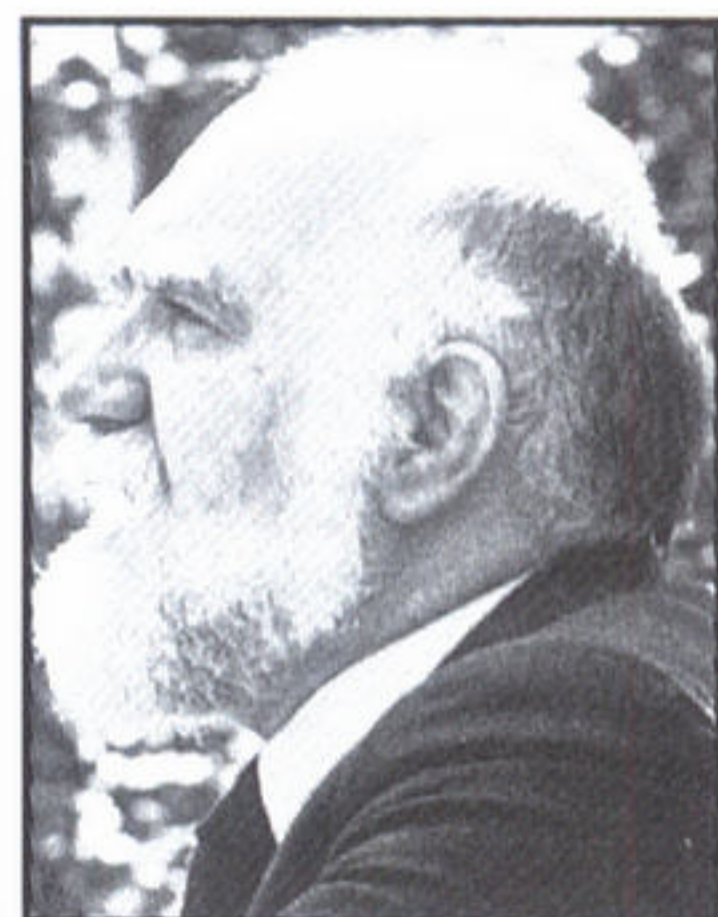


Carol Heyer

"Madrelita," (F & SF, Feb. '92) was on the 1992 Nebula preliminary ballot. She has upcoming stories in *Sisters of the Night*, *Ancient Enchantresses*, *Return to Avalon*, and *Star Wars: Tales from Jabba's Palace*. **Ric Meyers** is scripting the Jackie Chan comic book for Topps. Among his most popular nonfiction books are *The Great Science Fiction Films*, *For One Week Only: The World of Exploitation Films*, *Murder on the Air*, and *Martial Arts Movies*. His novels include *Doomstar*, *Dragon Rising*, and a trilogy: *Fear Itself*, *Living Hell*, and *Worst Nightmare*. He's a writer for Greenwich Workshop and columnist for *Inside Kung-Fu* and *The Armchair Detective* magazines. He has no social life, in Connecticut.



Patricia Duffy Novak



William J. Watkins

FRED ASKEW LIVES IN AUSTIN, TEXAS. When he was young, he was kidnapped by the U.S. Army and carried away to Vietnam. Soldiers of many nations found him to be an excellent target. Later, he became a nurse and worked for several years in a state mental hospital, until he mutated into a writer. Currently, he works in the computer industry, writing technical manuals for those who do not read. **Joel Naprstek** has taught at the School of Visual Arts, and he is currently teaching at the Joe Kubert School. He has worked in automotive art, mural painting, and graphic art for Malibu Comics. He has recently completed a graphic novel based on the Flying Tigers for Kitchen Sink.

Carol Heyer is represented by Worlds of Wonder for her science fiction and fantasy work. Her art is also found at Every Picture Tells a Story, the gallery in Beverly Hills that exclusively sells art from children's books. She is working on a cover for Hyperion's Disney Press, and another for Crippen and Landru. **Patricia Duffy Novak's** short stories have appeared in *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, in the *Sword and Sorceress* series (volumes 9, 10, and 12), and in several Darkover anthologies. In "real life," she is a Professor of Agricultural Economics at Auburn University and lives in Opelika, Alabama, with her husband Jim, daughter Sylvia, and an assortment of cats and dogs. She has finished writing her first novel and is "making the rounds" with it.

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