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# REALMS OF FANTASY

**Frank  
Frazetta**

**Tribute to a Legend**

**Liz Williams**

**Shapeshifter**

**Darrell  
Schweitzer**

**Knight's Dream**

**Dragon's Return**

**By Tom Gerencer**

**An Angel's Tale**

**By Fraser Sherman**

August 2002

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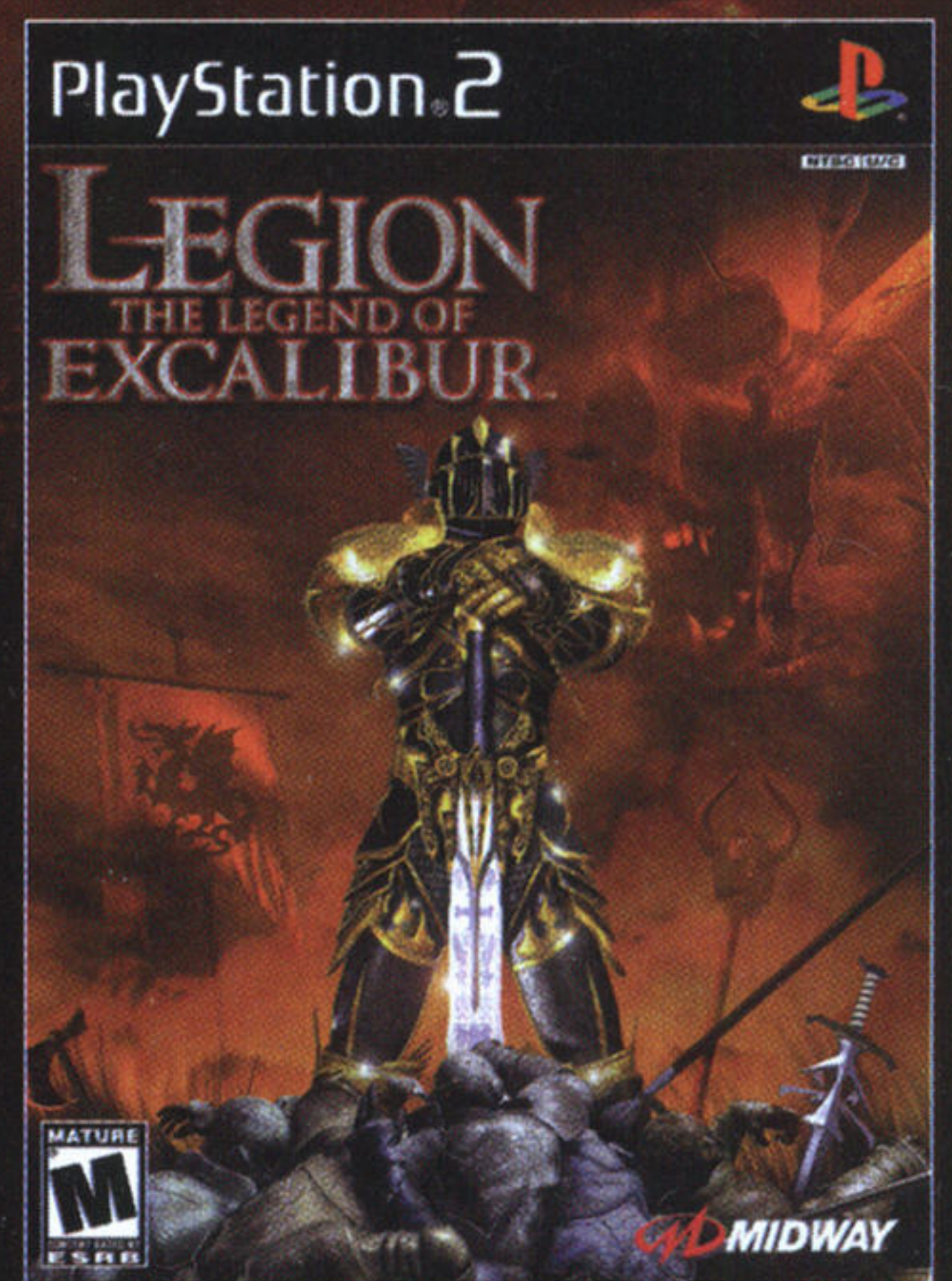


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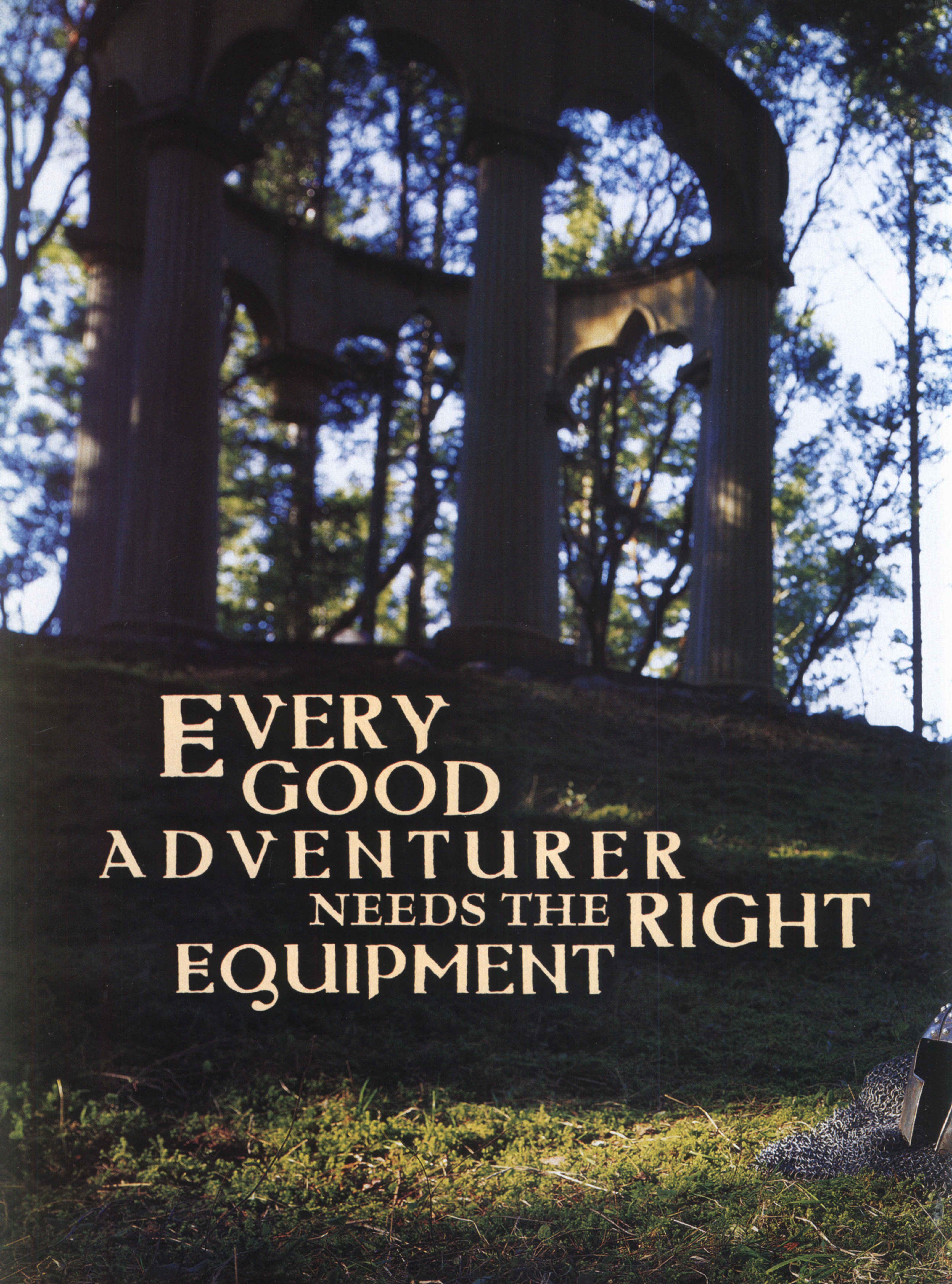
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*RIGHT: Frank Frazetta painted this for the cover of Conan the Usurper, by Robert E. Howard. The legendary Frazetta is the subject of this issue's Gallery.*

*COVER: The Sage by Stephen Youll.*



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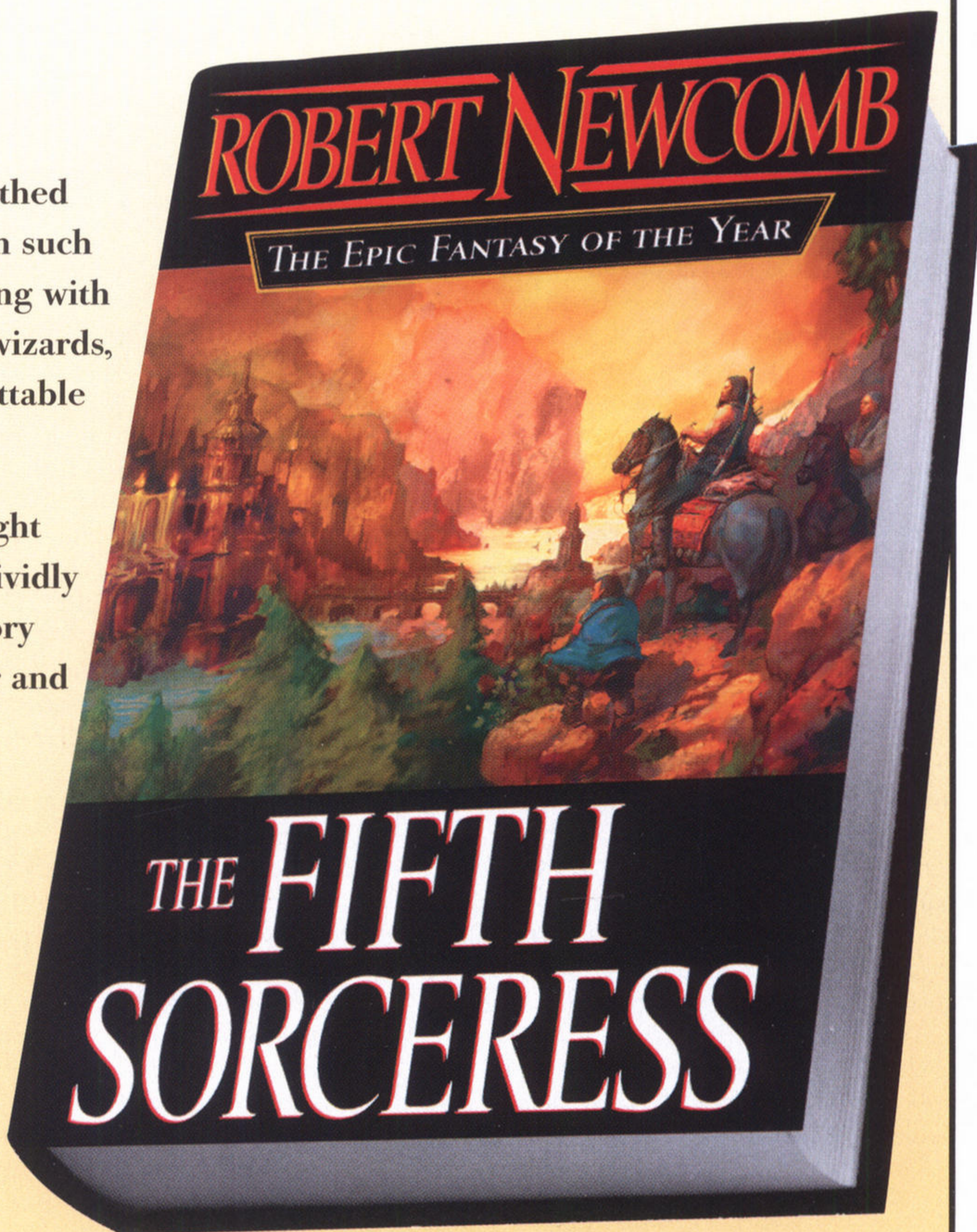
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Dear Shawna,

May I speak briefly to Sarah Frix? Ms. Frix, I have sold about two hundred stories. I have a couple of dozen books in hardcover. My work still gets rejected. When it does, my agent sends it to another market. That is the difference my 40-year career has made—I used to choose the next market and repackage the story. Now my agent does it for me.

I'm telling you this to reinforce the insight you have already, and to assure you that writing is not a crap shoot. Editors try to pick the best stories. When your stories are better than most stories appearing in a particular magazine, you will sell frequently to that magazine, provided your work is suited to it. It's like sword-fighting: make it flow and hit hard, and you'll win a lot.

Gene Wolfe

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

Allow me to begin this by saying that I love the magazine and I hope you will continue to publish it with the same high standards. When I read the letters section and I find a sniveling letter I wonder why it is that the writer simply won't stop buying the magazine and be done with it, rather than attempt to shame you into publishing a story? Just a thought.

I am incarcerated, and I have been receiving *Realms* for about five years, and I have my wife to thank for that. I used to be a Clancy/Ludlum/LeCarré type of reader, and my wife liked the "weird" stuff. I have, literally, spent the last 12 years reading a few thousand books, and she turned me on to Weis/Hickman, R.A. Salvatore, Irene Radford etc., and she introduced me to many new worlds, and I am now a fantasy fan. (But I still need to have my Star Wars fix!) Your magazine also introduced me to new authors and I look forward to its arrival. I can sink into the books, and magazine, and I get to leave this sewer for a few hours. For that I can't thank you enough. If I had to list my complaints with *Realms*, the list would be short—publish it monthly! I'd gladly pay double for a monthly subscription.

James "Red" Williams  
Huntsville, Texas

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

After the recent letters from Mr. Harvey and Mr. Madigan, it seemed to me that both editors and "the system" could use some kind words sent in their direction.

When I first started writing speculative fiction, I was reluctant to send it out, because I had been told success depended on "who you knew." Since I knew no one, I assumed that stacked the odds firmly against me.

Luckily, after a great deal of help (and a small amount of nagging) from my husband, I sent a story out into the world. I didn't have much hope. And, indeed, it did get rejected many times. But rather than simply being left to rot under piles and piles of other manuscripts (the ultimate fate, I imagined, of those who didn't "know anyone"), my piece was getting read. I used to race around the apartment, waving my latest rejection letter, in absolute rapture that the likes of Algis Budrys and Marion Zimmer Bradley were looking at my work and sending me personalized comments about it. For free! What a great deal. And, eventually, the story did sell, to Edward McFadden at *Pirate Writings*. I will always be grateful to him for giving me that chance.

In the years since then, I've sent out more stories. Some never sold. But most did, to increasingly large markets—despite the fact that, to this day, I still don't "know" anyone. My intention is not to pat myself on the back, but to point out that the system doesn't "suck." It works. It worked for me, and I believe it will work for anyone who persistently sends out quality writing. Editors slave long hours to make it work. Being able to share my stories with hundreds of strangers is something that still makes me feel incredibly blessed, and I thank all editors for the role they play in that.

Kathryn J. Brown  
Austin, Texas

*Well, it seems we've struck a nerve here, though I'm not sure why! It's not uncommon in our letters page to have missives from bitter, angry would-be writers who accuse us of everything from favoritism to utter idiocy, but it was quite uncommon for us to get quite this large a response to it. Perhaps it was the contrast between Sarah Frix's reasoned, thoughtful, and touching letter and the rambling obscenities of Doc Nebula and Mr. Harvey that made otherwise uncommunicative readers sit down and write us a letter. In any case, I want to thank all of you who responded, and to reiterate once again that we get about 800 manuscripts every two months, out of which we can publish maybe five or six. This is slightly higher than one half of one percent of the stories received. They're not great odds, it's true, but it's not a game of chance, either. If your story is better than the 795 others we got the previous eight weeks, we'll buy it, whether you are a first-time writer or a long-established pro.*

Your letters are welcome. Send them to: Letters to the Editor, *Realms of Fantasy*, P.O. Box 527, Rumson, NJ 07760. Or better yet, E-mail to: [realmsoffantasy@aol.com](mailto:realmsoffantasy@aol.com)

# REALMS OF FANTASY

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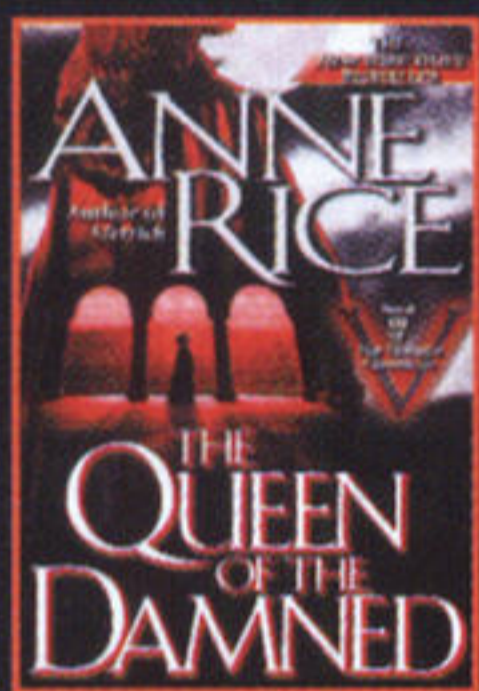
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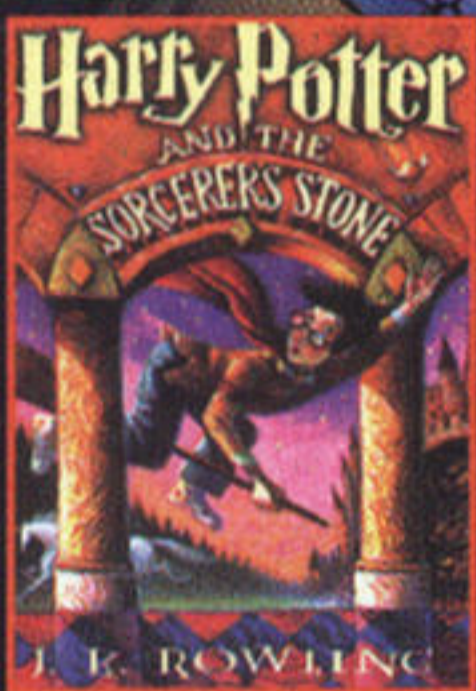
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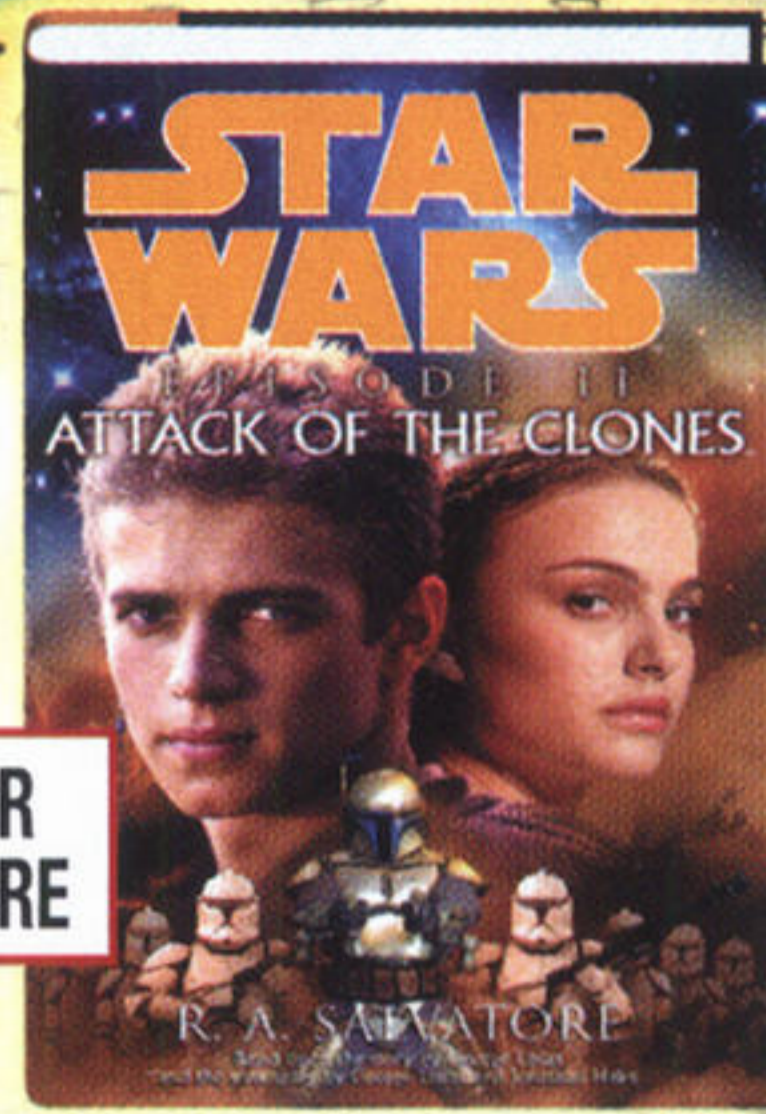
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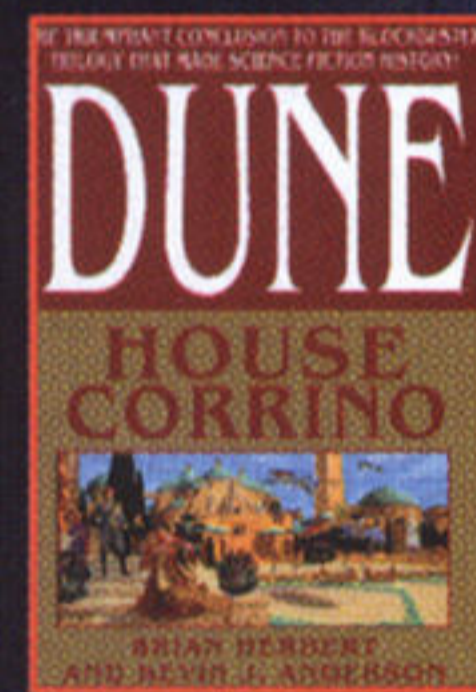


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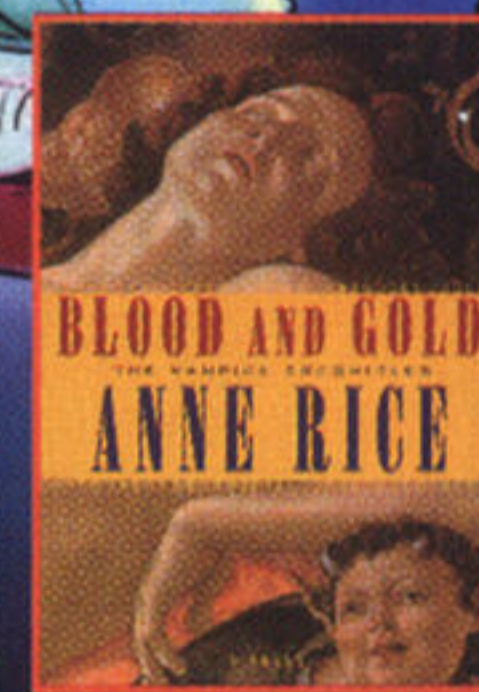
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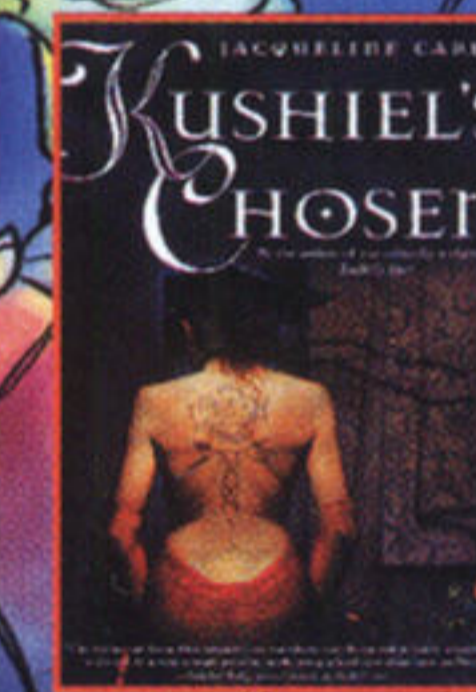
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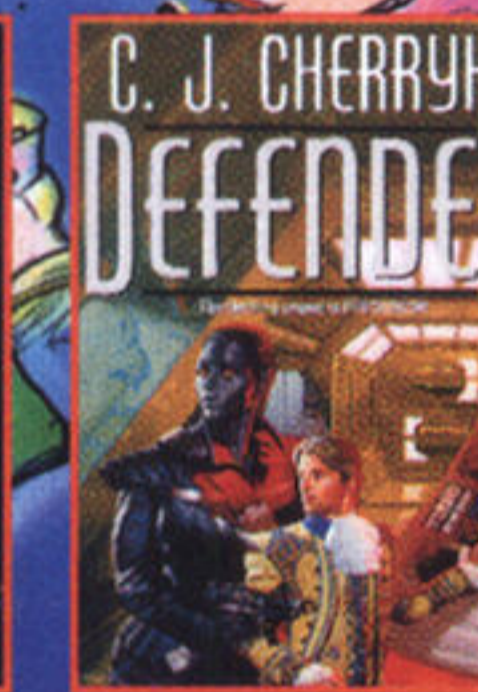
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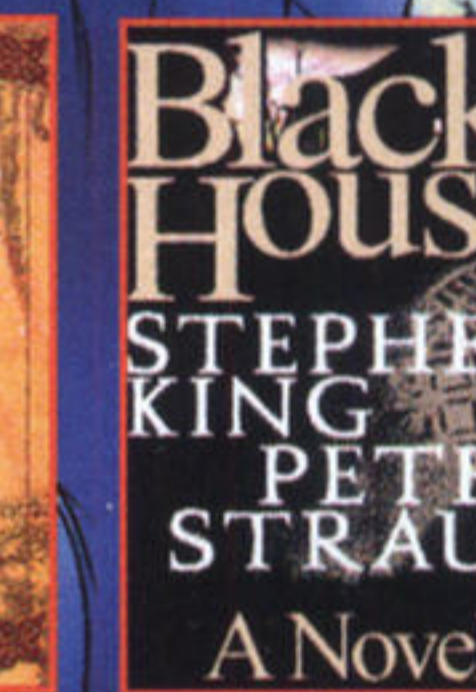
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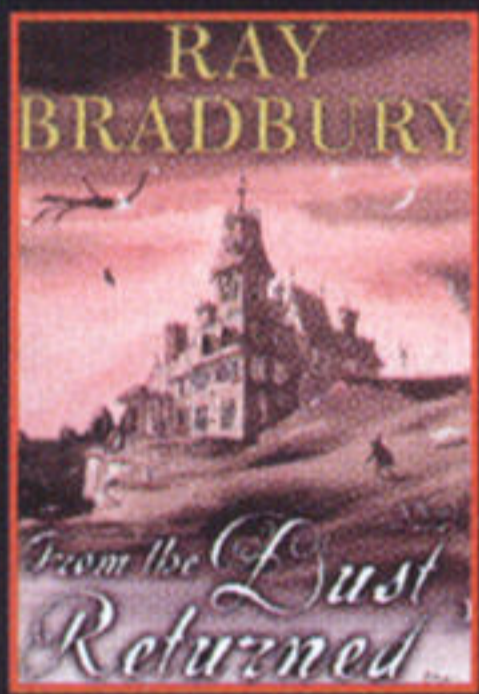
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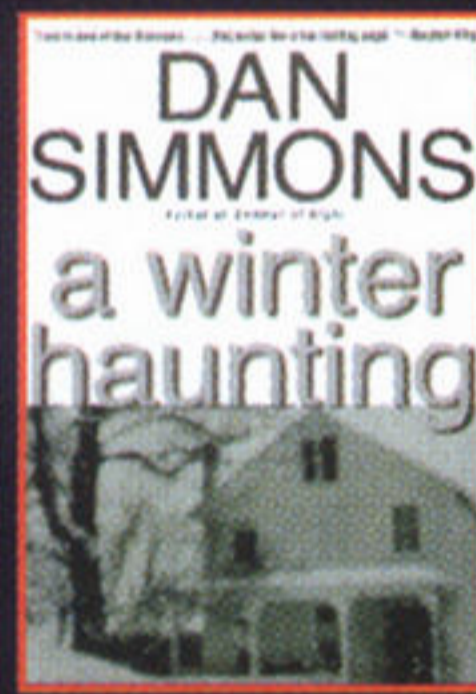
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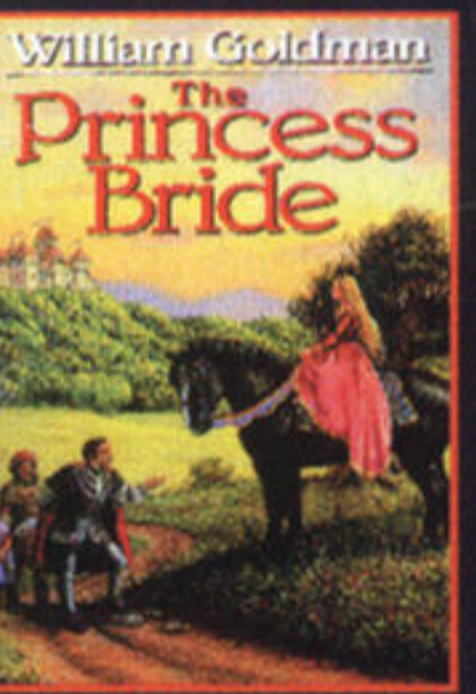
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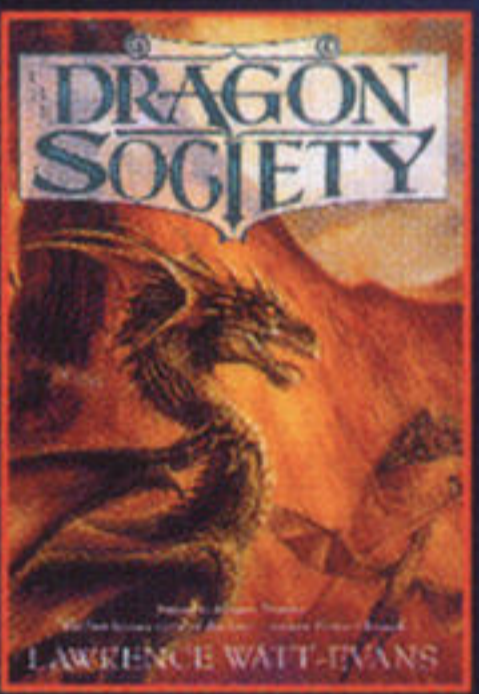
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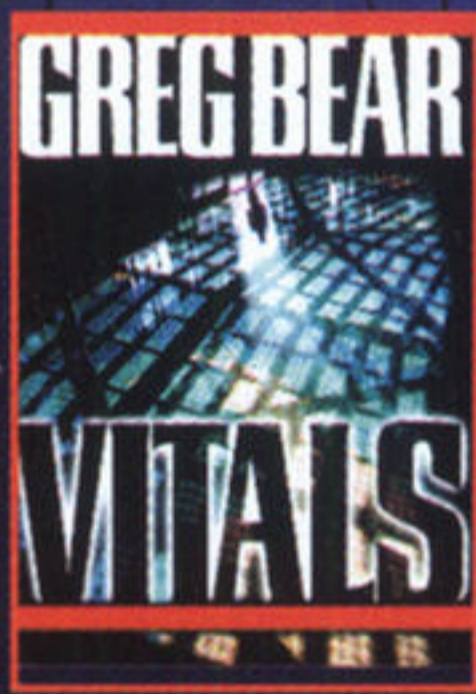
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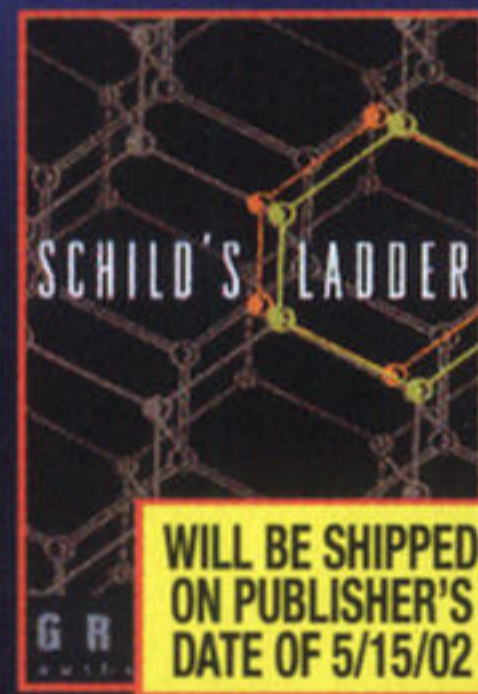
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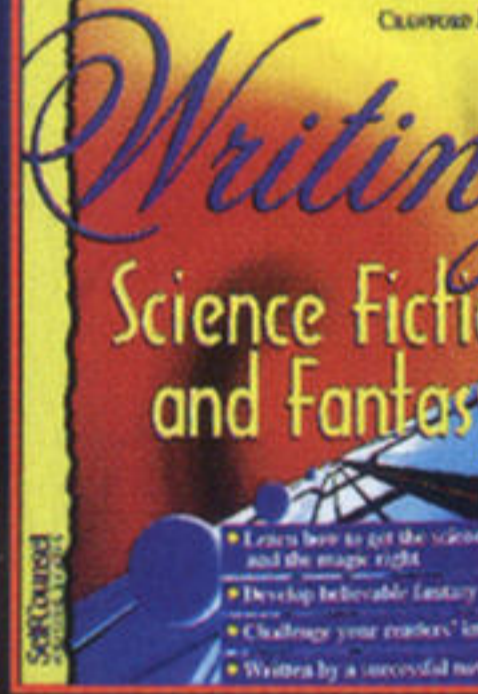
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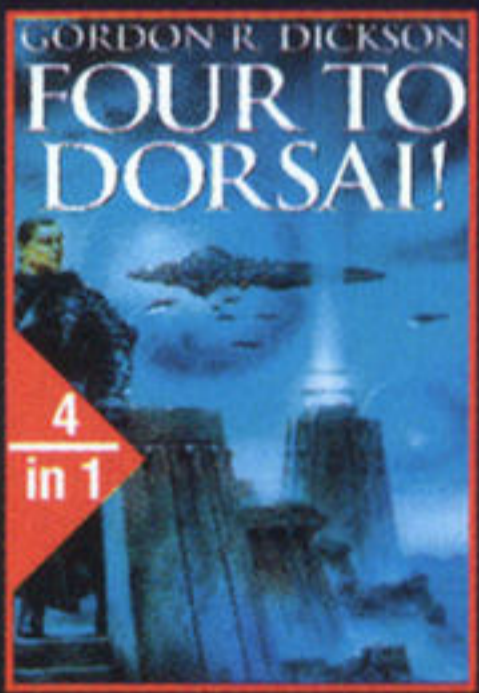
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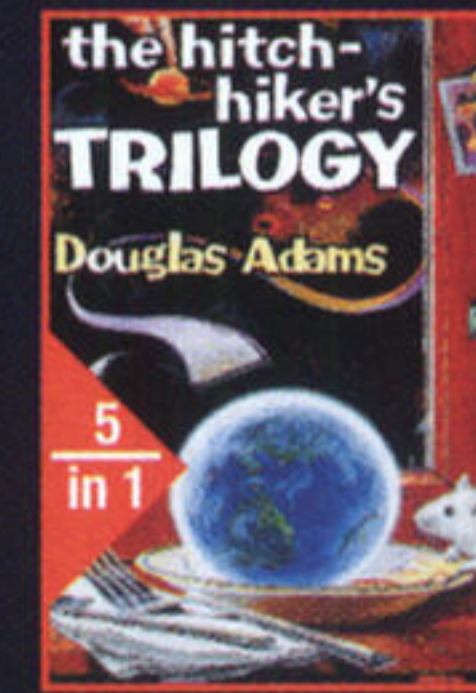
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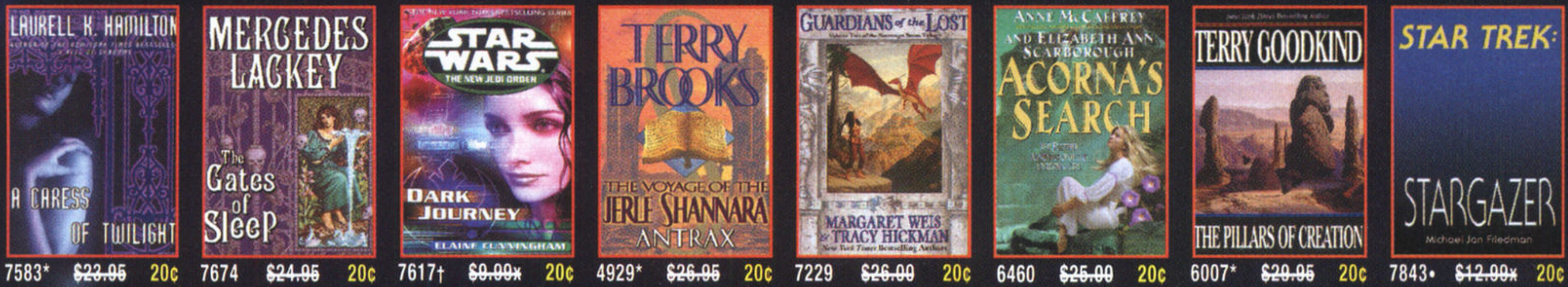
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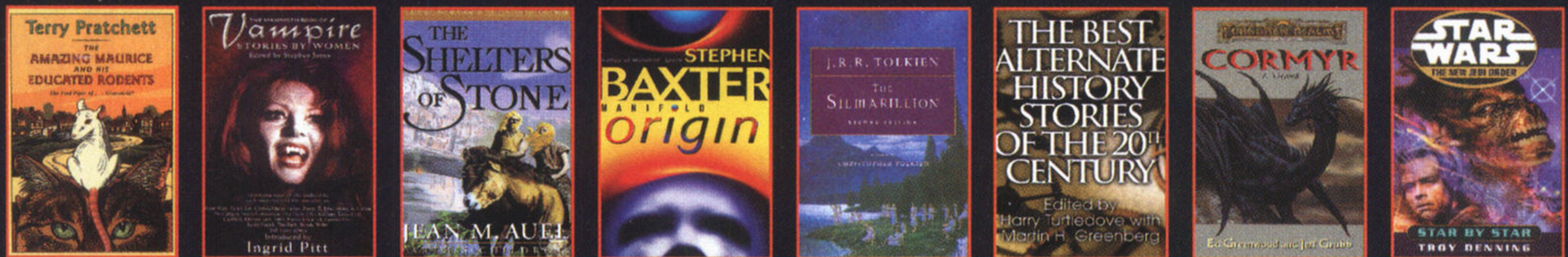
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Whether that news excites you or sets your teeth on edge, one thing is certain. You're in the exceptionally good hands of director Rob Bowman, the *X-Files* guru. Bowman spent years directing and producing episodes of TV's *The X-Files*, but he also directed *The X-Files* movie. He knows how to tell a good story, and he's not alone—one of *Reign of Fire*'s screenwriters is Matt Greenberg, creator of TV's *The Invisible Man*. Bowman also knows how to make a movie look great. With a budget he estimates at \$115 million, this one's bound to be gorgeous.

Bowman has invested the past two years of his life in *Reign of Fire*, and it's been a labor of love.

The man loves dragons.

*Reign of Fire* begins when a crew working to extend the London Underground accidentally breaches a cavern. As the workers and supervisors argue, a boy sneaks into the cavern with a flashlight and finds a hibernating dragon. When the boy runs outside, no one believes his story. The dragon escapes, unearths long-buried dragon eggs, and the dragon population soon explodes. Armies all over the world attempt to take on swarms of dragons, but the dragons come on too strong, too fast.

"[The armies] start dropping nuclear bombs all around the world, and that goes awry," Bowman says. "When one country says, 'We need to find the nest and nuke them,' that would be like India saying to China, 'Well, there's a nest in China, so we're going to nuke China,' and China saying, 'Well, if you drop one on us, you're going to get two back.' The collateral damage and the overreaction by the nations all over the world create a charred Earth. All that's left are nomads and Bedouins and marauders, and it becomes like the wild, wild West again.

"Now, I spent very little time in the movie dealing with that part, because I felt that was the wildly expensive, overly cheesy B-movie version, sort of like *Independence Day*, where it's

all about a sky full of aliens or dragons. To me, the more interesting story to tell was what happens in the last desperate hours when there's very few people left and the dragons are running out of food. Who's going to be the last one standing: one man and one woman or a pair of dragons? If your people are running out of food, then you're hoping that fate will come through and starve off the last dragons while you're still alive. The trick is to create the circumstances where you're not sure if there's going to be enough food for people or if there's going to be cannibalism among the people or who knows?"

And therein lies the story. The little boy who finds the first dragon grows up to be a man determined to hide and hope for the best. Meet Quinn Abercromby (played by Christian Bale of *American Psycho* and *Little Women*). Quinn turns an 800-year-old Norman castle into a fortress by retrofitting it with



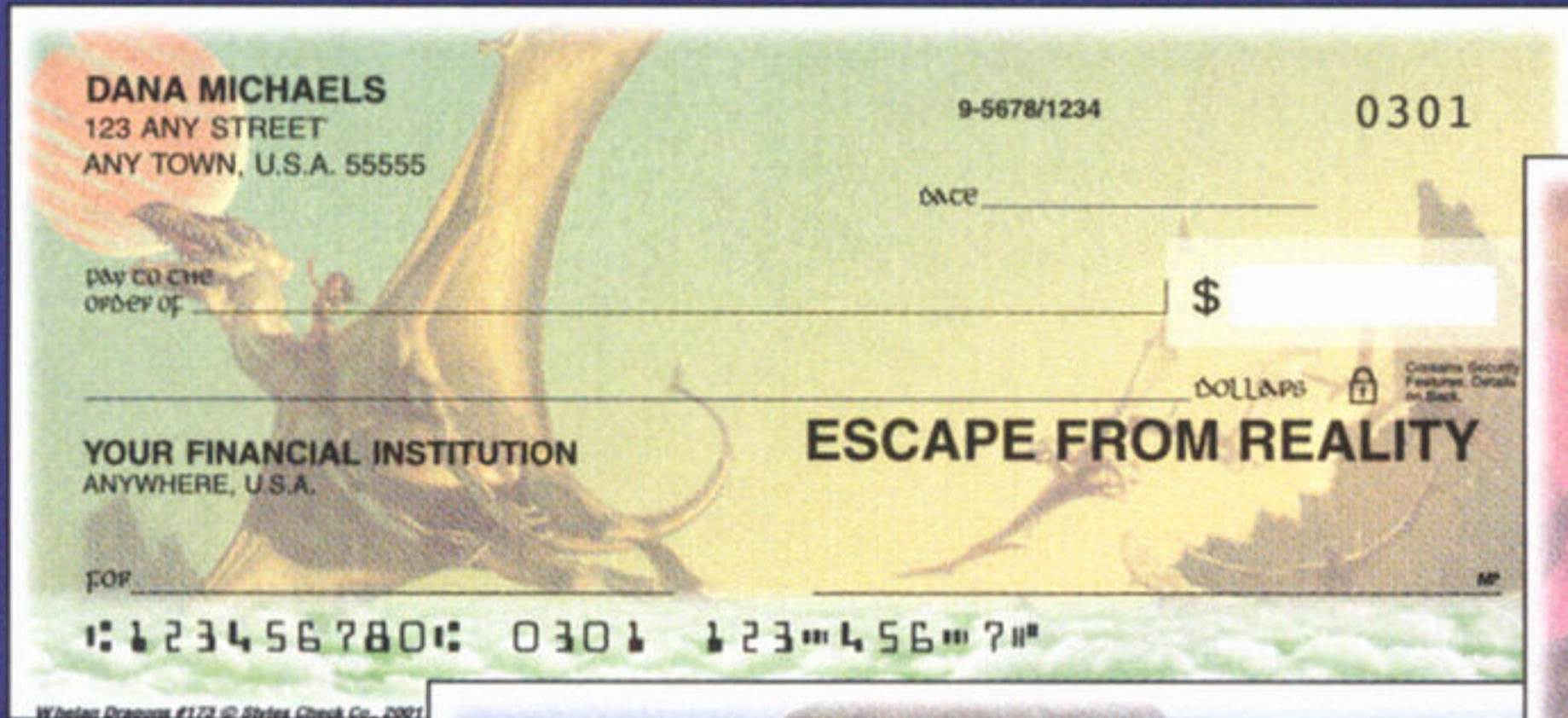
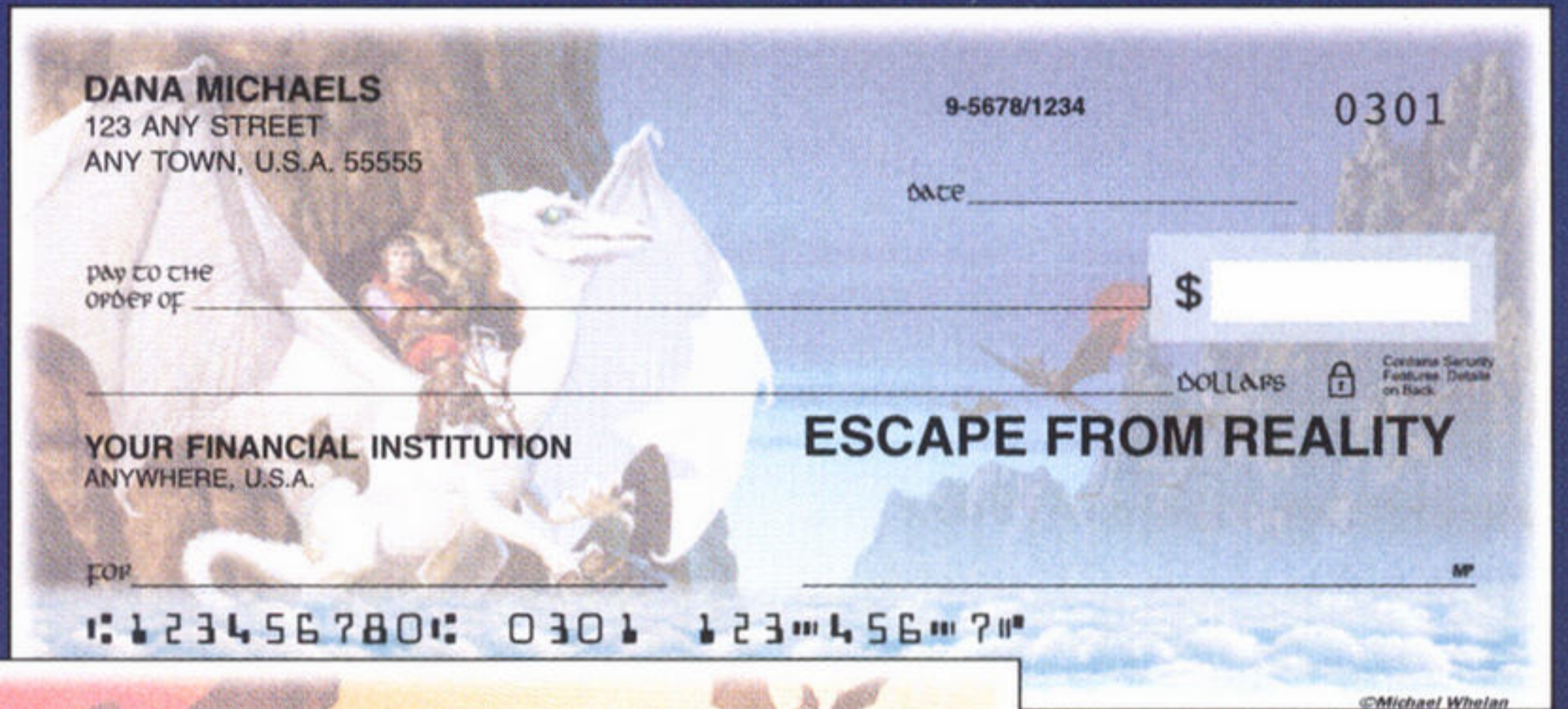
Quinn Abercrombie (played by Christian Bale) studies a dragon egg that was unearthed in a cavern below London.



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water, power, heating, plumbing, electronics—all the comforts of home.

But Quinn's cloistered existence is disrupted when he meets Denton Van Zan (played by Matthew McConaughey of *Contact* and *Edtv*). Van Zan is Quinn's polar opposite. He doesn't believe in hiding. He believes in meeting the dragons head on. He wants to take out the dragons before they destroy what's left of humankind.

Bowman describes what's at the heart of the argument between Quinn and Van Zan. "When there's a crisis, you find out who takes charge and who goes running for cover. I thought, 'This is a movie that puts people in extremely dire straights and tests their metal, and only the strong are going to survive. And when it comes right down to it, what is the right way to go forward?' It's a philosophical question about saying, 'Look, the big shark is just too big. I can't jump in the water and kill the shark that's eating all the surfers. You're going to need an army to kill that shark.' Well, there's no armies left. 'So I'm just gonna stay in the boat, and maybe he'll just go away.' That's Quinn's philosophy.

"Van Zan's philosophy is, 'I'm gonna get the biggest, sharpest knife I can find. And I'm gonna figure out his weak spot, then I'm gonna go kill the son of a bitch.' And Quinn says, 'Good luck. You'll never come back. And we're still going to have the shark, and you'll be dead, so what's the point?' And Van Zan's point is, 'Because at least I'm going to try. And if I don't make it, then hopefully somebody will step in my footsteps, because, darn it, we can't be losing all the surfers.' That was the interesting recipe that I found was a good setting for a fun movie.

"When I first read the script," Bowman continues, "I was fascinated by the central idea. What attracted me to it the most was the attempt to put it into a realistic circumstance—not wizards and warlocks and magic or flying horses—but what if this was real? I'm not so much saying that dragons are real as I am finding a metaphor or a manifestation for fear.

"Dragons, certainly in science fantasy and mythology, are all about a representation of fear and Satan and making you doubt yourself and hesitate. If there's any message in the movie at all, it's that you can't let fear make your decisions for you, because you'll find that they'll all be based on negative emotions and doubts, as opposed to pursuing the things you really want. It's much like the [Joseph] Campbell mythology, where the hero is reluctant to go off and chase his dreams. He'd rather hang around and play video games as opposed to going off and becoming something greater than himself by following his dreams.

"And it's usually some cataclysmic event that causes him to change his mind, much like in *The Searchers*: when they find the family burned they decide to go after the Indians, who are most likely going to kill them. It's Luke Skywalker going back and seeing his burned family—that's what makes him decide



*The war with the dragons brings about an apocalypse on Earth.*

to become a Jedi knight. It's an unfortunate circumstance that something horrible has had to happen for you to realize what you should have been doing the whole time. Because if he can become a Jedi knight, then he could always have become a Jedi knight—it just took a little cold shower to wake him up.

"The interesting thing about dragons—for some reason, I've been a fan of them my whole life—is that there is an oppressive behavior that's caused if you feel, 'Oh, if I go out and I try something that's risky and I fail, then I'll be a failure, and I don't want to be a failure.' And then people tend not to take risks or try new things."

The Campbell mythology Bowman talks about is the work of Joseph Campbell, the late expert on myths from a wide variety of cultures, present and past. Campbell wrote scads of books on the subject. While his best-known book is probably *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell may be more widely known for the PBS series in which he was interviewed by Bill Moyers. The Campbell mythology is nothing new to Hollywood. George Lucas studied Campbell's work while planning the original *Star Wars*. Rumor has it that, for many years now, Disney screenwriters have been using a template based on Campbell's analysis of the hero's journey to develop and write the scripts for Disney's animated movies.

When Bowman talks about Campbell and mythology, it seems to be the stuff he eats, breathes, and dreams. This makes sense, because Bowman has taken his own hero's journey.

"I did all that stuff when I was very young about apprehension and self-doubt and 'I don't know, will I ever be a movie director? It seems so far to go,'" Bowman says. "And then you think, 'Well, if you want it'—and I've always wanted to be a movie director—and if you're willing to at least try and study and do the work and keep pushing and pushing and pushing, the only way you're going to fail

is if you quit, so just don't quit.' I have found those rules to be absolutely bullet-proof.

"Not everybody makes it, but at least there's a journey involved, and the journey is the whole thing. The journey is the experience of saying, 'Along the way of becoming who you want to be, you become who you want to be'—that's part of the journey. Saying, 'Well, here's the five-headed Hydra. I'm scared, I should turn around and forget the golden fleece.' No, you've got to figure out a way to go around it. You've come this far—you're going to turn around now because you're scared? Or there's Medusa in *Clash of the Titans*. She's very, very lethal. You've got to figure out a way to get around her. That's what's great about *Clash of the Titans*, [the monsters are] all metaphors—if the hero is afraid of water, you put a big serpent in the water. 'I'm afraid of the water.' Well, you've got to get to the other side.

"The great thing about the hero's journey in *Jason and the Argonauts* [for instance, is that] they throw all these things in his path to convince him to stop. It's after you've defeated each one of these things that you say, 'I've earned it. I deserve to get the golden fleece. I've become something more than myself because I've persevered.' All those things seemed to ring true to me when I was reading the Campbell stuff and watching the Bill Moyers interviews."

But it wasn't a metaphorical dragon that posed the greatest challenge in making *Reign of Fire*. It was the dragons themselves.

First, Bowman had to design them. It was an eight-month process. "It was endless," he says. "I'm glad nobody told me that when I started, because I probably would have gone, 'Oh, eight months to figure this thing? God made the whole world in seven days!'"

Bowman began with a mental image of what he wanted the dragons to look like. He described it to an artist, who produced a drawing. The next step was figuring out what



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the dragon would look like when it was flying. Was it heavy-footed? Was it graceful? How fast could it move? What was the dragon's self-defense mechanism? How would it walk?

The filmmakers brought a paleontologist into the design process to discuss the wing-span-to-body ratio.

Bowman describes the results. "The paleontologist said, 'If you want it to be very fast and agile, you need big wings and a light body. If you want it to be like a T-rex with little wings, it's going to look a lot goofier, and it won't be able to glide—it'll constantly have to flap its wings.'

"I wanted it to be fast and agile, and so we gave it a 190-foot wing span and 120-foot body length, very serpentine-like.

"I went to the Bible for what the serpent's role, and we all know what that is, and so I based everything on the snake. And the sound that I've given to its breathing is that of the king cobra, which I found to be very, very creepy, unlike a growling T-rex or a roaring Godzilla, they just hiss like snakes. The king cobra has its own very resonant, poisonous-sounding breathing pattern, so we put that in there."

But the dragons posed a two-fold problem. First, although Bowman knew what the dragons looked like, his actors didn't. Bowman could see the movie—including the dragons—in his head, and he had to find a way to communicate his vision.

"It's like having a serial-murderer movie without the serial murderer in the frame," Bowman says. "You're just waiting for it, and people are looking scared, but where's the guy with the knife? What you're seeing out here [on the movie set] are houses and cars, but it's going to be an apocalypse and dragons. Well, it's hard for them to react to that. It is common for actors who work on technical movies to say, 'Gosh, you know you're just standing on green-screen stages looking with your mouth agape, looking scared but you don't even know what's scaring you. You're staring at a green screen.'"

So how did Bowman communicate his vision to the actors during filming?

"We did what's called rough animatics," Bowman says. "The digital lab would give me a very simple representation of the shot that I was doing on set. So you'd have little digital people running up in the frame, and here comes the dragon, and show his path, and when he starts to blow fire and how big the fire is. Just so they'd have some sense of scale. I would also have illustrations—paintings of the dragons. So people could at least, in their own minds, create a moving representation of the dragons, based on all my illustrations and my storyboards and the few animatics



Denton Van Zan (played by Matthew McConaughey) risks everything to beat the dragons before they destroy what's left of humankind.



you had. That's how you do it. And you've got to have a little faith."

Having a little faith has already paid off. What Bowman likes the most about the movie is the

way the dragons have turned out. "It's coming off as very realistic and original and plausible," Bowman says. "The dragons look as real or more so than I ever could have hoped. The animators are coming through with flying colors. There are enough complicated shots that they're winning on a number of levels in terms of flight, believability, characteristics, attitude. I think that's the other interesting thing, to take a digital creation and make the audience believe that it has attitude and personality. It can be angry. That's the fun thing: It's just a bunch of dots stuck together, but you believe it's a real thing. I'm very happy with it. It's been a long road, but it's going to work out in the end."

Ironically, *Reign of Fire* was so far along in production that the box-office success of *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* had no real impact in helping to get it made. Instead, Bowman relied on his *X-Files* experience. "That was what gave me the tools to tell this kind of story, because of its absurd concepts. We did that a lot on *The X-Files*—how do you create a realistic environment with ridiculous characters like aliens, little green guys, running around? It's all based on tone and the importance of three-dimensional characters who have hopes and dreams and wishes and fears. And reacting the way that real people would. It's all in the credibility of the reactions and in the lives of the characters. I could say, 'OK. These are real people. These people are just like me. And if I lived in that world, I'd feel the same way.' That's how you implore the audience's willingness to suspend their disbelief. I'm not saying the dragons are

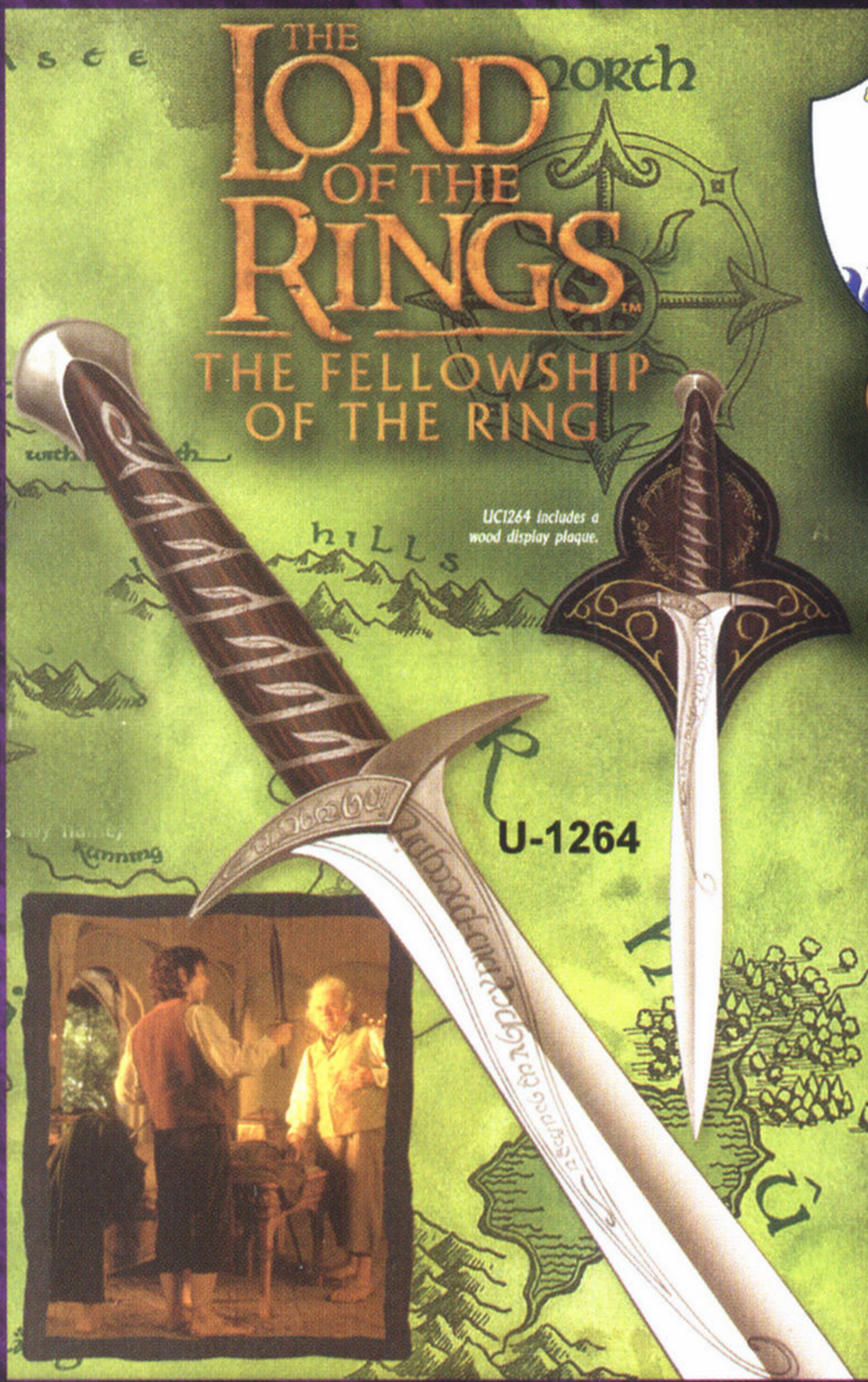
real, I'm saying the people are real. And this is how real people would live under these circumstances—you have to figure all that stuff out. Just having the confidence to know that I'd done it so many times, that I thought, 'OK, I know what the tone needs to be. I know how to tell the story. I just need to know how much money I have, and how big or small the movie can be.' But certainly I've always been a fan of *Night Stalker* and *Twilight Zone* and *Night Gallery*, where you take impossible notions and make them realistic."

Fantasy fans take note: Rob Bowman is keenly interested in making fantasy movies. Here, he shares his thoughts about both the current state and future opportunities for fantasy: "I thought there could be another resurgence for these kinds of stories. There was the Harryhausen thing in the fifties and sixties, there was Lucas and Spielberg in the mid- to late seventies. And we got back to lots of cops and robbers and serial murderers. There's a whole genre of movies that's kind of asleep right now. And with technology and the time it's been since there's been something of this kind, this might be the right time to make this movie. They can make photo-real creatures. I've always loved dragons, and castles are cool, so maybe let's give it a try. And then *Lord of the Rings* came out, and *Harry Potter* came out, and I thought, 'OK, there's an appetite for this kind of fantastic filmmaking. Fantastic ideas, fantasy, mythology, all this fun stuff."

"If nobody goes to see it, they're not going to make these kinds of movies anymore. You need these size budgets to exploit the tools, exploit the technology, but if they don't sell, if people don't like them, then it's going to go away.

"If we can get some return on the investment, then there will be more movies like this to come, because I think there are a lot more stories to tell." ♣





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## Of mud and man: Creation myths connect humans and clay.

*Thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return.*  
—Genesis 3:19

One day the scientists decided that mankind no longer needed God, so one of them went to Him, bearing the news. “God,” he said, “we don’t need you anymore. We can do our own miraculous things. We can clone people on our own. So why don’t you just get lost?” God was patient and kind. “Very well,” he replied. “If that is how mankind feels, then let us resolve this with a contest. Let us see who can make a man.” “Sure,” said the scientist, “that’s fine with me.” “But there is one condition,” said God. “We will do this just the way it was done the first time when I created Adam.” “Sure, no problem,” said the scientist. He bent down to grab a handful of dirt. “No, no, no,” said God. “You go get your own dirt.”

One of the most prevalent motifs among myths that explain the origin of humanity (usually the first man) is the image of his creation from the earth. The idea even crosses over into the realm of jokes, like the one above, which has been circulating in the scientific community for quite some time. The humor in the joke is immediately apparent, relying on themes that are quite topical these days. It’s an old joke that has appeared more and more frequently in the e-mail culture and on Internet sites since the human genome project—and, more recently, the controversy over cloning human stem cells—has been prominent in world news.

I’ve always wondered about this connection between humans and earth, even before I was old enough to understand the logic of “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” When I was a child, even before I could speak English, my Korean uncle explained the origin of the human races by referring to the motif of creation from clay: After he made the world, Hananim was lonely, so he decided to make people to keep him company. He took some clay from the earth and formed it into a man, then he baked it until it was done. But the first attempt was a failure; it was overcooked and burned black. So Hananim tried again, and this time he didn’t bake the man long enough, and he came out a sickly white. On the third try, Hananim got it right and baked the man perfectly, making him a golden yellow, which is the color of Asians.

This explanation did not jibe with the other creation story I learned later, which was the biblical account in Genesis, nor did it fit with the scientific explanation, which I learned even later, but it did introduce me to the connection between humans and clay quite early in life when children have the

leisure to ponder such questions at length. I played away from home quite a lot, in various parts of town and in the hills, and I did more than my share of experimentation. I did find, for example, that you couldn’t really make people out of just any dirt. Sandy dirt and regular mud never retained their shapes and couldn’t really be formed, but a certain kind of mud, namely clay, would hold its shape while it was wet and then harden when it dried. Some clays cracked and some did not, depending on their texture and color. Later, I saw many different types of clay when I visited a ceramics factory, and



Illustration by Web Bryant

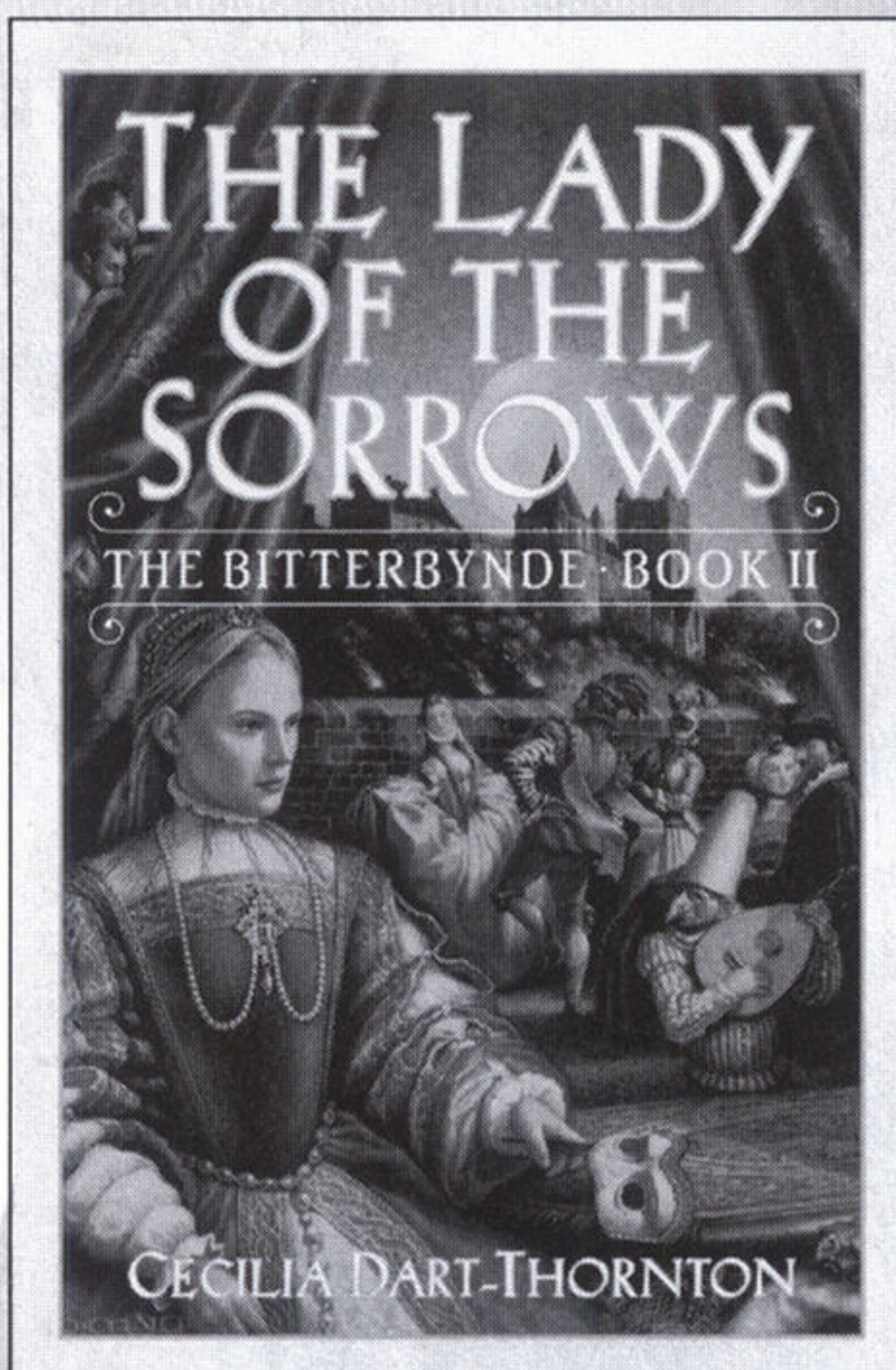
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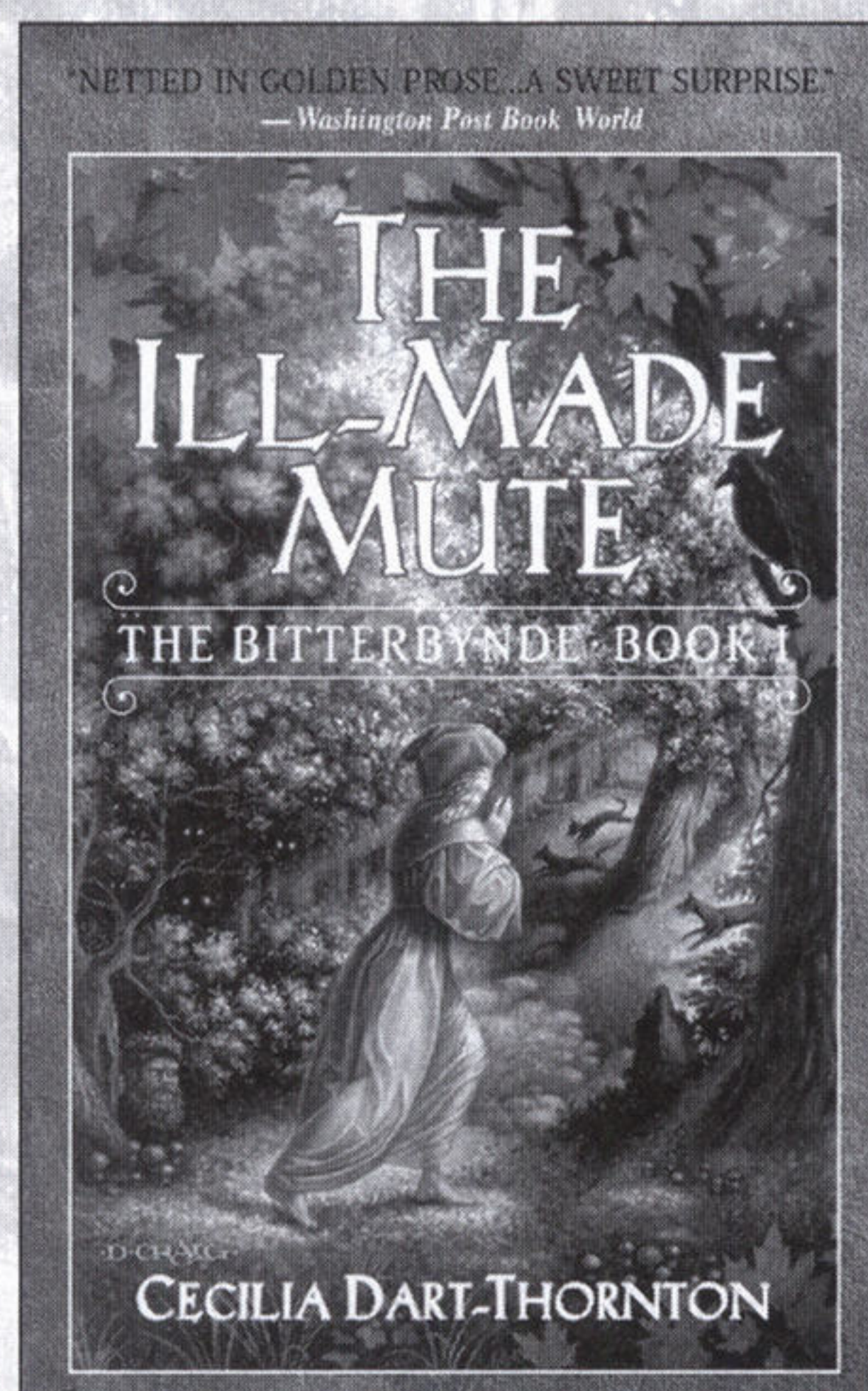


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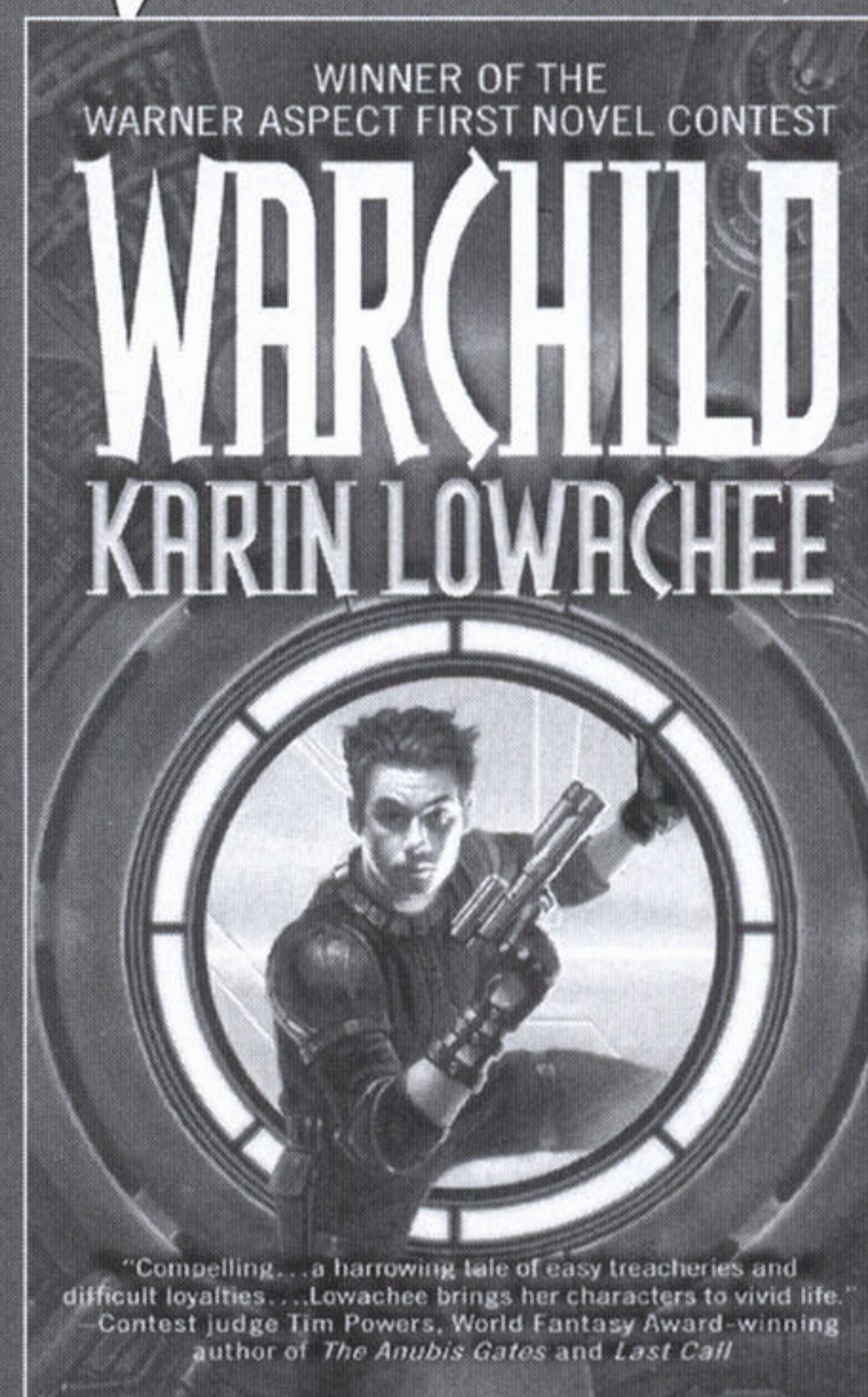
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even later, when I finally attended an American school, I was delighted by the Modeline brand of modeling clay, which became my favorite toy, much to my mother's annoyance. In the hot summers, I would store my creations—mostly dinosaurs and monsters—in our refrigerator. (I was never a Play Doh user.)

So what is this connection between clay and the creation of humans? Why is it so primal and prominent? The question struck me again not too long ago when I reread the story of the Golem of Prague to my daughter from Peter Sis's book, *The Three Golden Keys*. There was something about it that preoccupied me because it brought up another connection I hadn't really noticed before, but which promised to be interesting. So I decided to do some research. I started out by trying to find some fundamental and logically coherent connection between clay and the creation of humans. What I found was far more than just confirmation of a strong mythological association between men and mud.

### Men Out of Mud

When you consider the connection between clay and the creation of humans from a commonsensical point of view, there are good explanations. For example, clay is something from which humans can create things ranging from ceramics to figures of people, so it would be logical to project that association back onto an anthropomorphic god figure and its creation of the earth and humanity. The ability to construct artifacts out of various materials, among which clay was one of the first, is a feature that distinguishes "civilized" peoples from "savages," and if the gods are even more advanced than humans, then they should certainly be able to work clay better than mere mortals (and thereby the motif of the clay coming to life).

Clay and mud are also associated with fertility because they are earth mixed with water, and we tend to associate fertility with creation. Clay figures, particularly those made of terra cotta, were revered in ancient cultures; in the tomb of China's first emperor, Qin Xihuangdi, there are thousands of life-sized substitute people who were to be his subjects in the afterlife—they were all made of clay. I could go on, but I think the point is clear.

A quick survey of myths from around the globe regarding the creation of humans also gives a sense of the prominence of this motif. We can quickly spin the globe from east to west: In China, one of the creation myths describes the first humans being formed of yellow clay (for the Christian-influenced Miao in southern China, the first man is called Patriarch Dirt, because that is what God made him from). In Babylonian mythology, Marduk, chief among gods, creates humans out of his blood mixed with clay from the earth. In one Egyptian creation myth, the first man is made of clay on a potter's wheel. For the Magyars (the inhabitants of present-day Hungary), the sun god Magyar turns himself into a diving

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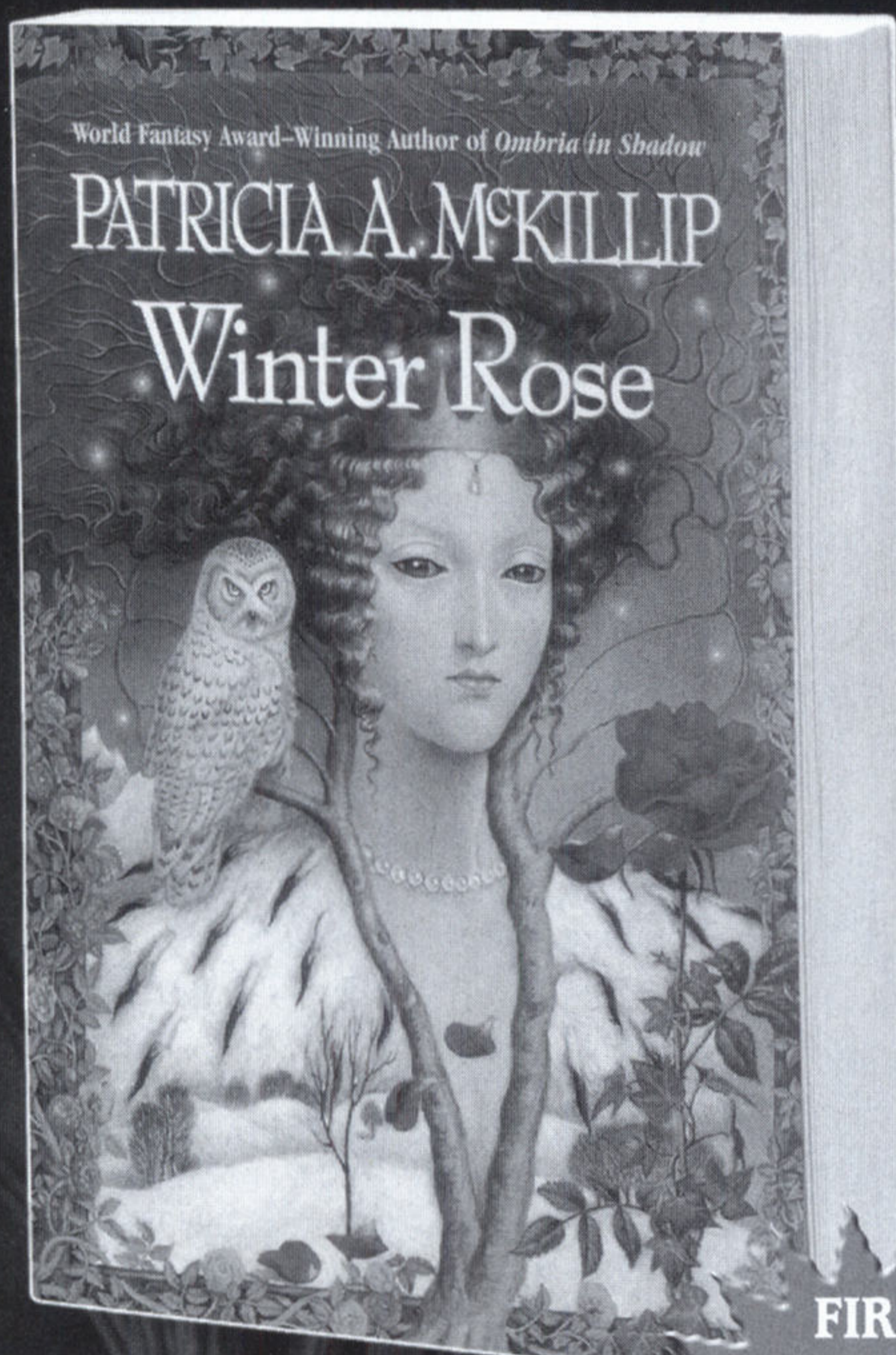
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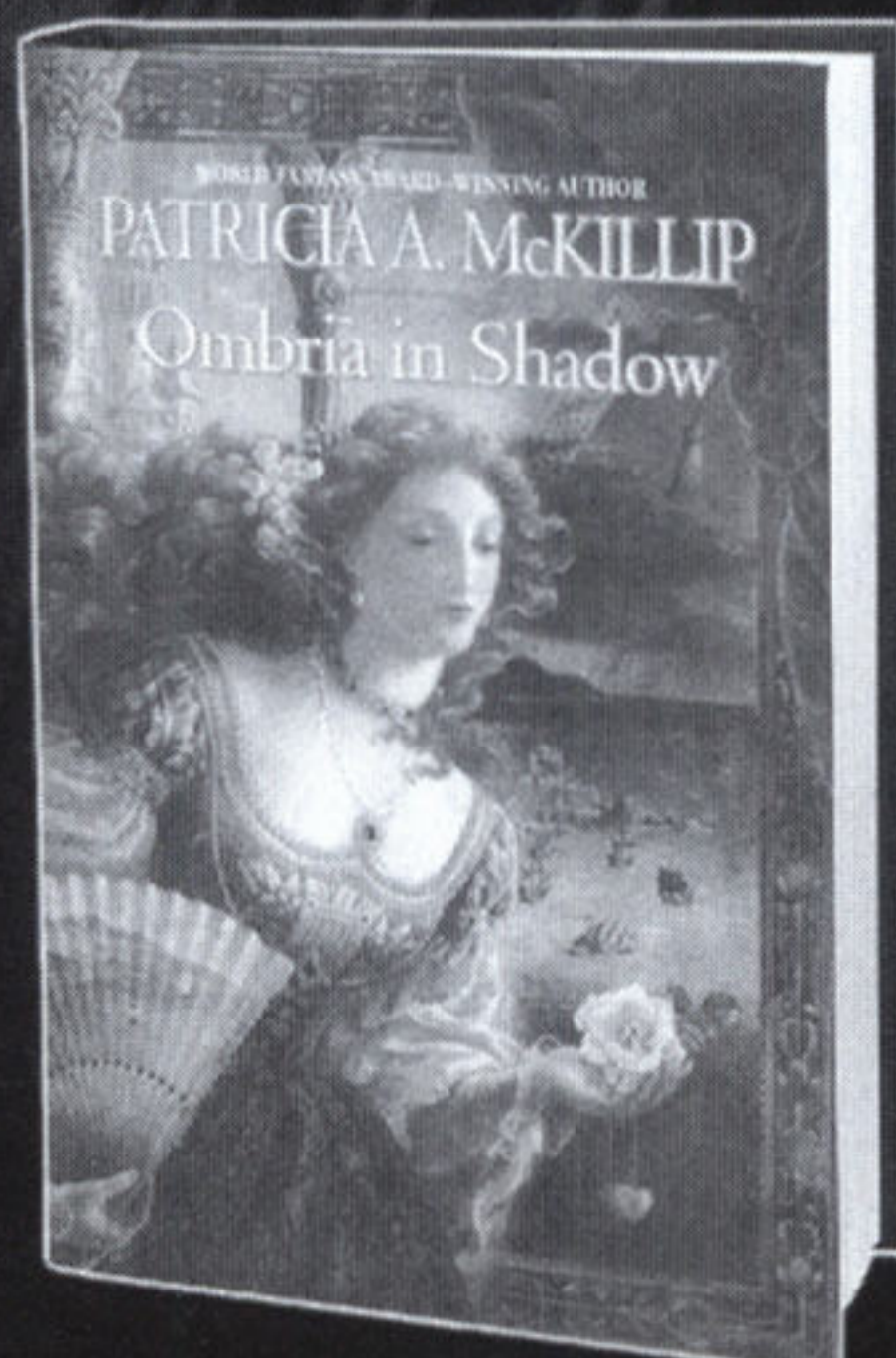
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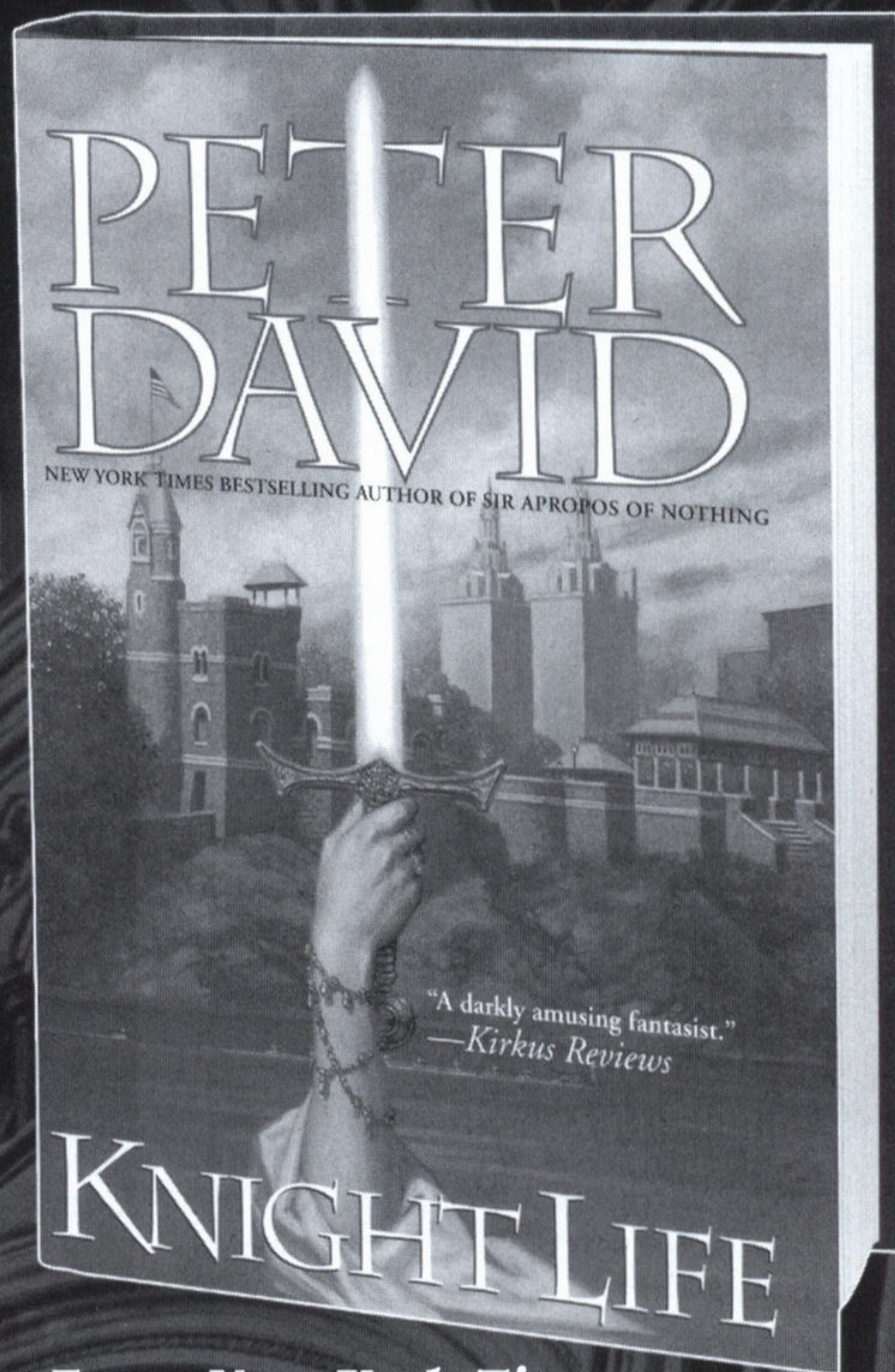
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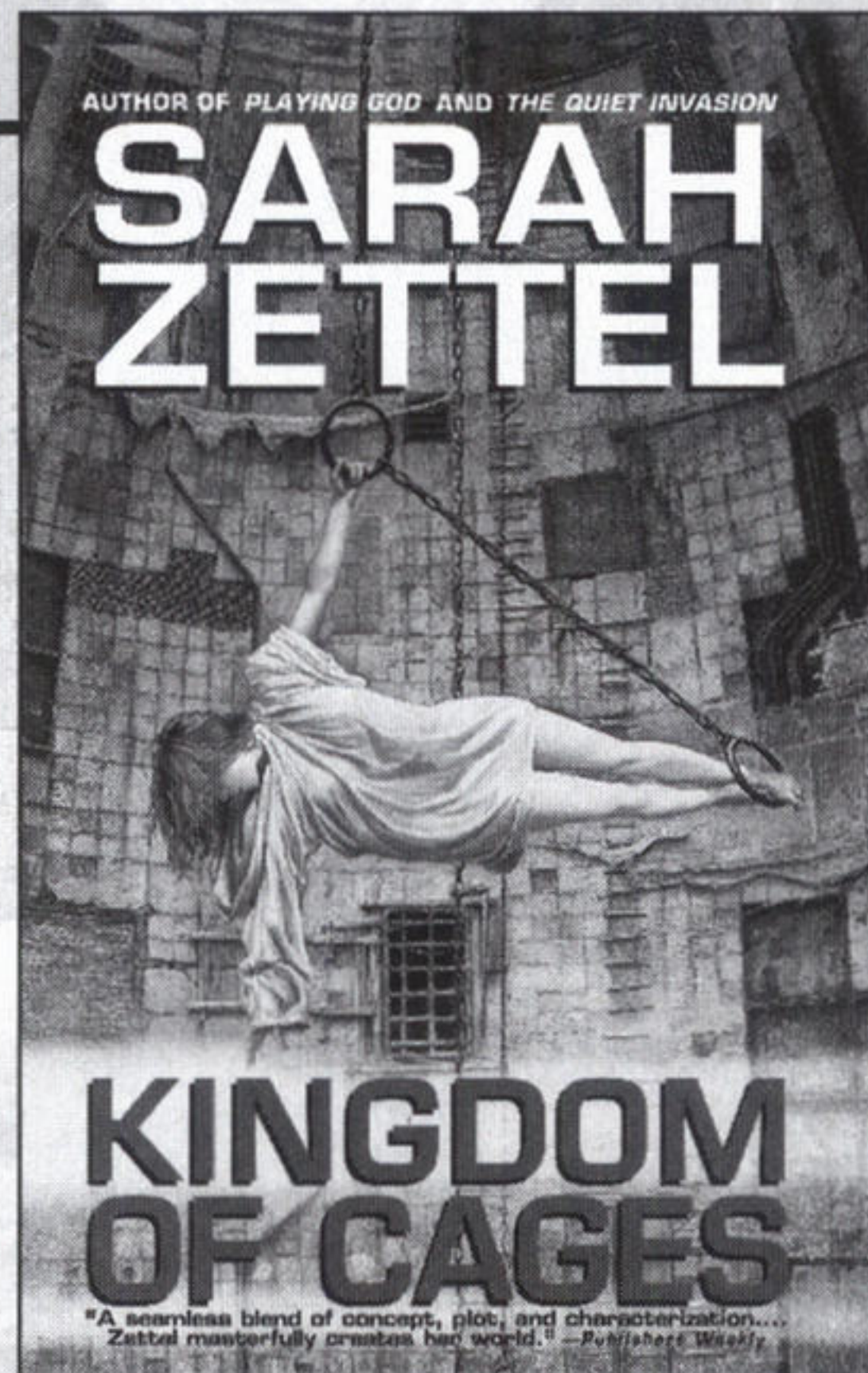
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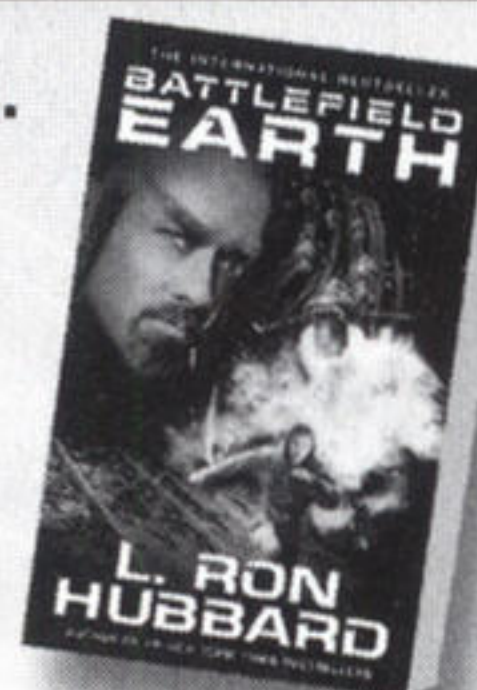
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duck and makes humans out of sand and a seedy muck from the ocean floor.

Now across the Atlantic to the New World: For the Salish, Old-Man-in-the-Sky created humans out of clay; because he formed them in the dark, he did not realize that some of the clay was red and some white, and that is why there are red and white people in the world. For the tribes in the mountains of Southern California, the creator Chinigchinich made humans out of white clay from the shore of a lake. In one Mayan myth, the two creators, Tepeu and Gucumatz, make the first humans out of clay because their earlier creations could not praise them. Other Native American tribes have myths that describe the entire world being made of mud from the back of a great turtle, humans emerging from under the earth, the earth rising up from the sea already inhabited. In Australia, among the Aborigines, one tribal creation myth describes how the Dreamtime Elders made themselves out of clay and then brought the rest of the world into existence by singing.

From Asia to the subcontinent, to Europe and Africa, then to the New World and even among the isolated Pacific cultures—in every inhabited part of the globe, one finds that the creation of humans out of clay is a prominent motif in local mythologies. One could argue that the human connection with clay is universal or suggest that the motif originated in one culture and then was dispersed around the globe and leave it at that. But that hardly does the motif justice.

### Holy Mud

Let us look next at familiar turf from an unfamiliar perspective, beginning with God's creation of Adam in the Bible. On the Internet, I found a Web site (<http://members.aol.com/wheragod/messages/dust.htm>) maintained by Lee Adams Young in which he summarizes what he believes to be a more accurate rendition of the epigraph at the beginning of this column. He refers to Theodore Hiebert's analysis in *The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (Oxford University Press, 1995):

"Dust" is a translation of the Hebrew word *apar*, which in this context is better translated as "dirt" or "soil." For the farmer, dirt and soil signify something of great value. The Hebrew name Adam is a pun on the Hebrew word *adama*, which is commonly translated "earth," "ground," or "land," but in Genesis 2-3 is better rendered "arable land."

Hiebert's revised translations are as follows: "God formed the man (adam) out of the dirt (apar) from the arable land (adama), and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man (adam) became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). Hiebert's rendition of God's curse on Adam is also less harsh in his retranslation: "By the sweat of your nostrils you [Adam] will eat bread until you return to the arable land (adama), for you were taken from it; you are dirt (apar) and to dirt (apar) you will return"



(Genesis 3:19).

Hiebert's point is to distinguish our notion of dust from a particular kind of dirt. Adam, through the wordplay in his name, is connected not just to dirt, but to dirt which can be cultivated, i.e., dirt from which something can be created. What Hiebert doesn't mention is that in Hebrew, *a-dam* can also be read as "of blood" or "of clay" (most likely red clay), and so it is associated with earth and the creative potential in a complex network of possible meanings.

The Koran, whose original sources overlap in many respects with the Bible, is actually more vivid and explicit about the creation of man from the earth. In a move to authenticate the scientific accuracy of what is usually read as figurative imagery, to prove the Koran to be revealed truth, Islamic scholars have consulted numerous scientists. On the Web site called "Stages in the Creation of Man" (<http://www.eastlondon-mosque.org.uk/iaw99/magarticles/creation.htm>) I found the following, which I quote at length because it is fascinating material:

"We asked Professor Moore to give us his scientific analysis of some specific Qur'aanic verses and prophetic traditions ... pertaining to his field of specialization. Professor Moore is ... Professor Emeritus of Anatomy and Cell Biology at the University of Toronto.... He wondered how the Prophet Muhammad (salallahu 'alaihi wa sallam), fourteen centuries ago, could describe the embryo and its development phase in such detail and accuracy, which scientists have come to know only in the last thirty years....

"Allah says in the Qur'aan [Koran] about the stages of the creation of man: 'Man we did create from a quintessence (of clay); Then we placed as (a drop of) sperm (nutfah) in a place firmly fixed; Then we made the sperm into a clot of congealed blood ('alaqah); Then of that clot we made a (fetus) lump (mudghah); then we made out of that lump bones and clothed the bones with flesh; then



Paul Wegener starred in and directed *The Golem: How He Came into the World* in 1920.

we developed out of it another creature' (Qur'aan 23:12-14).

"The Arabic word 'alaqah has three meanings. The first meaning is 'leech.' The second is 'a suspended thing.' The third meaning is 'a blood clot.'

"In comparing the fresh-water leech to the embryo at the 'alaqah stage, Professor Moore found a great similarity between the two. He concluded that the embryo during the 'alaqah stage acquires an appearance very similar to that of leech....

"The second meaning of the word 'alaqah is 'a suspended thing,' and this is what we can see in the attachment of the embryo during the 'alaqah stage to the uterus (womb) of the mother. The third meaning of the word 'alaqah is 'a blood clot.' It is significant to note, as Professor Moore stated, that the embryo during the 'alaqah stage goes through well

known internal events, such as the formation of blood in closed vessels.... During the 'alaqah stage, the blood is caught within closed vessels and that is why the embryo acquires the appearance of a blood clot, in addition to the leech-like appearance....

"Professor Moore also studied the embryo at the mudghah (chewed-like substance) stage. He took a piece of raw clay and chewed it in his mouth, then compared it with a picture of the embryo at the mudghah stage. Professor Moore concluded that the embryo at the mudghah stage acquires the exact appearance of a chewed-like substance."

Although it devotes much more particular attention to the issue of ontology, the Koran, like the Bible, brings up the same fundamental set of associations: God's creation of a human with blood and clay.

## The Golem

The more one looks at the parallels between creation myths and current scientific knowledge, the more striking and eerie they become. This is particularly apparent when investigating the Jewish folklore regarding the Golem.

In "The Golem: A Mute Man of Words," F. Levine gives a good definition of the creature: "A golem, perhaps the best known of the Jewish legends, is an automaton, typically humanoid and typically male, created as the result of an intense, systematic, mystical meditation. The word golem means (or implies) something unformed and imperfect, or a body without a soul.... The best-known tales of the golem concern one Rabbi Yehuda Loew, the Maharal of Prague, who created the mythical being to protect the Jews from blood libels and plots in the late 16th-Century. But golems are ancient lore. "Stories of artificial creations made by Jewish sages appear very early, during the Talmudic era (prior to 500 C.E.). In theological discussions, Adam is described as a golem during the time of his formation, but prior to God blowing life and (more importantly) soul into him. The earliest written story of such a creature occurs in the Babylonian Talmud."

The theory and the method for creating a golem are found in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, a Jewish mystical text (from some time between the 3rd and 6th centuries) also known as "The Book of Creation." According to the *Sefer Yetzirah*, God created the cosmos by using the 10 divine emanations of the Sefirot and the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Levine continues, "Medieval techniques of creating a golem often revolved around a highly complex procedure which required the mystic(s) to recite ... an array of Hebrew alphabet letter combinations and/or various permutations of one or more Names of God."

The final key to golem creation is an activation word, which also serves as a deactivation device. In most versions of the golem story, the word is EMETH (truth) written on the golem's forehead. To deactivate the golem, the Rabbi rubs out the first letter, leav-

## Suggested Readings

Some of the material for this essay comes from the following sources, which you may want to peruse for your own interest.

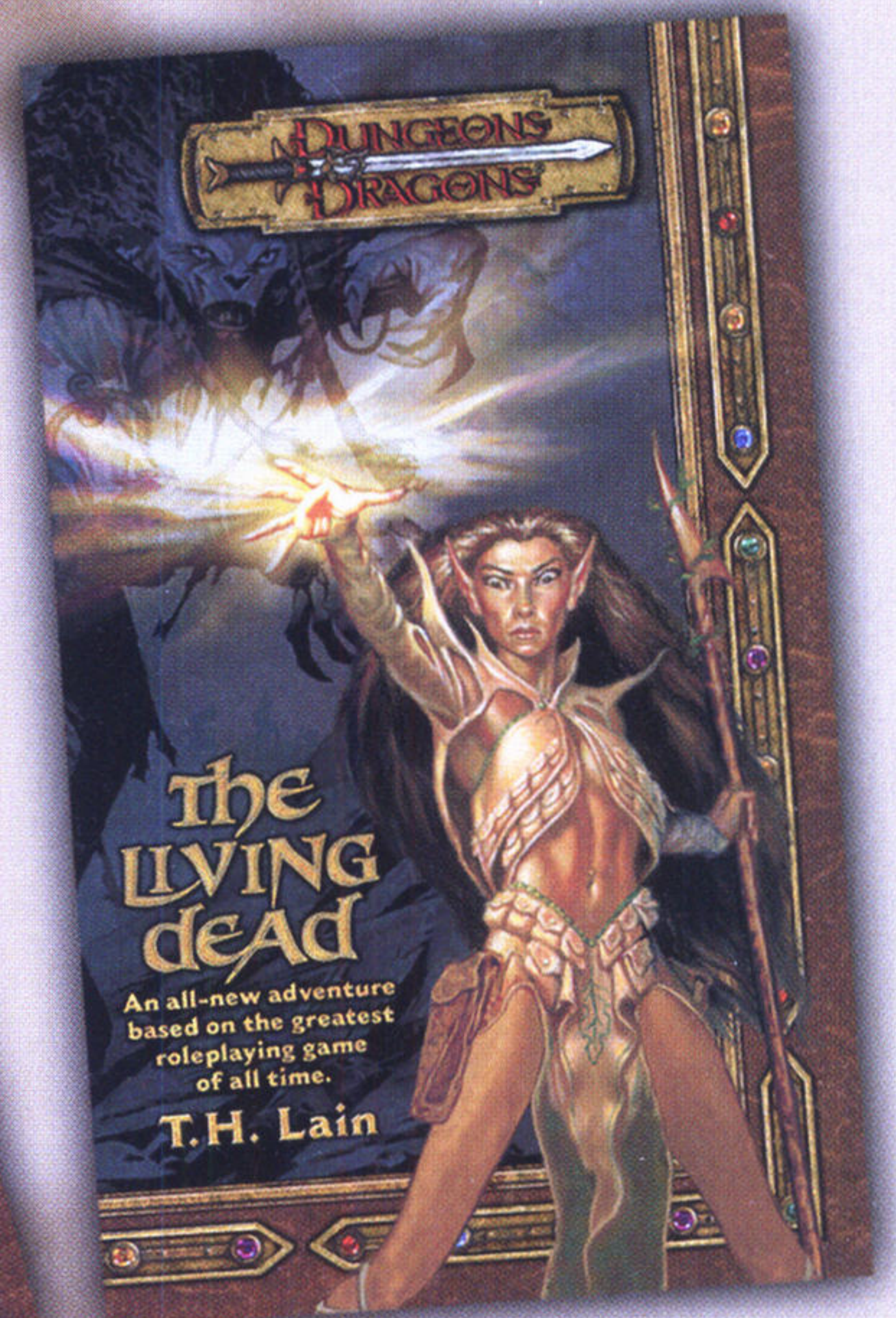
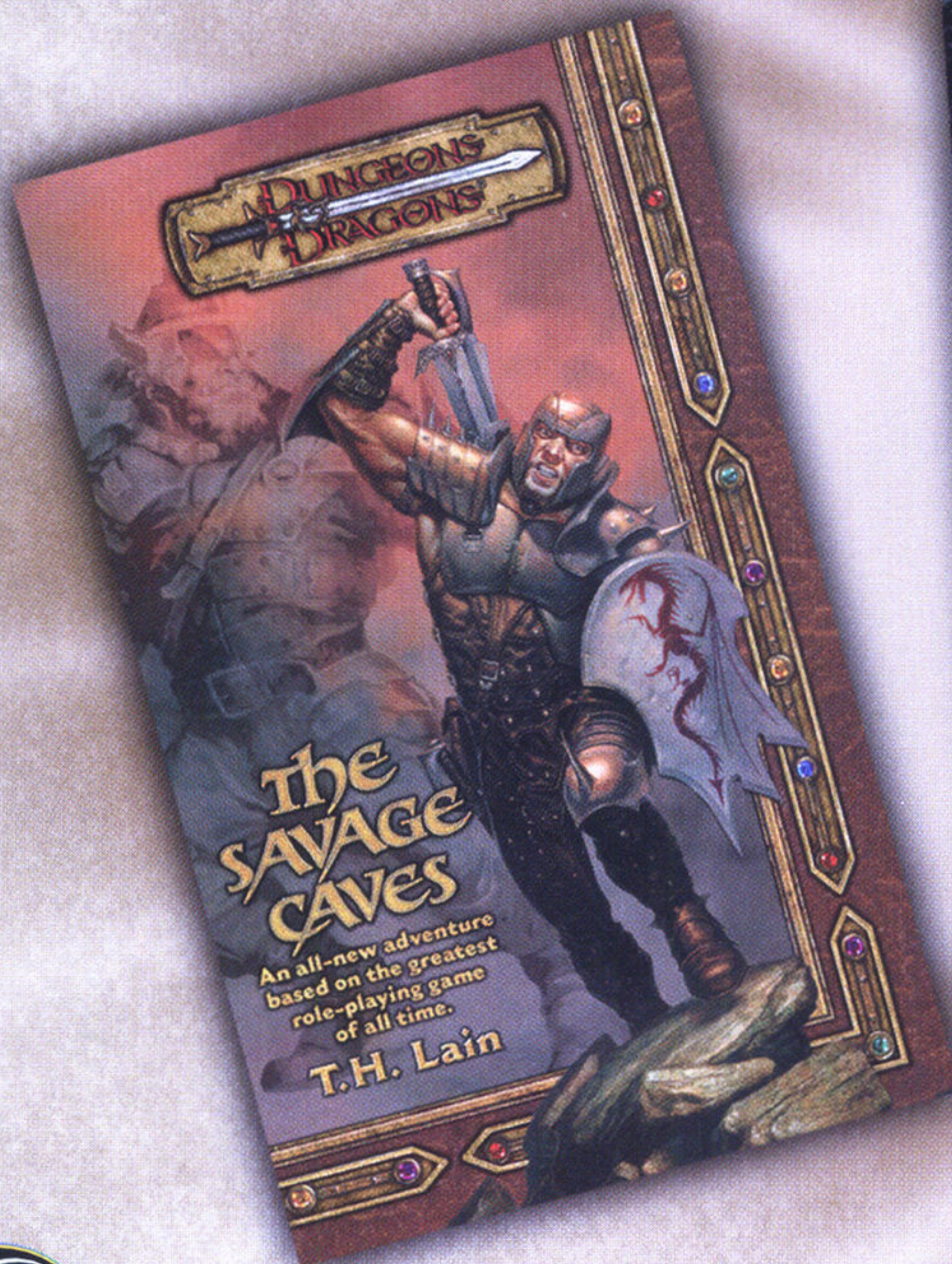
The first is *Genome: The Autobiography of a Species in 23 Chapters* by Matt Ridley. *The Language Crystal: The Complete Solution to Civilization's Oldest Puzzle*, by Lawrence William Lyons, is full of truly brilliant insights, a work of genius and eccentricity. It is a valuable book if you know enough to sort the useful scholarship from the conspiracy theory. F.H. Norton's "Clay: Why It Acts The Way It Does" appeared in *Studio Potter*, Volume 4, Number 2 (Winter 1975/76).

Online, see the following sources: For another version of the "Stages in the Creation of Man," more concisely argued with better graphics, see "Islam Guide: The Quran on Human Embryonic Development" (<http://www.islam-guide.com/ch1-1-a.htm>). "The Golem: A Mute Man of Words" (<http://members.aol.com/fegele/golem00.html>) is part of The Practical Kabbalah site maintained by F. Levine (<http://www.atomick.net/fayelevine/pk/>). Steve Krakowski's essay is part of his "An Ancient Occult Genetic Code" site (<http://ddi.digital.net/~krakowss/code01.htm>). Paddy Carroll's review of *Seven Clues to the Origin of Life* by A.G. Cairns-Smith is at <http://www.nua-tech.com/paddy/cairns.shtml>.



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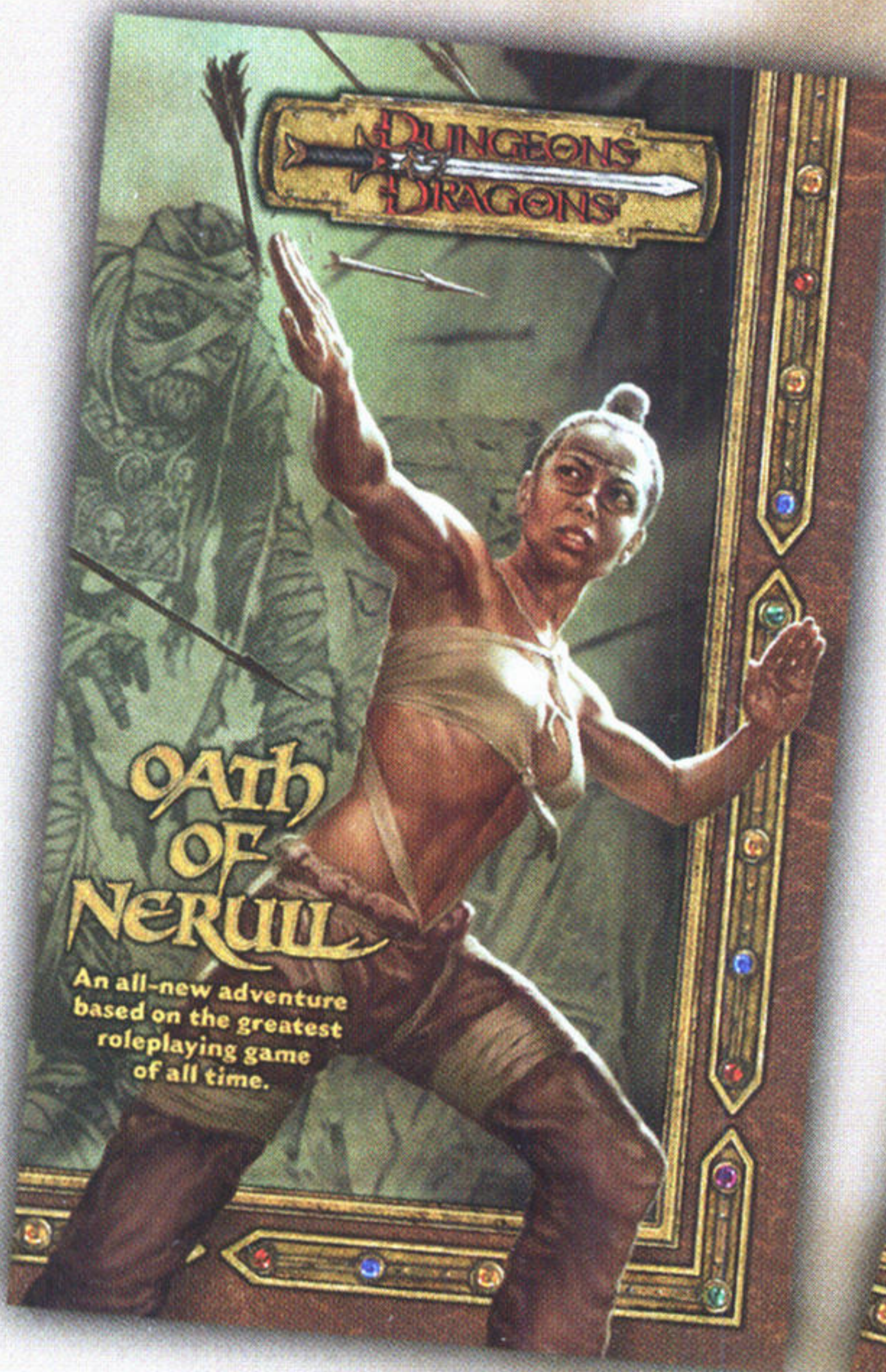
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ing METH (death). There are numerous variants on the activation word, but the one most likely to be the original is ADAM, as one might predict from Jewish creation lore. As I've just shown, ADAM has the layered meanings of "man of blood and clay"; erasing the A would leave DAM, which can be read as "clay" or "blood." (The letter A also signifies an ox, which might be why several golem stories are about the creation of a golem cow.) According to Pennick, the Hebrew A (Aleph) also signifies the Hermetic and Alchemical concept of "As above, so below," thus referring to the parallel creative powers of God and man. Man is God's golem made of clay, and he in turn makes his golem servant of clay.

There are surprising, scientifically relevant reasons for why clay might be the best medium for creating life. In an article called "Clay: Why It Acts The Way It Does," F.H. Norton notes: "If one takes any finely grained non-clay mineral and mixes it with water, a crumbly mass will be produced with almost zero formability. If the same is done with clay, however, there is produced a mass that is readily formed into any desired shape and, most interesting of all, it will retain that shape under the force of gravity. In other words, the clay mass has three unique properties; first, it may be deformed without cracking; second, when the deforming force ceases, the shape will remain fixed; and further, when the clay mass is dried, it has considerable strength."

Clay's unique features, Norton goes on to say, are due to the fact that its molecular structure is that of a hexagonal crystal. This hexagonal structure, it turns out, might be the key to the origin of life. Paddy Carroll, in his review of A.G. Cairns-Smith's *Seven Clues to the Origin of Life*, gives the following summary: "The author goes against most received wisdom by contending that it was inorganic substances—namely, complex forms of clay crystal ... —that provided the essential initial springboard for organic evolution.... Cairns-Smith proposes that organic substances only became alive after being co-opted, organized and supported by a form of 'scaffolding.' This scaffolding was made up of clay crystals, complex forms of which can evolve after a fashion; they used.... organic substances as tools with which to propagate themselves more efficiently. This argument was first put forward by the British crystallographer J.D. Bernal, who wrote the visionary *The World, The Flesh and The Devil*."

In a rather eccentric book called *The Language Crystal*, Lawrence William Lyons points out some of the significance of the number 6. As others have shown, the number 6 is associated with man, particularly the human body, but Lyons takes it a bit further. He quotes from Revelations, "Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is six hundred threescore and six" (13:18), pointing out that "man" here is "anthropos" in the Greek, which refers to all

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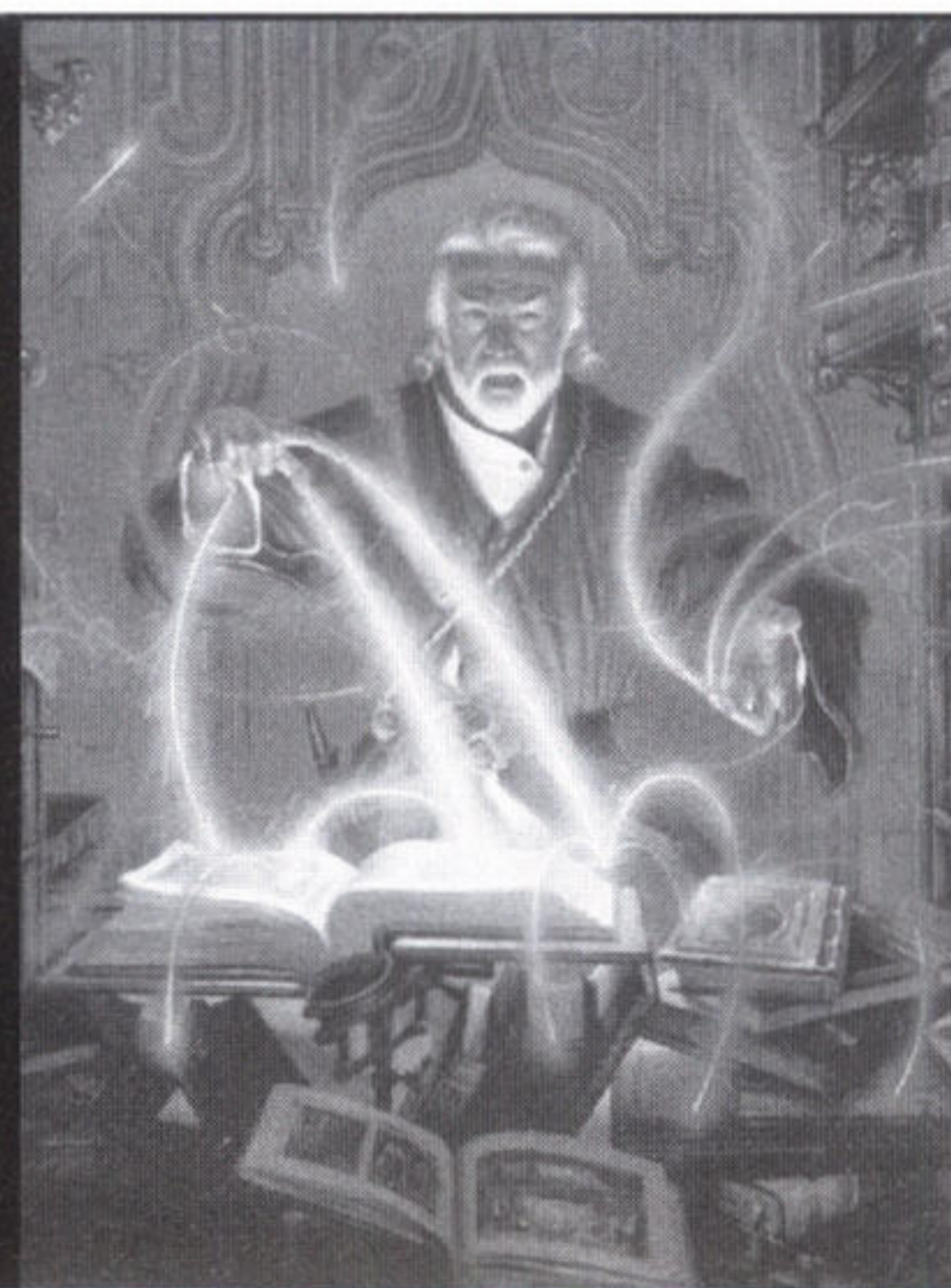
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of mankind. The 666 happens to add up to 18, for which Lyons has an amazing series of meaningful associations; many of them are unfortunately a bit far-fetched and laden with conspiracy theory, but two examples stand out: Water has a molecular weight of 18; glucose has a molecular weight of 180. Both, of course, are absolutely essential to human life.

Lyons also provides a periodic table of the elements showing their crystal structures, and it is interesting to note that more than a third of them are hexagonal; three of the four constituent elements for carbon-based life are hexagonal (carbon, hydrogen, and nitrogen—the other being oxygen). Lyons points out that in the Kabbalah, 18 is the number of life (it also happens to be 6, the number of man, multiplied by 3, the number of the divine Trinity).

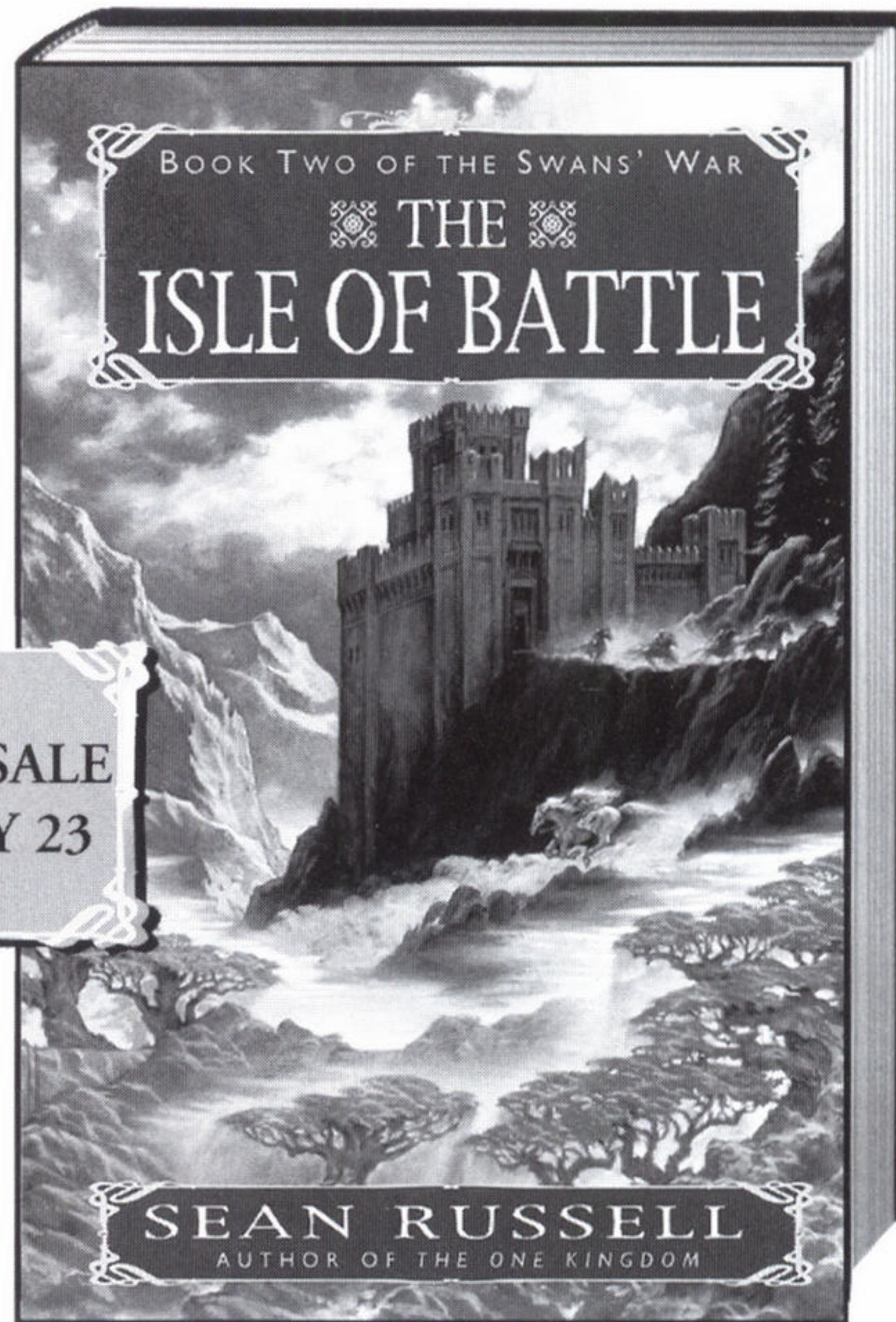
### To the Edges of the Field

Perhaps the numerology and the wordplay I've discussed seem merely to be mystical, but there are numerous approaches to the same problem of meaning. Steve Krakowski, for example, began his investigation by recognizing a potential parallel between coherent numerological systems. In "Interpreting *Sefer Yetzirah* through Genetic Engineering" (<http://ddi.digital.net/~krakowss/code06.htm>) he writes: "A number of years ago I stumbled across a unique similarity of form between the genetic code and a fusion of the Hebrew alphabet with the ancient Chinese divination system of the I Ching; or 'Book of Changes.' I was studying the I Ching when I came across a book that demonstrated an isomorphism between the 64 symbols of the I Ching (called hexagrams or kua) and the 64 codons of the genetic code. I wondered if there might be, among the mystic or occult systems of other cultures, a corresponding set of symbols for the amino acids of the genetic code for which the 64 codons code. I turned to the Hebrew occult system of Qabalah and discovered the *Sefer Yetzirah* or 'Book of Creation.'

"Because the 22 trump cards ... of the Tarot system of divination have Hebrew letters assigned to them, I thought that maybe I could compare the symbols, images, and concepts in the Tarot trumps with the corresponding contents of the I Ching kua. Then, if there are enough similarities, I could assign each of the trumps to a group of I Ching kua. The result would be a Hebrew letter assignment for each amino acid and punctuation codon in the genetic code."

What Krakowski found was an uncanny isomorphism. He continues, "in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, we have a magical text which purports to allow those who understand and use it to create living creatures. This is accomplished using 22 letters which are manipulated like bits of clay into chains that are arranged into complementary parallels and other shapes. This is very similar to scientific descriptions of the activity which takes place within the cells of living things. Scientists use the language metaphor to describe these chemicals

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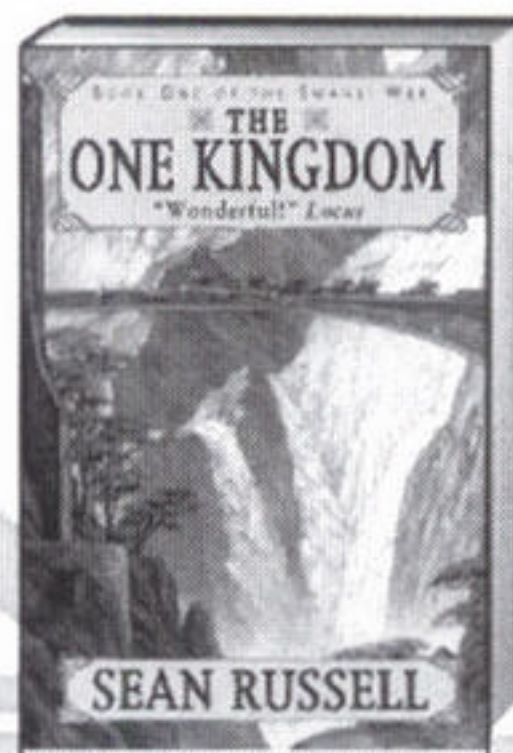


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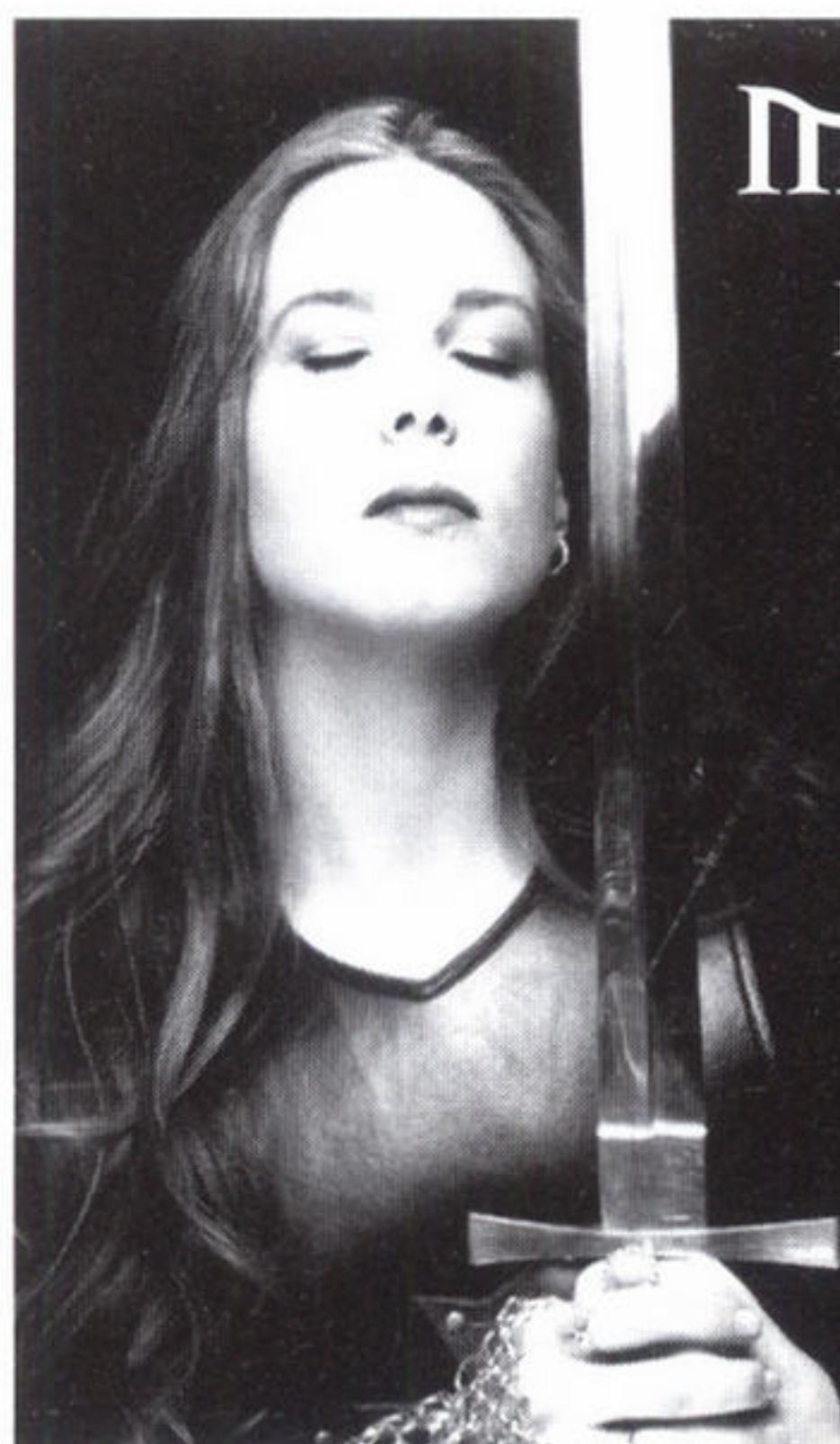
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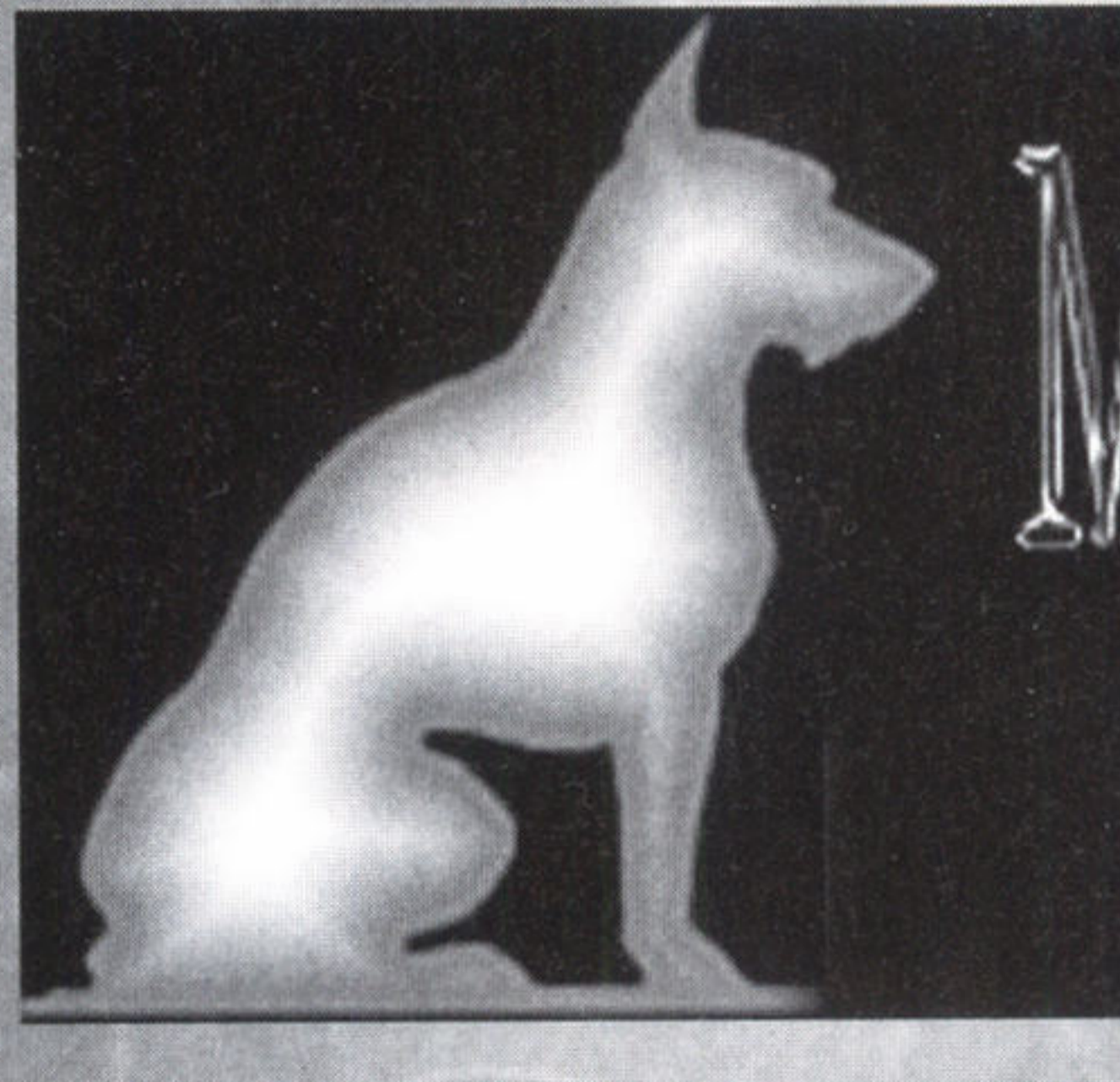
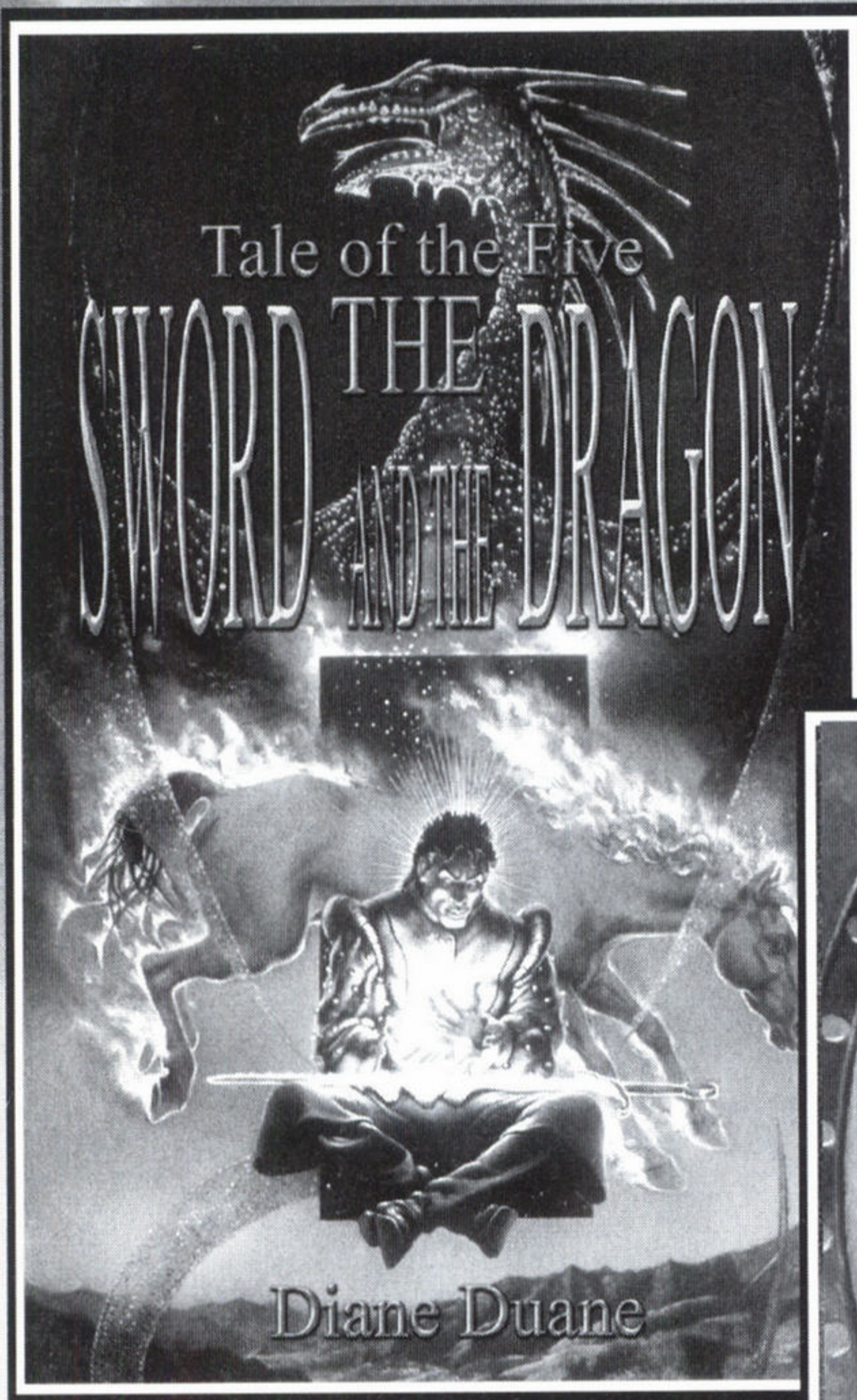
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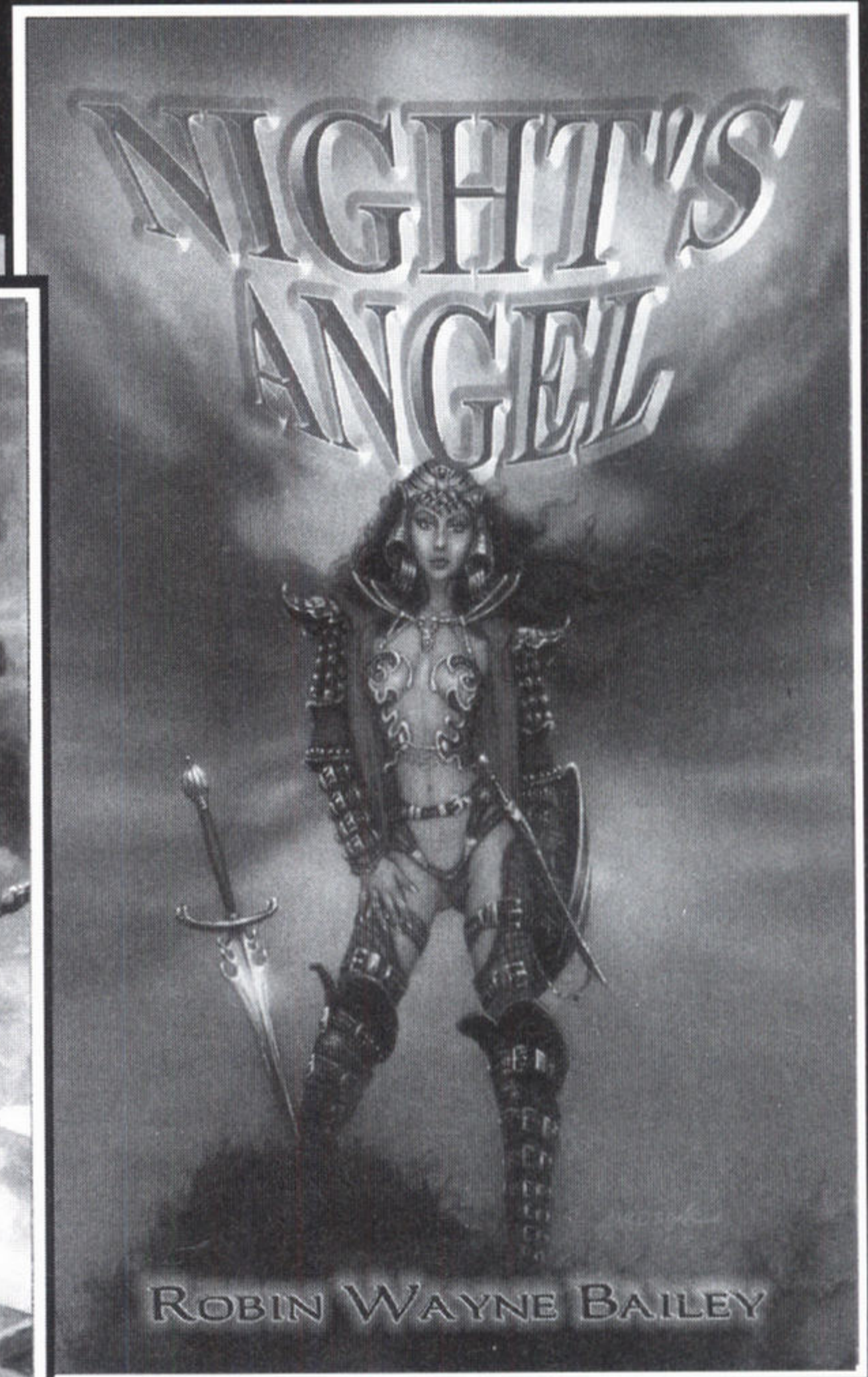
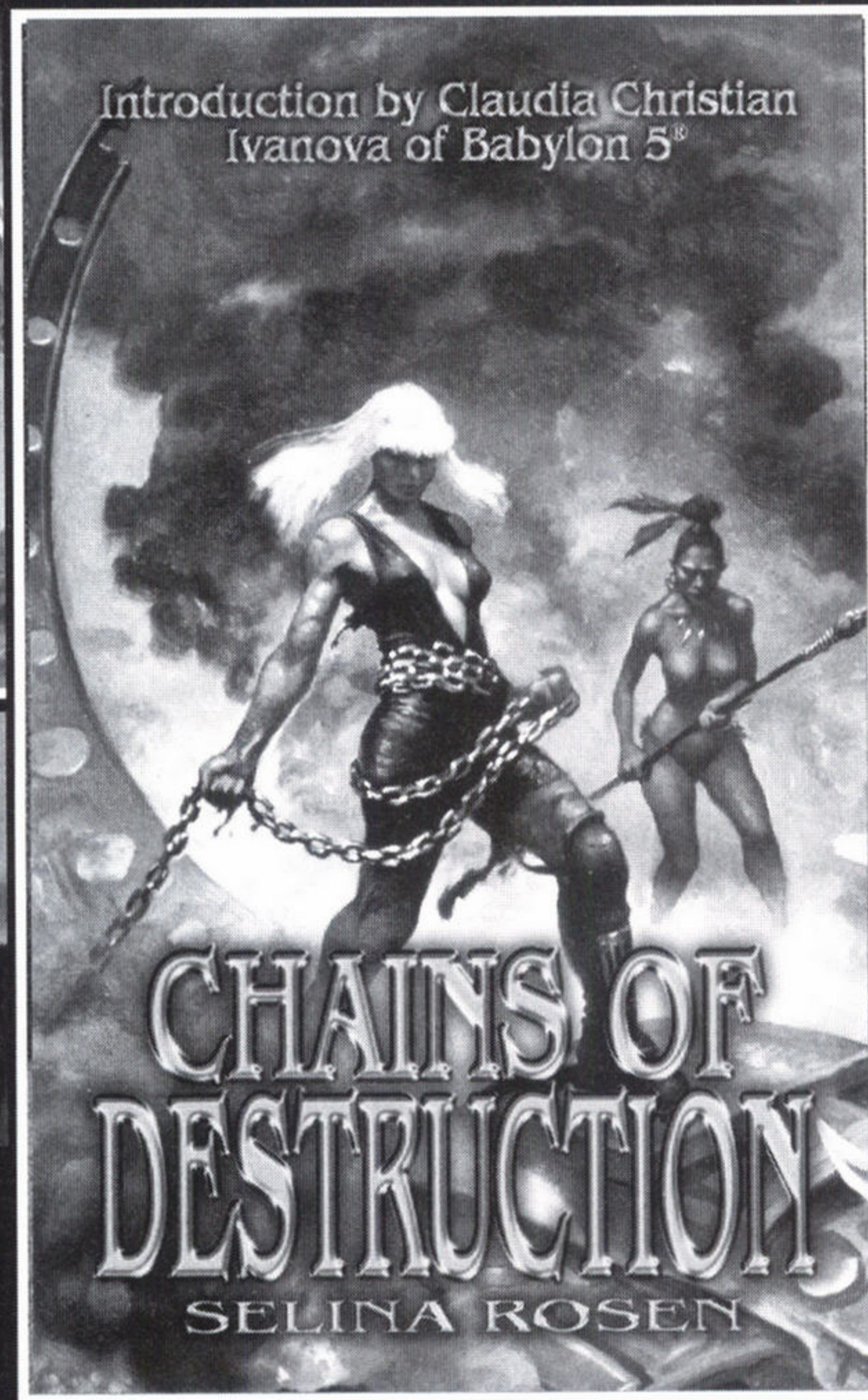
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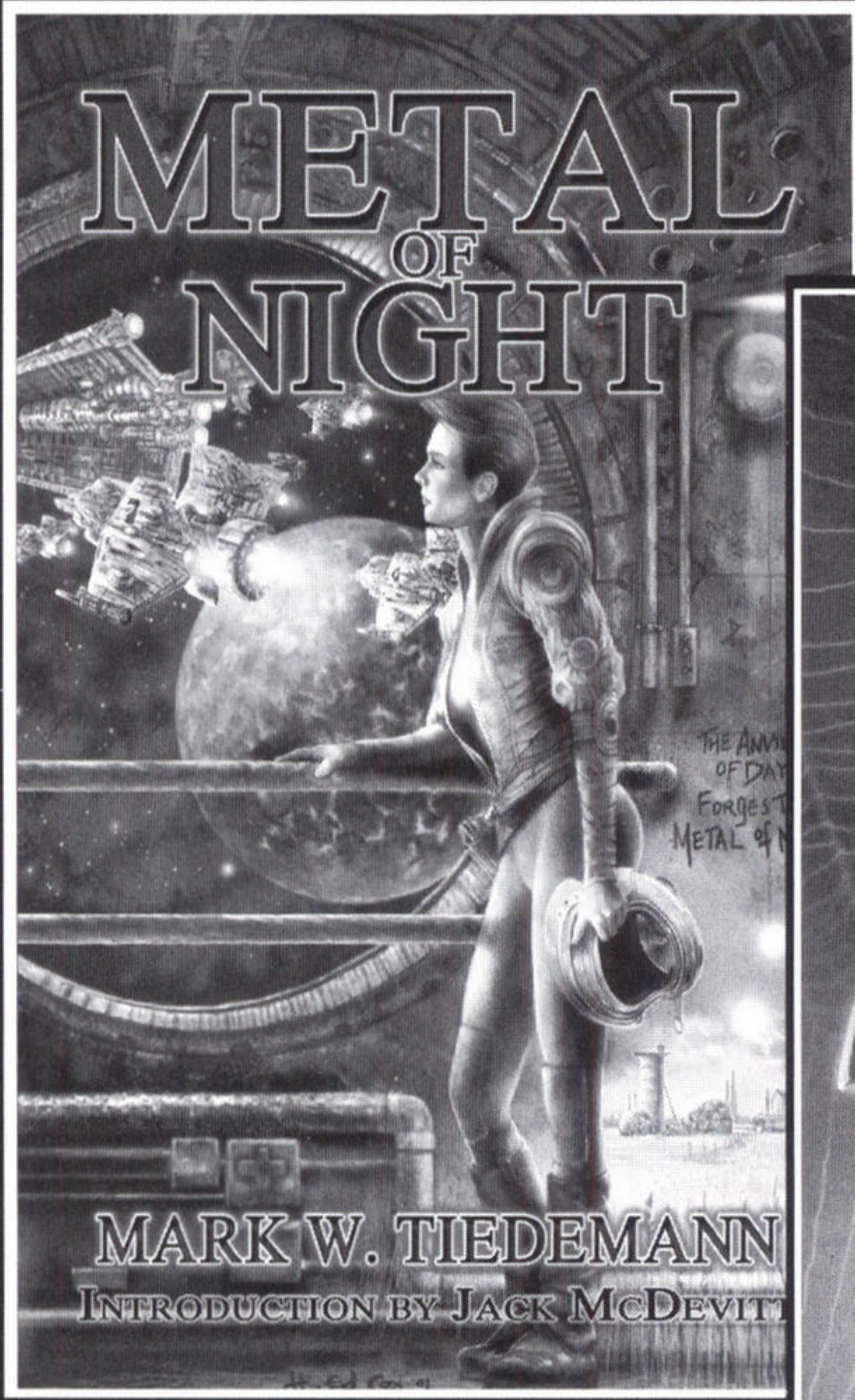
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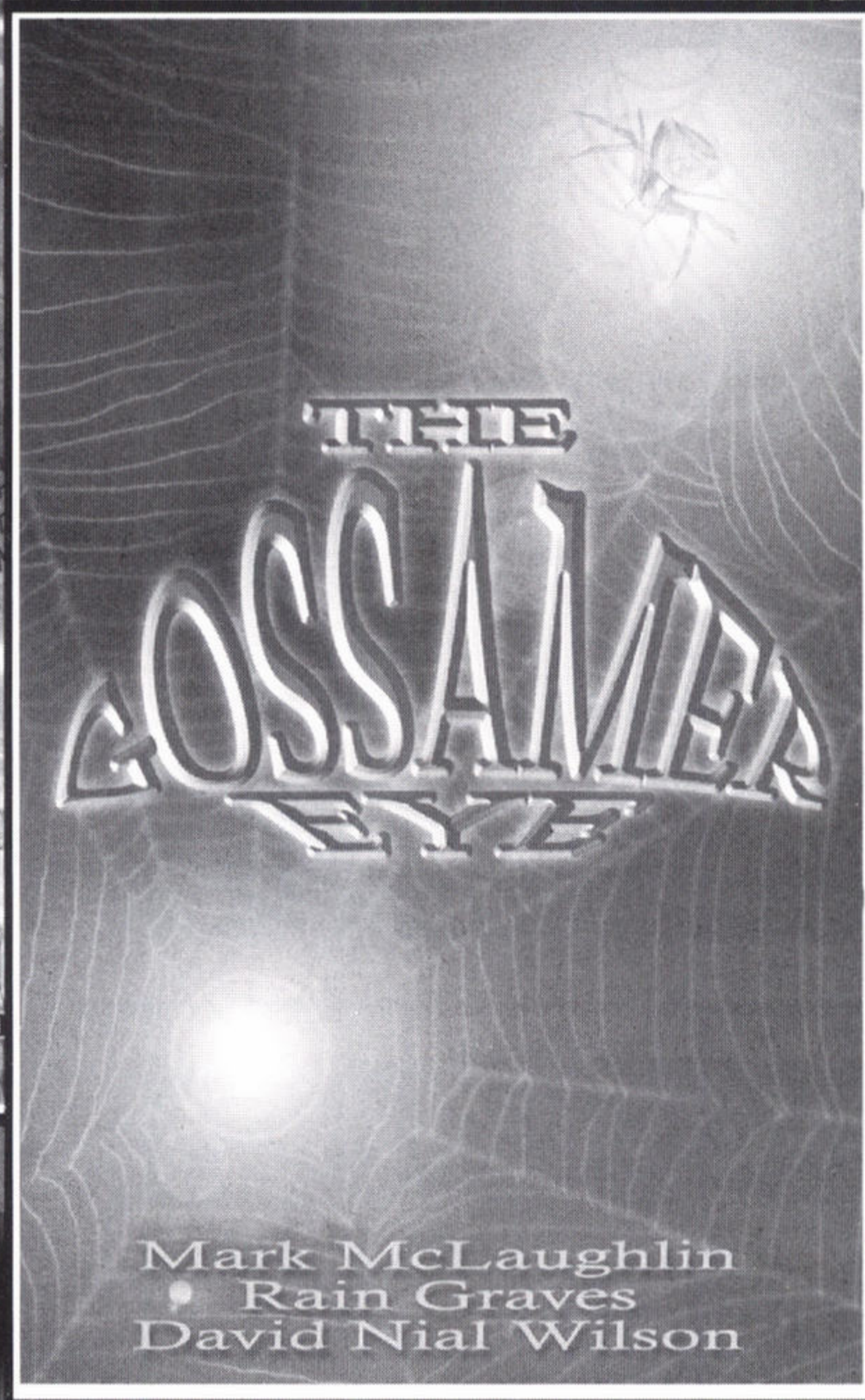


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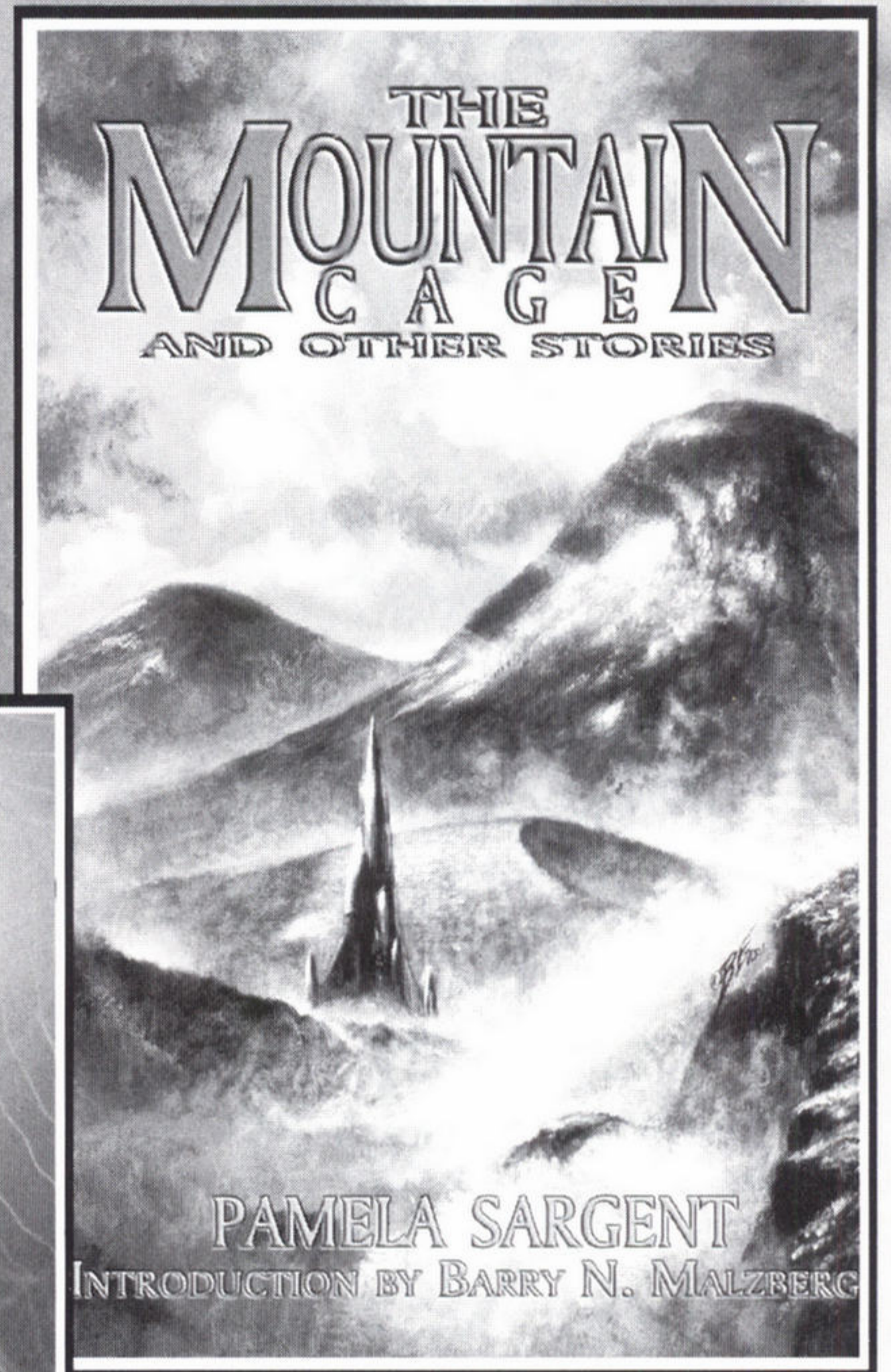
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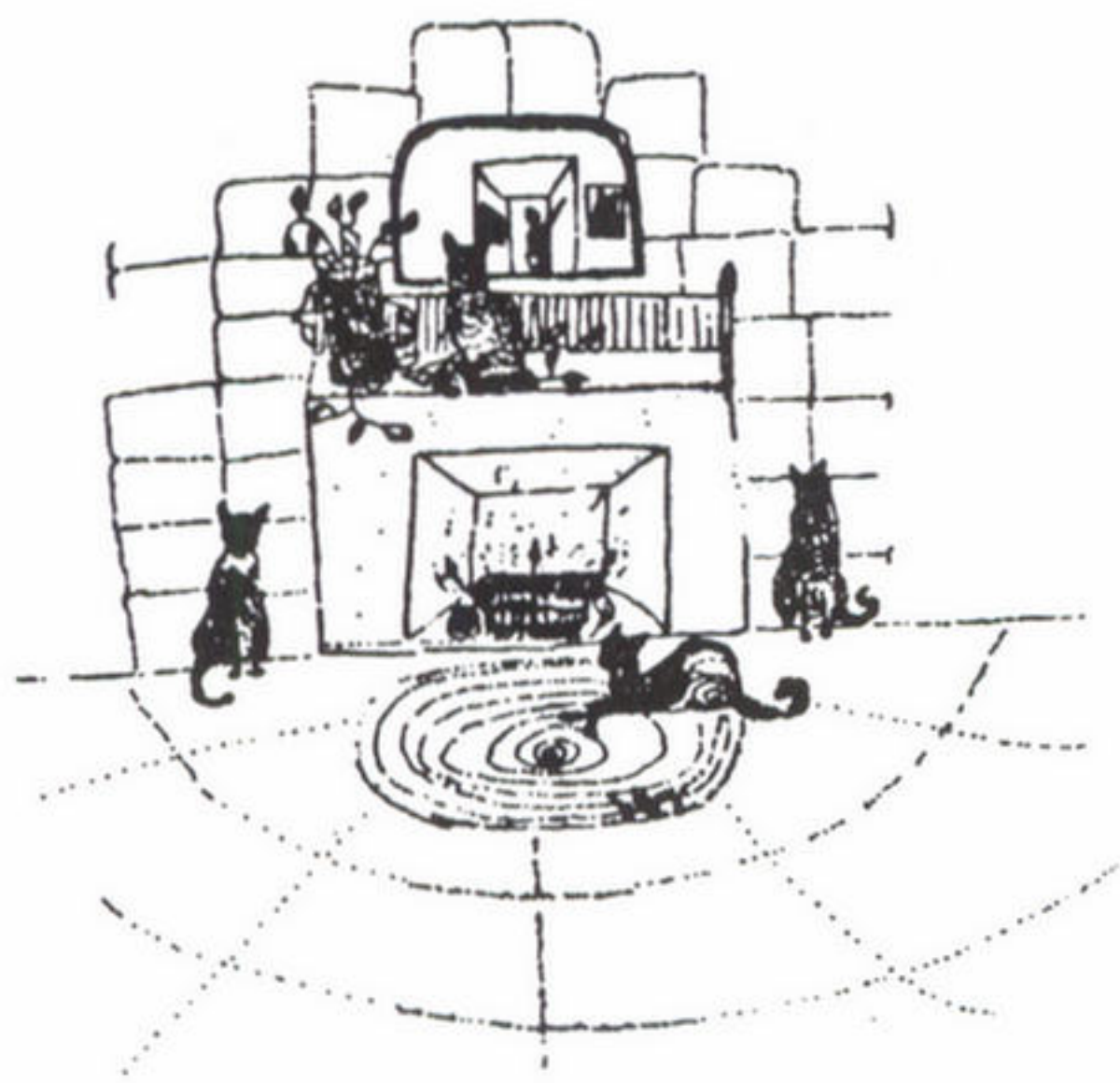
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and their activities. Lengths of DNA and the genes which reside there are referred to as genetic sentences and their chemical components are referred to as words and letters. Counting the stop codons as 2 separate groups there are 22 amino acid letters in the chemical alphabet of life."

The human genome happens to be made of 22 basic pairs of chromosomes with one additional pair that designates sex. In his book on the human genome (*Genome: The Autobiography of a Species in 23 Chapters*), the central analogy Matt Ridley uses is that of the book:

"Imagine that the genome is a book.

There are twenty-three chapters, called CHROMOSOMES.

Each chapter contains several thousand stories, called GENES.

Each story is made up of paragraphs, called EXONS, which are interrupted by advertisements called INTRONS.

Each paragraph is made up of words, called CODONS.

Each word is written in letters called BASES."

Ridley goes on to say, "The idea of the genome as a book is not, strictly speaking, even a metaphor. It is literally true. A book is a piece of digital information, written in linear, one-dimensional and one-directional form and defined by a code that transliterates a small alphabet of signs into a large lexicon of meaning through the order of their groupings."

The bases of the genome are the "letters" ATCG, which (you probably recall from high school biology) stand for adenine, thymine, cytosine, and guanine, which Ridley points out are "written entirely in three-letter words." The technical language that scientists use to refer to genetics, as Ridley notes, is full of terms like "translation," "messenger RNA," "transcription," "copying," "reading," and "decoding." He also organizes his own book into 23 chapters, titling each chapter loosely after the function of that particular chromosome.

A cursory comparison of those chapter titles with the Kabbalistic meaning of the corresponding letter of the Hebrew alphabet provides an alarming possibility (which I hope this column will inspire others to pursue at length). Let me give a few examples, which I found by consulting Nigel Pennick's *Magical Alphabets*:

Chapter 16 of *Genome* is called "Memory"; the 16th letter of the Hebrew alphabet is Ayin, which symbolizes (among other things), *foresight*. Chapter 17 is called "Death," which corresponds to the letter Pe, signifying *immortality*. Chapter 22 is called "Free Will," corresponding to Tau, which signifies the "chosen ones"; as Pennick puts it, "Esoterically, this represents the 400 Sephirot of the four worlds, which is 'synthesis.' It is the completion of the utterance of God, and thus encompasses creation"—rather fitting final chromosome. By strange coincidence, the 22nd letter of the Roman alphabet happens to be V, whose Hebrew parallel is Vau, the

*Continued on page 94*





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## High-voltage Gothic tales have not lost their shock value, even after 150 years.

In a very amusing appendix to *The Invisible Eye* by Erckmann-Chatrian, entitled “The Mysterious Case of the Missing Books,” Hugh Lamb describes the trials and tribulations he went through getting the first version of this book printed back in the early 1980s. There were endless difficulties with his slowly collapsing publisher, and when the book finally came out it vanished so instantly and completely that Lamb was not only unable to get any author’s copies, but some unknown other managed to get his or her check mailed into the dealer ahead of him the one and only time he saw it advertised in a catalog, and snatched it from his grasp!

I, oddly, did come across and snap up a copy of that first version, *The Best Tales of Terror of Erckmann-Chatrian*, in an eccentric Greenwich Village book shop (which very sadly closed its doors forever shortly thereafter) and I treasured it mightily and had a special little place for it upon my shelves. But, when the Ash-Tree Press announced that it was coming out with this new and expanded collection I looked for my beloved book and was puzzled and saddened to find it mysteriously absent. Many baffled searches since (I feel the urge stirring in me to start up another new one now even as I write) in every nook and cranny I can think of into which I may have thoughtlessly placed it inadvertently beyond my reach, has so far completely failed to turn up that determinedly inaccessible volume.

Is there some strange, supernatural hanky-panky (I haven’t heard that expression in a long time—I must really be getting on!) afoot? Some kind of a literary Devil’s Triangle in operation? I’ve no idea whatsoever, but I must admit it is decidedly spooky!

In any case, this new and expanded edition, *The Invisible Eye* (Ash-Tree Press, Ashcroft, B.C., hardcover; 277 pp., \$45.00), once again makes available one of the best, totally over-the-top collections of marvelously atmospheric and genuinely bone-chilling Gothic tales ever written and gives us not only the above-mentioned appendix but one of Lamb’s typically informative introductions and a generous list of sources that could easily start the more courageous dreamers among us upon a lifelong adventure of book hunting.

Erckmann-Chatrian was, in fact, two authors, respectively named Emile Erckmann and Alexandre Chatrian, natives of the endlessly disputed area of Alsace-Lorraine which, though it has one of the most delicious of

hearty cuisines and a landscape full of beauty, owns a history full of many dark and creepy turnings.

They tied up in 1849 and after persisting through a full decade of rejections and/or failures they hit their stride financially and aesthetically and enjoyed a rousingly successful career—during which they came to be affectionately dubbed “the twins”—and turned out a steady flood of very enthusiastically received novels and plays and short stories. Unfortunately there was a Gilbert and Sullivan sort of tension between them that built until it culminated in a lawsuit, and shortly after that their partnership was terminated by Chatrian’s death.

Today their work is almost entirely forgotten, save for their sensationally weird short fiction which was beloved of and highly recommended by such worthy experts in the field of the scary as M.R. James, H.P. Lovecraft, and the bizarre but always interesting Montague Summers.

But be warned: Although these stories are absolutely among the best of their kind they are decidedly



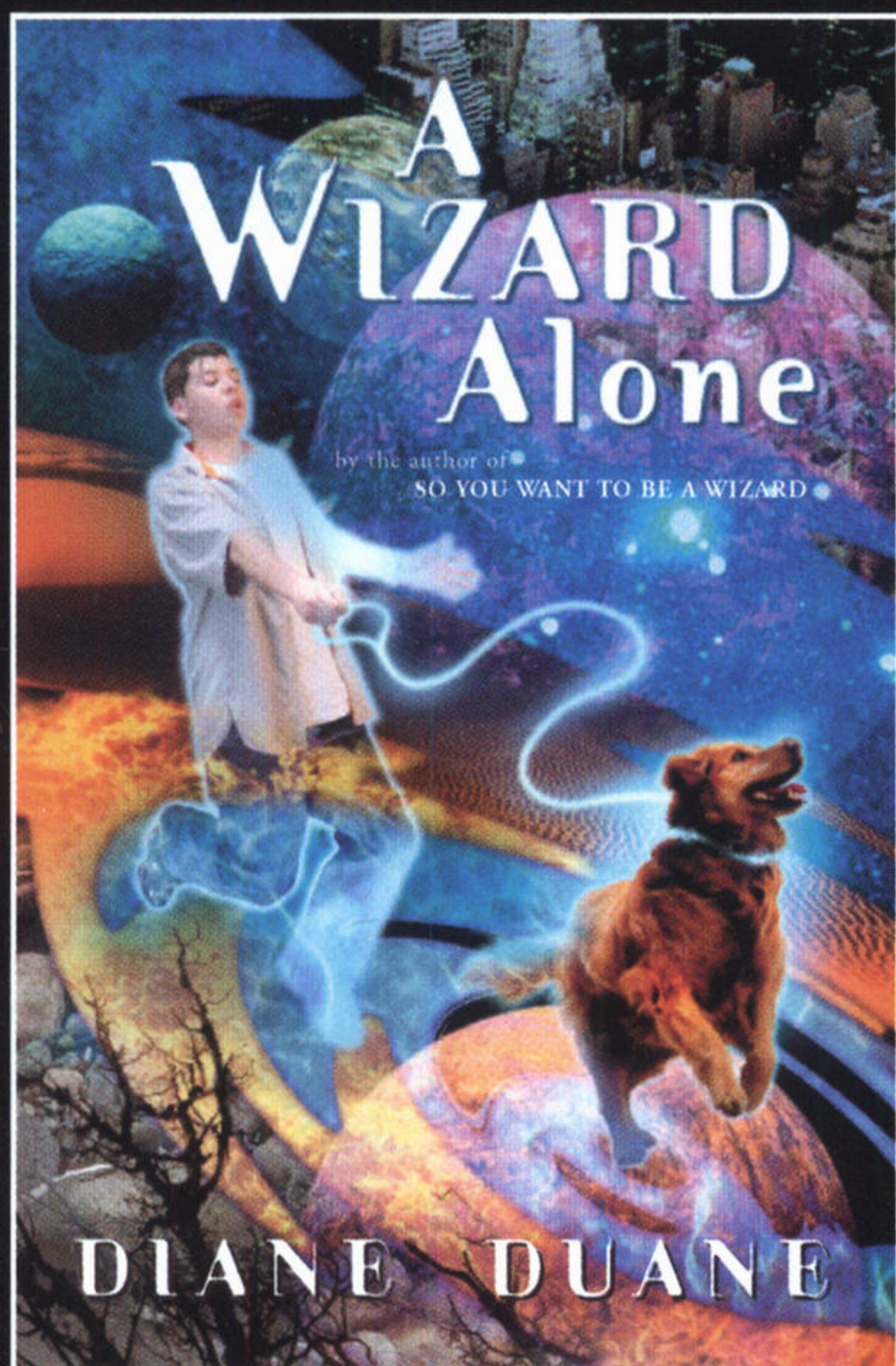
*The Decurion surveys his terrible cavalry in Wayne Barlow's Brushfire: Illuminations from the Inferno.*



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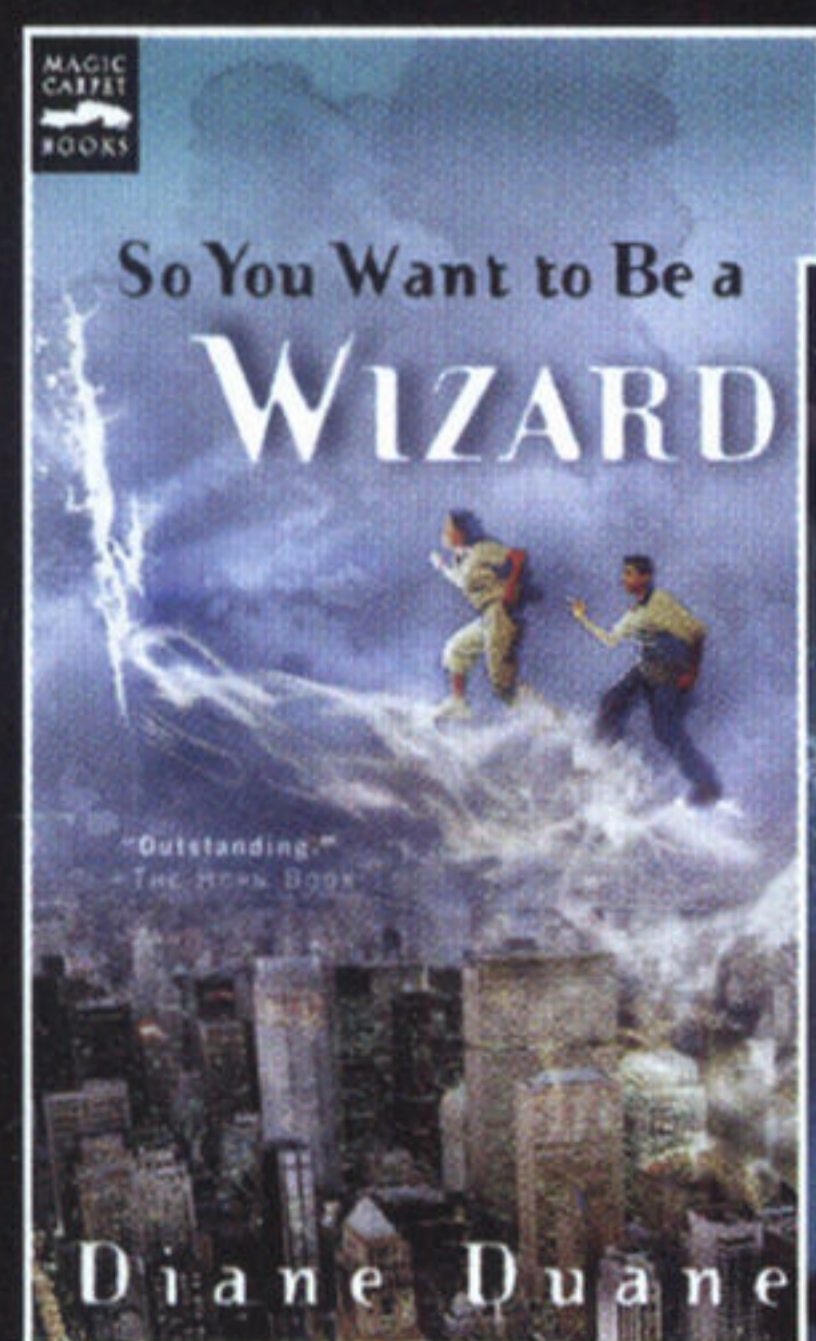


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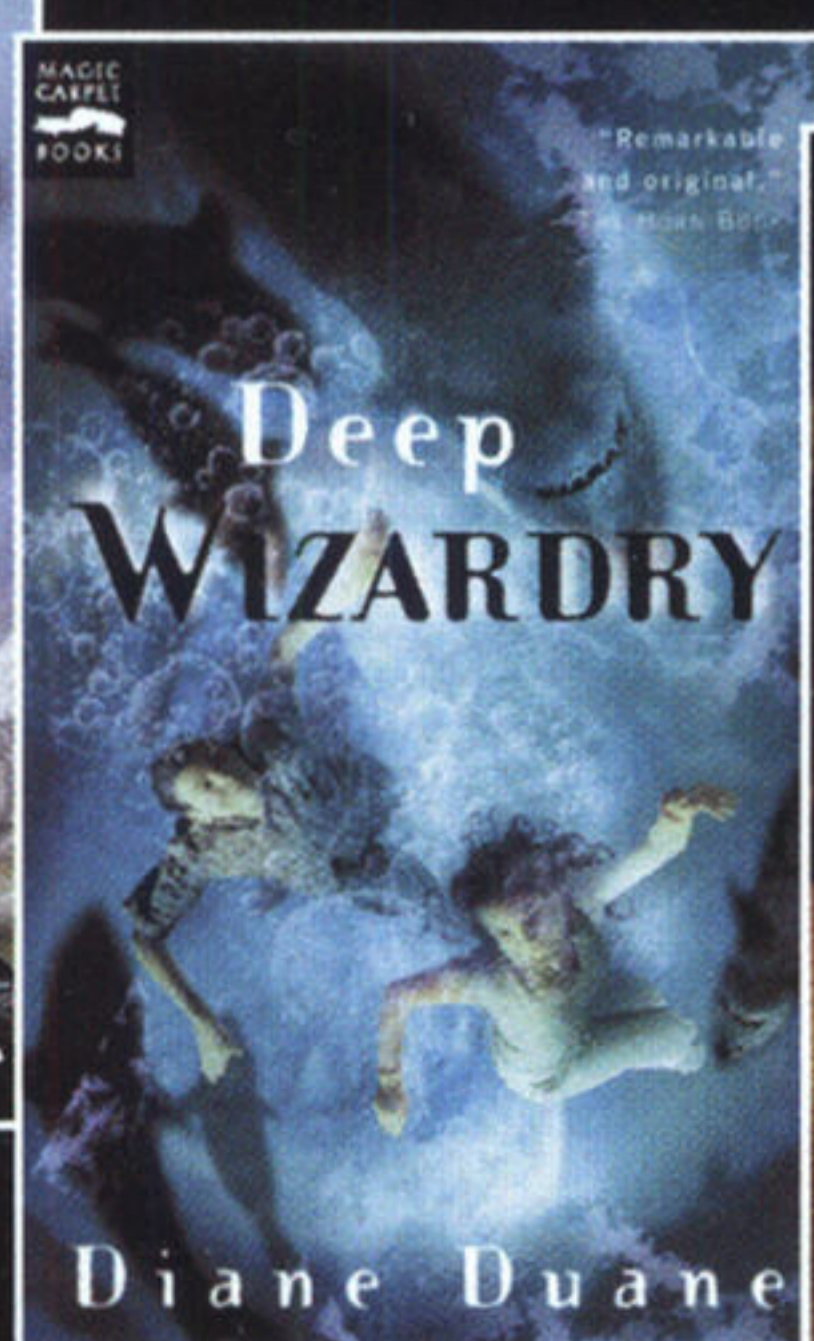


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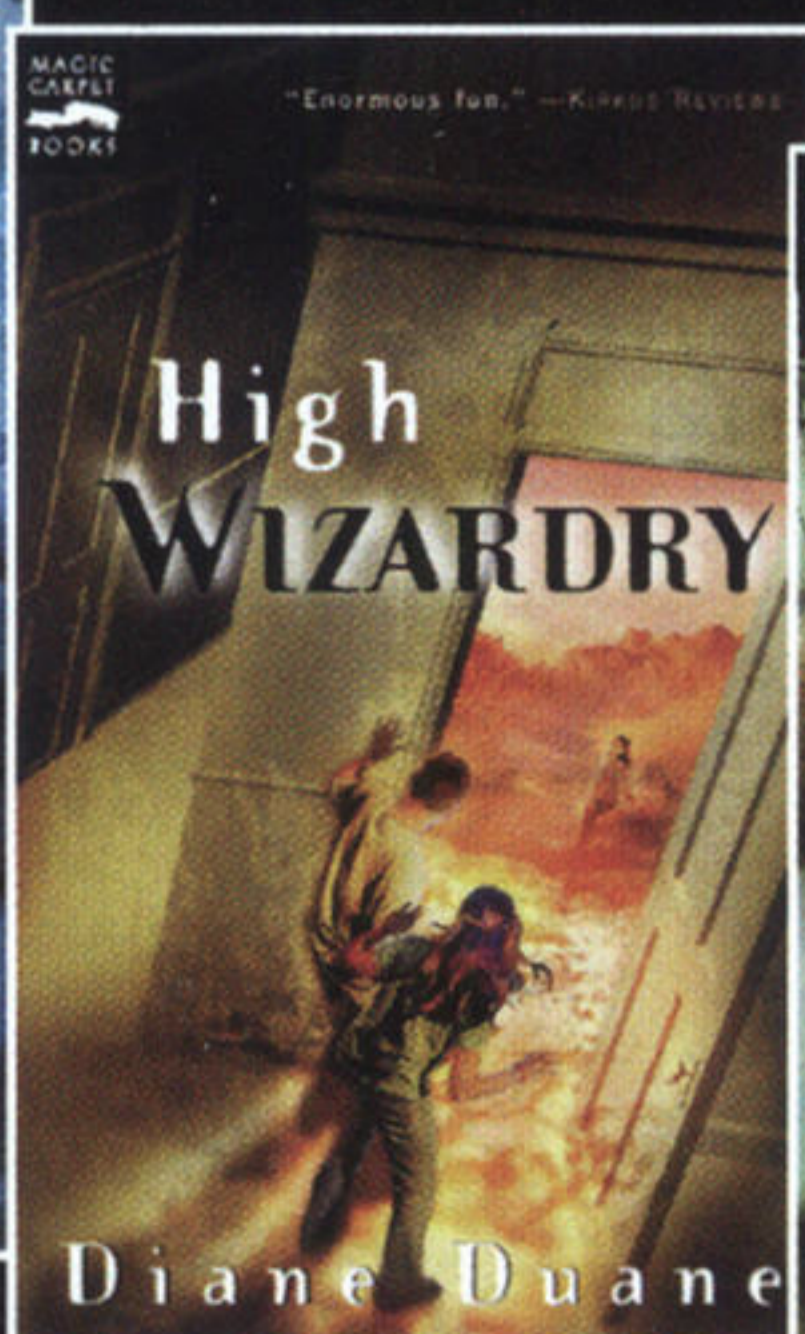
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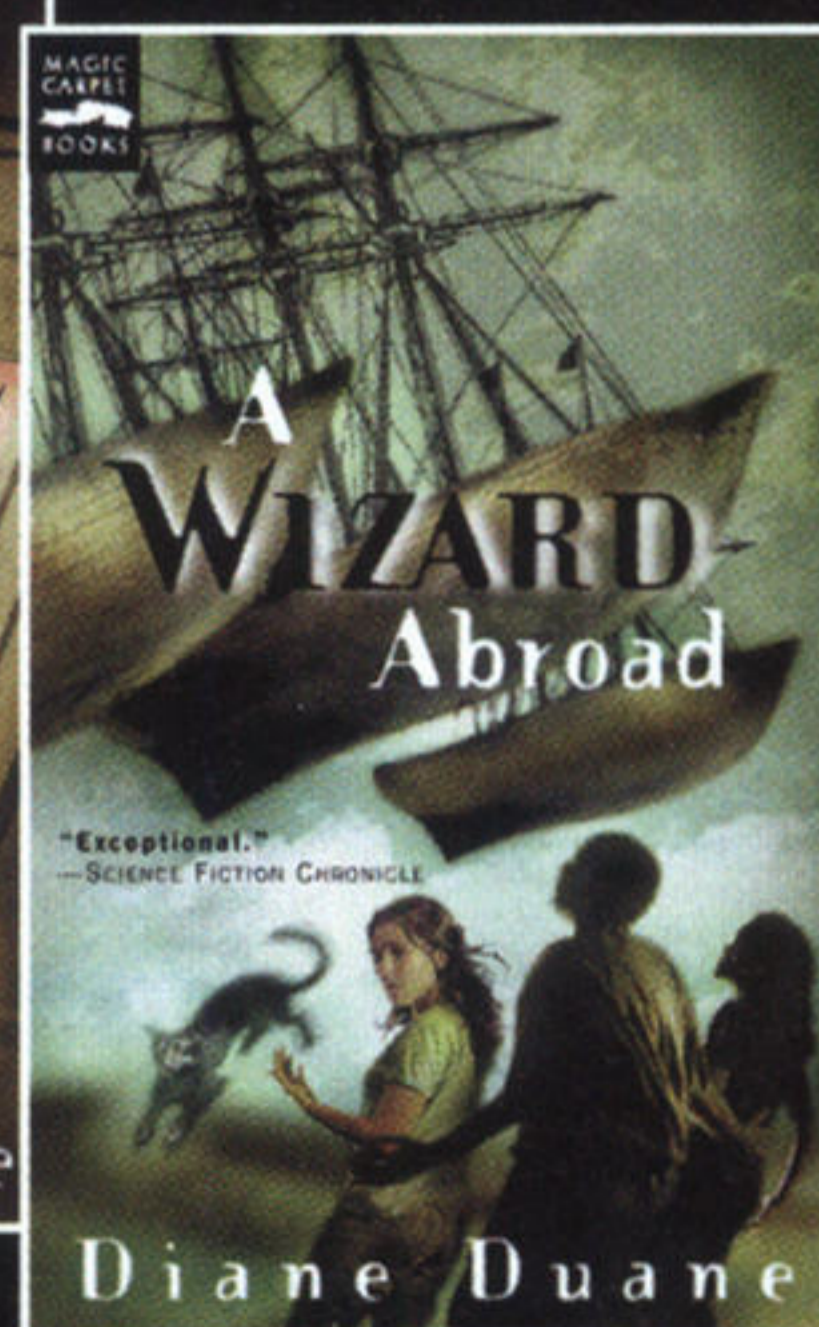
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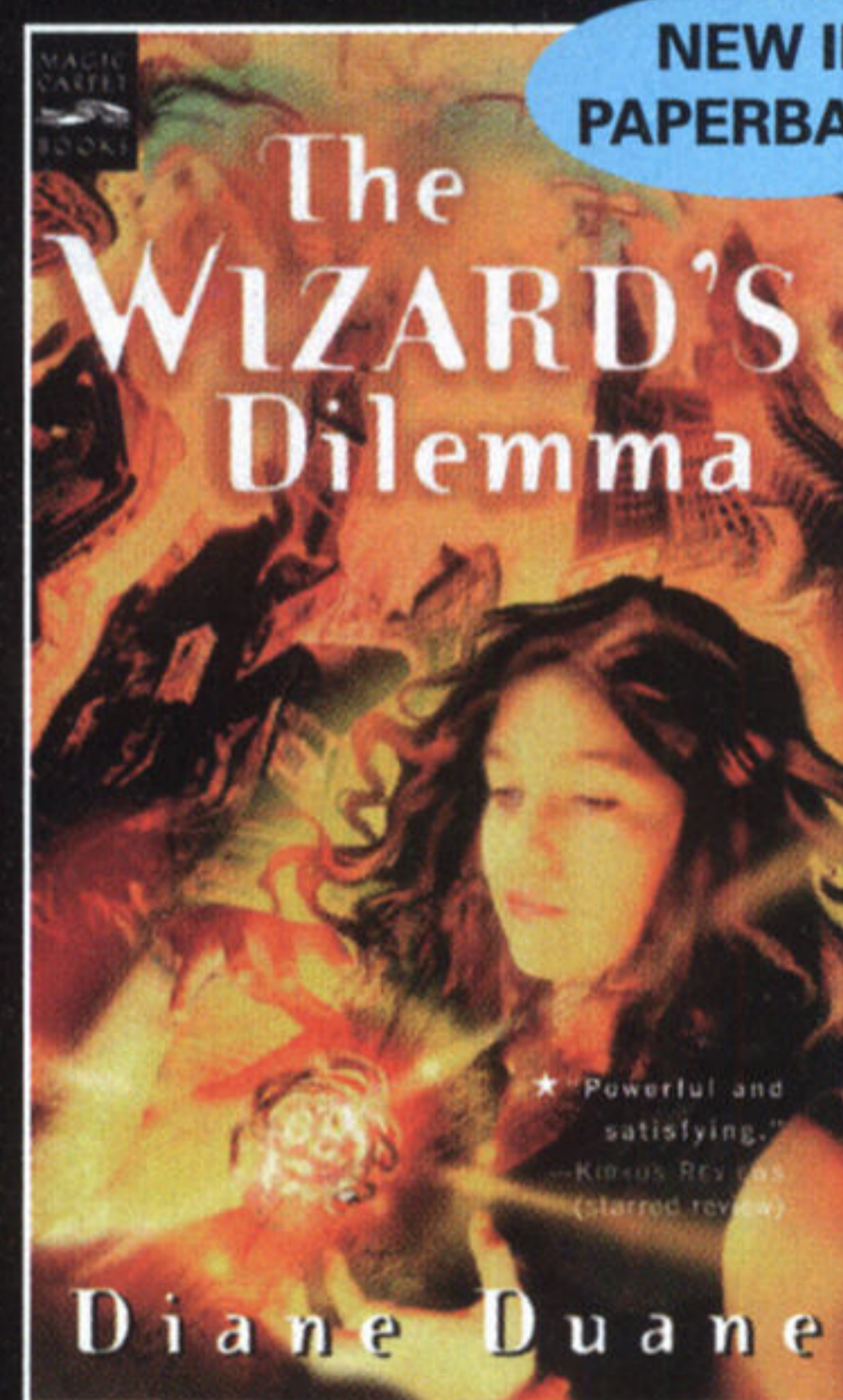
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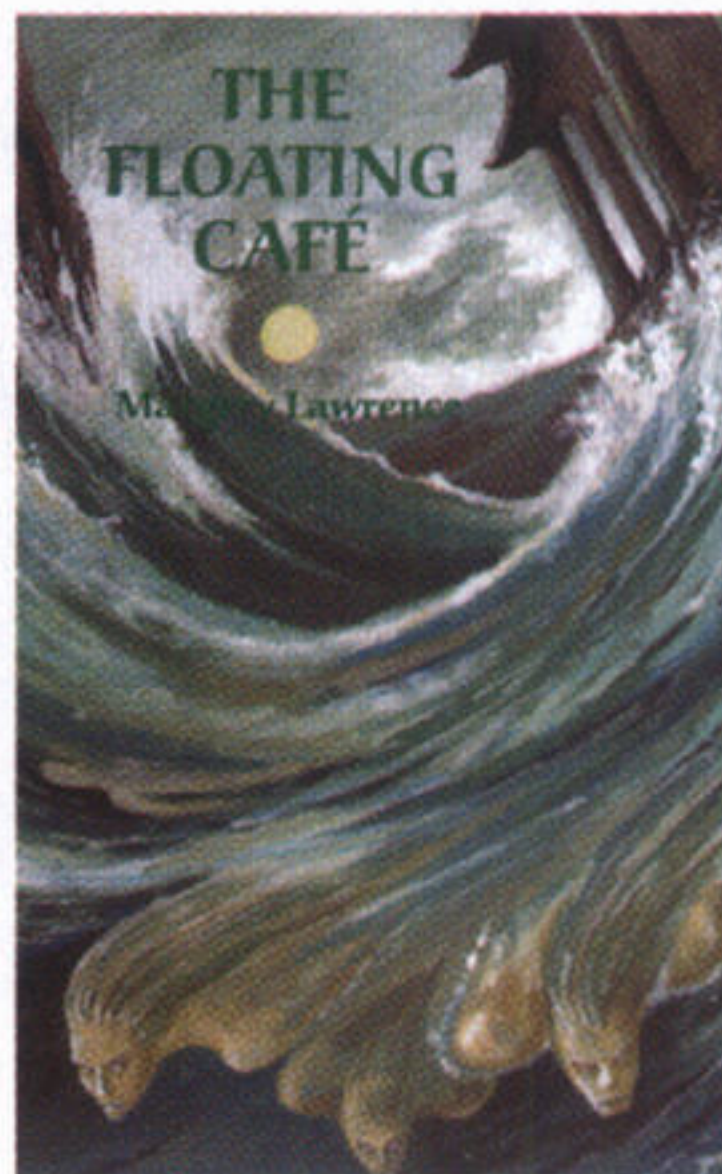
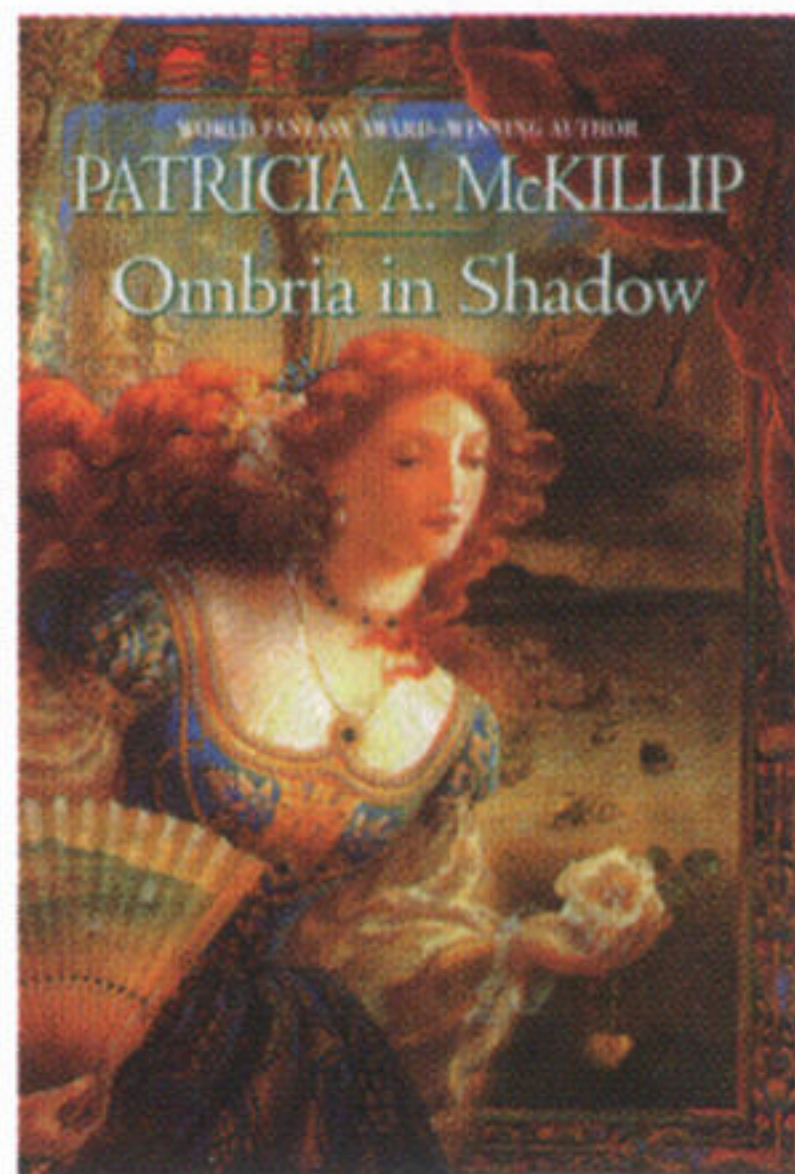
not for everyone. They are very much period pieces vividly executed in extreme, high-Gothic style. They are packed full of lightning and thunder, ancestral curses, and totally unrestrained, old-time lunacy, and feature werewolves with lots of hair on their faces and plenty of slather oozing through the cracks in their teeth.

But be warned again, for these are not quaint exercises to be aloofly enjoyed in the high camp mode, for they are truly and genuinely grim. They will lurk and leer in the crannies of your brain long after you've read them, for their shocks have not lost their voltage. They still bite.

At first you may smile just a little at the high-flown drama if you start your exploration with "The Child Stealer," for instance, as its language is boldly baroque and unrepentantly dramatic, but the story will have you gripped by the back of your neck before you know it and—take my word—it will end by wiping the smirk off your face.

"The Man-Wolf" could not be more Wagnerian, could not be more over the top and unabashedly operatic, but it brings twists and turnings to the old legend that enrich it marvelously, and I think you'll find in the end that its complexities and revelations are amazingly delicate and subtle, not in the least harmed by all the surrounding sound and fury but nourished by it. Wonderful stuff.

**The Floating Café** (by Margery Lawrence, edited and introduced by Richard Dalby, Ash-Tree Press, Ashcroft, B.C., hardcover; 189 pp., \$41.50) is an anthology of stories from another era that are also highly redolent of their time and ambience. They take place in the 1920s and 1930s and represent a great shift in mood from the wild and woolly style of Erckmann-Chatrian since they concern the doings of gentle English folk who, though they may



encounter supernatural entities ranging from the mildly eerie to the downright monstrous, always attempt to do it with as little fuss and bother as possible.

Although the collection does contain a couple of tales that concern very nasty menaces needing to be managed and that solidly demonstrate Lawrence's ability to handle extremely grim themes—one concerns the inventively sadistic ghost of "Kuja Rab, of Bhodalpore, called the Cruel" who haunts his lost, jungle-infested palace in order to continue savoring the suffering of his dead victims' spirits; another tells us about a singularly vile mask (or "marsk," according to a stalwart constable) whose sneering leer inspires the worst in those who look upon it—most of the stories are upbeat, albeit in a spooky way, and entirely charming. As I read them I found myself visualizing them into the kind of pleasantly entertaining little movies that came out of Great Britain during the 1940s; those gentle, smoothly produced black-and-whites featuring totally reliable and well-schooled actors being expertly directed and photographed as they played out interestingly literate and essentially encouraging dramas about rather ordinary but very game people rising to meet various challenges.

In general, Ms. Lawrence lures you into a mood of pleasant sentimentality but she adroitly avoids falling into mawkishness. The

account of a dying man being comforted by the ghost of a child he tried to save from death could have been a syrupy mess, for instance, but her intelligent presentation of the characters and the depth of her compassionate understanding of their different lonelines saves it completely from that fate.

In the end I found I took most to the wistful stories that

concern some form of love entangled one way or another with an intriguing supernatural complication. Among those, the ones I liked best were the stories that had some wry and occasionally downright comic elements.

The one I liked best of all is the title story, "The Floating Café," which runs somewhat counter to the pleasantly uplifting moral tone of most of the other fantasies and might even be said to have a sneakily subversive whiff.

The narrator is a very nicely realized tough old girl, the charwoman at The Marine Hotel of Mincombe-on-Sea who, seduced by a sufficiency of Guinness, tells us how she rather fascinatedly witnessed the luring of a nice young band leader and violinist named Gerald by a mermaid who had also developed an increasingly proprietary attitude toward "Neptune's Grotto," the café where the violinist played—sometimes to entertain its customers and sometimes all alone after the customers had gone and the moonlight made the waves glisten and let you just make out something long and dark watching in the water.

It's a lovely little story and I do hope you get a chance to read it.

In the meantime, read the book, as it's fun.

Some time ago I was delighted to have the chance to praise Wayne Barlow's *Inferno* in these pages and happily did so, going on at length (as is my wont), pointing out how appallingly real seemed the geography and

## Tanith Lee Is Reading ...

My reading is diverse, and seldom now among fantasy or science fiction. Strangely, you catch me when I've just encountered a stunning representative of each field. Both remind me, in their very different and contemporary ways, of the Masters I relished in my youth.

*The Bitterbynde Trilogy*, by Cecilia Dart-Thornton, begins with the novel *The Ill-Made Mute*. This stylish fantasy is packed with sumptuous imagery, color, and geographies,

yet keeps up a racing pace, shot through with fierce action and startling events. Every astonishment, meanwhile, stays *believable*. Dart-Thornton's winged horses and rigged air-ships really *do* fly; her people remain as real as any you might wish (or fear) to meet. They include an appealing heroine, and also the fascinating Thorn (perhaps related to the author?), who'll probably engage as many hearts among the readership as on the page! I have to say this glorious book gives me back my faith in fantasy fiction.

The book that has rekindled my allegiance to science fiction

is *Empire of Bones* by Liz Williams. With a rare control of structure, and the interplay between humans, aliens, and empire organized on colossal scale, Williams' epic, like Dart-Thornton's, is virtually unputdownable. Sparely, lucidly, this writer evokes not only a disturbingly credible future India, haunted by its own ancient glimmers, but extraordinary space hardware and other worldscapes that are frankly mind expanding. However, unlike much science fiction, Williams' book *never* sacrifices psychology, or humanity, on the altar of her truly wonderful gift for invention. More, she's achieved that almost impossible contradiction: aliens who are

alien (!)—yet accessible, *identifiable*.

To both of these women I extend the plea: *More! More!*

Alas, I can't extend that plea to my third Unputdownable One, the unique Elizabeth Bowen, since she died in 1973. Not long ago I finished reading her novel *To the North*. Of a novelist of genuine stature, a supreme example, this history of monumental pain and passion, cramped by grace, at last rippling free like an erupting volcano, within the perfectly reported, flower-vase confines of 1930's England. A delicately measured tale, with the killer punch of Chekov, or Tolstoy. Bowen is one of the Greats. Now I wish she were still at work. ☘





architecture of his Hell; saying how terribly convincing and creepily *meetable* were his demons and—rather especially—how believable were his depictions of the dreadful suffering of the damned.

Now there has come a sequel called ***Brushfire: Illuminations from the Inferno*** (Morpheus International, Beverly Hills, CA, 32 pp., \$19.95) and it is in all ways a worthy expansion and even deeper probing of the ghastly revelations put forward in the first work and adds rather uncomfortably to its credibility.

It is cleverly designed as a portfolio to back up the story *Brushfire* tells, which is that the Lord Sargatanas provided the artist with a studio made up of human bricks (everything in Hell is one way or another built from humans) so that he might make a series of portraits of various ghastly entities that sat for him under Sargatanas's irresistible command. We are to understand that the artist brought back the appalling results in the very portfolio we are holding with the highly vulnerable flesh and bones of our fingers.

A rather comforting feature of its being a portfolio is that the reader can tie it up tight with the string provided when he or she is done looking at its ghastly contents. This helps to give a tenuous feeling of safety that is nice even if it is a complete illusion.

I think the great difference between this book and the last one is the obedient stillness of the demons and other creatures sitting for

their portraits in the studio even when—most clearly in the case of Baron Faraii—it is pretty obvious that the sitter would very much prefer to be doing something else, such as torturing the artist.

There is no such feeling in the paintings done from sketches drawn in the field, all of which give the distinct impression that the viewer is in hideous danger. This may most successfully be conveyed in the painting of the Behemoths in the Stables of Yen Wang, which indicates a high probability one might be momentarily flattened by one or another of the creatures' hammer-arms. A strong runner up is Barlowe's depiction of an ominous conference between a flaming Lucifer Rofocale and a lounging, blood-soaked Decapitator which looks as if it might, at any moment, get completely out of hand and result in the total destruction of all its witnesses.

Once again, dear reader, as I did in the first review, I warn thee to mend thy ways!

**Gaban Wilson**

***Expecting Beowulf***, Tom Holt, NESFA Press, MA, trade paper; 365 pp., \$16.00.

I've long been a passionate fan of the comic fantasies of Thorne Smith, author most famously of *Topper* (1926) and similar screwball ghost stories. Smith's patented blend of absurdity, melancholy, irreverence, *joie de vivre*, and belief in the possibility of supernatural shenanigans strikes me as a bold and workable model for both fiction and for liv-

ing in general. But here's my problem: Smith's long gone from this world, leaving his small set of novels as the only sustenance we Smith fanatics will ever have to satisfy our needs. Where to find an acceptable substitute? I had drawn a blank among the current crop of funny fantasists until just now delving into the work of British writer Tom Holt.

The current bargain reprint volume by the dedicated archivists at NESFA Press combines two of Holt's earliest fantasies: *Expecting Someone Taller* (1987) and *Who's Afraid of Beowulf?* (1988). Both novels are laugh-out-loud masterpieces of expert slapstick, clever wordplay, farcical misunderstandings, and the clash of the unreal with the real. And given Holt's sympathies with the glamour of the gods he trafficks in, it's no surprise that the real often comes off second-best.

*Expecting Someone Taller* is the tale of the nebbishy Malcolm Fisher, who happens by a quirk of fate to inherit the Ring of the Niebelungs and the Tarnhelm. The latter gives him many useful powers, such as shapeshifting and teleportation, while the former confers nothing less than mastery of the world. Malcolm settles into his role as governing demiurge of our planet, reluctantly at first then with some enthusiasm. But the old gods—Wotan and crew—are still around and are not pleased at this usurper. Their schemes for getting the Ring away from Malcolm culminate with the machinations of Wotan's daughter,

*Continued on page 96*



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# The Fence at the End of the World

Just remember, Mama knows best and the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. Or possibly the universe.

Every evening they go out to the fence, down where the world ends. Marla and Kay hold hands for luck. It takes courage to go down there. They take turns looking through a crack in one wooden plank, its tip sharp with splinters just begging to pierce their hands. They search the sometimes featureless darkness for clues.

By Melissa Mia Hall  
Illustration by Laurie Harden





I AM POWER. I AM THE  
YOU ARE NOTHING WITHOUT ME.  
HERE TO CONTROL THINGS AND YOU  
YOU MUST

"I see a spot of light."

"A lightning bug—"

"A lightning ball."

"No, you don't."

"I seen it. I seen it plain as day, that a UFO gonna come down and scoop us up, take us away to Alpha Centauri, or who knows, maybe Camelot. I got to get me a King Arthur."

"Liar, liar, pants on fire."

"You wish."

They can't open the gate that goes outside. Mama told them never to open the gate. They can never, ever go outside. They will live here forever until their bodies rot and their eyeballs fall out.

Marla turns away from the fence. She sits back on her haunches like their old Irish setter Claude used to do. The ritual is getting tiresome.

"Ain't you ever sick to death about all this?"

"If'n you want to fall off the edge of the world, you go right on ahead and do it. You want to go together?" Kay puts an arm around her older sister and Marla shivers. "We could fall through space together."

"We could go during the day. I can see mor'n space out there then. The postman comes. So does all manner of folk. Everybody comes and goes. Why not us? I heard tell maybe somebody's gonna come and make Mama let us go to school this fall." The postman says everyone's got to go to school. He's tall, brown, and muscular. He looks good in his shorts. Name's Emmitt and he always talks to Marla like she's smart.

"We gonna look like fools. They'll think we retards," Kay says.

"I don't care. Mama can't make us stay here forever."

"But we will. We got to take care of Mama."

"Money ain't gonna last forever. We gots to pay bills," Marla sighs.

"No, we don't. Besides, nobody cares about white trash. We can just slide on by for a while—jest borrow from Peter to pay Paul—way we've always done."

"Don't be calling us white trash. Daddy was the trash. He shouldn't have gone off and left us," Marla says sharply.

The darkness seems to lift a little. Marla pushes Kay's arm away and stands up. She stretches her thin arms and Kay watches admiringly. Kay is smaller, chubbier. "Did you hear her? Was that Mama?"

Behind them the house appears to tilt as a sound whispers in the pecan trees drooping above it. "What if people never die, just seem like."

"You mean, play like they dead?" Marla doesn't like to talk about the dead. She bravely heads for the porch where Mama's old porch swing moves in the breeze in lop-sided fashion. Kay follows her. They sit on the steps, waiting for the air to turn cooler, but it's August

in East Texas and it's not at all likely. "I don't know, but say we climbed the fence and went over tonight, Katykins, what do you think would really happen?"

"We'd fall into pitch darkness, into nothing. We'd fall and fall and never land." Kay wraps her short arms around her knees and squeezes.

"Sure you would! I don't think Mama's right about this. It's crazy."

"She be bed bound. She can't make us do anything, that's for sure." Kay rubs her latest bruise and studies a scab on her knee. "Oh, who we kidding? Yes, she can."

It's an eternal argument, what Mama can and can't do.

The old neon hand is no longer lit. Folks don't come anymore to visit Madame Clarice, Spiritual Adviser and Gifted Psychic. It's like a magical circle has been drawn around their house. It happened around the time Mama came back from the hospital after the fit. Doctors called it a stroke. The girls knew better. Mama got so mad at them one day she just sat down and screamed until she couldn't scream anymore.

Marla has considered turning the electricity on and becoming the next Spiritual Adviser. Every town needs one and they really like them to be exotic. Marla has taken to wearing some of Mama's old get-ups. She is aware of how pretty she is. Sometimes she just stares at herself naked in the hall mirror. She tries different earrings. Mama can't say anything. Mama was so greedy.

"Marla, we gots to do something. I want to go to school. If we can see the sun and it is out there, every morning—" Kay points toward the gate that, for some peculiar reason, only the postman can open. "Then hey, we can go out there. We've got to."

They used to go out. It's not like they've never been. But Marla believes Mama is right. After the fit, everything changed. The air shifted. Spring became fall. Marla tried, one secret night, to go outside and her foot fell on air. She slipped and fell, held on to the edge of the world by sheer determination and pulled herself back into the yard. She looked down into nothing. The ground had given way. At first she thought there'd been an earthquake or something. Magic. Mama never wanted them to leave her. They had to stay. Because the world had become an illusion. "No."

Marla leaves Kay. She goes inside to the bookshelves where all of Mama's magic books live. They are virtually unreadable. She decides it is time for a bonfire. It might please Kay, distract her from unholy thoughts.

"What you doing, Marla?"

She makes a neat stack and starts to strike a match.

"Firemen'll come," Kay says, smiling.



SOURCE OF YOUR LIFE.  
I AM GOD'S HOLY VESSEL, SENT  
BASTARD CHIL'REN. I KNOW EVERYTHING.  
MIND ME.

Marla freezes. "Mama might get mad."

"Oh, don't do that—" Kay pulls out her pocketknife and begins to cut her arm, just enough to make it bleed a little. Then Kay sucks the blood. A row of scars displays her predilection toward hurting herself—a constant in her young life.

"Don't do that."

"It feels good."

Silence descends as the darkness lightens. They've been up all night. Kay lies down on the old quilt in the porch swing and fluffs her old pillow. She never sleeps in the house anymore. "I'm going to sleep now."

Marla hasn't slept in a good while. She wonders if she is a vampire, but really, only Kay likes the taste of blood. Marla might be a ghost. And she might just be crazy. Mama was. "Maybe it's time to leave Mama."

Kay has fallen asleep. Marla listens for Mama to make that almost breathless wheeze. She must listen very quietly. Mama only makes animal sounds now. Only silence answers. She creeps back to the fence. The light rises like fog off the bayou.

The TV broke last winter and they don't get the newspaper. She can only guess what's been going on out there. People don't send them many letters, either. And Marla can only dream what it would be like to have a computer. Mama said computers were evil.

Mama's relatives gave up on them a long time ago. Just bills arrive and some circulars. The Reverend Cleveland used to come and try to save their souls till the winter Mama threw boiling water on him.

The money is running out. And so are the checks she uses to pay for stuff with her Mama's forged signature. She doesn't want to stay any longer. Certainly it is time to leave Mama.

She undoes the latch on the gate and pushes. She puts one foot out. Air, still air.

*You can't leave me, understand—I am all you have in the world. I am power. I am the source of your life. You are nothing without me. I am God's Holy vessel, sent here to control things and you bastard chil'ren. I know everything. You must mind me.*

*Some say I be a Goddess. There are no names in the darkness, just truth, Marla Faith, and the truth binds. It does not set you free. Do you understand, spawn of man, the evil one?*

Mama became like a devil at some point. She was always right. That's why the money held out for so long. She was good at guessing games. Folk came all the way from New Orleans, Houston, and Dallas to listen to her prophecies. Marla believes it's not good to be right all the time. She thinks it does something to the heart, shrivels

it somehow. Folks need to be surprised. Marla looks at the palm of her hand. Mama read palms, did cards, looked in crystal balls, and played with numbers but they did not tell her what she saw. Marla thinks the Tongue told her. And the Tongue twists things mean-like every once in a while. She got too proud of it. Pride Goeth Before a Fall. Marla knows that must be true. That's why the fit came.

The Spirit took Mama's tongue. But she still speaks in Marla's head sometimes, especially when she's afraid she must do something Mama would not approve of.

"I guess it's time we told someone."

"No!" Behind her, Kay sticks her knife into Marla's back, just enough to prick and draw a bead of blood that trickles, like sweat, into her panties.

"You've hurt me. Put that knife away." Marla puts her arms out like Jesus on the cross, keeping her back to her little sister.

"I've done decided the Spirit has entered me. Mama's Spirit has given me the Tongue."

"You're sleepwalking, little sis."

"She's starting to stink."

"You're starting to stink." Like the voice ...

*MARLA FAITH AND KAY ALBERTINE, I charge you with eternal damnation if you ever leave me. Kay Albertine, you are my youngest and the one who must watch the oldest. There is a darkness about her. I see her stepping into darkness and falling, falling because she has no faith despite all I have tried to teach her. She thinks she has power. I own the power. She is nothing without me. Remember this.*

"Mama doesn't need us anymore—we've got to fend for ourselves now." Marla hurries, sidesteps the knife point, and pushes the gate wider. One step. Two. She'll have to run. Her joy mixes with pure relief to be getting away from the old, dead witch.

Kay screams like a banshee. If they only had neighbors to hear her, Marla could get help. "Mama is DEAD—" Marla says over her shoulder. "Come on, Kay, let's run—"

Dawn lifts the world into focus. Marla is thrilled with the light rising. The ground is strong. Her bare feet are free and then suddenly dropping into nothingness. Below her the cracked sidewalk becomes transparent with the promised void. "No—" Marla is sure the world is not an illusion. Mama can't be right all the time. She looks back at the fence in shock.

Kay holds the bloodied knife aloft. "I told you—Mama told you—the fence is the only thing that be real, Marla. The world without Mama don't exist—"

Marla keeps falling. ♣



# Where ANGELS FEAR to Lunch

The recent mishegoss about the millennium?  
All *narrischkeit*. HERE'S THE REAL STORY.

By Fraser Sherman Illustration by Hugo Martin

**I**t never bodes well when an angel shows up at my office first thing before breakfast. Especially when the first word out of its mouth is—

“Murder!” The shining golden figure materialized before my desk, scattering light into the room’s dusty corners, startling me into spilling half my coffee. “Dark powers have marked me for death, Mr. Shores, and only you can save me.”

“Dark powers? No kidding.” Never let a client see you’re surprised; I leaned back in my chair and took a slow sip of the coffee, scalding hot and weak, the way Ellie always makes it. The angel paused expectantly, pulling out a myrrh-scented handkerchief to wipe his brow.

“Did I hear—what the hell?” Standing in the office doorway, Ellie, my secretary, raised her hands for a banishment spell. At the same time, she couldn’t help smiling; angels have that effect. “Listen Goldie, you ain’t in my appointment book.”

“I am sorry, truly sorry,” the angel said, “but I have no time for appointments.” Ellie glanced at me; I signaled for her to hold off. Not that she could have banished him anyway. “By midnight tonight—I die!”

“You’re an angel.” Ellie ran a hand through her pink-dyed curls. “Angels can’t die, everyone knows that.”

“Foolish child! What ‘everyone knows’—”

“Simmer down, mister.” I gestured to the chair in front of my desk; he sat gratefully, wingtips brushing dust bunnies on the floor. “Coffee? Coke?” He shook his head. “Don’t mind if I—?” I poured scotch from a hip flask into my coffee and lit a cigarette. Alcohol and nicotine don’t affect me (neither does caffeine, for that matter), but the more I come off like Bogart, the better my clients seem to feel. Even clients like this. “If you’re in trouble, why not go to Him?”

“I am only a Virtue—a Guardian Angel. I’ve never even seen Him.”

“Never?” Ellie said.

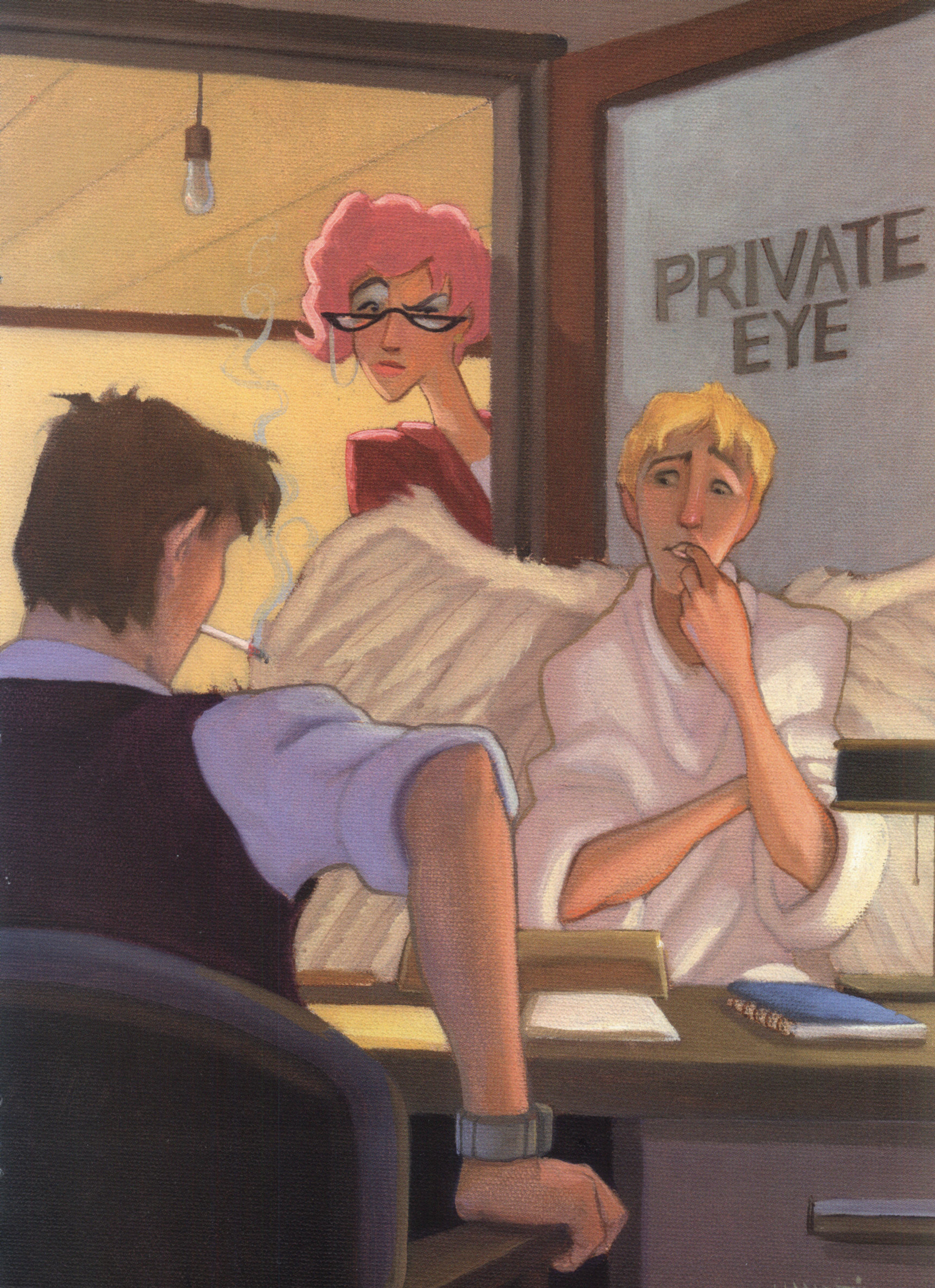
“I’ve never needed to, until now. His presence fills Heaven; I’ve always felt Him with me. But now—to actually talk to him, I would have to petition the Powers, the Principalities, the Thrones, the—

“You can skip this part, I know the rankings of the angels.”

“—and I don’t know which of them I can trust!”

“So why come to me?” I asked. “Nobody trusts me; unreliable, unpredictable, un—”





PRIVATE  
EYE



# “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE that someone in Heaven could want to KILL YOU FOR?”

“Do not all the hierarchy come to you for aid, even so? The matter of Lilith’s children? Or Metatron’s unfortunate—”

“No need to bring that up.” I didn’t think that business was common knowledge; word of that ever reached Him, I’d be in even deeper shit than I am. “Okay, spill.” He blinked. “Your guts, I mean.”

“I’ll be outside, boss,” Ellie said. “On the phone, seeing if the power company’ll give us another day or two.”

“Don’t you have money?” The angel looked surprised, which wasn’t pretty. Their faces are built to show serenity or occasionally wrath; other emotions look just plain weird. “After two thousand years—”

“Most of history, mankind’s relied on the barter system, remember?” I hate explaining this; no matter what I say, everyone thinks an immortal with nothing saved up has to be a doofus. “And I’ve never needed to buy food, or medicine. If I’d known money would get this important—but we’re talking about you, right?”

“Yes, of course.” The angel cleared his throat; it sounded like wind chimes. “I heard a voice in my chambers today—”

“Further back. Start with—I don’t know, your name, maybe?”

“Oh, yes ... I’m Maeriel, a Virtue as I said.” A guardian angel; who’d he been guarding, I wondered? “I was reclining in my chamber this morning—by your time—when a voice spoke to me. Tonight, at midnight—”

“By what time zone? Heavenly or—”

“Midnight, Eastern Standard Time. Then I will die.”

“So maybe Uriel or Michael was pulling your leg?” He looked at me. “OK, unlikely ... what about a mortal? You know some human souls have trouble adjusting to immortality, especially if it doesn’t meet their expectations.”

“They scribble blasphemous graffiti on mansion walls or put whoopee cushions on thrones. They don’t make death threats. No one rightfully in Heaven would. And I cannot imagine those who enter Heaven unrightfully doing so.” We both knew who he meant, and I had to admit he was right. “Worse: the voice hinted it held a place in the hierarchy—and that my death would be but the beginning of something more terrible, something directed against Him.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time. He’s still up there. And I know you can be killed, but it ain’t easy.” I couldn’t read his face, but I thought he was still worried. “If it’s that bad, kneel down and pray. He’ll hear.”

“I have prayed. I have heard no response. That may mean I have nothing to fear—or everything. And I cannot seek an audience otherwise without passing through the hierarchy—and surely the Voice must have anticipated that.”

“But you—both Heaven and Hell know Al Shores can’t be bought, can’t be intimidated. No matter who the Voice is, you won’t abandon me.”

His research wasn’t as good as he thought, but no need to tell him that now. “Well, the Voice probably knows you’re here—”

“Subtly cloaked as I am, no one could have followed me.”

“Uh-huh.” Outside my window, I could see a skinhead and a Black Muslim helping Rabbi Gould’s mother across the street; Maeriel’s presence was about as subtle as the 10 plagues. Well, in for a penny ... “My fee is one grand a day, plus expenses. Plus putting in a good word with Him if my name ever comes up.” His lips quirked; I didn’t ask why. “And one big favor, collectable any time, any place—don’t worry, nothing that’ll get you in dutch with Him.” My standard requirement; believe me, it’s come in handy.

“With that understanding, agreed.”

“OK then.” I snubbed out the cig and leaned across the desk, con-

fidential-like. “So, the big question: what have you done that someone in Heaven could want to kill you for?”

His baffled wing-shrug set the dust bunnies dancing. “Nothing.”

“You involved in the War?” Lucifer’s rebellion had left plenty of scores people were still trying to settle.

“I was one of those created later, to replace the Fallen.”

“Who are you guarding at the moment?”

“No one. A couple of centuries back, I was assigned to record-keeping—” I raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t do anything wrong, it’s standard for Virtues between assignments, but I turned out to be so gifted, they kept me on it. Currently I’m working on the great archives, all the way back to the War.”

“Why bother? You guys don’t forget—all anyone has to do is ask Michael or any of the Kerubim—”

“Even they don’t grasp all of it; the Light-Bringer’s rebellion raged across space, time, dimensions even some of us can’t comprehend. Millennia of collating and ordering the records, and we’re still not done. And He wants the complete narrative ready for humanity, when they ascend to their place above the angels.”

He paused—significantly. I took the cue. “What did you learn that you shouldn’t have?” He glanced warily, side to side; he wanted to talk, but he was afraid. “You know I don’t rat on my clients. There’s nothing worse He can do to me He hasn’t already done.”

“You really think so?” I did *not* like the note in his voice. “It’s true; I did learn something. Something I doubt any other knows—given the vastness of the archives, it’s little wonder no one else has come across the recollections of Kalmiya.”

“And who was he?”

“One of the angels who built the boundaries separating Hell from Heaven and Earth. In his memoirs, he said that the boundaries had been raised too slowly. That some of the rebels had escaped perdition and returned to Heaven, unnoticed, unrecognized.” I started to say something; he cut me off. “Yes, it is possible. Even those who fought the Fallen wouldn’t know all of them by sight.”

“But Kalmiya recognized some he knew. After watching the Unfallen for a few centuries, he realized their pride was undimmed. They believed they could succeed where Lucifer failed.”

OK, now he had my attention. “Have you checked this out with Kalmiya?”

“Vanished long ago, only the Archangels know where. Possibly on some mission elsewhere...” Or not.

“So what?” I shrugged. “If they are plotting against Him, He has to know.”

“He knew Lucifer’s heart too, yet He let the Morning Star rise in rebellion. You know better than most how hard it is to fathom His ways.”

“Point taken.” I did not like this—no question He’d win, but there wouldn’t be much left of Earth. That’s why there are two creation stories in Genesis: the second one was the reboot the universe needed after the war trashed everything. And the worst part was, I might still be around after it was all over. “OK, then. Al Shores is on the case.” I came around the desk and patted Maeriel’s shoulder sympathetically. “One thing—have you any idea how the Voice plans to kill you?”

“None. But there are weapons that could do it. At least five in the mortal world alone.”

That was worrying me, too, but I kept my poker face on. “Get on back to Heaven. I don’t want them to start missing you, might tip someone off.”

“Right—right!” He rose with a radiant smile that touched my heart



more than I wanted it to; he was an angel, what could I say? "When shall we—"

"Eleven tonight. One hour grace period. By then I hope to have it wrapped." Just don't ask me how. "Here, at my office. Of course, if you think of anyone, anything before then that might help, might be a lead—"

"Of course. And thank you. Thank you again." He smiled, then vanished in a shower of light that made me want to laugh and sing. But I didn't. I still figured this for some kind of joke—but if not, it was the kind of case He might intervene in. I don't like drawing His attention; I could never guess what He wanted, never knew which way He'd jump.

If I'd known, I'd have kept my mouth shut instead of mouthing off when Jesus walked by my house dragging his cross. I wouldn't have been cursed with immortality, wouldn't have changed from Ahasueris the cobbler into the Wandering Jew.

Nearly two thousand years later, I still hadn't made sense of it. I wasn't the only one making fun of Jesus, or cussing him out. I hadn't spat on him, or thrown cow patties—hell, Amos the Zealot had actually kicked the alleged Son of God. Why single me out?

"He gone?" Ellie stuck her head through the door, smacking her gum, jolting me out of a reverie I didn't have time for. "Let me guess, you forgot to get the money in advance?" I started to protest. "You know what happened the last murder case you waited for the money—and this one sounds real bad."

"Only if he's right. For my money, he's worried about nothing."

"Still, want me to read some chicken entrails?"

"You're a good sorceress and a great secretary, but you're no seer, babe. Ring up the prophet and see if she's free this morning. And if she ain't, mention my name." Like Maeriel, I had no time for appointments.

**I**gnoring the doorman's sniff, I slouched into the prophet's apartment building, took the elevator, hit the button for the penthouse. I made it up to floor 15 when I noticed I wasn't alone.

"Jew." He stood there in the corner, cloaked in shadow, radiating power. "You are interfering in matters you cannot hope to comprehend."

"I do that a lot." I reclined against the wall, looking unconcerned. "I hope you don't think teleporting in here is going to scare me."

"When I wish to deal with you, I will not scare you, I will kill you." I couldn't make out anything inside the shadow. "Stay away from the angel. Do not interfere in his fate. His death is no concern of yours."

"He's a client. That makes it my concern." Damn. Maeriel had been right—which meant this case was gonna be real nasty. Anyone who could threaten a Virtue I did not want to square off against. "Whoever or whatever you are, you know I don't fear death."

"But you will fear me. Do not make me warn you again." And he was gone. Confirming my opinion this was a really lousy day.

**T**he Wandering Jew?" The wiry, leather-jacketed Israeli brunette blocked the doorway, eyeing me skeptically. "You've been in New York six years; shouldn't you have wandered somewhere else?"

"Legends to the contrary, I only do it when people notice how old I'm not getting." She nodded and stepped back, opening the door. "That's your idea of a security check? Why not ask—"

"Idle curiosity, Mr. Shores, sorry."

"Al."

"Rachel." We shook hands. "Mossad knows so little about you, so we speculate. Why, for instance, you work as a private investigator—"

"Keeps my mind occupied. After two millennia, you know how easy it is to start brooding about stuff."

"Ah, no, but—"

"Trust me." Simplification. But a long rant about the unfairness of God and how someone, once in a while, needed to balance things in this universe, would only make me sound whiny. "Monique ready?"

"She's finishing up a tarot layout, then she's yours." Not that a prophet needs tarot cards, but some people prefer the props to admitting they're hearing the voice of God. "We had to defer a very important client to free up the time."

"Like there's another prophet up the street? They'll be back."

"True, but—" She caught herself. "Sorry. I know a little about what you've done for Monique—and Gabe and Sarah and Samuel before her. I—"

"Al!" A bleached-platinum blonde, about 19, jade and silver bracelets up one arm, ran out and embraced me. "It's so good to see you, it's been what, six months?" She scrutinized me thoroughly. "New trenchcoat? London Fog? Looks good on you."

"Got it at Goodwill. I see you've finally put on some weight."

"Rachel makes sure I remember to eat. Vast improvement over—you know." Meaning Samantha, Monique's treacherous, Moloch-worshipping ex-manager, who'd almost sent Monique and all the world to a fiery finish. "Everything's cool, 'cept I just saw I'll be cutting my legs shaving tomorrow."

"So don't shave."

"Remember what happened when you told Sarah to ignore her own prophecies?" Monique snagged my fingers, dragging me into the back room.

"I was kidding—never thought she'd listen." I'd known a lot of prophets; none of them had been as dumb as Sarah.

"So where you been the last six months?" Monique swung open the door to the inner sanctum. "You couldn't call occasionally? Pretend I'm more to you than just a stoolie?"

"I was ... busy." Which, being the prophet, she knew was a lie. The truth? She was still a kid, and I liked her a little too much. But one of the perks of immortality was that in five, 10 years ... "Right now, I need help."

"Trying to pinpoint Judgment Day again?" She settled on a cushion in the middle of the sanctum, brushing a Waite tarot deck aside. "I told you, there's no way—"

"I know, I know, it'll come like a thief in the night. I'll have to wait like every other living soul." But if I could be sure it wouldn't take another millenium, I'd feel a lot better. But she knew that, so I sketched Maeriel's story. "I don't need to know the future, just what's happening now. Is someone really after him? Who? Why?"

"You might get the future anyway, if I go into trance. Willing to risk it?"

Yeah, that was the rub; when you visit a prophet, you give up free will. What Monique sees, happens. "Why not? How bad can it be?"

"Jeez, Al, we both know better than that." Monique knelt down and prayed, eyes closed, breathing slowing down ...

"The shadow falls upon the caster of the shadow ..." Cryptic. What a surprise. "The spear shall strike, yet wound not in the striking ... the blood drips, sullyng the floor. The Innocent Fallen will rise, amidst the chaos ..."

The spear? Dripping blood? Shit! I leaned forward, hoping I'd hear something more, a hint about who was behind this, who wanted Maeriel dead, about the Unfallen ... but her head snaked limply forward. He had spoken.

Good manners required waiting a few minutes until she came around; I got up and left right away, muttering some explanation to Rachel. If I stayed, Monique would worm the truth out of me, and this was looking way, way too dangerous to have her involved. I stopped at a corner flower stand, took what money I had, and sent two roses up.

And walked down the mean streets, trying to convince myself the spear she spoke of meant Cuchulainn's Gae Bolg, Odin's Gungnir—



but I knew better. Her words referred to the Spear of Destiny, the Spear that slew Christ, one of the few mortal weapons that could kill an angel.

The Spear I'd kept hidden for 50 years.

Standing outside my office, I knew things were getting worse. The sun should have been streaming through the glass in the door at that time of day, bringing out my logo (Alan Shores Investigations. Discretion a specialty. No case too weird.), but it was dark, instead, like something big had blocked the light. Like my friend from the elevator?

Something told me I should go back to bed and start over tomorrow, but I heard Ellie inside so I opened the door. "—won't be in town for weeks, maybe month—oh, hi, boss, you're back early."

"You. Ahasueris." Eight feet tall, the golem spat the word out like gravel from its clay face. A trenchcoat concealed most of its clay body, but EMETH—life, in Hebrew—was clearly etched on its forehead.

"Me, Ahasueris, you golem. So?"

"Do not interfere."

"In what?"

"The angel. Forget him."

"Or else what? You know there's nothing anyone can do to me." Oh, if that were only true; still, a bluff couldn't hurt.

The golem's mouth worked slowly, struggling to shape the words. Finally the lips froze and another voice came out. "You're lying, Ahasueris, and we both know it. You can be broken—" The golem's fist demolished half of Ellie's desk. "—or imprisoned. The Templars held you for two centuries—"

"Remember what happened to them after that?"

"My power is far greater than theirs. Or yours. Be warned." The golem shoved one massive clay mitt into its pocket, tearing the seam slightly. It pulled out a wad of bills thick as my wrist and tossed them onto Ellie's desk blotter. Ben Franklin stared up at me from behind a rubber band. "Your fee, Wanderer. And there will be as much again after tonight, when the angel is dead."

"If you have the power to kill an angel, why bother buying me off?" Even as I argued, I pocketed the bundle. "What's this about?"

The golem opened its heavy fist and patted me gently on the head. The fact it could have popped my skull like a blackhead was not lost on me. "Earn your fee, Ahasueris, and keep silent. Good day."

"No illusion spells on the coat," Ellie said as the door closed behind it, "so we know Clayboy didn't come here on the subway. Standard cabbalist manufacture, I'll trace him ... shit, teleported from the hallway, I've lost him." She cocked her head thoughtfully. "So why not just break all your arms and legs? It'd be a lot cheaper."

"Yeah, you'd think ... but no reason we can't take advantage of it." I flipped Ellie the bankroll. "Go make nice with the power company, OK?"

She stared at it as it landed in her lap, like I'd tossed her a tarantula. "Boss, you aren't letting them—"

"No, they're not buying me out. Is that any reason not to take their money?" I reached out, plucked the roll back, pulled out a hundred and tossed the rest back into her lap. "And might as well treat myself—and maybe a friend—to lunch while I'm at it. After I do some thinking."

Ellie headed for the door. "Say boss, is it true? That if I'd wiped the E off his forehead—"

"That it would turn the word 'life' into 'death'? Sure. Erasing it would only take—oh, Excalibur to cross it out, or five minutes concentrated spray from a fire hose to wash it away." My hand strayed to my hip, remembering a clay fist shattering the bone to fragments. "Believe me, I know."

As soon as she'd gone, I poured myself a scotch. Like I said, no buzz (He apparently didn't want me drowning my sorrows in booze—or opium, cocaine or lotus dust, I'd tried them all), but I like the taste of a good single-malt. It helps me relax, helps me think. And I had a lot to think about.

I'd been watching on Golgotha when Longinus had stabbed the dying Jesus after five minutes protesting to his centurion. Most legionnaires hated crucifixion detail, but Longinus loved watching Jews die, slowly; I'd been very happy to see him 30 years later, shriveled, palsied, and completely toothless.

The Spear had killed Jesus, but saved him from a slow, painful death; that made it sacred and accursed at the same time. When King Arthur's knight Balin stabbed King Pellam with it, 15 centuries or so back, a fifth of England was laid waste. And Pellam was just a king, if it struck an angel ... oy.

So was it coincidence Maeriel had come to me, or was someone running a scam? But what? Nobody could get the Spear without my consent, and I sure as hell wasn't giving it up, no matter what. I wrestled with that a few minutes, then decided to focus on my only other clue—the golem. Only a tzaddik, a spiritual master could bring clay into life, and no one that evolved would send a golem around to hassle me like this.

With one exception. Which suited me fine, because I really, really didn't like him.

The Dice Society is NYC's premier hangout for Big Apple paranormals—mages, a few of the better vampires, immortals (though we have our own place too), mystics. The name has nothing to do with gambling, but with the way God plays dice with the universe (Einstein's problems with quantum mechanics were nothing compared to his objections to magic).

As I'd hoped, I found Zurinov sitting with a couple of his cronies in one of the lounges, gesturing expansively with a glass of vodka and babbling about something. When he saw me approaching, the smile wiped off his fat Russian face. "What do you want, Jew?"

Jew. Just like the shadow had said it. "I'm a member. Been one for over 50 years." One of his buddies got up; I shoved past him, leaned down into Zurinov's face. "Remember, back in the USSR? The good old days when the Soviets shelled out all that money for your occult research, the stuff they claimed was only parapsychology and mind-reading? How they gave you the money to prove a good Red could make a golem just as good as any Jew?"

"And you interfered with my research. Abducted Soviet citizens who—"

"Rescued kabbalists you drugged and tortured to give up their secrets, you bastard." I grabbed him by the collar and pulled him close enough that I could smell his vodka breath. "Listen Ivan, and listen good. Hang out in the US of A looking for new employers, reminisce about how great you were, slander my people like I've heard you doing—but stay away from the angel. He's under my protection now."

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"No, of course you don't. Stay away from him anyway. And forget about getting your hands on the—a certain item, OK?" No need to let the rest of the world in on my having the Spear.

"Al?" Suddenly, Steve Randall stood at my shoulder. White magician, ex-priest, semi-official Vatican agent. "Al, why don't I buy you a drink? Single-malt? Glenfiddich?"

"Fine." I dropped the Russian back into his overstuffed chair. "I've said what I have to say, anyway." I followed Steve into the bar, sat down next to him, and ordered a burger.

"You're buying?" Steve said. "You actually got a paying client?"

"Wonders never cease." The drinks came, so did the burger; the chef's time-shifting spells meant the food sometimes reached us before we ordered. "So what's up?" He jerked his head back toward Zurinov.

"No biggie." I took a big bite out of the burger. No pink. Perfect.

"You probably said the same thing when you insulted Jesus. Honestly, a guy about to be executed—"

"Exactly. A criminal, the umpteenth fake messiah, big deal."

"Al, we want the Spear." Man, what was this? "There are—rumors—fulminations—something wants the Spear, and—"

"What Spear, Steve?"



---

# “MY GOLEM has not been anywhere today— and I WORK FOR NO ONE, not anymore.”

---

“Don’t play games, my dad saw you take it from Hitler’s hands in the bunker.”

“I lost it.” Steve just looked at me. “If I had it, why would you want it? Drips blood all the time. Costs you a fortune in paper towels and Clorox.”

“Officially, we want it as a relic of our Savior—OK, OK, my Savior. Unofficially—well, you know what the Spear can do in the wrong hands. After Hitler somehow convinced the monks at Carbonek to give him—”

“Somehow? You know how, Steve. They were the biggest bunch of Jew-hating bastards your church—”

“The Pope condemned them as heretics after the war.”

“Yeah, that helped a lot.” The Spear made Hitler more than a brilliant orator, let him tap the worst part of people to create Kristallnacht, the Final Solution ... final for too many of my friends, and for the last descendant I knew of.

“I know the Church has a lot to answer for—but we don’t have time to discuss it now. In four years it’s going to be the Millenium —”

“No, really?”

“Can you imagine what would happen if someone got stabbed like Pellam, but on the millenium? Instead of ravaging a few hundred square miles, the surge could take out an entire continent—Al? I know that look, you’ve thought of something.”

Oh, had I ever. Oh, damn, damn, damn! “Steve, level with me. Did you ever hear any stories about fallen angels still around in Heaven?”

“Everyone in the Church hears those stories. They’re the religious equivalent of an urban legend, like Pope Joan, the good angels trapped in Hell, the Phantom Cardinal—”

“The Wandering Jew? Look, I got no time for this.” I grabbed the rest of my burger, slapped down the c-note with my other hand. “Save the change for me, Steve?”

“Al, some of the Ecstatics have been having ominous visions, if you know something—”

“You guys are on His side, Steve. I’m on ours, and I’m not sure they’re the same. Besides, I have almost two thousand years on you—respect your elders and stay out of the way!”

I hadn’t fitted all the pieces together. Like who was behind it. And what Zurinov thought he’d gain, given what would happen to him—or had he been told the whole story?

As the elevator lifted me to my office, I wondered why I even cared. If things were shaping up as I thought—well, it’d be over for me. No more wandering. No more watching my friends grow old. No more wishing there was still someone around who could get the joke about the centurion and the fried fish (if you weren’t around in Palestine way back when—well, you just didn’t have the context).

But all I could think was that I didn’t want Steve, or Ellie, or Monique to die. And my decisions could determine if they lived or died ... man, I wished this cup would pass from my lips. Something I doubt Jesus ever said, he was the most doubt-free guy I ever met, even at the end. Lucky son of a bitch.

I swung open the door. “Ellie—oh, crap.” Sitting in her chair I saw one of those damn Russian dolls that have little dolls sitting inside them. I could just make it out—the lights weren’t working. “Zurinov?”

“How observant, detective.” His voice came from the air—probably originating miles away. “Now unless you want your purple-haired slut—”

“She’s a virgin. Pledged to Lilith.”

“All American girls are sluts. In Mother Russia—”

“Spare me, OK? Where is she?”

“Open me, open me, open me ... “ The doll rocked back and

forth in eagerness; I bent down and opened it up. The doll inside immediately chanted the same thing.

I’d opened it down about five levels when I found it. A simulacrum of Ellie, her face frozen with fear. “Nice work.” First rule: Never let them know you’re sweating. “Wouldn’t think you could get that much detail on a simulacrum that small.”

“Tonight, at midnight, you will have the Spear at your office. Or the girl dies.”

The dolls shattered before I could respond.

**A**lmost midnight. I’d done nothing but sit at my desk in the dark and think. Why hadn’t Maeriel made our appointment at 11? Was he dead after all? That would blow the few theories I had out of the water. What was I missing?

I heard the front door open. Footsteps, one set human, one set unnaturally heavy. The door to my office swung open; Zurinov strode in, golem behind him, Ellie tucked under its arm. “Why is this room so dark?”

“Guess she didn’t have a chance to pay the light bill before you grabbed her—right, El?” She nodded; I pulled out a flashlight and set it on the desk, illuminating all of us. Clayboy—a different one from last time—dropped Ellie on the floor and set its foot on her head, lightly. Her eyes were blazing, furious ... impotent.

Zurinov smiled. “The Spear?”

“Fifty, 60 years from now—a century tops—she’ll be dead. What makes you think I’d give up the Spear just to prolong her life a few decades?”

“Hah? This from the one who risked his life to save President Johnson from me? When you did not even like the man?”

“I like commies even less. And that would have tilted the whole Cold War too far in your favor.” As it was, he’d been too broken to make another run at office, and we’d wound up with that wiener Nixon.... “Ellie’s not the same level of importance.”

“Well, then, might as well dispense with her.” Zurinov gestured to the golem.

“OK, you win.” His smile grew. “I’ll give you the Spear—but there’s a few things I’d like to get straight first, if you could explain.” He nodded; he’d always been the pedantic sort. “Who the hell are you working for? Why’d you warn me off the case?”

“Eh?”

“Why’d you send the golem today?”

**M**y golem has not been anywhere today—and I work for no one, not anymore. As you Americans say, entrepreneurship is the way to go.

“You will help me with that. After you came in mouthing your meaningless threats, I realized someone had been—leaning on you, is that the word? And a few inquiries confirmed you are rumored to have one thing worth taking—the Spear of Longinus. Whoever seeks it will now have to deal with me.”

Oh, good, that made things even less clear. And when he held out his arms, I had no choice. I reached into thin air and slapped the Spear down in his hands. Three feet of blackened wood. An iron head, with blood running down the ferrules from the base of the blade, then dripping off the tip. Zurinov shivered slightly as he tasted its power, and the golem removed his foot from Ellie’s head. “Now let me tell you why you don’t want to give anyone—”

“You’ll tell me nothing, Jew. But we will wait for your



enemy together.”

And then midnight struck. And Maeriel appeared, lighting up the entire room. “The Spear,” he said. Zurinov smiled at the sight of him—but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Give it to me, wizard, give it to me.”

Shit. Now it did make sense—no, it didn’t. “Why?” I asked. “If you wanted the Spear, why all that crap about someone trying to kill you? I mean, if you want the Spear, your story has to be crap, right?”

“I’d tried and failed to tear the Spear from its hiding place,” Maeriel said. “Convincing you to give it to me was the only alternative. My talk of murder was to make you think of the Spear; then I would convince you the only way to stop the Voice was to use the Spear against him. I sent the golem to further intimidate you; I thought, rightly, that would make you all the more willing to fight.”

“And then Zurinov dealt himself in.” Or rather, I’d dealt him in, dammit. Maeriel’s plan would never have convinced me to use the Spear, but Zurinov had forced my hand. I’d set myself up. “You decided to hold off when you saw he could do your dirty work for you.”

“To which I have no objection,” Zurinov said, raising the Spear. “All that matters is settling on a fair price—”

“I give you nothing.” Before either of us could move, the Spear materialized in Maeriel’s hands. I activated the spell laid on it, the one supposed to return it to its hiding place—but it didn’t work. “It is a very powerful spell. But I am a Virtue. And I have a vision—one you might share, Ahasueris.”

“Bringing on Armageddon a few millenia early?” I shook my head. “Sorry, don’t think so.”

“What?” Zurinov glanced from one of us to the other. “Is this a joke, Jew?”

“In a few minutes,” I said, “he’s going to stab himself. A divine being, struck by the Spear on one of the holiest nights of all time—two thousand years since Jesus was born.”

“That’s four years away!” Zurinov said. “Have the centuries confused you—”

“Hamster gone asleep at the wheel, Ivan? Every biblical historian knows Jesus was born around four years before the official date. Allowing for leap years, changes in calendar systems—tonight’s the night, right? A few minutes after midnight?” Maeriel nodded. “Stabbing a king—not even killing him—leveled a kingdom. Impaling yourself on the Spear will destroy, what, everything?” Another nod. “Why?”

**G**od is perfect ... but His universe is flawed. And while it exists, it cannot be perfected, for He bound Himself to obey creation’s rules. The wages of sin must be death. A triangle must have three sides. And no one can escape Hell until He harrows it.

“And this is a problem for you?” Zurinov said, as bewildered as I was.

“Have you ever heard tell of the Innocent Fallen? The angels still grappling with the Fallen when the walls of Hell were formed?” I nodded—though I hadn’t heard the name until Monique mentioned it in her trance. “I had thought it mere legend, until in the records, I found proof.” He shook his head. “A world without justice. A world where innocent spirits can be trapped, damned ... this creation must be destroyed, that the Innocent Fallen may go free, that a better world may be forged—”

“And that’s your call to make?” I said.

He looked amused—I think. “Are *you* suggesting one should not question His judgment?”

“I—OK, hell, no, but killing everyone? Damning billions straight to Hell—”

“Only those who deserve damnation. The innocent will be raised up—”

“What about repentance?” I ran my hand through my hair, trying to find the words to make him see. “Some of the damned still might be able to redeem themselves, but not if you destroy everything now!”

“Why do you dispute me?” He had one of his unnatural-looking frowns again. “Do you not long for the Last Trump yourself? Do you not see

yourself as living proof of His injustice? You of all souls know—”

“Exactly! I know—and I can live with it. Maybe that’s why Man will assume a place above the angels—we can accept imperfection. We can rationalize, justify—”

“Avoid seeing the truth.” I think the wind-chime noise was a sigh. “I see it. I cannot avoid it. I will do what He loves humanity too much to do—end this world. End it all.”

“This is insane!” Zurinov gestured. The golem lumbered forward—and froze in mid-step. So did Zurinov. Maeriel set the head of the Spear against his glowing breast.

“You’re making a mistake,” I said. And I had to convince him of that, fast.

“Creation ends now.”

“It won’t end, that’s your mistake. Your plan is flawed.” That caught his attention. “To destroy everything, you plan to kill yourself. Suicide. A mortal sin, because it’s the complete rejection of His will.”

“And if I must be damned afterwards—”

“You’re damned the instant you do it. And thereby become Fallen. Stabbing yourself won’t have the same effect, then.”

His expression didn’t change. “You’re trying to trick me.”

“You won’t destroy creation, you’ll just—I don’t know, blow up Earth? Reduce everything to a wasteland? Is that your idea of justice?” I had no idea if I was reaching him or not. “As for the Innocent Fallen—maybe there’s something I can do about that.”

“Help them? Impossible.”

“Remember what I did for Metatron? That was impossible, too. And the money your golem put down could pay for a lot of footwork.” The worn iron of the Spearhead still rested against his breast, blood slowly soaking from the tip into his robe. “Give me the Spear, and I’ll see what I can do. Aren’t those better odds than spreading untold misery to no avail?”

For a long second he stood there, face impassive. Then he shifted the point away from his chest and placed the shaft in my waiting hands. “There is much you must know.”

“Be in my office at noon tomorrow. We’ll talk.”

And he vanished, leaving me with nothing but a flashlight for illumination again. And the knowledge that Ellie, Monique, Steve would live to see another day.

“Very good, Jew.” I spun around to see Zurinov moving. “Now, as we were saying, you will either give the Spear to me—or else.” The golem moved too, turning back toward Ellie.

“Not today, Ivan.” I jerked the Spear up (I’d never have brought it out of hiding just for this, but since it was handy ... ) and scratched the blade over the “E” symbol on Clayboy’s forehead. Two quick strokes half crossed out the symbol, turning EMETH—truth—into METH—death.

Suddenly lifeless, the golem fell. Right on top of Zurinov.

Zurinov screamed as they hit the floor together, a couple of hundred pounds of clay on top of him. He’d managed to raise some sort of shield, but I doubted he’d done it fast enough to avoid breaking a rib or two. “You—Jew—you—”

“Yeah, me.” I went over and slashed Ellie’s bonds, pulled off her gag. “You OK, kid?”

“Fine. ‘cept the bastard felt me up once.”

“Well, he won’t be feeling anything for a little bit.” I could see him trying to cast something, but he was in no shape to focus. “OK, Ivan, here’s the deal: I’m not going to blow your head off—easy as it would be—and in return, you’re going to get out of my office before I come back in the morning. And remember, Maeriel would be sooo unhappy if you killed me before I start work on his problem.” Just the same, I’d check with Monique to see if she saw Zurinov pulling anything. “And don’t think you’ll ever be able to wield the Spear. If you knew some of the spells I’d had placed on it—they wouldn’t have stopped an angel, but you’d be real sorry.”

He glared at me with fury as Ellie and I left the office. But I’d just saved the world; pissing off an anti-Semite was just icing on the cake.

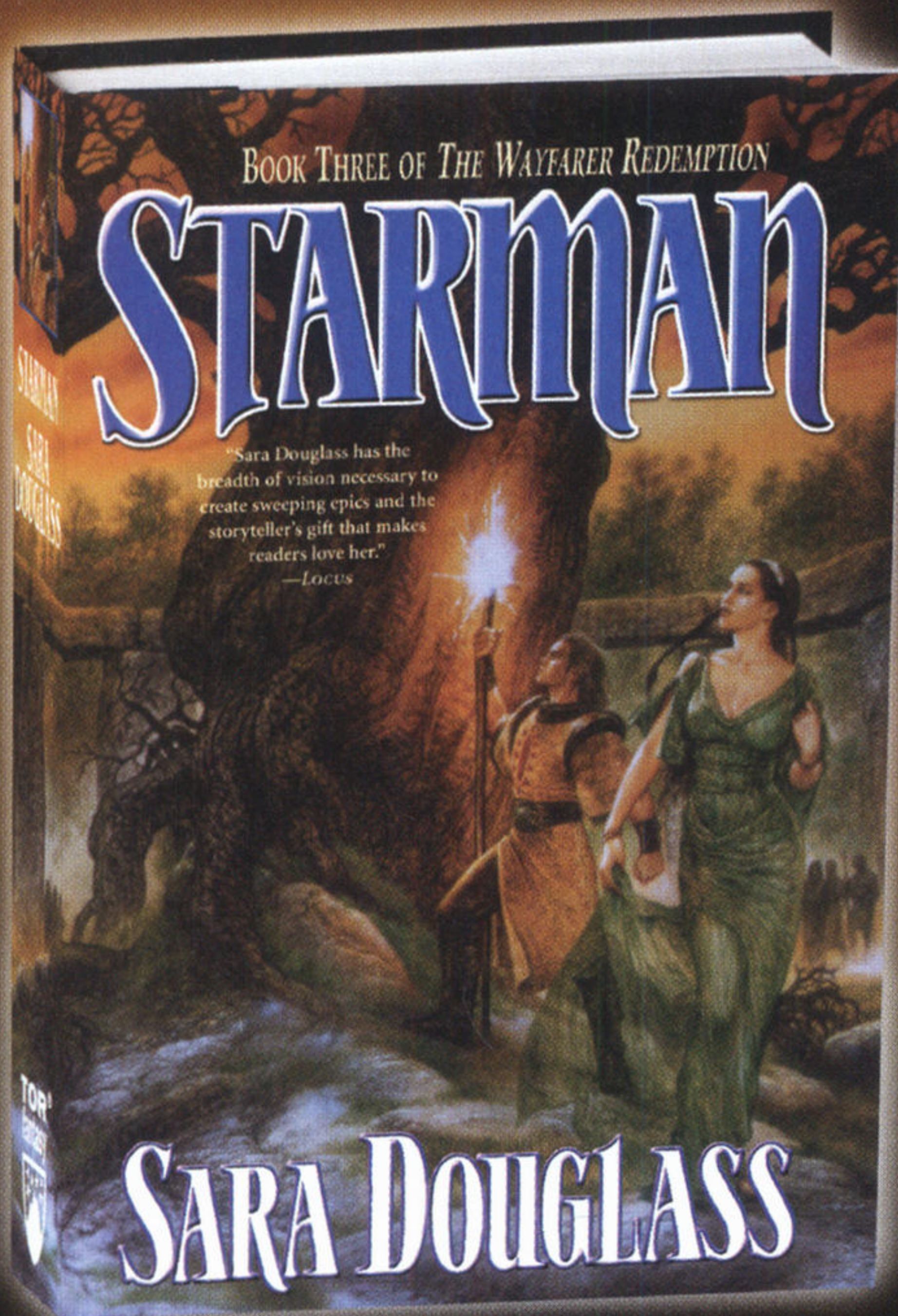
And tomorrow morning, we could finally get the lights turned back on. 🦋



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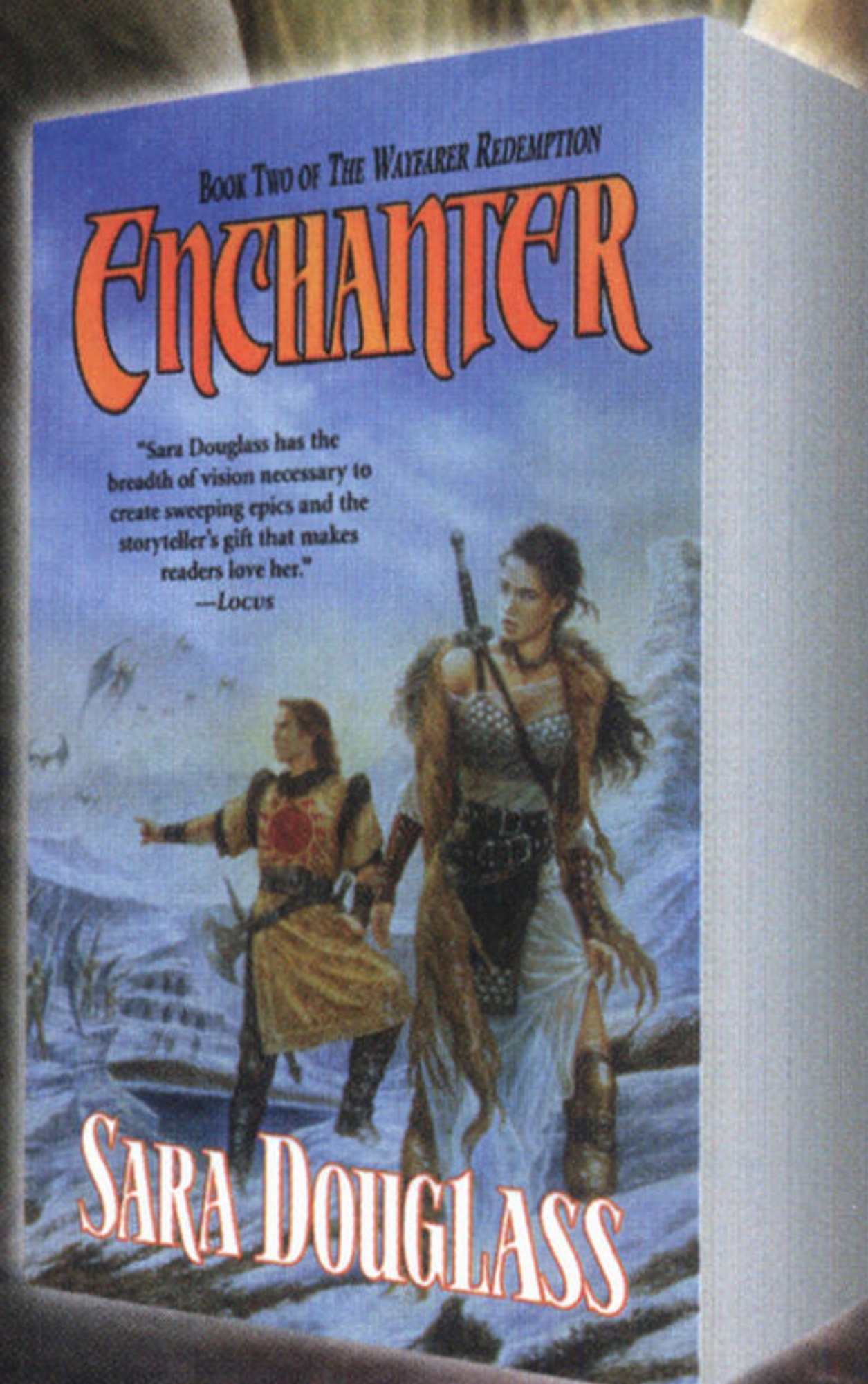
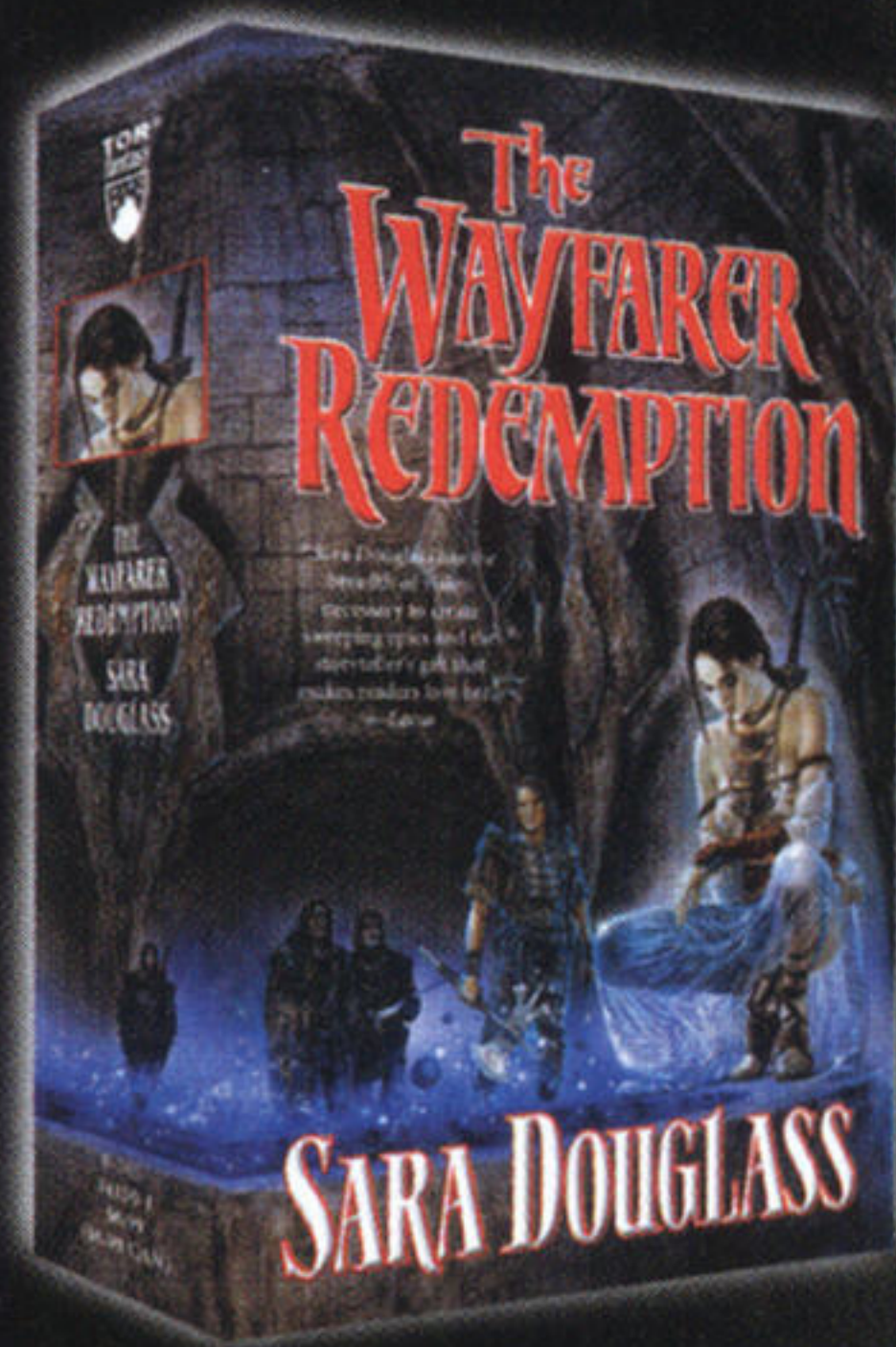
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# the Librarian's DAUGHTER

*It's not easy to bear the weight  
of prophecy—fate can be foretold,  
but almost never forfended.*

---

The prophet stood in a marble chamber of the great palace and broke a princess's heart by telling her what she already knew, but with an authority she couldn't deny. The prophet, called the Dreamer, wrapped the coat of a spotted horse tight around herself, the head with its gaping eye holes pulled over her face like a hood. Even so long after the mare's death the skin smelled like a slaughterhouse, bloody and wet. It had belonged to a dear friend, though, so the Dreamer hugged it close. The mare whispered dreams to her, and she became a prophet.

"Two paths lie before you. In one, you marry for political reasons a man you have never seen. The union brings peace to two warring kingdoms. You will be known as the Just, and history will remember you kindly, as it has not remembered many of your ancestors. But you will always carry regret in your heart."

BY CARRIE VAUGHN • ILLUSTRATION BY MARK HARRISON







The Dreamer's blood rushed hot, her skin flushed, the horse's coat grew sticky with her sweat. She held its legs twined around her arms, the bulk of it wrapped around her body. Its weight bent her shoulders. She gazed around the chamber with eyes that were not her own.

"In the other, you marry your true love." She nodded to the man who stood beside the princess, a distant cousin who had wooed her and won her heart. They clung to each other like vines. "War follows. Ambition. Pride. Strife. You sometimes ask yourself, did he marry you for love or for your throne? But your nights together are sweet until the end."

The man lunged two great strides, breaking from the princess, who tried to hold him back. Anger made his skin red, and he snarled.

"How dare you? How dare you speak so to the Royal House?"

The spell broke, the air turned cool. The Dreamer took a deep breath, smelling leather now instead of death. The prophecy had ended. She bowed deeply to the royals but did not remove the horse skin cloak.

"Her Highness asked the fortune of her marriage told."

**H**e wanted to hurt her, she could tell by the way his hands clenched and his body trembled. But he did not dare because she was the Dreamer and no one dared touch her. She had faced kings and emperors more powerful than this whelp and had not flinched.

The princess, a charming girl of eighteen with black hair and cream skin, held her face in her hands. All monarchs confronted these paths: the well-being of their people or the gratification of their own desires. Which would she choose? This was no longer a vague, academic question; her father the king was gravely ill. The Dreamer's vision had forced the choice on her at last.

"Darling, don't listen to her." The beloved tried to laugh, a harsh sound in the room's stillness. "What is prophecy? We will prove her wrong!"

"Be quiet," the princess said.

The Dreamer bowed again. "I will take my leave now."

"Thank you, Dreamer." The princess sat straight, rigid on her velvet throne. Her eyes dry, she nodded graciously at the Dreamer and did not glance at her princely cousin. She looked as though she had made a decision. Her lover's violent reaction to the prophecy may have made the choice for her. "Will you stay with us this night? There will be a small feast."

The Princess's small feast could feed a poor village for a year. Roast peacock, puddings,

sugary sauces, and brandied fruits; a warm night in a feather bed. They always invited her to stay for the feast, no matter how dire her predictions.

"Thank you, Your Highness, but no. The road calls me."

The Dreamer left the marble chamber, the palace, and found the road leading out of the kingdom. The princess's grandchildren would hear stories of this day.

Out of sight of the palace, she stopped, folded Falla's skin, magically tanned and cured, and tucked it deep in her rucksack. Also in the sack: a change of clothes—skirt, shirt, tunic, and stockings; a wool blanket for sleeping; a water skin and some travel fare; and a book of poetry and ballads, a last gift from her father. She loved books.

She walked with the sack over her shoulder and a straw hat on her head and became a common traveler, a scholar on the road between libraries. The librarian's daughter.

Years ago, when she still lived with her father, a librarian to the King of a now distant realm, Elsa used to sneak into the royal stables after supper to feed carrots to the horses. She went in the evenings, when the place was quiet, after the animals had been fed and the grooms were away eating their own suppers. The grooms didn't like her disturbing the royal steeds.

Her favorite was the spotted mare, the familiar of the King's Wizard. She looked like a court jester, brown spots of all shapes and sizes splashed over her white coat. After the first time Elsa gave her a carrot, Falla always waited for her, head stretched as far out over the door to her stall as she could manage. After such a greeting, how could Elsa stay away? Falla let Elsa scratch her neck, her ears, the spot between her ears, where she couldn't scratch herself. The mare sighed and let her lips quiver with pleasure. When Elsa looked into the mare's large, dark eyes to try and learn what the animal was thinking, Falla rested her muzzle on Elsa's shoulder and breathed warm air on her neck. And Elsa, tears in her eyes, thought: How wonderful to have this large, warm creature trust me.

For ten years now, since she was fifteen, Elsa traveled where the roads led her and did not mind the way. She appeared at the front gates of castles, palaces, cathedrals, and guild halls when she was needed, as if she'd been called. Sometimes, messengers on winded horses found her, begged her to come with them even as they panted for breath. Life or death might depend on the dreams she had when she wore Falla's skin.

Sometimes, though, she lived for herself. She went to Brewersville for its festival because she wanted a mug of fresh cider.

Anonymously, she bought her mug from a vendor set up with a dozen other tents and stalls in the large field outside the town.

Musicians played, local folk who brought out their instruments perhaps twice a year, but made twice as merry because of that. In the center of the ring of wood and canvas merchant stalls, a crowd danced the ground to dust. She took her cider to a quiet spot, a tree with a view of the crowd but outside the paths of travel, outside notice. She sat with her back to its trunk, her pack at her feet, and rested.

She had begun to find it difficult to talk to people.

She would go the whole day without speaking to another soul, except to say thanks to the folk who sold her food and drink. She'd leave the town before nightfall and sleep on the open road, far from people. The music drew her, but she couldn't bring herself to join the dance. She wasn't sure she could open her mouth without prophesying, even to laugh with the crowd.

"A pretty girl like you should be smiling on a festival day."

The figure spoke as he moved to block her view of the field. He might have stepped out of a ballad in the book, he looked so much the part of a rogue. Young, he had just a shadow of a beard and short, dark hair, a firm jaw, and a cocky half-grin. Worn leather boots contrasted with fine leather breeches dyed gray, and a leather jerkin opened over a loose, linen shirt. He wore a knife at his belt, a pouch over his shoulder, and stood with his arms crossed, considering her.

Dumbly, she stared. She stood apart, a seeress, a legend, and she had long since stopped thinking of herself as anything like pretty.

"Tell me, what is the matter?"

She had to remember words and took a deep breath before speaking. "Thinking dark thoughts, I suppose."

"May I join you?"

"In thinking dark thoughts? How could I stop you?"

He sat beside her in the grass.

"I am Conrad. You are?"

Being flirted at, and the novelty of it startled her. "Elsa."

"Elsa. Very good to meet you."

She didn't have a clue what to say next. She'd spent her childhood in libraries and her young adulthood wandering at the whim of a haunted horse skin.

He rescued her from a confused silence. "Will you dance with me?"

She grinned at him like he'd sprouted mule's ears. "Do young men always come right up to women and ask them to dance?"

"Yes, they do. You must be from a strange kingdom if you've never before been asked to dance."

The kingdom Elsa came from was not much different from this one, which was part of the reason she'd stopped here to rest. But the road between this one and that was a



long one, and she frowned thinking of it.

Sensing the change in her mood, Conrad urged more gently. "Come, dance. Just a round or two. It will distract you from your troubles, whatever they are."

He stood with a noble flourish, bowing as he offered his hand. His eyes were alight. His smile seemed honest. Elsa took his hand, and suddenly could not remember the last time she'd touched another living creature. She'd

famous for it, I imagine." By this time she had some experience with legends and thought she was right. In the stories about highwaymen and professional scoundrels, when such men weren't utterly reprehensible, they were handsome and dashing. They swept girls off their feet. Stories were true sometimes, Elsa knew that very well.

She touched his cheek, ran her hand on the stubble. He felt warm, rough, giving.

copse at the edge of the market, and found a view of the tree, a strong oak that guarded the market square, where they'd left their packs together.

And there he was, crouched by her pack, searching inside it.

She stepped from her hiding place and went to him. "You are a thief. I knew it," she said, smiling. She wasn't angry. She had no valuables except the book, and she

She looked like a court jester,  
brown spots of all shapes and  
sizes splashed over her white coat.

missed the warmth, the blood.

She danced until her heart pounded. Arms flung, legs working, bow and turn, circle with another couple, and there Conrad was to take her hand again and lead her back to the start. His gaze never left her, and she only had to see his face again to smile. Bow, cross, turn, bow again, her skirt swept behind her, the musicians quickened the beat, and she kept pace until she thought she'd trip and fall.

In one movement, a couple would touch hands briefly as they crossed to the other side of the line. It was meant to be tantalizing, a moment of flirtation, of seduction. The music lingered at the step, as though to tempt. Once, after Elsa had lost count of the rounds, she and Conrad came to this step. Instead of the touch, he picked her up by her waist, lifted her, held her close so their bodies pressed together, then he set her in her new place in the dance with a touch to her cheek. This audacity wasn't unheard of, it had happened before—when a man had a particular fancy for the girl he danced with.

The musicians stopped for rest and drink, and the dancers paused to catch their breaths. Conrad kept Elsa by his side by holding her hand.

This wasn't meant to happen to her. She walked in gray spaces.

And he—perhaps he really was a rogue from a legend. Perhaps that was why he'd found her, legend to legend.

"You're a thief," she said.

He grinned a sly fox grin. "Why do you say that?"

"You've got that air about you. You're

He took her hands and pressed a coin into them. "We're both thirsty. Buy us a flask of wine. I'll be waiting where we left our packs." He kissed her cheek and smiled.

The head groom warned her that the Wizard would not like her playing with Falla. But Elsa kept on, because it was so clear the mare longed for such attention. For her part, Elsa didn't like the Wizard. He wore black leather armor, rings in his ears, and he scowled and cursed. When he had to consult with her father, the librarian and great scholar, the Wizard treated him like a common servant. Even the King was a little afraid of him. He was powerful. He had called rain from blue sky, had changed lead to gold. He rode out on his spotted mare to slay dragons and returned with the horns of the beasts slung on his saddle, the mare prancing with pride.

He was kind enough to Falla in his own way, petting her, speaking to her. But he never fed her carrots or scratched her ears. Nonetheless, Falla kept close by him whenever he was near. Elsa's father said Falla was his familiar, and his magic was bound to her, or came through her. But Elsa didn't think the Wizard loved the mare.

**Elsa** didn't go to buy the wine. She went away from Conrad, toward the market stalls and out of his sight. Then she slipped between a bread merchant's stand and a fruit seller's and went around back, made her quiet way to the

could see why a well-stuffed bag like hers would attract attention.

He hardly noticed her. He didn't flinch with surprise or even glance up at her approach. Stricken, he was staring at something he'd found in her pack. He said, "And you're the Dreamer. The prophet. Here's the spotted horse's coat the tales speak of. You're her."

She sat with him. When she moved to touch his shoulder, he cringed. He pushed himself away from her and the pack, propping himself against the tree trunk.

"What of it?" she said, a bit sadly. With him, she had almost felt normal, just a girl at a market dance.

"I never expected—I didn't think to find—" He stared at her pack with the blank, shocked expression of someone to whom she'd just delivered a prophecy. Good or bad, they never knew what to do with her visions.

"You flirted with me just to distract me and steal from me."

He huffed at her disbelieving tone. "It is a common enough strategy, milady. All the better when the woman's pretty."

The musicians were playing again, but their music sounded distant, and Elsa felt as though she heard the laughter of the townsfolk through the haze of sleep. Sun scattered flecks of light through the tree branches; their place here was shaded and separate. A breeze made the leaves rustle.

"You really think I'm pretty?"

He laughed a little and wouldn't look at her. "You're not supposed to be here, part of the world with the rest of us." He made it sound like she'd done something wrong,



being here with him and pretty as well.

"And what of you? You're a famous highwayman, I know it." He had to be, a dashing thief, a flirting rogue. "Tell me which one. The Raptor? Oslo of Pinnacle? Robin of the Greenwood?" All were stories in her father's book.

"No, none of that. I'm just a common thief, milady."

"Don't call me that. I'm Elsa, a librarian's daughter. And no one has ever before called me pretty."

"It's no doubt hard to tell, with that horse skin pulled over your face." She barely heard him, he spoke so softly, his face turned away.

Elsa had a daydream that she made up herself and had nothing to do with prophecy. In it, she buried Falla's coat in a dark wood and never chanted visions again. But the story always got away from her, and instead of living free, she was pursued by Falla's voice, which cried after her not to abandon her.

"You're frightened of me," she said. "Why don't you run away? Doesn't the Dreamer's wrath frighten you?"

"It should. But you—you don't seem very much like the seeress in the stories. You—you're young. Alive."

And the stories were old and dead. "I'm not the Dreamer when I'm not wearing the skin. I'm just a girl. A librarian's daughter."

"I saw the book."

"It was my father's."

They sat together quietly, Elsa thinking all the while that he'd leave her at any moment.

Instead, he asked, "How did this happen? That isn't part of the stories, how you came

being again.

"The horse was magic, and when she died she called to me. It's hard to explain." She wasn't used to talking; her words faltered. She shook her head, swallowed, and spoke again. "How does a man become a famous thief?"

"I tell you once and for all, I am common. Nameless."

If she wouldn't tell her story, she couldn't expect him to tell his. After this, they had sat so long in an uncomfortable silence, she thought he'd surely leave her now. But he didn't. He stayed. He was even watching her.

"Elsa the Prophet. Can you tell me my future?"

"You probably wouldn't like it. People usually don't, especially when they ask for it."

"What do you do, to learn someone's future?"

"I sleep a night wearing the skin. I dream the answer, and the next morning tell the person."

"Spend a night with me, Elsa. Tell me my future in the morning."

Falla wouldn't like it. Elsa could almost hear the mare chiding. This was selfish, the dreaming turned into a parlor trick. If the dream were terrible, none of them would be happy. But to spend a night with Conrad—she would dream what she had to.

She knelt beside him. He touched her cheek, then kissed her, slowly and gently. It

spent, she crawled on top of him, bit his ear and whispered, "Again." He said, "Yes," and they did.

When they finished, Elsa moved a little way away, leaving him to the wool blanket. She took the spotted horse skin from her pack and wrapped it tight around her. Silent, Conrad watched as she curled up to fall asleep and dream.

She never dreamed for herself. Others asked her to wear the skin, and she did so because the skin demanded it. Tonight, the skin was reluctant.

*Tell me about Conrad.*

*I cannot tell you,* Falla said, her voice like the rustle of hay.

Even dead, she smelled of horse: warm hair, hay, and dust. In memory, Elsa felt her breath and heard her nostrils snorting.

*Why not? Is he wicked? Is there a mystery surrounding him? If he is common as he says, then so is his future. Why not tell me?*

*Do not ask me this.*

*I have served you for ten years, why can't you answer me now? Is it because I like him?*

*It will hurt you to hear this. I do not wish to hurt you.*

Falla was her friend, despite all that had happened, despite the fact that her devotion to Falla made Elsa something other than human. Elsa used to hang on Falla's stall door and wonder what the mare would say if she could talk. If she had known then what the mare would say—I do not wish to hurt you—Elsa would have cried with happiness, because this meant that Falla loved her as much as she loved Falla. But love caused pain as well as joy.

Elsa had a daydream that she made up herself and had nothing to do with prophecy.

to wear the horse's skin. How did a girl like you become the Dreamer?"

If she told him the story, he would only become more horrified. It wasn't a story for telling, without the filter of decades of legend. She wanted to talk to him, though, and wanted him to talk to her. She wanted to tell him something that would keep him here, talking to her. She did not know when she would have a chance to touch another living

was lovely.

They found a hidden place in the woods outside the town. They stripped each other, quickly and desperately, as though afraid of interruption or afraid this wasn't real. Cool air chilled their skin, making every touch that much warmer. Elsa didn't think to open her eyes to look. They made love on her wool blanket, spread on the ground under a thicket. When Conrad lay back,

*Tell me his fate, Falla. I must know.*

*You are sure?*

*Yes!*

*You cannot save him. You will stand watching, his fate in your hands, and you will do nothing. Is that what you wished to hear?*

Elsa cried, because Falla spoke truth, always. *Falla, Falla, I can't do this anymore.*

*Hush, dear friend. I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

Once more, Elsa felt her soft muzzle



against her hands, and Falla's dark eyes gazed at her.

The first time she put on Falla's skin, it was still wet with flesh and blood.

One day, the King needed a prophecy, and the Wizard worked his most powerful spell. But the spell failed, the prophecy did not come. It was a black day, as the Wizard stormed out of his workroom and the King despaired of overcoming his troubles. Folk everywhere wondered how the great Wizard could have failed.

Spying, the librarian's daughter discovered the truth. She first went to the stables to see Falla, but the Wizard's familiar wasn't in her stall. With a pounding heart, she went next to the Wizard's tower, which was empty, because the Wizard was in the great hall, arguing with the King. By the front door to the tower, she found stairs leading down to the cellar.

There, the Wizard had sacrificed his familiar to raise power for the spell. The girl found the horse dead, her belly sliced open, her guts spilled over the floor, a slick mass of intestines and organs that made no pattern and offered no portents. She had been a noble animal, and the girl cried at the injustice of it. In her grief, a power took her. With the Wizard's own sacrificial dagger, lying abandoned on the stone floor, she skinned the horse. She took the bloody skin to the great hall where the King pleaded with the Wizard to try again and the Wizard insisted such a prophecy was impossible. Wearing the skin wrapped tight around her, she delivered the prophecy that the King sought. "Betrayal! This is a Wizard who will slay his dearest servant for power. This is a Wizard who will covet his King's throne!"

The Wizard denied it, the King disbelieved it, and the librarian pleaded for his daughter's life, which the Wizard threatened to take. The King granted the librarian's request, because while he did not understand the magic, he could see the girl was helpless in its grip. As she fainted, her father carried her home from the great hall. They both cried a bit, and he helped her run away into exile. A year later, the King died of a mysterious creeping illness, and the Wizard took the reins of power before chaos could disrupt the kingdom.

The next morning she awoke, naked and tangled in the legs and neck of Falla's coat, a fringe of white mane tickling her nose. Conrad slept nearby. She lay still and watched him until he stirred.

When he opened his eyes, looked at her, and smiled, her heart beat faster.

*He could be a friend,* she thought to Falla. *My only other friend beside you.*

*Do not fall in love. Your fate won't allow it. I know, Falla. I know.*

Elsa and Conrad sat and faced each other,

Elsa wearing the mare's skin, Conrad wrapped in the wool blanket.

"Well?" he said.

She lowered her gaze. "I didn't dream. Your future isn't for me to know."

He gave his fox-sly smile, a joyless expression. "You're lying. You cried in your sleep. Thrashed like you were having nightmares. You must have dreamed something terrible."

**T**ears pricked her eyes. Some-

times, as with the princess and her marriage, she dreamed paths as clear as plate-glass windows. Other times, like last night, the dreams were murky, little more than emotions and terror, which Elsa had to express. Conveying them meant reliving them.

"Tell me," he said. "I'm not afraid."

She quelled her own fear and spoke softly. "I dreamed of betrayal."

He considered that, his expression falling to a frown. "Am I the betrayer or the betrayed? Whose betrayal?"

"Mine," said Elsa.

After a long moment watching her, he pursed his lips and nodded, content to live with the enigma of prophecy. "Then I should leave, I suppose. If we are not near each other, we can't betray each other."

The princess's cousin thought he could escape prophecy, too. Perhaps Conrad could actually succeed. She watched him dress, still wishing he was a famous rogue. Then perhaps his own legend would save him from hers.

He straightened his cuffs, fastened the last straps on his boots, and took up his pack. "Well then, I'm off."

So that was that. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know. About." He paused and bent for a last kiss, dry and warm. His smile was bright, genuine. Perhaps he'd remember her. "God bless you and your hard path, Dreamer."

Elsa dressed, packed her blankets, and started on her way more slowly. It was almost midday when she returned to Brewersville and saw a crowd gathered by the oak at the edge of the market. No musicians played today. She pushed through to the front to see what had happened.

The town constable was about to hang a man from the tree. The condemned man—barefoot, stripped to his waist, and wearing ragged, third-hand trousers—stood on a stool with his hands bound behind his back. The noose around his neck was tied to a sturdy branch.

The man was Conrad, his expression slack, his gaze staring forward at nothing.

"That man," she said to a laborer beside

her. "What's he done?"

"He's a thief."

Elsa still carried hopes. "A famous one? A highwayman or a rogue or such?"

"No," the man said. "Just a common thief. Got caught this morning cutting the mayor's purse."

Then he saw her. He hadn't seemed to be looking at anything, but his gaze found her. A look of such tenderness, such regret passed over his face. Like he would have kissed her right then, if he could have.

She knew what to do.

She knelt and pulled at the tie that fastened her pack.

When she wore the spotted horse's skin, she became the Dreamer, and her words were prophecy. *He will be a hero! Free him and he will lead your armies to victory! He is a savior!* She could say these things and make a grand story, how the Dreamer snatched the rogue from the maw of death.

*But you'd be lying.*

Yes, she would. Conrad wasn't a hero. But if she could make him one, if she could inspire him.... He could make this prophecy true, after the fact.

*If you use me for a lie, I will never speak to you again.*

So. She could save Conrad, or she could be the Dreamer, but not both. She thought she wanted that, to leave Falla and never hear her speak again. Falla, who had rested her muzzle on Elsa's shoulder with trust and love. So because she had known Falla for half her life, and Conrad for only a day, the choice was not as hard as she wanted it to be.

The story was so much larger than she.

The hardest thing was to leave her pack closed, to stand while he watched. Seeing this, he must have known what she had thought of, and what she'd decided not to do.

She hoped he understood why she couldn't help. But he probably thought she was being cruel, and that was most likely the thought he died with. The constable kicked the stool away and Conrad hanged. Elsa shut her eyes, but heard the crowd gasp and the rope creak as it swung with its weight.

Conrad or Falla, but not both. She'd have liked to have Conrad as a friend, but Falla was the only friend she knew.

The crowd dispersed but the body stayed hanging to serve as a warning. Elsa lingered, chasing away crows and stray dogs that came too near. She wanted him whole.

Late at night, when the town was asleep and no one would come near the gallows tree, she retrieved the stool and stood on it to cut him down, using the Wizard's sacrificial knife. She hefted the body over her shoulders and took him to the woods to do the rest.

The first time she put on his skin, it was still wet with flesh and blood. ♣



# The Witch's Bicycle

By tim pratt

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL KERR

there's a lot of power to be found in the common rituals of everyday life, and sometimes even the powerless can tap it ... if they recognize it in time.

**E**ven her bicycle was evil.

A heavy black chain wrapped around the frame and front tire secured the bicycle to an iron lamppost in front of Antiquities and Tangibles, a cramped and jumbled antique store downtown. The bicycle seemed to strain against the chain like a half-starved greyhound, skeletal and ferocious. It was a heavy bike with wheelguards that had been new in the 1950s. The frame was dusky red, the color of rubies from a long-forgotten treasure trove. The handlebars curled like ram's horns. A headlamp on the front glittered in the afternoon sunlight, throwing bright flashes. The seat was pitted black leather, and the spokes were bright, shiny chrome. The pedals were spiked to grip the soles of shoes, and to cut anyone foolish enough to try and pedal the bicycle barefooted.





GIRL  
BOY



# Her hair and her dress were the same

The bicycle's owner emerged from the antique store. Her hair and her dress were the same red as the bike frame, like faded silk roses, her black leather beret matched the seat, and chrome rings flashed on her fingers. Her eyes, before she put on her sunglasses, were as bright and reflective as her bicycle's headlamp. She carried a plastic bag with a real drawstring, and something inside the bag rattled and clattered. Something old and obscure, surely, as it had come from Antiquities and Tangibles, the Sargasso Sea of the antiques trade, the place where only the most marginalized and unappreciated remnants of the past fetched up.

She unlocked the chain and wrapped it around her waist like a belt, then fastened it, spinning the combination lock into nonsense numbers. She dropped her bag in the chrome basket behind the seat and mounted the bicycle. Her boots were leather, with chrome buckles. She cooed to her bicycle, and it seemed almost to steady itself, as if some gyroscopic mechanism kept it upright. As she pedaled away down the sidewalk, she sang, and the hum of the smoothly oiled bicycle chain and the rasp of the fat tires on the pavement seemed to sing with her.

She sang "What Is This Thing Called Love?"

Behind her, in the basket, the bag's contents shifted and clattered, not at all in time with the song.

Cory sat out behind the high school, throwing rocks at a sewer grate, waiting for the bus to come back. Because his school was overcrowded, there were two separate bus schedules. First load left right after school, and went fully loaded. The second load made it back about 40 minutes later, each bus picking up a dozen or so leftover students. For some reason Cory's subdivision had drawn second-load status, and now he had to suffer through this empty after-school time. He had to get a car next year, or at least make friends with someone who drove. The other people who rode his bus were out behind the gym smoking pot, probably. Even they didn't want to have anything to do with him. At least they weren't violent—just stupid. Unlike some—

"Look who's here," a smooth voice said from his left. Cory hunched his shoulders. School had only been in session for three weeks, and he'd already grown to hate that voice. He didn't even know the kid's name, the leader of the vicious little trio. He didn't have any classes with him, and in a high school of 2,000 students it wasn't surprising that he never saw him during the day. But this kid—Cory thought of him as "Rocko" because he looked like a young and pugnacious version of Edward G. Robinson, though his voice was surprisingly pleasant—this kid rode second load on one of the other buses, and apparently had nothing better to do in these 40 dead minutes after school than to look for people to torment. His little trio—the other two Cory had dubbed "Angel" and "Curly," after Rocko's henchman from the movie *Key Largo*—usually hung around by the vending machines, harassing the freshmen who emerged from after-school band practice to get sodas or chips. Cory had run afoul of them once and gotten away with no worse than a shoving, and since then he'd spent his time reading outside or in odd corners of the school, occasionally slipping away when he heard them approaching. It could be worse, he supposed—in lots

of schools there were stabbings and shootings, but as his mom reminded him, this was a good school in a good area. Which meant only the risk of being beaten up by three guys—he wasn't likely to die.

Apparently the band kids had grown wary, and the trio had gotten bored and gone searching for new meat, because here they were. Cory had been so engrossed in stone-tossing that he hadn't heard them coming.

Rocko sat down beside him and slung an arm over his shoulder. Cory shrugged him off, and Rocko laughed, that pleasant, easy laugh. "You like throwing rocks, huh? You want to have a little rock-throwing contest?"

Cory started to stand up. Rocko grabbed the arm of his jacket and pulled him back down. Cory tried to jerk his arm away, but Rocko held him tight, not even moving from his place on the curb. "Just a friendly game," he said.

Cory glanced at Rocko's buddies. Angel and Curly lounged against a science classroom, watching him, sneering. Angel was black and Curly was Hispanic. Say what you would about Rocko, he wasn't a racist. As long as you were mean-spirited and servile, there was a place for you in his gang.

"No, thanks," Cory said. "I don't feel like playing a game."

Rocko ignored him. "The way I figure it, there's nothing too hard about throwing rocks into a grate. That's not any kind of a challenge, you know? Now, if you were aiming rocks at a person, and that person was trying to get away—that'd be challenging. Don't you think?"

Cory couldn't believe he was hearing this.

"We'd need bigger rocks, though," Rocko said thoughtfully.

Cory jerked his arm away again, and this time broke free.

"Ready to start running?" Rocko asked.

"What makes you be like this?" Cory asked, frowning at Rocko's froglike, smiling face. "Why do you do this?"

"I look at it like dogshit," Rocko said. "There's dogshit on your shoe, you scrape it off, right? I look at you, and I see dogshit, but I can't get rid of you, you just keep ... hanging around. If I can't get rid of you, I can at least let you know you're dogshit, right? Make sure you don't forget it."

Cory just stared at him. He'd dealt with bullies in the past, and small-scale violence, but those had always been brutally stupid people, strutting for their friends. Rocko sounded so ... reasonable.

"There's just this look about you," Rocko went on. "The way you walk around, all hunched up, the way you always look like you smell something bad. I see you in the halls and it disgusts me." He shrugged. "So I guess that's why I do this. Plus, my psychiatrist says I'm in a really explorative stage, that I'm testing my boundaries and trying to define myself."

Cory took a step backward. Where could he possibly go? The school wasn't that big, and he had to come back here to catch the bus anyway. He couldn't outrun them if they decided to chase him.

"Anyway," Rocko said. "The place where I used to live, before I moved here, they had security guards everywhere, they had metal detectors, they had to lock down the classrooms a couple of times because of riots in the halls. Then I come to this place and there's no cops or anything, I can't believe it, I mean, I know it's the sticks, but really. So yeah, I guess I'm just ... testing the boundaries." He



# red as the bike frame, like faded silk roses.

stood up. Angel and Curly stood a little straighter when Rocko rose, like well-trained dogs. "I'm not going to kill you or anything," Rocko said. "But ... you know ... it's a long year. No telling what could happen." He glanced at Angel. "How long 'til the bus comes?"

"Fifteen minutes," Angel said. He did not have Rocko's orator's voice. His voice sounded like someone falling down a flight of stairs.

"I gotta get a fucking car," Rocko said, shaking his head. "This is just ridiculous. Another year until I turn 16, can you believe that?"

"You could always get a bicycle," Cory said. He wasn't sure why—it just popped out.

"What am I, 10 years old?" Rocko said.

"Let's beat his ass," Curly said. "This talking's bullshit."

"Talking's not bullshit," Rocko said. "But there does come a time for talk to end. You've got 10 minutes, guys. Have fun."

"We're not like him," Curly said, approaching. "We're not testing boundaries or anything."

"Nah," Angel agreed.

Rocko sat on the curb, seemingly oblivious to the impending violence, picking up rocks and examining them.

Cory couldn't do much but run. Probably a couple of teachers were still hanging around the office, and if he got really desperate he could burst into the band classroom and take refuge there until the bus came. Everyone would think he was a pussy, but he'd rather be mocked than beaten. He backed up, trying to gauge the right time to dash. He could head for the dark covered area between the gym and the science buildings, the place everybody called "the Tunnel," and then break across the courtyard and get into the main building. Maybe they wouldn't catch him.

"What's up, guys?" a girl's voice said from the direction of the Tunnel. Angel, Curly, and Cory all looked.

The girl was tall and brunette, her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail. She wore a striped field-hockey uniform, and there were bits of grass stuck to her knees. She held a hockey stick, resting it across her shoulder, and for a moment Cory thought she looked like a particularly athletic incarnation of Death, armed with some kind of wooden practice scythe. "You guys waiting for the bus?" she asked, all innocence.

"We were just waiting for you, baby," Curly said, smiling widely and stepping toward her.

Cory, relieved to no longer be the focus of attention, relaxed, then immediately felt ashamed. Now they were going to give this girl shit, and he couldn't do anything about it—why should he feel better at her expense?

"I heard all you field hockey chicks are lesbians," Curly said, still smiling. "Wanna prove me wrong?"

She flipped her ponytail. "Oh," she said, in a bored voice. "I didn't realize you were assholes, or I wouldn't have bothered you."

Angel laughed.

She looked at him. "That was an inclusive comment."

"Bitch," Curly said. "I know—"

"Now, now," Rocko said, rising from his place on the sidewalk. "That's no way to talk to a lady."

"She shouldn't talk to me like she did," Curly said. "Nobody talks to me that way."

"Sticks and stones may break your bones," Rocko said. "And, as you might have noticed, she does have a stick, and you do

have bones."

Curly snorted. "Shit. What's she going to do with that?"

The girl smiled at him. She had braces, but Cory still thought it was a beautiful smile, if a little nasty and malicious. She didn't move the stick, didn't thump it into her palm, nothing—just stood there, smiling.

"Shit," Curly said again. "Ugly bitch ain't worth the trouble." He turned his back and slouched away. Angel glanced at Rocko, then went with Curly, back toward the band practice rooms.

The girl glanced at Cory. "You're not saying much. Are you the ringmaster of this circus?"

"No," Rocko said. "That would be me. But I wish you wouldn't judge me by the company I keep. Good help's hard to find."

"So what are you doing here, then?" she asked Cory, ignoring Rocko.

"Just ... waiting for the bus," he said.

She nodded. "Me, too. First time I've had to ride it. I used to ride home with a friend, but now practice has started..." She shrugged.

Cory was never good at talking to people, especially not to girls, especially not in front of Rocko.

"He's really not worth talking to," Rocko said. "He just asks a lot of stupid—"

"I think your friends are waiting for you," she said, glancing at Rocko. "Maybe you should go check on them, make sure they don't get lost or something."

Rocko frowned, then smoothed back his dark hair. "Which bus do you ride?"

"None of your fucking business," she said.

Rocko narrowed his eyes. "Just wondered if you were on mine."

She simply looked at him.

"Fine," Rocko said. "See you around." He glanced at Cory. "And you—I'll definitely see you around." He sauntered off.

"He's a little shit, isn't he?" the girl said, watching him go. She glanced at Cory. "I'm Heather."

"Cory."

"Those guys bother you a lot?"

He shrugged, uncomfortable. "Not really. Sometimes."

"Girls mostly just talk about each other. And that can get nasty, believe me. But they don't tend to ... hit each other so much. I feel for you."

"It's no big deal. I can handle it."

"No doubt," she said, and though he was acutely attuned to sounds of sarcasm and contempt, he didn't detect either in her voice. "Which bus do you ride?"

"228."

"Hey, me too. Where do you live?"

"In a subdivision called Foxglove."

"Cool," she said, nodding. "My family just moved there. We're the last house on the street, down by the circle, right up against the woods. I haven't met anybody else in the neighborhood."

He shrugged, looking off toward the road, unsure whether to be nervous or pleased to hear she was his neighbor. "There isn't really anybody else our age. Some little kids is all."

"Maybe we could play basketball or something. My dad put a hoop up over the garage."

"I'm not very good at basketball."

She shrugged. "So play with me and you'll get better, right?"



"Yeah. I guess so." She was a jock. She'd stomp him at basketball. Wouldn't that be fun? She hadn't laughed at him yet, but she would. Everyone did eventually.

The stoners came wandering from behind the gym, and a minute later the bus appeared.

Survived another day, Cory thought. He glanced at Heather. Got rescued by a girl.

He got onto the bus and took his usual seat halfway back, on the passenger side. He looked out the window at the parking lot.

Heather plopped down next to him. "This seat taken?"

She wanted to sit next to him? What did that mean? "No."

"You mind if I sit with you? I mean, I know there's lots of room and all, but it gets boring sitting by yourself."

"No, it's fine."

"So what do you do for fun?" She had her hockey stick in her hand, and she thumped it against the back of the seat in front of them while she talked.

He shrugged. "I watch a lot of movies. My dad has a big library of videos."

"Cool!" She said. "I saw *The Burning Witch* last week—have you seen it?"

He shook his head. *The Burning Witch* was a horror movie—from the previews it looked to be mostly about a woman who cackled and set things on fire with her mind, and then some teenagers defeated her. It looked pretty dumb. "No, I haven't. I like mostly old movies. Black and white stuff."

She frowned. "Like *It's a Wonderful Life*?"

"No ... like *The Big Sleep* and *Lady in the Lake* and *The Thin Man* ..." She was looking at him blankly. "Um ... *Casablanca*? *The Maltese Falcon*?"

"Oh, yeah," she said, nodding. "Wow. You like that stuff, huh?"

She didn't seem contemptuous, exactly, just ... surprised. "Yeah, well, my Dad really likes them, so we watch them together sometimes. He likes Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall a lot. We watched a movie called *Key Largo* a couple of weeks ago. There's a guy in that movie named Rocko who looks a lot like ..." He trailed off.

"Like who?"

He sighed. "Like that guy back at school."

"So he looks like a smiling frog?"

Cory laughed. "Yeah." He glanced at her. She was nice. Not like most of the other girls, who always found something in him to laugh at—his shoes, his hair, the way he walked, the way he talked. It didn't much matter—they always found something. Even the ones who didn't tease him just ignored him.

"I haven't seen many old movies. Maybe we could watch one sometime?"

His dad would tease him so much if he brought a girl home! He'd mean it in a good-natured way, but Cory was already wincing at the thought. Still ... if Heather thought the movies were cool, it could be worth a little teasing.

"Sure. I'd like that." He reached out and tapped the handle of her hockey stick. "Don't they usually keep these at school?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm supposed to practice at home, try to get 'better control' the coach says. I've got a stick of my own, but it hasn't come from California yet. My parents have so much stuff, it's two big truckloads. My dad's driving back with the last of it this week."

"You're from California?"

"Monterey," she said. "Lived there my whole life."

Cory grimaced. "From California to North Carolina. Seems like a step in the wrong direction."

She shrugged. "All depends on the people, right? If I can make

good friends here, it'll be just as good as home was."

She flashed him that braces-and-all smile, and just then Cory would have done anything for her.

Rocko watched bus 228 pull away, his face expressionless. His two associates had drifted off, probably to smoke in the bathroom. Rocko went back outside and sat on the curb. He picked up a rock and held it up to the light, watching the bright flecks flash. He thought about dissections.

Suddenly a bicycle was before him, its rider a woman with dusky red hair and a black leather beret. She was somewhere past young, but not all the way gone into middle age. She looked like a hippie in her long dress and tights, but her boots were a biker's, and she wore chrome rings. She looked down at him from the bike's high seat. The bicycle seemed to complement her, and he realized its color matched that of her hair.

"Rocko," she said, her voice somewhere between a purr and a rasp.

He frowned. "That's not my name, lady." He didn't like sitting here, with her peering down at him—he felt vulnerable, like a frog in a dissecting pan. He started to get up.

"Frog in a pan," she said. "Nice image, Rocko. But now you're pithed."

He froze, his ass just inches from the concrete, stopped in the act of rising. His legs began to quiver immediately from the strain of holding himself up. He felt his heart beating, but he couldn't blink, couldn't move. Like a live frog pithed for dissection, his spine pierced with a metal rod, everything but the most basic physical functions suspended. His fear even had a detached quality; it was wholly intellectual, with no emotional component. He wondered clinically—and he could be very clinical—whether his glands were working, whether adrenaline was pumping into his veins. He thought not.

"Sit down," she said, and his butt hit the curb. She leaned over, the rose curtain of her hair almost touching his face. "I call you Rocko because that's what the Boy calls you."

Rocko heard the emphasis she put on the word "Boy," knew that she meant it as more than a generic term. "This is about the Boy, and the Girl, so I'll call you by the name they do."

Rocko was trying to move his arms. He wanted to lash out at her, knock her over in a tangle of legs, skirt, chrome, and chain. He thought about his psychiatrist—"testing boundaries"—he'd never had boundaries as tight as this, trapped in his own body.

"But you can have a place in this, too, Rocko. You can be the Rival. You do like her, don't you? The Girl?"

Rocko growled—or tried to. He didn't make a sound.

She laughed. "She snubbed you, didn't she? And for that dogshit, that Boy you hate without reason."

Without reason? Rocko always had reasons, and that kid, that Cory ...

What? Well, he was a piece of shit, always had his nose in a book, he slouched around, stank of cowardice, thought he was better than everyone else.... There. Lots of reasons. A whole truckload of reasons.

That girl, though ... she was something else. He had no doubt she'd have used that stick today, if she'd needed to. She was pretty, but not snotty, not afraid to get sweaty and play hard. Not like Cory, who'd probably never sweated in his life.

"Yes," the woman said, nodding. "You can be the Rival. You are the Rival." She crooked her finger and he jerked upright. It felt like there was a rope wrapped around his chest, pulling him to his feet.

She's a witch, he thought, with that same intellectual fear.

"Would you like to kill the Boy, and win the Girl?" she asked.

Kill? Rocko had a certain interest in the subject, but killing anyone would be so messy in the particulars. Just like beating someone up—



he didn't much enjoy that, though he often desired the consequences. That was so often a problem; to achieve a certain end, he had to resort to ugly means. If only he could skip those intermediate stages, wave his hands and have someone die, or put them on the ground writhing in pain.

He looked at the woman (he had no choice, he couldn't even blink, but now he *looked*). She'd pithed him like a frog without even saying a word, and he suspected that she didn't need to hear him speak, because she could read his mind. Maybe he could learn power like that from her. The power of ends, and the circumvention of clumsy, inelegant means.

"Kill?" he said, and now his voice worked. The idea of killing lacked emotional color, too. He could kill someone easily, if he felt like this while doing it. "Sure. I could do that."

She grinned. "A will to kill is a wonderful thing. It means you always have a last resort. But you really just want the Girl, yes?"

Rocko grunted. He didn't want the girl to think he was nothing, that was for sure, and he couldn't stand to see her with a dogshit like Cory.

"So the best thing to do would be to humiliate the Boy, somehow, and let her find out about it, maybe even witness it. Then she'd know he's nothing, and that you're clever, and brave, and much more worth her attention. Yes?"

Rocko could feel her eyes boring into him from behind her black glasses. "Yeah. Yeah, that would do it."

"You and your little friends can come up with something, can't you? Something suitable?"

"Something suitable for a shit like him," Rocko said, getting an idea. Of course. Everyone had to use the bathroom sometime, didn't they? "I think so."

"Good," she said. "It's better than murder, at least for now. If you've never buried a body, you don't know how much trouble it can be."

Cory!" his mom called. "You have a visitor!"  
Cory looked up from his homework—just a worksheet on ecology, boring as mud—and frowned. Who could—

Oh. His throat tightened a little. Could it be Heather? Already? "Coming, mom!" He stopped in front of the mirror, raking his fingers through his shaggy, brown hair, then gave it up as a bad job. Heather'd seen him at very nearly his worst this afternoon, and she'd seemed to like him fine then.

He hurried downstairs, into the living room.

He hardly recognized the girl he found there. Heather had been sweaty, grass-stained, red-cheeked, and mussed before. But this girl—she could be one of the prettiest girls in school. She had blue ribbons braided into her hair, and wore a plain white T-shirt tucked into khaki shorts. Her sneakers were clean, too, not the scuffed ones she'd been wearing before. He could faintly see the lace of her bra under the shirt, and he looked away, blushing.

"Heather tells me you met at school today," his mom said.

"Yeah," Cory said. "She just moved to the neighborhood."

"Welcome to town, Heather," Cory's mom said. "I'll have to go meet your parents sometime."

"Sure," Heather said. "My dad's not here yet, he's driving in another truck full of stuff. He'll be around next week, though."

"I'll make a point of introducing myself," she said. "There's brownies in the kitchen, if you guys want a snack. Would you like to stay for dinner, Heather?"

She glanced at Cory. He shrugged. Heather rolled her eyes at him. "Sure. That'd be great!"

"I'll leave you two alone," Cory's mom said, glancing at Cory with a small, secret smile—a smile that meant she'd be asking him about

this nice new girl later on. She went into the kitchen.

"She bakes brownies and she makes dinner?" Heather said. "What, did you win the mom lottery? We eat Chinese and pizza most of the time at my house."

"Chinese and pizza sounds pretty good to me. Mom's a research assistant for a lawyer, and she works from home about half the time. She usually makes something for dinner on the days she's home."

"How come she doesn't pick you up from school?"

He shrugged. "She says just because she's home doesn't mean she's not working."

"Well, that's too bad. It means you get to keep me company on the bus, though." She twirled around, an impromptu ballerina. "How do I look?"

Cory had never dealt with a girl his own age in such proximity before. How did you answer that? What would she think if he said she looked pretty? Would she think he liked her? Did he like her? "You look fine," he said cautiously.

"Aren't you a charmer?" she said, but it was good-natured. "I was just going to come right over, but my mom's big on making good first impressions; she said I shouldn't meet the neighbors for the first time looking all grubby. She braided my hair and made me change—she wanted me to wear a dress! I don't even like wearing dresses to church."

Cory wouldn't have known what to think if Heather had shown up here in a dress—he certainly would have felt uncomfortable in his own jeans and T-shirt, even if this was his house.

"Want to see my room?" Cory asked.

"Sure." She followed him up the stairs. "You'll have to come to my house sometime, and check out the woods out back. They're really cool."

"I go back there a lot, actually. There's some really nice, quiet places. The woods are pretty big, too, bigger than you think at first."

"Ever get lost?"

He hesitated, always unwilling to make himself sound foolish. "Yeah, once. I finally came out of the woods about a mile away on the highway, and walked back from there."

"I haven't gone far enough to get lost yet, but I'm sure I will." It sounded like she relished the idea—like it would be more of an adventure than an embarrassment. Maybe, for her, it would be. And maybe if he went exploring with her, he could learn to look at getting lost in the same way.

He showed her his new computer, and the Bogart poster he'd gotten for Christmas. She really liked his microscope, sitting dusty on a shelf—seemed a lot more interested in it than he'd ever been, truthfully. "Oh, good books!" she said, looking over his row of Charles de Lint and Orson Scott Card. She tapped a copy of *Ender's Game* with her forefinger. "I read this in school last year." She pulled down one of his Sandman trade paperbacks. "I've never read these. Are they any good?"

"They're awesome."

"Let me borrow them sometime? You can raid my shelves, too, if you want."

"Sounds good." So what if she liked bad movies? She had good taste in books, at least.

They talked about books for a while, then played video games. She was better than him at killing zombies, but he excelled at racing futuristic cars through decaying cityscapes.

Cory's dad got home right before dinner. He was nice to Heather—he was always nice to everyone. His parents mostly talked to Heather during dinner, asking about her old hometown, what her parents did, and so on. Cory learned a lot about her that way, and Heather seemed perfectly at ease around his parents. Dinner was chicken parmesan with salad and some kind of sun-dried tomato bread—a



nicer meal than they would've had if they didn't have company over, Cory suspected.

After dinner, Cory walked with Heather out in the yard. "Sorry about that," he said. "My parents playing 20 questions with you that way."

"It's OK. They're parents, they do stuff like that. I didn't mind. As long as you can play the same game when you come to have dinner at my house."

Cory felt warm. For the first time since school had started, he began to think that this year wouldn't be horrible. It was possible Heather would meet other people, find out Cory wasn't exactly at the top of the social ladder, and drift away from him ... but maybe she'd stick around and be his friend. That would make this year a lot better, even if they didn't have any classes together.

"Want to go down to the woods before it gets totally dark?" she asked. "There's this really cool spot by a stream, it only takes about five minutes to get there from my house ..." Unself-consciously, she reached out and took his hand, pulling him along. Her hand was warm, and Cory wanted to hold it forever.

Heather lived at the end of the street, and as they walked along, Cory noticed a woman riding toward them on a bicycle, moving in slow arcs, drifting from one side of the street to the other and back again, only incidentally making forward progress. She had long reddish hair and wore dark glasses. She wore a long skirt, too, and Cory didn't see how she could pedal the bicycle without getting the fabric caught in the chain and the gears. The woman stared at them as she approached, slowing down. She rolled past them so slowly that it seemed like her bicycle should fall over from a lack of forward momentum. Her skirt matched the bike frame, and her boots seemed almost a part of the pedals—looking at her made Cory's eyes get blurry. The impression was hard for him to define, even to himself, but he had trouble telling where the woman left off and the bicycle began, like they were a single creature made of chrome and flesh, hair and leather.

Heather's hand tightened in his, and they stood still as she rolled past them, mere feet away. She grinned, and for an instant her teeth seemed to flash like chrome. Then she pedaled on, something in a bag clattering in the basket behind the bicycle seat, like pieces of metal clanging together.

Cory and Heather stood for a moment, watching her go. "Does she live around here?" Heather asked.

"Never seen her before in my life."

"Weird," Heather said decisively, and then squeezed his hand and started walking again.

That night, Cory woke in darkness. He sat up, disoriented. Something had awakened him, but he wasn't sure what. Some noise outside, maybe? He went to the window and looked down into the back yard.

Someone was pedaling a bicycle around in a circle in the grass, a girl in a nightgown. Was that ... Heather? It looked like her, still with the blue ribbon in her braid. He frowned, wondering what she was doing down there, wondering if he should go down himself. She just kept pedaling that big old-fashioned bike, going counterclockwise around the dogwood tree in the middle of the yard.

Cory pulled on his shoes, grabbed his jacket, and slipped quietly down the stairs, frowning. Was Heather OK? Just out for a middle-of-the-night adventure?

He went out the back door, closing it quietly, then down the steps across the grass toward Heather. "Hey!" he called softly, not wanting to wake his parents.

When he got within a few feet of the perimeter of her circle, he realized the rider wasn't Heather at all. He couldn't understand how he'd thought it was—she wasn't even wearing a nightgown, and she was an adult. That's when he began to think it might be a dream.

The bicyclist skidded to a stop in front of him. He stepped away, afraid, because this was the woman he and Heather had seen earlier, the one who seemed somehow blended in with her bicycle.

"Hello, my darling Boy," she said, putting a funny emphasis on the last word.

"You shouldn't be here," he said. "This is private property."

"I'm here to help you. But if you want me to go..." She shrugged and put her foot on the pedal.

"What do you mean?" He was cold despite his jacket, the night wind blowing straight through him. Would he be cold, if this was a dream?

"There's a boy at your school," she said. She didn't put any particular emphasis on the word "boy" that time. "You call him Rocko, yes?"

Cory nodded. It had to be a dream, but that didn't make it any less disturbing.

"He's going to do something nasty to you tomorrow afternoon, my Boy. He hates you, but that's not such a large thing—his kind is always full of hate, though he is rather more a monster than most bullies, I think. Today, though, he became jealous of you, too—he likes the Girl, the Girl who likes you. His jealousy is much more dangerous to you than his hatred. He'll want to do something about his jealousy, something to humiliate you."

"How do you know that? How do you know I call him Rocko?"

"Because I'm the good witch, my Boy, and I want you to defeat your Rival." She smiled, and the bag in the basket behind her shifted with a clatter.

"What's in that bag?" Cory asked.

She looked behind her, then back at him. "You'll find out soon enough. Have patience. I do. You won't need anything from that bag tomorrow. You'll just need a little bit of magic, a tiny spell ... a turn-around. I'll teach you how to do it. It takes a little blood to start with, but that shouldn't be hard—I bet there will be blood tomorrow afternoon, your own blood, if you're not quick. After the blood is spilled, it's just the matter of a gesture, and a word, and certain ... patterns ... of thought. I'll show you how." She reached out toward his face, and he flinched away. "Shh, be a good Boy."

He wanted to turn and run, despite her claim to be a "good witch"—nothing about her reassured him, nothing made her seem good. He couldn't believe she had any human feeling, any more than ... than a bicycle would.

He couldn't move, not a muscle, though, and oddly, he didn't feel afraid. He thought frightened thoughts, but panic didn't sing in his veins. The witch touched his face with her fingers, and with her chrome rings.

"You won't remember any of this, my Boy. Not until tomorrow, when you need to."

School the next day was the usual—everything pretty easy except for Biology, where Cory struggled to understand what mitochondria did, and why on earth he should care. He'd agreed to meet Heather down by the office when she got done with classes. Earth Science was his last class, and thinking about seeing Heather again soon made it hard for him to think about "the ecology of the microcosm" that his Earth Science teacher kept talking about.

He didn't think about Rocko all day, until he started reading after school. He sat on a bench near the office and read *Good Omens*,



# This murder over a Girl was not an isolated event, it was an ancient thing.

thinking it'd be pretty cool if he had the kind of powers the kid, Adam, had in that book. There were bullies in that story, but they were pretty harmless—you never got the sense the kids really worried about being beaten within an inch of their lives by Greasy Johnson, like Cory feared Rocko and Curly and Angel. Maybe that was because *Good Omens* took place in England—maybe people just weren't as violent on the other side of the sea.

Cory stuck the book in his bag and wandered down the hall toward the bathroom so he could pee before meeting Heather.

He stepped into the bathroom, and rough hands grabbed him, slamming him against the wall. Angel and Curly had him by the arms, and before he could even think of pulling away they stepped on his insteps, crushing his toes, pinning his feet so he couldn't kick or thrash. "Hiya," Curly said. "No girls with sticks here to save you today, huh?"

"We're still not testing boundaries," Angel said. "So don't worry about that."

Rocko sauntered out of a toilet stall. "I didn't think you'd ever come to take a piss, kid," Rocko said, zipping up his pants. "I figured the place to find a shit like you would be right here, in the toilet, but then you made me wait. I'm a busy guy. It's not right, me having to wait for you."

Cory thought about the old movies he'd seen, about Bogart's effortless aplomb, the way he'd casually disarmed the gunsel from *The Maltese Falcon*. But even Bogart got beaten up sometimes, especially when two or three guys came for him at once. And Cory was no Bogart. He wanted to spit in Rocko's face ... but what if they just planned to scare him? Wouldn't spitting make them do something much more nasty?

Curly ground his foot into Cory's instep, and Cory bit back a shout of pain. He could try to keep from blubbering like a baby, at least.

Rocko looked at his watch. "Are you meeting your girlfriend this afternoon, dogshit?"

"Leave her alone," Cory said, without thinking.

Curly and Angel laughed, one right into each of Cory's ears.

"I think he's in love," Angel said.

"I think he just wants to fuck her," Curly said sagely.

"I thought that's what you wanted to do," Angel said.

"True," Curly agreed.

"Does this make you feel tough, three against one?" Cory said.

"No," Angel said. "But it's more fun this way, and I usually feel pretty tough anyway. Do you think I couldn't kick your ass on my own?" He ground down with his foot, and Cory couldn't stop himself from yelping.

"Well, we don't want to keep you from meeting Miss hockey-sticks-and-sunshine," Rocko said. "So we'll get this over with and then let you go." He paused. "Punch him in the bladder a couple of times, first; let's see if we can make him wet himself."

Cory clenched his teeth. Curly hit him just above the pelvic bone, and it made a sharp bolt of pain jolt through him, but he kept control of his bladder.

"That's a little too close to his dick for me, man," Angel said.

Curly scowled.

"Fair enough," Rocko said. "I guess it doesn't much matter, anyway.

Bring him over." Rocko walked to the far stall, the one that was always out of order, that didn't flush properly. He pushed open the door, and a horrible stink wafted out. "We all took turns filling the pot," Rocko said. "There's some shit, and some piss, and some more shit."

Cory started to struggle then, wrenching his arms as hard as he could. Curly and Angel grunted and held on tight, dragging Cory across the floor toward the stall. Knowing he couldn't break free, Cory opened his mouth to scream—

—and Rocko shoved a wad of balled-up toilet paper in his mouth, making him gag. "Shut up," Rocko said quietly. "I can keep you from screaming—you see that, right? So no one's going to come help you. I'm going to take that toilet paper out of your mouth, and if you try to bite me, I'm going to do something a lot worse to you than I already have planned." He grinned. "I want your mouth cleared out, so you can taste my shit and piss in there, but if I have to, I'll keep you gagged. I'll just swish the next wad of paper around in the toilet bowl first. Can you be quiet?"

Terrified, helpless, Cory nodded. Rocko reached to pull out the paper.

Blood, Cory thought. The thought came with nothing else, no context, no mental referents, but he acted on it all the same, biting Rocko's finger.

Rocko jerked his hand back with a hiss, and Cory saw the flecks of bright blood on his forefinger. "You shit!" he cried. "God damn you, I'm going to get you for that!"

Something welled up in Cory when he saw the blood—words to be said, certain movements to be made with his fingers, and a strange twisting in his mind. He didn't know where the impulses came from, but he followed them, because he somehow knew his salvation lay that way.

Everything blurred. His vision dimmed, and he felt as if he'd been dropped down an elevator shaft, a sensation of things whipping past at high speed. Turnaround, he thought. An interval of time went by—he couldn't be sure how long—but when he came back to his normal awareness, things had changed.

Rocko was kneeling before the filthy toilet, his head inside the bowl, and Cory had his foot pressed down on the back of Rocko's neck. He stumbled back, horrified—what had he done? He'd only wanted to get away!

Curly and Angel were leaning against the wall, bleeding from split lips, looking groggy. "Fuck," Angel said, his voice slurred. "That's some kind of kung-fu shit."

Rocko lifted his head, and turned to look at Cory. The things smeared on his face made Cory gag, and it didn't help that they'd planned to shove his face into the toilet bowl; that didn't make it any less horrible.

"Get him!" Rocko snarled. "Get him and fucking kill him!"

"To hell with you!" Angel said. "Did you see what that mother-fucker did? I'm not messing with him!"

Curly nodded his assent, and the two of them went stumbling out of the bathroom.

"How did you do that?" Rocko said softly, still kneeling on the floor. "You little bastard, that wasn't kung-fu, that was fucking impossible."

"Just leave me alone," Cory said, his voice hoarse. He felt horribly on edge, and he wasn't sure he'd be able to keep from crying. He



backed away. "Just stay away from me, I don't want anything to do with you, leave me alone!"

He ran from the bathroom, stumbling toward the office. He slowed down and took deep breaths. Rocko wouldn't be coming after him, not right away—he had to clean his face off first. What had happened back there? How had he done ... whatever he'd done?

Turnaround, he thought. The thought came in a woman's husky voice, but that didn't make any sense, either.

"Cory?" Heather said. "Are you OK?"

She came hurrying down the hallway, hockey stick in hand.

Cory shook his head. "I ... Rocko and his friends tried to mess with me again, in the bathroom."

She scowled. "Are you OK?"

"Yeah. I got away." He didn't want to go into details, not least of all because he couldn't remember the details. "I'm OK."

She put her hand on his shoulder, and Cory realized he was shaking. "Take it easy. It'll be OK. Let's catch the bus."

"Yeah. OK. It just ..."

"It's adrenaline," she said. "You're still all jazzed-up from it. You'll feel better soon. Come on."

**Y**ou sure fucked that up, didn't you?"

Rocko jerked his head up from the sink, where he'd been washing his face for the 10th time. He looked in the mirror, but didn't see anyone behind him. He turned around, and there was the woman, the witch from yesterday. Standing—with her bicycle—by one of the toilet stalls.

Rocko wondered for a moment if he was going insane. Witches and their malevolent bicycles didn't usually hang out in high school bathrooms. What would his psychiatrist say if Rocko told him about this?

"That piece of shit had some kind of trick," Rocko said through clenched teeth.

"Looks like you're the piece of shit, now."

He took a step toward her threateningly, then stopped, remembering the pithed feeling from yesterday.

"It's not too late, though," she said. "You tried humiliation, and it failed ... turned around on you, in fact—you were humiliated instead."

"So what do you suggest?" he asked, trying to stay cool. "Your last advice didn't help me much."

"As I said, the will to kill is a wonderful thing. You shouldn't do it here at school, though ... we wouldn't want you to get expelled."

"So where?"

She shrugged. "An opportunity will present itself, Rocko. Opportunities always do."

"And what should I kill him with?"

"This," she said, and took the bag from the basket on her bike. She opened it so he could look inside.

"That's a pretty weird suggestion," he said after a moment.

"Not the sort of weapon a ninth grader would be expected to use, though, my little Rival. And you don't own one, and it's not something you can pick up in the hardware store, so it's unlikely to be traced back to you. As long as you keep it clean of fingerprints and ditch it after you're done."

"What do you care? What's in this for you?"

"I'm the good witch, and I'm a big believer in the power of true love. I think you and that Girl could be beautiful together, if we get the Boy out of the way."

Rocko didn't believe her for a moment, but it didn't matter. He hadn't wanted to kill Cory before, not really, but now, after what he'd done to him in the bathroom today... "Can you make me like I was yesterday? So that when I ... when I do it ... I don't feel anything?"

"Oh, my little Rival," she said. "I think that's something you can learn to do on your own. Maybe you can even learn to enjoy the killing."

He thought that over. She was right. And whether he enjoyed it, or felt nothing, or whatever, he could still do it. "I can't carry that out of here," he said, nodding toward the bag. "It's not exactly inconspicuous."

"Would you believe me if I told you it will be near to hand when you need it?"

He looked at her for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah. From you, I believe it."

**C**ory and Heather sat together again on the way home. "Do you have Mr. Troublestone?" she asked.

"Yeah, seventh period, for Earth Science."

"Me too, but I've got him fifth. Do you have to do that micro-ecology thing?"

"Yeah. Seems like a pretty simple report."

"Simple, but boring. I was thinking it would be fun to write the report about something in the real world."

"Like what?"

"Like that stream in the woods behind my house. There's flies and frogs and reeds and even little fish..." She shrugged. "I thought we could study that. You know how Mr. Troublestone's always talking about old-time naturalists, drawing pictures of animals and flowers and stuff. I bet if we did something like that for the stream, learned about its ecology, we'd get a good grade. And it's more fun than just reading about the stuff."

"That sounds good. You should do that."

"We should do it. I bet he'd let us work together, since we'd be doing more than just a report—we'd have drawings and an observation journal and stuff." She shrugged, and didn't look at him. "You know, if you want to." She kept her voice neutral.

She's afraid I'll laugh! Cory realized. Afraid I'll make fun of her, or think she's a geek! It was a revelation, to realize that she could fear something like that from him, and it made him like her even more. "It sounds great," he said. "I'd love to do that with you."

She grinned. "Hope you don't mind getting a little mud on your face."

"I can think of worse things."

They went down to the stream that afternoon and sat looking into the water. It would have been easier to do this project in the spring, when there'd be tadpoles and things, but they could still find interesting stuff to write about. After a while they just sat, tossing stones into the water, already easy and peaceful together.

"I had a weird dream last night," Heather said, leaning back on her elbows, looking at the leaves overhead. "About that woman we saw ride by on the bicycle yesterday. She had a measuring tape, and she kept walking around me, asking me to hold out my arms and stuff, and she took my measurements. She said she thought I'd be a good fit, and when I asked her if she was going to make a dress for me, she just laughed. She said I'd make one for her." She frowned. "No ... she said 'You'll make a good dress for me. You'll fit like a glove.'" She shook her head. "Weird. It freaked me out a little, I don't know why. Scared me bad enough to wake me up."

Cory didn't say anything, because now he began to remember his own dream—or had it been a dream at all? "I dreamed about her, too."

Heather looked at him. "No. Really?"

"I think so," he said, nodding. "I dreamed she was riding her bicycle around and around the tree in my backyard. Only it wasn't her at first, the—the woman." He'd almost said "the witch." Had she



called herself a witch, a good witch? He couldn't quite recall.

"It wasn't her? Who was it?"

"It ... I thought it was you, first, and then it turned into her." Saying those words chilled him, as if he'd dropped his heart into the autumn stream running at their feet. To begin as Heather, and turn into that witch, what a horrible idea!

But Heather was grinning at him. "You're having dreams about me, huh?"

He blushed, then laughed, forgetting his fear. "Yeah, well, it was a bad dream, so don't be too flattered."

"I knew you were a charmer from the first moment I met you," she said. "I should get going—it's almost dinnertime. Want to come back here tomorrow, and start on this project for real?"

The next day was Saturday. "Sure. What time should I come over?"

"Oh, whenever. My parents usually make a big breakfast on Saturdays, but I don't know if mom will, since dad's still out of town. Come over around 10, I guess, just to be safe."

They made their brief farewells, and Cory walked farther into the woods, taking the scenic route in the general direction of his house.

Something moved in the bushes. He paused, listening. Probably it was just somebody's dog, but there were deer, sometimes, and he always enjoyed getting a glimpse of those. He looked toward the source of the sound, in a thick tangle of underbrush.

Something pushed out of the tangled vines and branches—something red, and black, and chrome.

It was the bicycle, the witch's bicycle, pushing its way through the woods. Its headlamp—multifaceted as a fly's eye—seemed to consider him.

The witch was nowhere to be seen.

Cory, frightened beyond all reason, turned and fled the woods, racing for home.

That night, as the Boy and the Girl and the Rival all slept unquietly, the witch rode her bicycle through their neighborhood. Bad dreams drifted from her like vapors, and she sang "Love Is a Many Splendored Thing," her bicycle tires humming along. The day before the transference always woke romantic thoughts in her—for without love, without the ancient dance of Boy Meets Girl, how would she keep her youth forever?

She rode her bike through the Girl's yard, her bicycle not bumping at all as it went over the grass, not slowing as it went into the trees, its headlamp dark. She had no need of the light—both she and the bicycle could see perfectly well in the dark.

She'd left off her black beret tonight, and had instead braided her hair with a bit of blue ribbon. Otherwise she looked the same as always, not yet ready to completely give up her resemblance to the bicycle in order to fully assume her resemblance to the Girl. That could wait until tomorrow, when her mind would be fully loosened.

She looked around the stream for a likely spot. The location was a good one, really—in her girlhood, when this little play had been acted out the first time, it had taken place in a dark wood, by a little stream not unlike this one. Her young lover (whose name she'd forgotten long ago—she just thought of him as the First Boy) had faced off against his Rival for her affection while she stood by, watching, horrified ... and fascinated. They had both stolen their father's dueling swords, planning to fight for her like grown men. The Rival's blade had snapped against the Boy's, breaking in half. The Boy had stabbed the suddenly disarmed Rival in the heart ... and when she saw the blood, the Girl who would become the witch understood. This murder over a Girl was not an isolated event, it was an ancient thing, enacted time and again in various guises throughout the ages.

There had to be power in that, she knew, in that timeless repetition, a power that could be awakened and directed and sealed by the spilling of blood.

She took the bag from the basket and opened it. She drew out the Boy's sword and jammed it point-first into the dirt by a tree. It was a dueling epee, old but newly sharpened. It had taken her ages to find a set that looked even close to being right. Then she removed the Rival's sword, identical to the Boy's. She took a rasp file from her bag and sat in the dirt with the Rival's sword across her knees. She filed away at the blade halfway down its length, humming as she did so. Her bike stood nearby, seeming almost wary, standing upright even though the kickstand hadn't been put down.

She'd discovered the secret of eternal youth—one of the secrets, anyway; she supposed there must be many ways, for those willing to walk beyond the lighted paths. She'd survived so long, rejuvenating herself, by staging reenactments of that first fight, when she'd been a young thing in the first bloom of womanhood. She never let her hair turn gray, and in recent decades she rode her bicycle, to make herself seem young. She'd worked with this bicycle for so long that blood and magic had washed over it, making it into something more than a disguise and a conveyance—making it into something alive, something almost like a familiar. She resembled the bicycle, too, dressing to match it, and that further confused the question of her identity. Tomorrow she would drink a potion to loosen her mind, to loosen the threads mooring her spirit to this body. She would put a blue ribbon in her hair, and dress herself to match the new Girl.

But that was only preliminary business, nothing more than clearing the way. The meat of her magic required other people, young people—and blood. Every few decades she found a new Boy and Girl and Rival, and put this little passion play into motion. Making sure the Boy and Girl got together, seeing the Rival humiliated, driving him to murder. The Boy would face the Rival and kill him, while the Girl looked on. When the blood spilled, a sacrifice to ignite the spell, the witch would become the new Girl, sliding easily into the young body, crowding out the resident mind—taking her place in this new variation on the old drama of love and murder. That was the power of imperative resemblance, the magic of recurring situations—she would become young, as she'd been at that first duel. Her old body would be left behind in the woods, and would cause a stir when discovered, but nothing would come of it.

The witch turned the sword over and rasped at the other side of the blade. She'd have to smear it with dirt so the marks wouldn't be noticeable. She would have a little trouble in the Girl's body, of course. She wouldn't have the girl's memories, or access to her mind—her mind would go wherever such things went when they were crowded out, probably nowhere, into oblivion. The witch would have trouble dealing with the Girl's parents. In the past, she'd had to kill parents, but things were easier in this day and age. Now, she only had to tell someone in authority that her parents touched her inappropriately, that they invited their friends to touch her inappropriately. The witch could press lit cigarettes into her new young thighs, and show the burns to the teachers or the police—that should take care of any disbelief.

The witch hummed happily as she rasped, moving the file in time to her song. Finally she put the file back in her bag, satisfied. She put the filed sword into the dirt on the other side of the stream, half-hidden by a bush. She thought a duel across the water would be very picturesque. She wondered if the Girl would faint at the first sight of blood. That's what the last girl had done, and it had made the transition to her mind much easier. No resistance at all, just a simple expulsion.

The witch climbed onto her bicycle and rode out of the woods,



into the dark. Tomorrow she would be young again. It had been too long—it had always been too long.

Rocko woke up Saturday morning after a round of awful dreams, in which he'd tried to stab a boy by a stream while a dark-haired girl looked on, wide-eyed and helpless. He'd felt strong in the dream, like a conqueror ... but the next thing he knew he was dying, his blood running into the water.

He woke, shivering.

His parents weren't awake yet. Good. He slipped into the kitchen and ate a cold biscuit out of the fridge. Then he dressed, thinking about Cory, about finding the right time to strike.

When he went out the side door, he found the witch's bicycle leaning against his house. He approached it warily, but it seemed harmless and inert. He touched the curved handlebars. Just metal. He looked around for the witch, and didn't see her anywhere.

"You know the way to his house?" Rocko asked.

The bike just sat there.

Rocko took the handlebars and moved the bicycle into the yard. He climbed on and started pedaling the heavy bicycle, wondering how he would know which way to go.

The handlebars tugged under his hands, toward the left, and Rocko went with them. Like the planchette on a ouija board, he thought, moving under my fingers.

For some reason, even though he was not the type of boy to sing aloud, he found himself shouting the half-remembered words to "Love Me Tender" as he pedaled.

After about a mile, the bike started pedaling itself.

Cory walked to Heather's house with his notebook under his arm, thinking about his dream last night. He found Heather in her front yard, smacking balls with her hockey stick, driving them into one of those portable netted goals. She wore jeans and an untucked blue shirt. Her hair was mussed, and her face was red from exertion. She was altogether beautiful.

"Want to take a few swings?" she asked, seeing him.

"Maybe later."

"Any time. Want to head for the stream?" She picked up her bookbag from where it rested by a flowerbed.

"Sure."

"Mom said she'll make lunch for us. She wants to meet you."

That both pleased him and made him nervous. "You told her about me?"

She laughed. "I had to tell her something when I went to your house. She made me braid my hair, remember?"

"Right, right." They ambled into the woods. She swung her hockey stick at pine cones.

"Did you have any—"

"—weird dreams last night?" she finished. "Yeah. No witch, though, just watching a couple of kids I'd never seen before try to kill each other."

"I dreamed I stabbed somebody. There was a girl there, too ... and she came over and stared down at the kid's blood while it ran into the water. She hardly seemed to notice me, even though I tried to get her attention."

"That's so messed up," she said. "Very weird."

"I saw something yesterday ..."

"What?"

"I thought ... I thought I saw that woman's bicycle in the woods. Not her, just the bike, with no one riding it. But that's crazy. Right?"

"I don't know. I just wish the dreams would stop. If it keeps up,

I'll be afraid to go to sleep."

They got to the stream and started talking about their project, both of them glad to have something besides bad dreams to pay attention to.

The bicycle took Rocko into a subdivision after about an hour and a half of riding. He hoped the bicycle would be around to take him back, because he didn't remember the way. "That sword better be here," he said to the bicycle when it began slowly coasting toward the woods at the end of the subdivision. "Not to mention that dogshit Cory."

The bicycle did not respond, but a short distance into the woods, it stopped moving and started to fall over. Rocko stepped off and stood still, listening. He heard water, and, maybe, voices. Did Cory have friends? It didn't seem possible. But if he did ... well, Rocko would do what he had to when the opportunity presented itself, as opportunities invariably did.

He crept through the woods, toward the voices ... and saw Cory and Heather, right across a stream.

Heather. Shit. He hadn't expected her to be here. Still ... maybe it was a good thing. Cory had surely told Heather how he'd made a fool of him, driven off his friends and left him face-down in a shit-filled toilet bowl. They'd probably laughed about it, when it should have been Cory she laughed at.

Well, he'd show her now, wouldn't he? Show her that he couldn't be messed with that way, not without consequences. She'd see.

He glanced around.

And right there, driven point-first into the soil, was the sword. He pulled it out and held it. It felt good in his hand—it felt natural.

No feelings, he reminded himself. Just do what needs to be done. He started across the creek.

"Did you hear something?" Cory asked.

"I don't—" Heather began.

The next things happened very fast.

Rocko came out of the bushes on the far side of the stream, holding something long in his right hand—was it a sword? He wasn't scowling, or cursing, or smiling, just hurrying toward the stream with a fixed, intent expression on his face. Cory instinctively stepped between Rocko and Heather.

"Are you crazy?" Heather shouted, falling back. Cory didn't know which of them she was talking to.

Cory retreated too, banging his elbow on a tree. He glanced that way—and saw a sword, driven point-down into the dirt by the tree trunk.

What he had to do seemed obvious. He'd done it last night in his dream, hadn't he?

He pulled the sword out of the dirt and held it before him. He'd never held a sword before, but he knew how; it felt like second nature.

Rocko stood on the other side of the stream. "This is for my humiliation," he said. He nodded toward Heather. "And for the Girl."

"You can't have her," Cory said, not sure where the words came from. "You'll have to come through me."

"So be it," Rocko said, and jumped across the stream. Cory waited in *en garde* position, his mind curiously blank. These events seemed to have little to do with him—they were almost formalities, somehow, but essential nonetheless.

Rocko raised his sword, and his face finally betrayed expression—a snarl of total, concentrated rage.

Then Heather hit Rocko with her hockey stick, snapping his sword and driving the broken pieces into his chest. A look of comical surprise crossed Rocko's face, and he looked toward Heather. She hit



“I don’t know how it works ... but it’s got a mind of its own. It might even have her mind.”

him in the side of the head with the flat of the stick, and he stiffened, then stumbled backward and fell in the stream, still holding the hilt of his sword.

“Jesus,” Heather said, breathing hard.

Then, off in the bushes, the witch screamed.

What had the Girl done? Her place was to stand to one side and watch the bloodshed, not intercede! The witch had loosened the moorings of her mind, dressed in jeans and a blue shirt to match the Girl, put a ribbon in her hair. She was ready to become the Girl, waiting only for the Boy to spill the Rival’s blood and ignite the spell—and that had been ruined!

She ran out of the woods where she’d been watching. “Bitch!” she yelled. “You little whore, you little interfering whore!”

It might not be too late. If she could make the Rival bleed, maybe this tableau was still close enough to the original—the imperative resemblance hadn’t totally broken down. She was too far away, though, she’d never get to him and kill him in time, especially with the Girl still standing there, fierce as an Amazon, her hockey stick in hand.

But her bicycle—it was closer.

Rocko sat up, groggily, and saw the witch coming, screaming. He looked at the shattered remnant of sword in his hand, and suddenly understood the essentials, if not the particulars, of the situation.

The witch had set him up. She’d meant for him to die here, and had given him a useless sword. She’d probably been behind Cory’s impossible feat of strength and speed in the bathroom, too.

He would kill her. He struggled to his feet.

Then he saw the bicycle bearing down on him, and froze, pithed by fear.

The bicycle came out of the trees, lumbering slowly at first but then building speed. Rocko stared at the witch’s bicycle as it raced toward him. Heather held her hockey stick across her chest, but she was looking at the witch, who was dressed like Heather and grinning horribly.

The riderless bicycle was going to pass by Cory. He saw its ram’s-horn handlebars, only they’d twisted, so their points aimed forward, like a bull’s horns. They would gore Rocko easily, and his blood would pool in the stream...

In one smooth motion, with thoughtless ease, Cory tossed his sword point-first toward the bicycle as it passed him. His sword flew neatly into the spokes on the back tire. The rotation of the wheel slammed the sword against the frame, binding the spokes and making it impossible for the wheel to turn. The bicycle slomed, and the witch screamed again. The bike skidded for several feet before it fell, then slid into the stream, stopping by Rocko’s feet.

Rocko looked down at it, then at the witch, who stood clutching her hair and shouting incomprehensibly.

Rocko grinned. He reached down and snatched the sword from the bike’s spokes. The bicycle’s wheels spun, but it couldn’t seem to right itself. Cory cursed softly. Rocko was going to come after him, and this time he didn’t have a weapon of his own. He couldn’t run, either, not if that meant leaving Heather to Rocko’s mercy, and to the witch.

Rocko lifted the sword and shouted. His face held plenty of expression now—fury, and delight.

He didn’t run for Cory. He ran past Heather, straight for the witch.

She hardly seemed to see him—just stared at Heather, and pulled on her hair, and wept.

Rocko plunged the sword into the witch’s stomach, driving it in to the hilt, then put his hand on her chest and shoved. The witch fell over backward, her body sliding off the blade. Rocko lifted the sword high, then drove it down into her throat.

He left it there, sticking up, not unlike the way Cory had found it, sticking up from the ground. Rocko looked at Cory and Heather, his eyes glazed, breathing heavily.

“Don’t come near us,” Heather said, moving close to Cory, clutching her stick.

“Shit,” Rocko said, his voice thick. “I’m not messing with either of you. I took care of what I needed to do.” He frowned. “Almost, anyway.” He approached, and Heather stepped in front of Cory—protecting him, as he’d moved to protect her.

Rocko didn’t come much closer to him, though. He veered back toward the stream, and the bicycle. “This thing. I don’t know how it works ... but it’s got a mind of its own. It might even have her mind.” He looked at Heather. “Get that stick over here, and smash this thing up, would you? I’ll get a rock.”

“He’s right,” Cory said. “I don’t know what happened, but ... the bicycle is part of it. We have to break it.”

“Don’t mess with us,” Heather said. “Don’t mess with Cory.”

Rocko shrugged. “He proved he was worth something. He saved my life.” He flashed a sick grin at Cory. “If Heather hadn’t ambushed me, though, and if I hadn’t been stuck with a second-rate sword, I’d have finished you.”

“We’ve seen what you can do,” Heather said, looking at the witch’s body, then away.

Rocko looked at the witch’s body and nodded. “Yeah. I crossed a boundary there, didn’t I? I wonder what my psychiatrist will say when I tell her I killed her because she was a witch?”

Cory and Heather didn’t say anything. They just went to work on the bike with the stick and some rocks, shattering its headlamp first, then pounding its wheel hubs into shapelessness. Rocko bashed at the seat until it came off. Halfway through their destruction they heard shouting and footsteps.

“Who—” Cory said, alarmed.

“Grown-ups,” Rocko grunted. “Those builders of boundaries. They heard all the screaming, probably. Let’s finish this before they get here.”

They worked faster, and when they finished, the bicycle was just bits of junk glittering in the stream.

“So much for the micro-ecology,” Heather said. “The water will probably be poisoned forever.”

A woman came into the clearing, followed by another woman and a man. “Heather!” the first woman shouted. “What—” She saw the witch’s body. “Oh my God!” she cried, covering her mouth with both hands.

“I killed her,” Rocko said, stepping forward. He looked over his shoulder at Cory, then favored Heather with a smile. He turned back to the grown-ups. “I killed her because she was a witch.”

The adults looked at one another.

Heather grasped Cory’s hand, hard. He squeezed hers just as tightly. This was going to be a long afternoon, and long days ahead ... but maybe, on the other side of it, he would still be able to hold Heather’s hand. ♣







# WOEWEATER

BY LIZ WILLIAMS ILLUSTRATION BY LORI KOEFOED

I wear the skins of the things I have slain, for my mistress told me long ago that it would be my only protection against their spirits, and the cold. The hood that hides my face is sewn from the spotted pelt of a lynx; my collar is made of marten's fur, and the long coat that keeps out the bite of the snow is that of a white leopard, from the lands far to the east of this island of Albion. I am not one of those men who hunts for food, nor for gold or pleasure, but from necessity: to prevent the spread of evil. And when I falter, thinking how soft and comfortable it would be to settle down in some small walled village with herbwife or merchant's daughter, I remember the death of the white leopard whose skin I wear: how it looked at me with human eyes at the last, and with its final breath hissed my name. There are animals in this world, but there are also beasts.

WE TEND TO  
SEE WHAT  
WE EXPECT  
TO SEE,  
EVEN WHEN  
WHAT WE'RE  
LOOKING FOR  
ISN'T THERE.



That winter, late in 1792, I had come north, up through the dark forests of Gwalia to the lake country, to seek such a beast. It was not long before the depth of the cold, and the Solstice—a festival I mark more than the Christian's Christmas. The Hunter, my own constellation, spun overhead with his hound running at his heels, a star as blue as the eye of a god. I paused at the crest of a ridge, seeing the pines march away before me into the frosty dark. Strapping the snowshoes more securely to my feet, I glided swiftly on. The old man, the one who had sent me on this quest, had given me a name and a place in the last moments of his life: Minerva Vow, and a house named Woewater.

**T**hat house now lay below me, on the still shore of a long lake. The gleam of a crimson lamp shone in an upstairs window, patterning a bloody square onto the snow. The house was tall, with pointed gables and iron gates. I tried to picture it in sunlight and summer, and failed. As I neared the gate, I slipped the coat from my shoulders, reversing it so that the fur was on the inside and it was once more dark and anonymous. I took the hood and stuffed it into a pocket. I did not want to bear the signs of my hunter's calling; I feared that they might already be too evident to one such as Minerva Vow. Pausing for a moment before the gate, I touched the sigil that hung on a chain around my neck: the symbol of Cybele, lady of beasts. As a hunter of her creatures, I was myself bound to her, and must placate her when necessary. The sigil was warm with my own warmth, but I knew how quickly it could grow cold when one of the beasts was near. To my surprise, the gate was not locked: ones such as Mistress Vow are often justly fearful of visitors. The latched gate spoke of unnatural confidence. I walked down the path to the oak door and reaching up, pulled the chain of the bell. I did not hear it ring, and was about to reach for the chain again when the door opened.

A woman stood before me on the step. I am used to the nature of the *were*, their haughtiness, their bravado, but Minerva Vow—if this was she—looked only alarmed. I had an impression of dark eyes in a pale face, a cloud of light brown hair, and then she drew back into the shadows.

"Who are you? How did you get inside the gate?" she asked, breathlessly. "I locked it not an hour before."

"It was open."

"Open?" The white oval of her face tilted up, as if seeking an answer in the heavens. "I was certain it was locked. Who are you?"

"My name is Leopold Dee. I am a traveler in medicines. I fear I am lost." The name was true, at least, though it was not the one by which I have become most usually known.

"And I am Minerva Vow. Where are you headed for?"

"For the Scotland road. But I lost my path, and it was dark and cold—I wondered whether I might seek your hospitality?"

She paused for a moment, uncertainly.

"I am here alone. I do not think—"

"Then where is the nearest inn?" I asked, to call her bluff.

"Amble, 10 miles away." She looked up at the sky once more, to where the snow clouds were massing over the pines. The Hunter was gone now, but beneath the edge of the clouds I could

see the hard light of a winter's moon, two days from the full. I was certain she would let me in, despite her dissembling. Why hunt the wild wet woods, when you can stay by your own fire and feast in peace? I have learned this of beasts: they are ruthless, but they are also lazy.

She seemed to make up her mind, as I had known she would. "Very well, then. You may stay, but only until the sky clears in the morning." No doubt this was designed to put me at my ease. She stepped aside, and I followed her into the house.

Within, the hallway was paneled and shadowy. She led me into a small parlor, with a fire smoldering in the grate. Had I indeed been the traveler I claimed, I did not think that I would have been too appreciative of the hospitality offered: the house was barely warmer than the woods, despite the fire, and almost as dark. Beneath the resinous smolder of the logs, and the smell of damp and age, I thought I detected something more pungent: the scent of old meat, or fresh blood. The homes of beasts are rarely to human taste, or human comfort. Woewater served only to confirm my suspicions about the nature of my hostess, but looking covertly at her now, I was unsure as to which of her kind she might be. Something little and quick, perhaps, that relies on a snap to the throat. Not wolfkind; she was too frail for that, too unassuming, and she lacked the sensuality that one finds so often in the great cats. I thought once again of the snow leopard, and inside my sleeve my fingers curled into soft, dead fur. Then she turned, and I saw her sharp profile against the fire-lit wall: the hook of a small nose, the eyes, the brown hair like dappled feathers. I thought I had my answer, then.

"There are rooms upstairs," she said. "You may use one of those."

"You live alone, then? You have no family? No servants?" No honest young woman would have let me into her household, should she live alone.

A short, quick shake of the head. "None living."

Beneath the cloth and the fur of my coat, my *sgian dbu*, the hunter's black dagger, rested comfortably against my thigh. I reached down and touched its topaz hilt. *None living*. The presence of the dagger reassured me, a little. I followed Minerva Vow up the stairs. Her long skirts drifted like a ghost's. She opened a door and motioned me inside.

"Here."

**T**he room was small and damp, and dominated by an ornate bed. The posts that held it up were carved in the form of trees, entwined with ivy in a different wood, and at the top the spread wings of oaken owls supported the curtains. There was no fire, but there were fresh sheets on the bed and a cover, the mottled skin of an animal that I did not immediately recognize. It was only after Minerva had quietly withdrawn, leaving me with the candle, that I realized it was not one skin, but many: the little hides of mice and voles and shrews, painstakingly stitched together. My suspicions fell into place. Minerva was not a beast, she was a bird. I would have little enough to fear from an ordinary bird of prey, but the *were* were larger than the original form, perhaps from some need to conserve physical substance, and like all their brethren indisposed to human kind. It seemed to me that



# THE HOMES OF BEASTS ARE RARELY TO HUMAN TASTE, OR HUMAN COMFORT.

I could hear a shrieking in the dark.

There was a basin filled with water on the dresser, but I had to break the skin of ice before I could wash the journey from me. I did so hastily, then crawled beneath the musty cover, with the *sgian dbu* clasped in my hand. I fell into the hunter's light sleep, more trance than unconsciousness. Figures moved in the darkness behind my eyes: the long body of a wolf, a seal with a woman's tearful eyes and sharper bite, the glistening coat of a fox against the shadows of the pines. All dead by my own hand, and no one but a hunter knows how greatly to mourn the passing of something beautiful and dangerous. Beasts do not have the limitations of animals; their hunger is human, and wholly mad, like a maw at the world's heart, but for the sake of my own soul, they must be slain when they have taken their animal form. Dreaming, I remembered the curves of Minerva's face; its lunar crescent, now on the wax, now on the wane. Two days and the moon would be full. *You may stay, but only until the sky clears in the morning.* And beasts are liars, like all humankind. I did not sleep soundly until dawn.

When I awoke, it was to gray light and snowfall. Peering through the casement, I saw with grim and distant satisfaction that the flakes were coming down so heavily that the ridge of the pines beyond the house was invisible. The sill was icy to the touch, and skeins of cold, curdled water had formed in the basin. I gathered my coat around me, and went downstairs.

Minerva was sitting at the fireside, her brow furrowed as she stared into the flames. I said, "It's snowing hard, now." I startled her; she jumped like a hare and her hand went to her throat. Her kind often grow nervous, as the moon swells.

"Yes," she said, faintly. "Yes, it's a blizzard."

"Perhaps you would not mind so greatly if I stayed?" Both hunter and prey can toy with words, like cats with mice, but she said, sounding strangely worried, "I think you will have to. But by tomorrow, I'm afraid you must be gone. I am expecting—company."

I smiled. "I doubt if it will prove troublesome."

She frowned, as if teasing out meaning, then rose swiftly to her feet.

"I have to see to the porridge."

**T**he game was ended in so prosaic a manner that I stared at her as she went out of the room. Her feathery hair was bound up into a coil; she looked like a fierce, but secretly shy, school mistress. She brought me my breakfast in silence, and the day passed. Fortunately for my patience, there were many books. We spent the day companionably enough, in front of the meager

warmth of the fire. We spoke little. Once I said, "It seems a cold house, and a large one. Would you not be more comfortable in a cottage?"

"It was my family's house," she answered. "I inherited it when my father died. He had no other children."

"Could you not sell it? I'm sure some fashionable person would pay good money for such a rural retreat."

"It is not for sale," Minerva said firmly, then added, "but I would love to live elsewhere."

**S**he gazed wistfully into the fire and the corners of her mouth turned down. I felt a brief pity for her: of course she could not move. They would put her to death after the first full moon. Here, she had solitude and probably victims enough. A bird would be able to cover a larger area than an animal form, and would be less traceable. Any experienced tracker can follow footprints, after all, but there can be no mark left on the sky. She fell silent after that, brooding, like a hawk that longs to be flown.

That night, I looked once more out of the casement window. The snow was still drifting down, but I could see the gleam of stars to the east, and then the disc of the moon slipping up between the treetops, only a sliver away from the full. I placed a chair against the door that night, and again clasped the black dagger close to me. Transformation is an unchancy thing, and some of the more powerful beasts could summon up their form before the full of the moon. Indeed, I once met a hunter from the east who had slain a tiger at twilight, when the moon was new. I drew the dagger from its sheath and held it before me. The topaz at its hilt glinted in the candlelight like a fierce, cold eye. I do not remember falling into slumber, but I must have slept, for I awoke with a start to find the candle had gone out. It felt like that still, silent darkness just before dawn, when the night is at its deepest. There was something in the room. I heard it rustling. The dagger's hilt was cold in my fingers. I lay still, breathing the slow, calm breath of sleep. It was at this time that the snow leopard had come for me, slinking in through the flap of the tent. I had woken with its breath on my face, and that breath had been as cold as a grave. I heard nothing more, but the room seemed filled with a clammy dampness. I peered beneath my eyelids, but could see nothing. Then a hard, curved claw curled around my wrist. I struck out with the dagger and felt it bite home. The claw was snatched back. I rolled from the bed, the dagger held before me.

"Do not touch me," I hissed. "I know what you are!" I stumbled



across the room and tripped over the chair wedged beneath the door handle. How had she got into the room? Perhaps through the casement, closing it softly behind her. With my back against the wall, I fumbled for the candle and lit it. Light flared up. The room was empty. I searched it, but found nothing. I sat on the bed until dawn, clutching the dagger.

That morning, at breakfast, Minerva Vow was pale and withdrawn. Surreptitiously, I glanced at her arm for some sign of injury, but the voluminous sleeves would have concealed even a thick bandage. Yet she seemed dispirited, and I thought I knew why. Her attempt on my life had failed. She peered anxiously out of the window and said, "I thought it would have stopped by now, but it's worse than ever. The drifts have piled up against the gates."

"Reluctant though I am to partake further of your hospitality," I said, with some sincerity, "I fear I must do so for a further night. I cannot travel in this."

"Then you must stay," she replied, with an uneasy glance in my direction. "May I ask one thing? It is a strange request, I know. But will you leave your door unlocked tonight? It—it was a custom in our family, on Solstice Eve, so that the luck would not become trapped in the house."

"I think I might manage that," I said, with a smile. I had no intention of doing as she asked. Tonight, I planned to wedge the bed against the door, and to sleep as much as possible during the day so that I would not have to do so at night.

**I** spent some of that day reading, and a couple of hours exploring the house. It was a huge, rambling place, but much of it seemed uncared for and neglected. The kitchen was neat and clean, but the main room—a once-handsome, paneled affair hung with what I presumed to be family portraits—was filled with dust. I studied some of the portraits, and saw that the crest of the Vow clan was indeed an owl. So many of the aristocracy had taken on the power of the *were*, literally feeding off the peasantry. Yet so many of them could not help but betray themselves: the crests, the coats of arms, even sometimes the names... It was as though they almost craved the recognition that would be their downfall.

In one of the bedrooms leading from the first floor landing, I discovered yet more evidence. In this room, the rusty smell of ancient blood was strong, and there were stains on the floor and

the room itself, conjured a deep unease in me. I felt as though there were eyes on my back, and when I whipped around, I found Minerva staring at me.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I do beg your pardon. I was bored. I was exploring. It was rude of me, I know."

"It was—inadvisable," she said, coldly. "Parts of the house are unsafe; I do not have the money to effect repairs." We stared at one another in silence. Her chin was lifted, and the dark eyes were opaque with anger. With mock meekness, I followed her back down the stairs.

**N**ight came quickly; tomorrow would, after all, be the shortest day of the year. The house fell into a muffled twilight, with blue shadows hazing the snow before Minerva rose abruptly and drew the heavy, stifling curtains.

"You said you were expecting company," I said. "Friends?" "They won't get through the snow, I'm sure," she said, quickly. "They're from a village 20 miles away. It will be quite snowed in by now."

"A pity," I said, slyly. She shot me a startled, nervous glance and I realized I had frightened her. It should have made me glad, but I found myself suddenly sorry for her. Why this should be I did not know—the *were* bring their fate upon themselves through the darkest of magics, for greed and for power, but at that moment she looked like a human girl and nothing more. I wanted to say, "Don't be afraid of me. I won't hurt you," but it wasn't true and we both knew it. Tonight was the full moon. By morning, one of us would be dead.

"I—I have things to do in the kitchen," she said, and bolted.

We ate a meager dinner in silence. I was wary of the food, wondering whether she might not poison me, but that is not the way of the *were*. They prefer to eat what they have killed, and she could not poison me without condemning herself. That evening we both retired early.

On the landing she said, anxiously, "You won't forget, will you? About not locking the door?" In the candlelight her face looked pinched and drawn. I wondered whether the change was already beginning.

"I won't forget," I said. That, at least, was the truth. When I reached the illusory sanctuary of my own bedchamber, I secured

I ONCE MORE HEARD THE VIXEN BARK.  
FULL MOON, AND WE WERE OUTSIDE.

skirting board. Some of the more refined *were*-clans occasionally boasted a killing room, to bring their victims back to the security of their own homes and dispatch them at leisure. The thought, and

the casement from the inside with a length of wire, twisting it around so that it could be opened only with difficulty. Then I pushed the heavy bed across the room, so that it partly, but not



entirely, obscured the door. I would wait until I heard her trying to get in, exhausting even her unnatural strength, and then I would move the bed aside and slay her. It occurred to me that she might hunt elsewhere, try other prey, but there would be few creatures abroad in this snow and besides, I was sure now that she knew me for her enemy. She would do all she could to see me dispatched. I placed a chair by the window, so that I could see not only the room but the soft, cold darkness beyond, drew the dagger, and waited.

**A**s the early part of the night passed, the full moon rose above the pines, casting an icy light across the snow. Once, I started at the beat of wings, only to see a great tawny owl drifting across the garden toward the trees. I wondered, then, but it did not return. From the direction of the woods I heard a vixen's sharp cry, then silence. The moon cleared the treetops and sailed up into a starry vault; the snowclouds had finally gone. Then a shadow swooped down from above, enveloping me. Cursing, I struck out with the dagger, but caught only the loose, soft folds of drapery. It was then that I realized that the heavy curtain had fallen from the window on top of me. I struggled free, but it was too late. Claws snapped shut around my wrist as I raised my hand. I turned, lashed out with the dagger, and connected. The claws once more retreated into the darkness. Frantically, I spun this way and that, seeking Minerva's changed form. The door thudded open and reverberated against the bed. I stumbled forward, but my ankle was torn and bleeding, and I caught my foot in the folds of the fallen curtain and fell. A high, panicky voice cried my name.

"Mr. Dee!"

I struggled to my feet, glancing wildly about me, but the claws once more grabbed at me and I went down. As I fell, I realized two things: the snatching claws were inside the room, but the voice had come from outside. And as I stared up toward the ceiling, I saw in the lamplight from the half open door that one of the owls on the pillars that supported the bed bore a thin, ugly scar of newly exposed wood. The wall at my back creaked, and moved. The carved ivy that ornamented the bed twined out, lashing itself around the door frame so that the gap between the bed and the door was filled with a mass of snarled foliage. A further strand snaked forth and wrapped itself securely around my leg, pulling me toward the wall which, as I watched in horror, began to open up, revealing a great, dark hole.

"Mr. Dee!" Minerva cried again. "Guard your face!"

I froze for a moment, then covered my head with my arms. There was a rush of light behind my eyes as the flame of the thrown lamp touched the curling ivy. It went up with a roar. The frond encircling my foot was abruptly withdrawn. Scrambling to my feet, I saw that the fire had spread to the bed and licked the fur coverlet. It flared up like a torch. I was trapped. I could not reach the door without passing through the fire, and the wall was still gaping open behind me. The stench of old meat poured from it.

Minerva!" I shouted. "I'm going through the window!" Stepping back a few paces, I threw myself against the pane,

and the window shattered. Cold, fresh air streamed past me as I fell.

I landed in the snow bank below the window. Fire billowed out through the shattered pane and the lacerations on my hands stung in the cold. Then the front door was jerked open and Minerva Vow rushed out into the garden. She threw herself to her knees beside me, in the snow.

"Are you hurt?"

"No." I blinked. The snow had cushioned my fall. "And you?"

She grimaced. "I bruised my shoulder against the door. I told you to keep it unlocked." She pulled me to my feet and we made for the gate, then beyond, to the comparative safety of the pines. I could hear the fire gaining strength as we staggered through the snow.

"It isn't you who becomes a *were* at full moon, is it? It's the house." A fresh shower of sparks hissed into the snow, as if to add emphasis to my words. She nodded, wearily.

**W**oewater has been in my family for generations. It—seduces you, Mr. Dee. If you are born in the house, as I was, then you can never escape it. It whispers to you in the night, it shows you wonderful dreams and visions. But at the full moon, it summons things in. Sometimes just rats, or foxes. Sometimes people—though not for some years now. I would have warned you, but I was not sure and besides, you could not have made your way through the snow. It was a choice of two evils. I waited until you had gone to bed, and then I kept vigil in the hallway. I thought if—if anything happened, I could hurry you outside."

"But you must have known that I might tell folk of what I'd seen, if I lived."

"I thought I could pass it off as an accident—a collapsing ceiling in an old house, if anyone came. But this place has an evil reputation. A deserved one."

"Then why did you not burn it years ago?"

"I had nowhere else to go. And the house—I told you. It held me." She paused, chafing her hands against the chill, and I could see the shock in her face. "And will you, Mr. Dee? Tell folk of what you've seen?"

I looked at her. Her hair was trailing across her face, and her brow was smudged with soot. The dark eyes were anxious, but there seemed to be a light behind them. I wondered how much of her nature I had imagined, and how much might yet be real.

I said, "No. We've both gained our lives and our freedom tonight. I won't tell."

In the woods, I once more heard the vixen bark. Full moon, and we were outside.

"We should find shelter," I said. "And I'll help you to find a place, when we leave."

Minerva looked at me doubtfully. "There's a boathouse down on the lake. Now that the snow has stopped, we can make our way to the village when dawn comes."

I took her hand. It felt as small and cold as a claw. Together we made our difficult way through the snow toward the lake, and behind us, Woewater burned. ❧



# How It Ended

**BY DARRELL SCHWEITZER**  
**ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL LEE**

Jehan, a knight of Auvergne, who had been called the Brave in his youth after he had taken up the Cross and served in the holy wars, and now was called Jehan the Good to his face and Jehan the Placid or even Jehan the Fat behind his back, stirred awake on a winter's morning.

He sat up in bed, shivering. His breath came in white puffs. He reached over to the nightstand, broke the ice in the fingerbowl, then wiped his face.

The sharpness of the cold air on his wet face was good. It reassured him.

Yet he sat with his knees raised up under the covers, his arms locked over his knees, and he was not reassured.

"The dream again?" The Lady Asenath stirred beside him. Her gray hair had come undone and streamed all over the pillow, yet her face was still marble-white and beautiful. It made her look, he thought, like something cast away among leaves and vines.

"It was the dream."

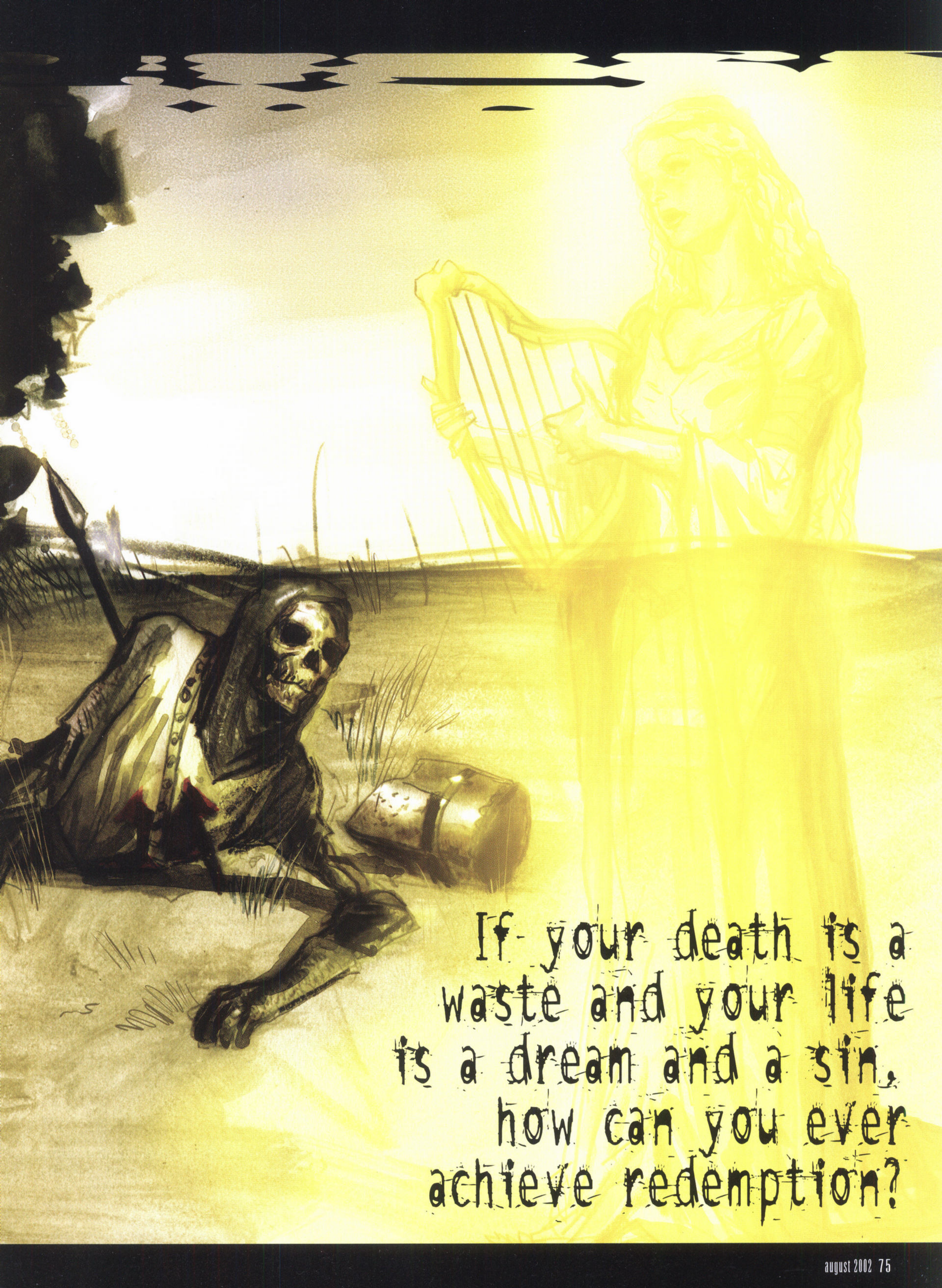
"Vapors of the mind. Forget it."

*But he could not forget how he had dreamed of a slain knight lying in an empty field, beneath the sun and stars. All his short life this young knight had served God and the cause of righteousness, and yet now God and righteousness seemed to have tossed him aside like so much rubbish. Seasons pressed gently yet relentlessly upon him, first the dry leaves, then frost gleaming off his shattered hauberk (for he had been struck with a spear through the breast); and then snow covered all. In spring, flowers grew between his bones, birds took the last strands of his yellow hair to make their nests, and his great helm was made the habitation of worms.*

Jehan dreamed these things in the night, and in the morning the dream was not quite over, lingering even as he regarded his wife sleeping beside him, as he thought of his three sons, as brave as ever he had been, all of them now gone to the Holy Land to fight for God with great distinction. The youngest, knowing he would inherit no lands, had even carved out a dukedom for himself by the Sea of Galilee, in the very homeland of Our Lord.







If your death is a  
waste and your life  
is a dream and a sin,  
how can you ever  
achieve redemption?



Should he, Jehan, not then be content?

Yet he was afraid as he regarded the age spots on his hands, as he thought how the top of his head was bald and his whole body grew gross and decrepit. These were the first touches of the grave, he knew. He thought it even as the dream did not end, but continued while he sat awake, in his memory like an echo *and the soul of the slain knight lingered, and could not rise up to Paradise nor slide into the Pit, but struggled to get free like an animal caught in a trap. It cried out in a voice that was no more than a faint breeze rustling last autumn's leaves, but a voice nonetheless, filled with sorrow and longing and bewilderment that all his courage and chivalry had brought him to this.*

# Jehan

looked at his spotted hands and wept softly, for something he could not put into words, a truly nameless dread.

His wife got up, wrapped herself in a robe, and came around to his side of the bed. She kissed him gently on the forehead, then tugged him by the arm.

"Come here."

He let her lead him to the window, where he stood in the bracing cold and beheld his own lands, untroubled by war and witches all these years, stretching as far as the eye could see. True, he held them in trust for a duke, who held them for the King, but for all practical purposes they were his, and he had grown fat on the profit of them.

The fields lay brown and still beneath a steel-gray sky. He could smell snow in the air. Crows soared above the stubble of last year's crop.

He saw the mill by the river, near the castle gate, and beyond, a new cathedral rising up, one tower complete, the other half-built; and houses clustered like piglets around a great sow. His wife said, "Look. This is *not* a dream."

It must have been in a dream then, still dreamed while he stood there awake, *that the slain knight heard a voice calling his name, out of the darkness on the first evening of summer. Dared he hope to awaken from the nightmare of death? Dimly, his mind came to itself. His limbs stirred. With a great heave, he stood up. Worms tumbled onto his shoulders.*

*And a voice sang to him, beautiful beyond words, it seemed, and he dared further to hope that it was a voice of an angel, summoning him to Paradise. Yet he did not rise above the earth....*

"Be thankful for what you've got," Jehan's wife said. "God has been very good to us."

"How can I be certain?"

Playfully, half-angry, she buffeted him on the temple. "Ah, you've got worms in your head. They've eaten your common sense."

*Clumsily, groping, like a player impersonating his way through a play when he has completely forgotten his part, the dead youth walked, his armor rattling, mud pouring out of the joints, scraps of rusting metal trailing behind. Yet he found some semblance of strength, as bone came together unto his bone, and the mud and rotted leaves and few scraps of flesh remaining fused together in imitation of life.*

He opened his eyes.

*And the voice sang in his mind, as if in a dream that lingered even when he stood there awake; and the voice was not that of an angel, for there was an edge of sorrow in it, but it called him nonetheless; and he could almost make out the words.*

But Jehan's wife only laughed and said, "Do me the favor of

remaining alive for a while. We have work to do." She put her arms around him from behind, placed her chin on his shoulder, and nuzzled her cheek against his. "Besides, I still love you. What would I do without you?"

What indeed? Therefore he rose and dressed, called for his servants and his breakfast, and went about the business of the day, some dull matter involving rents and tenants and an inconsistency in accounts.

All the while, as he endured these things, listening to stewards complain about one another and about the burghers, and to the burghers complaining about the stewards, Jehan the Good, the Gracious, Generous, Caring, or Reasonable (called thus to his face) otherwise known as Jehan the Old, the Inert, Stingy, Bald-Head, or Sluggard realized with the force of quiet revelation that he could not be absolutely certain that he had ever awakened from his dream at all. He could just as readily be a dead man dreaming himself alive.

It was like the first piece of plaster falling from a ceiling, a tiny speck, but the beginning of the end nevertheless.

*Adventures came to him. As a knight, he turned toward adventure like a plant toward the sun. A demon swooped down out of the sky, its black, swirling wings blotting out the sky like ink spilled on an illuminated page. Stars shone faintly through it, and a face like a leprous, pale moon rose and spoke to him, bidding him to lie back in his grave, to rest and be still.*

"I cannot rest," said the dream-knight, for the music within his mind would not let him rest, nor had he any grave.

*The blackness darkened, the stars gone. Only the moon-face remained, rising slowly above the horizon, saying, "Tarry then, and despair until my master Satan fetches thee."*

*Yet again a maiden's voice, sorrowing and beautiful beyond words, called the knight by his name. Therefore he did not despair, but with greater urgency drew his rusted sword and struck. The demon's blood poured down through the sky like an aurora, and the leprous face vanished.*

*He walked more surely now, beneath a summer sky filled with brilliant stars.*

The afternoon was better. Jehan's groom brought a new stallion for him to ride. He could still do it. He still felt young in the saddle. He trotted the horse around the yard, faster and faster; and within his mind he heard that infinitely haunting song all the while; and his doubts increased, like plaster falling; and he saw *the dead knight in the worm-filled helmet, walking amid wolves, which closed around him, then drew away, disturbed, but able to dismiss him as carrion too far gone to be worth devouring.*

*The earth trembled. A dragon reared up, filling the sky, its flaming breath roaring over him. Yet he divided the fires with his sword as a ship's prow divides the ocean, and the dragon fell away, and the sword was made new and strong by the heat of the flames, and the fire was the slow and gentle sunrise, and still he heard that voice within his mind.*

He startled the groom by spurring the horse suddenly and riding out of the castle yard, through the gate, down the curving path past the mill, over the bridge until he drew up at the rectory behind the new cathedral and pounded on the door, while the townspeople gaped and remarked that old Jehan (whatever they called him) had not moved like that in 20 years.

# In

his mind, more plaster fell from the ceiling. In his mind, the earth shook. In his mind, he heard, still, that bewitching, yet not at all comforting, song he could just about make out as, in his continuing dream of memory,



He saw the leprous moon above the towers, and the stars were blotted out as if ink had been spilled over them.

he came to a town, where all fled before him in terror, but for one dirty-faced child, who spoke with the voice of prophecy, saying, "Your lady awaits." But a mounted knight waited for him in the middle of the road, beyond a ruined bridge at the edge of the town. There was no challenge. The knight lowered his spear and charged; and the dead youth in the worm-filled helm caught hold of the spear with more than human strength. He yanked the horseman out of the saddle and swung him shrieking down onto the ground, like a thresher threshing wheat; and the rider died in the roadway, his neck broken, his ghost stirring in confusion like a little whirlwind amid the dust, before it found its way either to Paradise or the Pit.

Yet the young knight who had arisen from the dead had no such relief. He seized the terrified horse, holding it to his will. He mounted and galloped, as memories rose in his mind like bubbles from the depths of a dark pool, summoned by that song he constantly heard, beautiful, terrible, almost resolving itself into words of infinite mystery and power.

Jehan pounded on the door, which opened. He sent novices scurrying to fetch Father Giles, a learned and holy man. He spoke to the holy man in a torrent of words, a great tempest of sputtering fears which ended over and over again in the question, "What if—? What if—"

And Father Giles took him aside, into a great hall, where massive books were kept chained to desks. He opened a volume of chronicles, pointing to the pictures and running his fingers slowly over the words as he read how Jehan the Brave, in the 18th year of his life, had put on the Cross and journeyed to the Orient, where he won great worship as a servant of Christ, riding at the side of the hero Godfrey of Bouillon into Jerusalem when the city was taken and the streets ran with blood of slaughtered pagans up to the knees of the horses, all for the glory of God. This was all written down. It was certain: the deeds of Jehan, his return, his marriage, the births and exploits of his sons.

But Jehan told how he had dreamed of a young man who took up the Cross, yes, but also carried his lady's glove beneath his surcoat, thinking on her when he should have been thinking on God; how he was killed over some trivial point of chivalry before he even got to the Holy Land and left like a heap of rubbish in a field, rotting and rusting while his soul was caught like an animal in a trap.

"These doubts are like scabs," said Father Giles. "Don't pick at them."

Yet Jehan felt the cold earth upon his face. He felt the wind and the leaves and the frost upon his bones. Nervously, irritatedly, he brushed his shoulders.

He fled from Father Giles and leaped onto his horse, riding back up the long, curving road to the castle in the evening twilight—for the day had somehow fled all too fast—and he felt the stones become an avalanche in his mind, the plaster gone now, the edifice

of his life and sanity collapsing. He saw a dragon rearing up behind the castle. He saw the leprous moon above the towers, calling out his name; and the stars were blotted out as if ink had been spilled over them. He reared up his horse and called out a challenge, yet no one answered him, save for that singing voice he still heard within his mind, beautiful, shrill, bewitching, horrible, telling him in words he almost entirely understood now, that at long last he had *awakened*, that what he had thought to be real life was a dream and his dream was reality.

He trembled. He wept. Like a player who has forgotten all his lines and has to pretend, fooling no one, he dismounted and entered the great hall of the castle.

There a dirty-faced servant child stood before him and spoke with the voice of prophecy.

"The Lady Asenath awaits you."

Now he heard the music of his dream clearly, and he understood the words without any doubt. When he confronted his wife, her eyes widened, and she *knew* that he knew and with a long, despairing wail, she fled from him.

And the dead knight, returning home from the wars, greeted the Lady Asenath whom he still loved, and he removed his great helm, scattering worms. She screamed and screamed. And her scream became a kind of music, the echo of it a song just at the edge of understanding; and she did not sing alone, but joined her voice with another, one who cried out in anger and pain and the despair of utterly lost hopes.

**There** was, in this castle, a certain room Jehan was not allowed to enter, far below in the vaults, a room kept barred with heavy bars, chained and locked, blocked with stones, forgotten in the darkness and damp. It had been Asenath's castle before it was his. Her father had died without a male heir, and he gained the place through marriage, having proven his worth in the wars of the Cross. But he married and gained the castle on the single condition that he never go down into that vault, unbar that door, or discover the secret of that room.

At the time he had laughed about it. "I don't have to know everything," he'd said. "Just let it stay where it is and I will stay where I am, and all will be well."

And his bride Asenath, who loved him, laughed and agreed.

But now she turned from her flight and followed after him. She shrieked and clung to him, and fell to her knees, begging that he remember his promise, that he just leave things alone and let all go on as before.

"If you love me—" she cried. "If you love me—"



# The harp was made of human bones and strung with golden hair.

He did love her, still, but he could not stop. It was too late. He had awakened. The singing voice inside his mind revealed all. Outside that barred door, he heard that voice, not in his mind but with his ears, like any other sound.

His wife shrieked and no servant dared stop him as he hurled away the stones. He had but to touch the door and the heavy bars, the locks, and chains all fell away like dust. The door swung open, and there within, revealed by some unnatural light of vision, was a harp set upon a stone coffin. The harp was made of human bones and strung with golden hair. It played itself and sang with the voice he had heard all these years in his dreams. And as he looked there rose up from out of the stone coffin the ghost of a maiden who sang and played upon the harp now, where before it had played alone.

Jehan turned to Asenath and demanded in astonishment, though he already knew the answer from his dreams, "What is this?"

She fell to her knees, sobbing, and said only, "I did it all because I loved you."

He listened as she told how she had drowned her own sister, Eleanor, down by the mill.

"But you didn't have a sister."

"You could not remember her, for she was not part of the new thing I made by—"

"By what?"

"By witchcraft." And Asenath told him how her younger sister foolishly loved Jehan the Brave also, though he was betrothed to the elder. When word came back that Jehan was killed in a duel, and the younger dared mock the elder, all else followed: the murder; the frenzy of the younger sister's absurd, twisted love, her anger, and pain bound into the harp by Asenath's great magic; the harp commanded by Asenath to call Jehan back, to alter the very course of time and turn their lives in another direction.

"This was surely a great sin," said Jehan. He drew his sword and struck a blow, smashing the singing harp. In profound silence, the spirit of the murdered Eleanor drifted up. It gazed upon Asenath in terrible reproach, but only for an instant. Then that gaze turned to things beyond the living world, and the spirit passed through the stone ceiling and was gone.

In silence, Jehan beheld his wife, on her knees before him, her face wet with tears.

"It was for nothing," she said softly.

*In the final instant of the dream, Asenath recovered her composure. She stopped screaming and spoke calmly, saying, "Welcome husband. I have waited long for your return." And trembling, she accepted his embrace.*

Old Jehan knelt down and raised her up. He realized that he should be angry. He should condemn. Yet he could not.

He got out her glove from beneath his clothing, where he'd always kept it as a love-token, and pressed it to his face as if it were the sweetest smelling of roses.

A worm fell onto his shoulder, and another.

She looked at him, wide eyes brimming with tears, but silent.

"I cannot judge," he said at last. "I can only say that these things are for God and that from God you should seek forgiveness, not from me. A true knight must defend and succor his lady always, or else he is not a knight." He took her by the hand and said in a low voice, "Hurry, I don't think we have much time."

He led her upstairs into the great hall. He commanded that a feast be set and that all make merry. But he and his wife took their supper in their own chamber while the household celebrated, uncertain what was being celebrated.

He ate little, gazing into her face all the evening. Once a worm fell into his wine cup. Discreetly, he spilled it out.

**While** he still had the strength (which was failing fast), he led her to their bed and lifted her onto it. He lay beside her. They did not touch, but merely lay there, on their last night together, speaking of the love of two young people who lived long ago. Was it not expected, he put to her, something you read in the chronicles anyway, that a knight's love for his lady should transcend all things, even morality? Did it not follow, she rejoined, that hers should do likewise?

He supposed that it should. "Let God sort it out."

Later, he held her hand in his, though his hand was no more than bone and a few scraps of flesh and old leaves. He was afraid. He asked her to comfort him, to tell him that yes, somehow, they really did have three brave sons, that such sons would be possible, born out of illusion, begotten by a corpse, and still be living sons.

"Let God sort it out," she said. "I think so."

"Truly ours is the greatest romance in all the annals of chivalry," he said.

"I think so."

"I love you," he said, but he did not say, *more than God*, nor did she say it.

And so it ended.

In the morning, then, the servants found her kneeling by her bed, weeping before some old bones which had somehow come to be there. This was a great prodigy, they knew. Father Giles was sent for. Asenath confessed to him, and gave over all her riches and lands to her sons. She put on the veil, spending the rest of her brief life as a penitent, beseeching the forgiveness of God, and of Jehan, and of her sister Eleanor.

But that same morning, just before dawn, Jehan saw the leprous, devil-faced moon crumble into sparks and shooting stars. He saw the sun rise. His soul broke free, like an animal out of a trap, knowing that the quest of his life was complete, that his knightly task had been nothing less than to draw Lady Asenath back from the brink of the Pit.

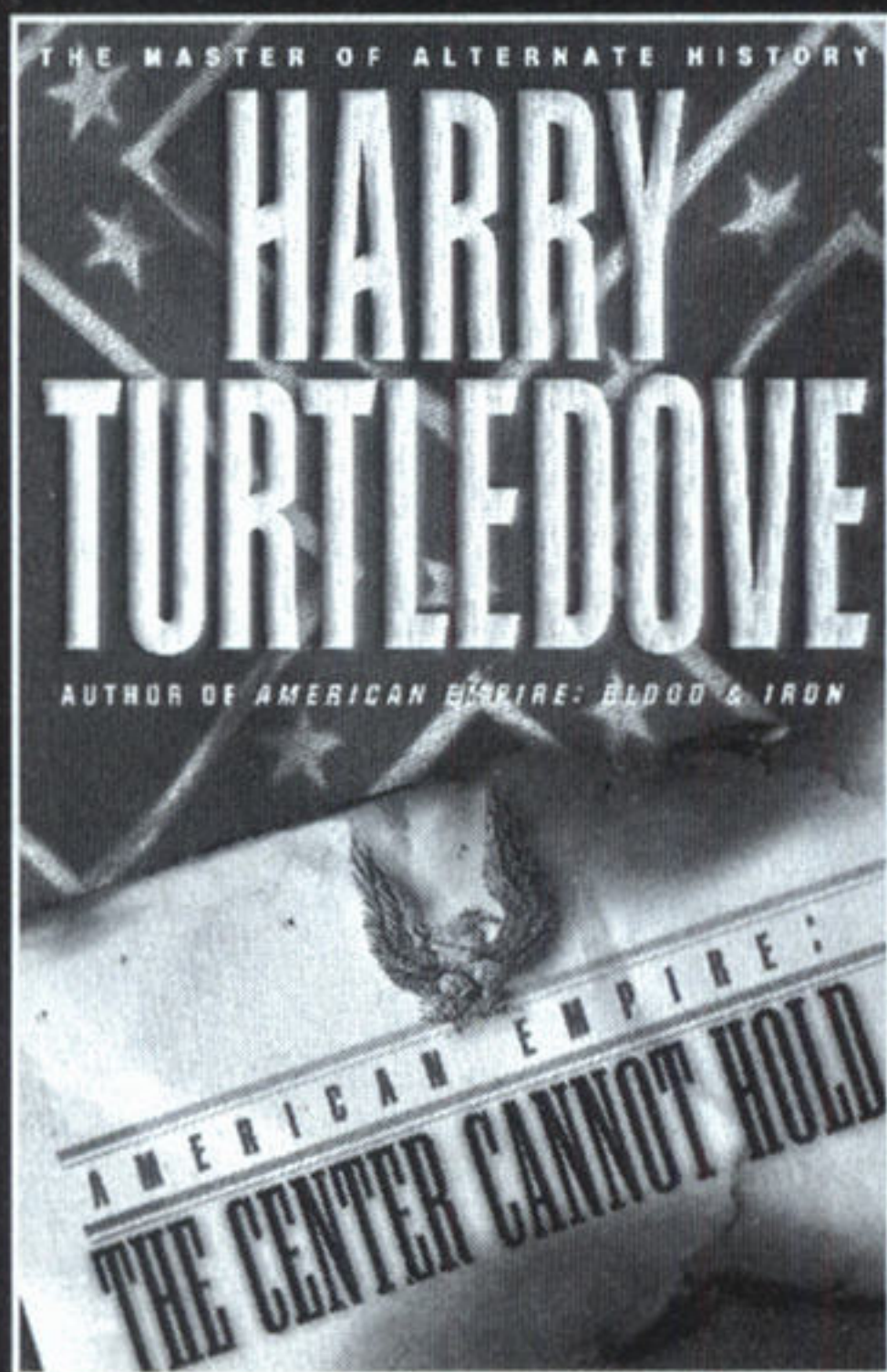
He had done it, by the grace of God, and he gave thanks.

His soul leapt up. The angels caught hold of him. ❧



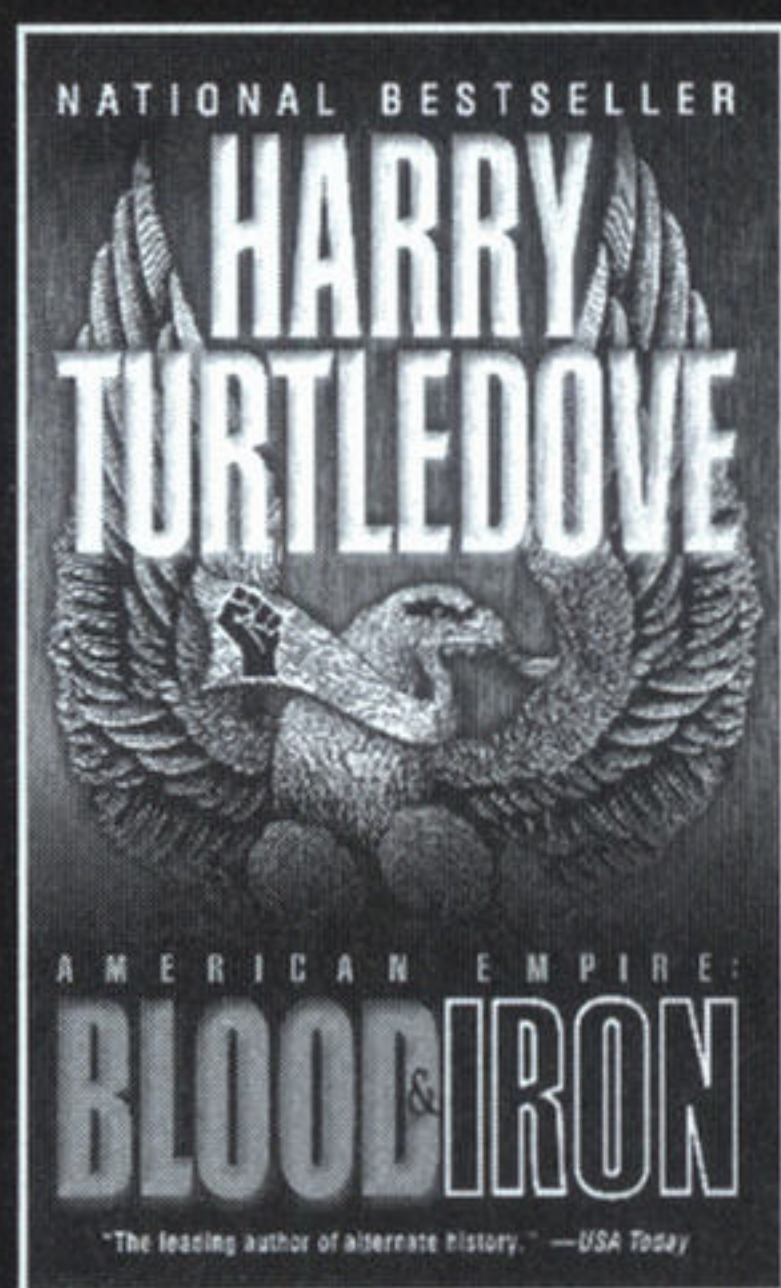
**DEL  
REY**

# Thrills on contact.



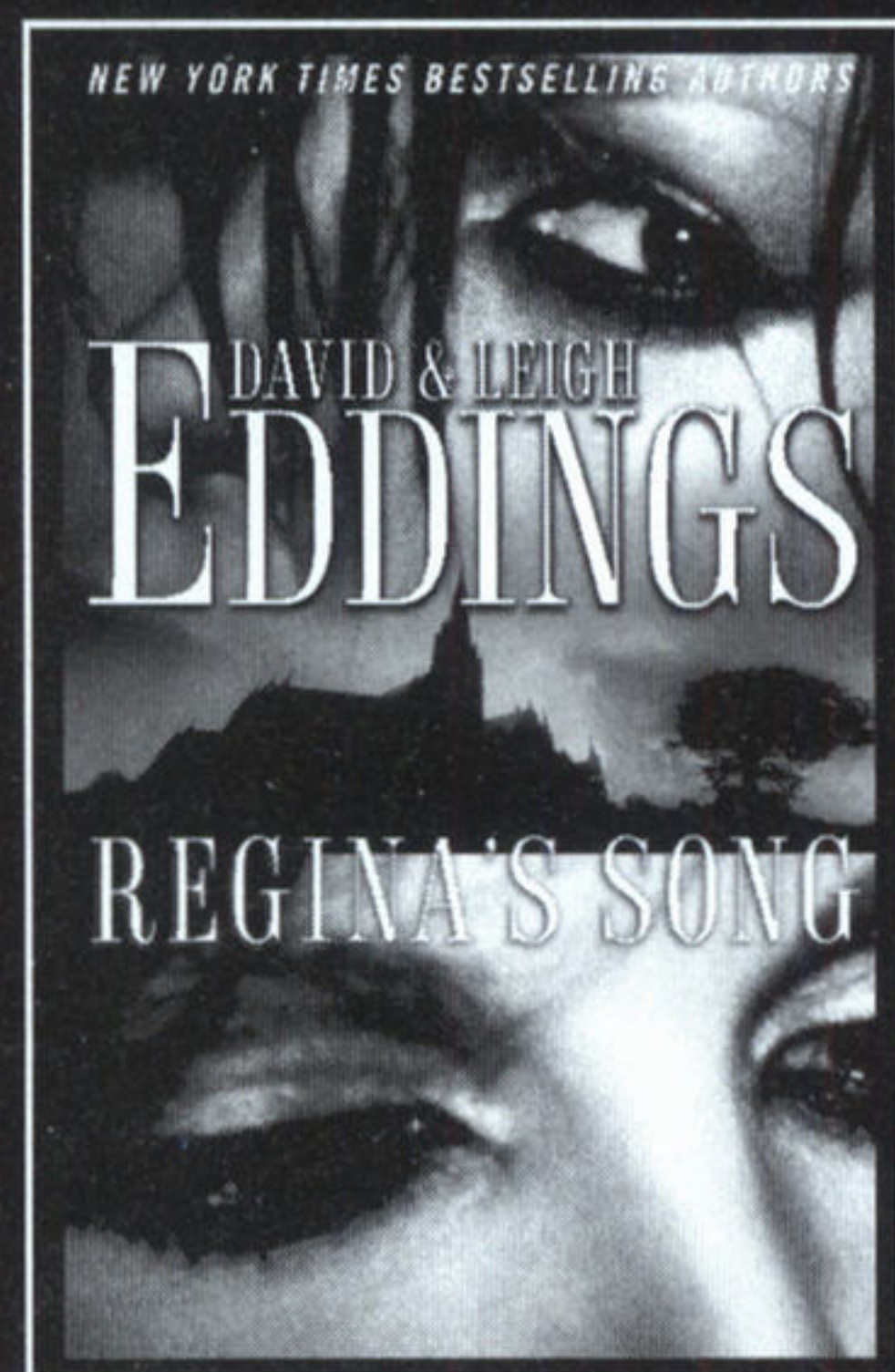
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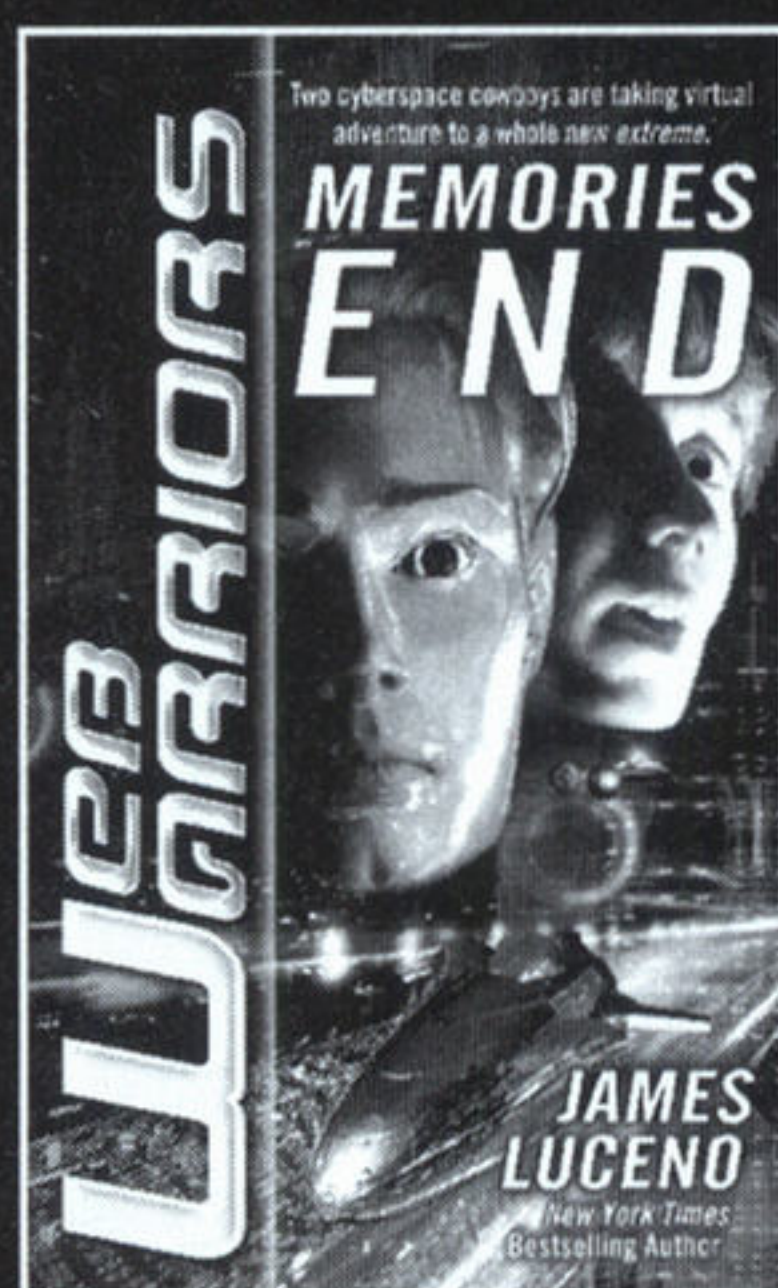
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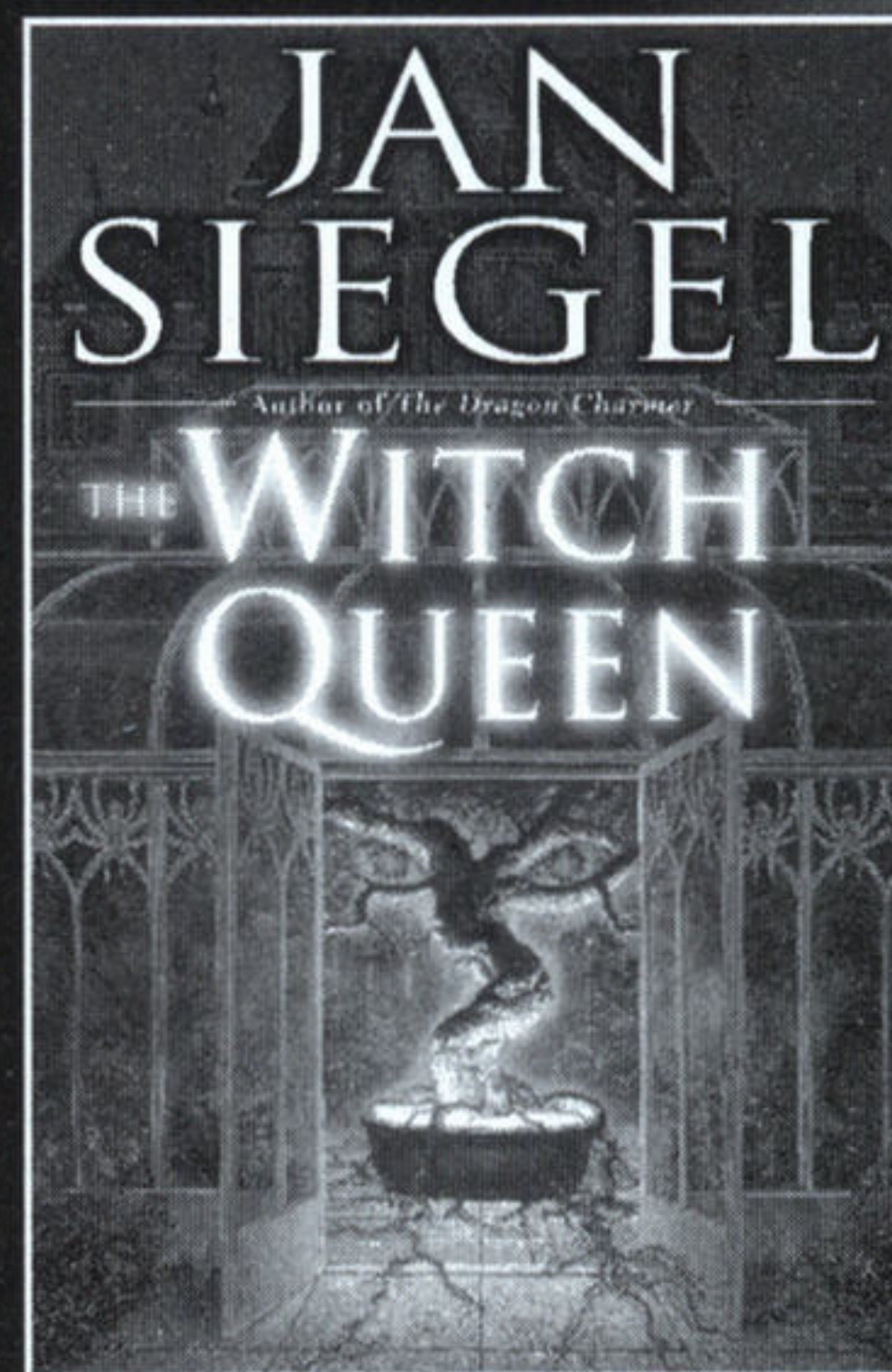
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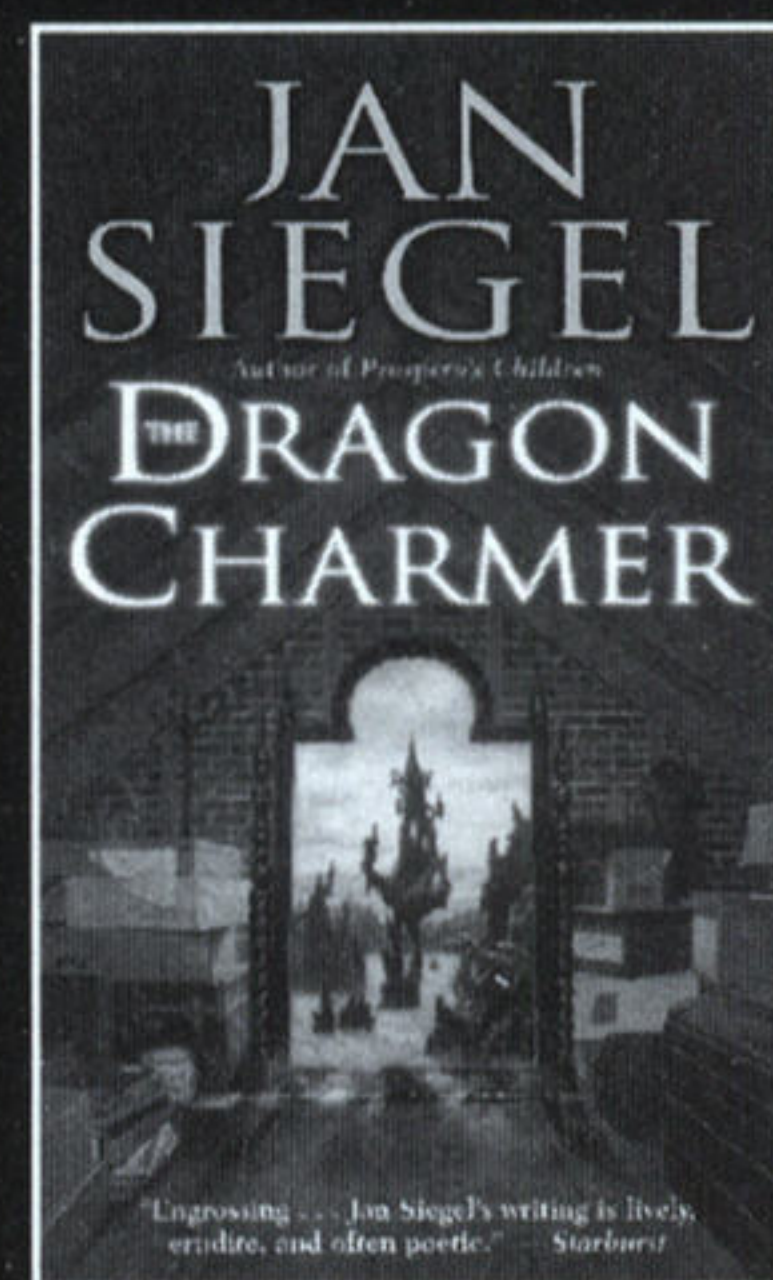
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# A Taste of Damsel

We all need a little magic in our lives —  
what's a few sheep between friends?

The dragon was at least 60 feet long, and Colson, in spite of his fear, could not help wondering how many sets of luggage it would yield.

He also dropped his *Two Rivers Times* on the sidewalk. A picture of the mayor stared up at him from the front page.

Then, the dragon said this:

“You haven’t seen any sheep around, have you?”

Colson had not, but he didn’t say so. His brain had system-crashed from fear. Fear had sealed his mouth. It had killed his ruminations, such as, Where had this dragon come from, and where was it going, and why had it just stepped out at him from behind the municipal building on Park Street, smoking from the nostrils?

He found himself, incongruously, admiring the tonal qualities of its voice, which sounded like something that might’ve come out of a multimillion-dollar sound effects studio. All gravel and echo and chest-thumping bass. He found himself wanting, but unable, to run.

BY TOM GERENCER

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTOPHER SCHENCK





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Solita  
2007



"Because I'd really like some sheep," said the dragon. "Or even a damsel in distress—like maybe a princess—but I don't suppose you've got one of those handy then, do you?"

"Not on me," said Colson, obligingly patting his pockets while a car screeched to a halt behind the beast's thick and lashing T-Rex tail.

"You ever eat a sheep?" asked the dragon, and Colson, who hadn't, found himself answering, "Lamb ... with mint jelly ..."

"No good," said the dragon, while the Hyundai behind it tried to reverse, and (in the process) smashed musically into the front bumper of an approaching BMW. "You're missing the gestalt," the dragon went on. "You're just getting the meat. Where's the fur? The blood? The intestines? The bone?"

Colson, who did not know the answer to any of these questions and really didn't want to, was unable to utter an intelligible reply.

"I've got a fire in my belly," said the dragon, then, "Watch."

*It let fly* with a gout of bright, hot flame, illuminating and warming the cloudy, late afternoon-ness of the commercially zoned street. The wet tar steamed. Colson's newspaper, which had begun to osmote where he'd dropped it on the sidewalk, now started to dry, and a telephone pole across the road, toward which the horizontal pillar of fire had been directed, blazed up, sluiced in half, and fell over with a crack. Its wires bounced, and then sparkled and spat.

"You do that to a sheep," said the dragon of its most recent achievement, "and you get a wonderful mishmash of flash-cooked, carbon-crisped meat and tender insides. Crispy-juicy. Know what I mean?"

Colson, who was a big fan of Cajun cooking, did know, so he said so.

"The problem is," said the dragon, while three police cars pulled up behind it, "that I can't find any. I've been all over. You know what I see?"

Colson shook his head.

"Things," said the dragon. "Things you can't eat. Like this," it said, stomping the tarmac, and putting a dent in it. "And that," it said, shooting another jet of flame at the orthodontist's office across the street, imploding the front windows and setting the curtains alight.

More cruisers pulled up behind Colson. Police ran this way and that and the other, yelling things into radios. Bib-wearing patients and smocked oral hygienists stumbled out the back of the burning office building.

The dragon stretched its Lear Jet-sized wings.

"And those little, growling, overgrown beetle-machines," it said.

Colson supposed that the dragon meant cars.

"Do you know I ate one?" the dragon informed him. "Pah! Disgusting! I've still got

some stuck in my teeth!"

Its lips pulled back, then, like green, muscled curtains, and made way for its teeth—long, sharp stakes—between a lower two of which Colson could see a distinct (if also somewhat scorched and melted) metal disc. The thing looked like a hubcap.

"And the flat places," snarled the dragon. "The big, flat, cavelike places. They burn easy. There's people inside. But no sheep. No damsels. No treasure. Just junk, and peasants, and light, vapid music."

"Malls?" wondered Colson, aloud, and the creature said, "Malllls." It relished the word. It hated it. It said it again.

"Malls. But no sheep. What have they done with the sheep?"

Colson tried to think: about wool ranches and industrial farms and the like, but his brain was gridlocked again, and the dragon sat back on its great, gray-green armored haunches, and it started to purr. The sound was like a locomotive at idle.

"I love sheep," said the dragon. "Juicy, crispy sheep. I love everything about them. I love the way they bleat when you chase them. The smell of burning wool."

Its eyes gleamed—great glassy bowling balls in its huge lizard's head.

"I think," it said then, looking way down at Colson—a man in a suit, alone, with no sword—"that it pays to have an obsession, don't you?"

By now, the police had set up barricades (with their cars) on either end of the street, cordoning it off from all traffic: car, foot, and otherwise. Behind these, the usual crowds of gawkers were quickly collecting.

"I mean," the beast continued, noting Colson's numb expression, "that if you don't have something that jazzes you up, then you're dying."

Colson nodded.

"Sure," he said, because it sounded right.

"I get jazzed up over sheep," said the dragon, pointing a two-foot, clawed thumb at its vast, plated chest. "And damsels. And, you know, gold, and so on. But I can't," it said, pausing to set fire to a nearby oak tree, for emphasis, "find any!"

Colson suddenly felt like a naked Saint George. He thought briefly of outwitting the dragon and coming off a hero, and proving, once and for all that man's power is in his intellect and that intellect always wins. But then, he thought, weren't dragons supposed to be exceptionally smart? He had read that somewhere. And wasn't he likely, therefore, just now, to be cooked?

Something snapped in him then. Call it resistance to fate. Well, thought Colson, if I'm going to be fried, I might as well have fun in the meantime.

"I know what you mean about obsessions," he told it. "I like karate."

"What's that?" said the dragon, the roll-tops of its eyelids rising.

"Karate," said Colson, "is when you beat the

hell out of people, for fun."

The dragon appeared to consider this.

"Yes," it said, weighing its head to one side. "I can appreciate that. Do you get to burn them, too?"

"Unfortunately not," said Colson to the dragon's facially visible dismay. "That's not all, though," he told it. "I like chess, too. And Taoism, and whitewater rafting."

"Can you eat them?" said the dragon, but Colson admitted his newly revealed passions to be inedible, which disappointed the creature again.

"I don't know," it said, sighing like a hot August wind. "You go to sleep for a few thousand years, just a light nap, you know, and the next thing you know, all these geological strata have piled up on top of you, and then some guy digs you up with a teensy little brush and goes yelling to a bunch of other people about his 'discovery,' and so you set fire to him and you go out for a quick sheep, you know, because you're famished, and everything's changed."

The dragon spat fire.

"Everything's different," it said. "And you have to relearn the language of the damsels and heroes, you know, because that's different, too, although not very hard on account of your vast intellect, and you find out that they've taken away all the sheep."

While they'd chatted, the crowds around them had grown considerably. Across Main Street, in Library Square, there was a man selling hot dogs. The burning oak tree and the orthodontist's office cast a flickering, warm glow over both the dragon and Colson.

"My favorite sheep," it confided, "were the ones in Wales. Big, fluffy, flavorful things. I used to eat them like popcorn. I developed a weight problem."

"You're kidding," said Colson.

"I wish I was," said the dragon. "I couldn't stop. The damn things were just so inviting. And there were so many."

It chuckled, then—a rumbling earthquake of a sound—and it said, "I remember I got so fat I couldn't get off the ground."

"Excess is a problem," said Colson, who had a habit of watching too much television.

"A big problem," the dragon concurred. "And another thing I used to overdo was the towns."

"You ate them?" said Colson.

"Well, set fire to them," said the dragon. "And ate parts of them, yes. But I never knew when to stop, you know, and so I'd wind up with an awful headache. And heroes, too. I used to eat lots of those, although I never really liked the taste of them, but you had to do it, you know, for form's sake."

Its eyes narrowed then, to smoking (literally) slits, and it fixed Colson with a singularly blood-freezing stare.

"You're a hero, aren't you," it said dangerously.

"Me?" said Colson. "I'm a clerk at a copy shop."



“What is it?” said the dragon. “A magic sword? A spell? A single, perfect arrow?”

The dragon looked skeptical. One huge eye widened. Colson could see himself reflected in it, and he thought he looked pitifully small.

“You’re a hero,” it told him. “The stance gives it away. I can always tell by the stance.”

Colson slouched, then, on purpose, but the dragon said, “Ah-ah! Too late! And even your slouch is heroic. What are you hiding?”

“Excuse me?” said Colson, because to his knowledge he was hiding nothing.

“What is it?” said the dragon. “A magic sword? A spell? A single, perfect arrow?”

Colson, who had on his person only 73 cents and his Rite Aid Rewards card, only shrugged.

“I don’t have a thing,” he said. “No sword. No spell.”

“No arrow?” said the dragon, and Colson shook his head.

“And no sheep, and no damsels. No gold,” he threw in. “I’m just Colson.”

The police broke in helpfully at that point, via bullhorn, to inform the two of them that they were entirely surrounded, and that they should lay down their—um—and that they really ought, you know, if at all possible, to come out, so to speak, that is, even though they already were out, with their hands—or whatever—up ... maybe. That is, if it was OK with them.

The dragon, by the time the police finished, had looked up and around at them by turning and raising its head in that slow and precarious way available only to dragons (and cowboys and samurai, only on a much larger scale) and it now gave them an evil gleam from both of its eyes.

“Sheep?” it rumbled, and when they said, “What?” through the bullhorn, it asked if they had any.

“Or damsels, or gold,” it went on. “I have already,” it informed them craftily, “got a hero.”

**C**olson trembled a little on hearing this, because he had just remembered telling Sherry he’d be home by three, and if the dragon ate him, or cooked him, or did anything similarly final, certain problems would thereby arise to interfere with his fulfillment of this promise.

The dragon sat back then and, picking up a hind foot, it bent down and chewed at the claws.

The world seemed, to Colson, to hang on a thread.

Then the dragon looked up and said, “Ciao.”

It took flight with a great leap and a windstorm from its wings. Colson’s newspaper split apart and the pages took off like a flock of white birds, and just like that, through the whims of both fate and a mythical beast, his life was spared.

The dragon climbed higher and circled, and, pausing only to swoop and set fire to a couple of police cars and the hot-dog cart near the library steps, it was gone.

The police took a few potshots, and later they made Colson sit still for a statement, but he simply kept telling them that the whole thing hadn’t happened, and that they were probably victims of some mass hallucination or other, and, frustrated, they let him go.

A reporter showed up two days later, from *The Amazing Examiner*, and Colson gave a full description of the events to her, and in a week the little rag ran Colson’s story on its cover (along with an exceptionally bad artist’s rendering of the dragon) and that, pretty much, was that.

Except that in August, Colson was watering the back lawn when the dragon showed up again.

It landed on a hydrangea bush and a row of begonias, crushing them flat.

“Hey, pal,” it said, and Colson, armed with the sprinkler, said, “Hi.”

The dragon told him, then, that it wanted to thank him, because his talk of Taoism and whitewater rafting and karate had awakened it to the idea that, while the modern world was a hopeless place when it came to sheep and damsels (and in truth, it said, since it had last seen him, it had found some of both, but they’d been of inferior quality) it might have other things to offer that hadn’t existed long ago.

“I tried the karate, and the whitewater, and the Taoism, for example,” it said, “and they weren’t for me.”

It shuddered then and said, “Especially the Taoism. All that, ‘emptiness,’ and ‘be like an idiot,’ nonsense. Gyaah.”

“And the whitewater?” said Colson, surprised.

“Oh, that was fun enough, but you get sick of it after a while.”

The dragon told him that it had taken up gardening, and that it also liked to read novels.

“Especially Danielle Steele,” it said. “She is truly a master.”

“Don’t you mean ‘mistress?’” Colson corrected, and the dragon shot him a look.

“That was sexist,” it told him. “Very, ‘not now.’”

It went on to say that its other new interests included cajun cooking and surfing the Internet, which it likened to the connections

between a vast hive mind.

“It’s bringing on a new age,” it assured him. “It’s a free exchange of ideas on a truly global scale.” Colson agreed that it was, and the dragon shook out its wings with a flapping like sailcloth.

“Anyway,” it told him, “I wanted to thank you, because if you’d kept your mouth shut, or just tried to slay me or something, I’d never have known, and at best I’d have wound up eating you and then being vanquished by humanity, you know, like in one of those Godzilla tragedies.”

The dragon told Colson that it had seen several of these movies on cable, and that it always ended up bawling by the end.

“Glad I could help,” said Colson, not noticing that the water from the sprinkler was soaking his shoes.

“Whereas now,” the beast went on, “I’m a contributing member of society. I write articles for *The Washington Post*. About gardening. And the Internet. And Danielle Steele.”

It thanked him again, and (after describing, briefly, its custom-designed computer, with the oversized, heatproof screen and the two-foot-square keys) it told him it wanted to keep in touch.

“I think this back and forth of ideas,” it said excitedly, “is important. So invigorating and refreshing. And it lets one let go of the old, stop resisting and fighting the ghosts of the past, and go on to embrace the new.”

“Ssssure,” said Colson, and he told the great, mythical, lizardlike beast what his e-mail address was.

“Thanks again,” it said. “And you should try new things, too, you know. It opens up whole new worlds. Maybe,” it added, “you should try eating a sheep.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” said Colson thickly, and the creature took flight, and the treetops bowed low in the wind.

He stood for a while, watching it dwindle to a speck, until a voice asked him, “Who were you talking to?” and he turned around to see that it was Sherry’s.

“A friend,” he told her.

“An old one?”

“No, new. We were talking old dragons. New tricks.”

She gave him the special, eyebrows-raised look she reserved for whenever he said anything weird, and he put down the sprinkler and walked to where she stood in the doorway.

Leaning forward, he kissed her, just to see what a damsel would taste like. ♣



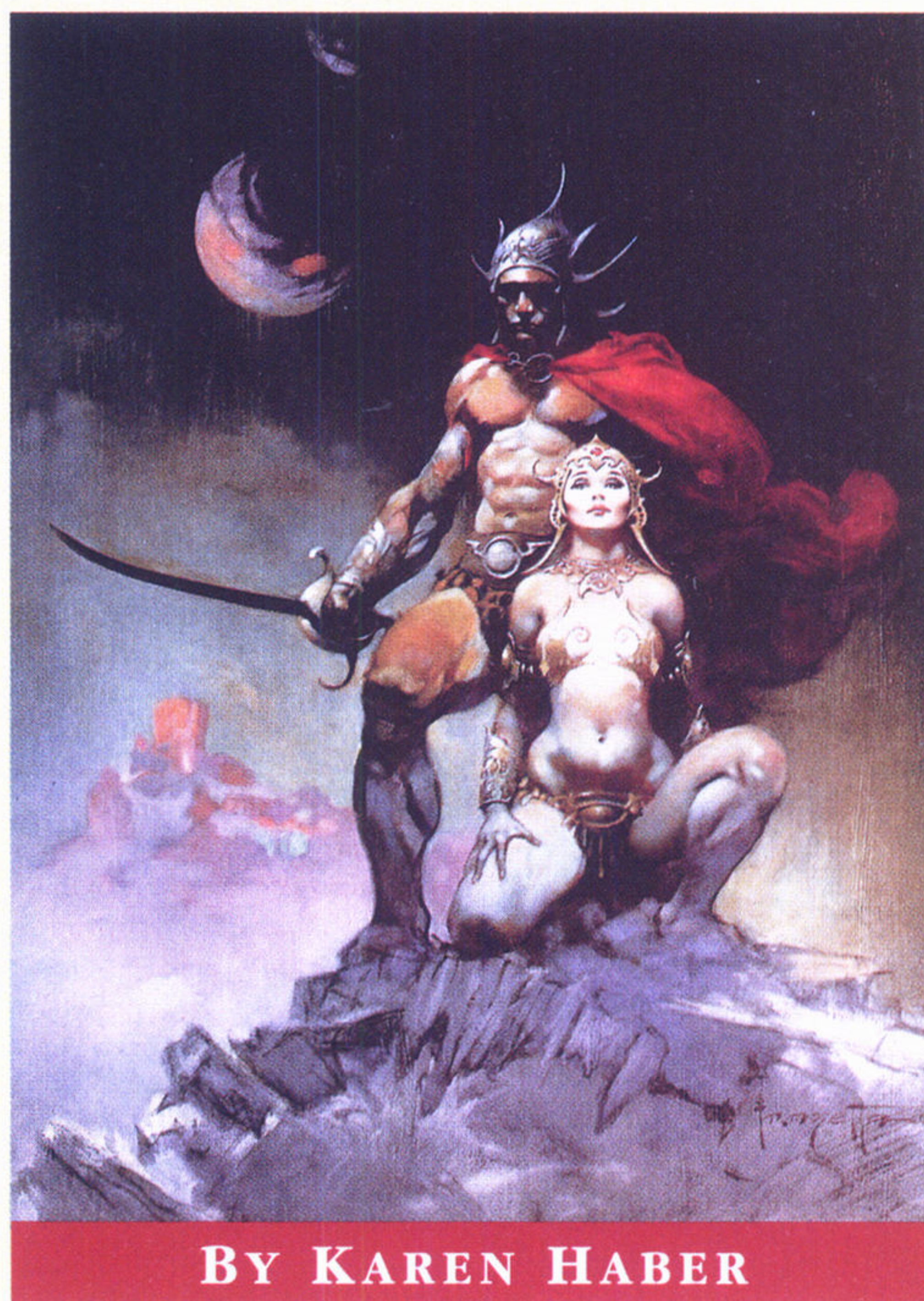
# LEGEND

*One of the 20th century's most important illustrators inspires us all with his vision.*

FRAZETTA. THE NAME IS LEGEND. It summons romantic visions of muscled heroes and pulchritudinous damsels, of vertiginous angels, ferocious beasts, and fiercer men. But the man behind the brush may be the fiercest of them all.

He's done it all: fine art, film art, portraiture, cartooning, comics, horror, fantasy, science fiction. He has left his inimitable mark upon each field, and upon those who would come after him. He's won it all, too: the Hugo, the World Fantasy Award, the Chesley, the Spectrum Grand Master, and Awards of Excellence from the Society of Illustrators.

To quote Rick Berry, "Frazetta transcends illustration—to fine art. There will be those who, rolling their eyes, say, 'Oh, come on! This guy paints winged demons, wizards, swordsmen, and mythological doodahs....' Certainly. So did da Vinci, Michelangelo, Tiepolo, Goya, and Picasso. What is always objectionable to some is commercial success in the popular culture.... The subject of great art is not this or that given subject, person, or thing.... The subject of great art is vision."



**BY KAREN HABER**









*PREVIOUS SPREAD: (left) Frazetta's admiration of the female form is evident in *A Fighting Man of Mars*. The painting was for the Science Fiction Book Club edition of an Edgar Rice Burroughs book. (right) Horse and rider are frozen in motion on a background filled with color and action in *The Eternal Champion* (1970). An earlier version of the painting appeared on the cover of Michael Moorcock's book of the same name. Frazetta later added the mountains and sky and changed the shield pattern. (inset) A menacing Count Dracula draws his cape around him as he moves through the swirling mists. The painting was conceptual art for a never-produced animated adaptation of Stoker's novel.*

*ABOVE: Marooned graced the cover of *Tomorrow Midnight*, a collection of adaptations of Ray Bradbury stories that originally appeared in various EC Comics during the 1950s.*

*RIGHT: Human skeletons litter the floor and horrible creatures lurk in the shadows in *Chained*, a painting filled with drama, color, and texture. It was done for the cover of *Conan the Usurper*, by Robert E. Howard and published by Ballantine Books.*





# THE BODY IN MOTION FROM THE INSIDE OUT.



Vision he has. Enough for several lifetimes, and several artists. In fact, Frazetta has *been* several artists: cartoonist, realist, fantasist, impressionist, and colorist.

Longtime Frazetta friend Nick Meglin, writing in *Legacy*, had this to say of the “Frazetta Look”: “Exaggerated action, dramatic lighting, dynamic composition, and an imaginative and highly personal color sense all played a part in depicting the quintessential moment of a bigger-than-life scene that became his illustration hallmark.”

Frazetta once told an anecdote about creating a self-portrait. The year was 1961 and he had just left a frustrating—to put it mildly—meeting with art directors in New York City. “I was in a total state of rage. Frustration, you know, where I felt like I could have killed someone if the wrong person had made the mistake of getting in my way. I was walking down the street, and as I passed a house with a picket fence in front I reached out with one hand and snapped off one rung after another.

“I looked in the mirror when I got home and said, ‘My God, look what is happening to me. That is worth painting. I’ve got to capture that expression.’”

The resulting painting can be seen on page 139 of *Testament, The Life and Art of Frank Frazetta*, edited by Cathy and Arnie Fenner. It’s a remarkable painting, both for its naked emotional content, and fearless execution. Those lion-yellow eyes will haunt you long after you close the book.

Frazetta’s passion is tangible in every painting he does. His dynamic compositional skills and luscious depiction of flesh have earned him the awed regard of his colleagues. His mastery of the human and animal body in frozen motion, of color and line, are the envy of flocks of wannabe artists.

Vincent Di Fate wrote of Frazetta in *Infinite Worlds*: “Frank Frazetta ... is easily one of America’s most famous and respected illustrators.... His personal vision is so compelling that those who tend to imitate him seldom venture far from the vision he has established. He is the essential artistic driving force in the SF subcategory of heroic Fantasy and, clearly and unequivocally, is one of the most influential figures in SF Art.”

Among my favorite Frazettas is one for which he won the Award of Excellence from the Society of Illustrators in 1972: his cover for a science fiction novel *Downward to the Earth*, written by my husband, Robert Silverberg. Who—and what—are those three rough beasts slouching through the ochre aether?

Three other works I especially love are *Sea Witch*, *Egyptian Queen*, and *Mothman*. All three paintings feature the artist’s uncanny use of color, textures, and light to invoke moods of mystery and romance. At least half of *Sea Witch* can be read as an abstract painting ... and, perhaps, an homage to J.M.W. Turner.

Yet another Frazetta painting for which I have special affection is *Roman Chariot* (pp. 46-47, *Testament*) where the pulchritude on display is male, with an obligatory slave girl thrown in the foreground, of course. This dynamic composition showcases the artist’s treatment of figures tensed and ready for action.

A child prodigy, Frazetta showed such artistic ability and promise that he was given formal art lessons between the ages of 8 and 12 years. At age 16 he had his first comic strip published.

The artist himself, sexy and movie-star handsome, was the frequent model for his cover heroes, and his wife Ellie was the perfect model for many of his dream women. He drew his inspiration from many sources, first and foremost among them the late Roy Krenkel, his friend and colleague. It was Krenkel who set him on the road to book-cover illustration, asking Frazetta for help with paintings and eventually arranging for him to take over painting covers for Ace Books.



FRAZZE+T+A'S PASSIØN IS +ANGIBLE IN EVERY PAINT+ING HE DØES.





**F**razetta understands the body in motion from the inside out. His own athleticism gives his artwork an extra kick. At age 19 he was such a gifted baseball player that he received an offer to trade in the local sandlot for the New York Giants' farm club and a chance at the big leagues. Frazetta wasn't interested in riding a Greyhound from Brooklyn to Texas just to hit balls in the dusty heat. The baseball diamond's loss is our gain. He still has the look of a retired athlete, a guy who might just step up to the plate and hit one into the bleachers for old time's sake.

There are legions of fans, artists, and art directors who consider him their own MVP: most valuable player. The Society of Illustrators certainly agrees, inducting him into their Hall of Fame.

"It's hard not to sound gushy when discussing Frank Frazetta's accomplishments," says Arnie Fenner, editor with his wife, Cathy, of the definitive retrospective trilogy of Frazetta's work, *Legacy*, *Icon*, and *Testament* from Underwood Books. "Frazetta's reputation as one of the 20th century's most important illustrators is already well established. His awards are only the most visible validations of his status. But consider that it was Frank, with the tenacious support of his wife, Ellie, who changed the way publishers treated illustrators and their art. He was the first to insist on the return of his originals as a condition of taking a job. He was the first to retain the copyright to his commissioned art. The first to make fantasy art available to the mass-market through Ellie's poster business. The first contemporary illustrator—much less "fantasy artist"—to have a retrospective book on his work published. Frank provides a contemporary link to the classic illustrators of the Brandywine school. His influence on the attitudes and career choices of several generations of artists that followed his lead is considerable."

Looking at an iconic Frazetta image, give yourself permission to just wallow in the color, the chiaroscuro, the exaggerated musculature, dynamic action, powerful impact. The sheer unadulterated erotic energy. Speaking of which, here's the master himself on one of his favorite painting subjects:

"I obviously like to paint a woman who has a little meat on her bones.... In real life I like slender, shapely women, but I found that when I was interpreting them on canvas or paper it just doesn't read. I have to exaggerate in order to match my imagination."

"For me, for my style, if I draw a slim woman it doesn't seem right, it doesn't create the Frazetta effect I'm always shooting for. It's missing the strength, the movement, the dimensions.... An artist has to be true to his own vision—wherever it takes him—if he wants to create anything that lasts."

And again, here is the artist on a favorite part of the female anatomy: "I could probably sit around and paint fannies all day," Frazetta laughs. "Talk about simple shapes! Two very simplistic curves, but fascinating as hell. It's more than that. It's the way the rest of the anatomy ties into that area—incredible beauty. A woman came up to me at the San Diego Comic Con and said, 'Frank, when you paint an ass it's like, whumpf!' And she made a fist. I thought that was pretty nice."

The Frazetta Museum, a family-owned institution, is up and running with Ellie Frazetta as official welcoming committee. Says Ellie: "There are no other fans like Frazetta fans. Of course I'm going to greet everyone personally as long as I'm able: how could I not?... So much of what we've done over the years has been in reaction to what the fans have wanted: Frank and I feel like we owe them so much that it's easy to want to try to give something back."

"My artwork doesn't say an awful lot," says Frazetta. "The paintings are theatrical, melodramatic, even corny—but still beautiful. There are contrasts, there's menace, a lot of movement, but no real honest-to-God heavy message. What do they really represent? Nothing more than a very emotional interpretation of a particular concept."

"Most of the time when I start a painting, I don't have a solid image in my head, just a certain feeling about what I'm going to do. Sometimes I see the images very clearly, but they're usually real basic. I don't see detail, just a certain atmosphere—that it's warm or cold, that it's frightening or eerie.... As my mind works on this my hand will draw almost unconsciously, building shapes and masses. What emerges sometimes surprises me as much as my audience." 🐙

*The Frazetta Museum is open on Saturdays only, 11 AM to 4 PM, April through December. For more information, consult the official Frazetta Web site: [www.frazettaartgallery.com/ff/index.html](http://www.frazettaartgallery.com/ff/index.html) or contact the museum at: [custserv@frazettaartgallery.com](mailto:custserv@frazettaartgallery.com)*

*Special thanks to Arnie Fenner and Charles N. Brown for assistance with this article. All quotations are taken from Testament unless otherwise noted.*



*ABOVE: This ink and watercolor illustration was used on the cover of issue #209 of Famous Funnies, an anthology comic book series that ran from the 1930s to the 1950s. This was one of seven covers Frazetta did for the series that were devoted to the character of Buck Rogers.*

*LEFT: This painting originally appeared as the cover of Dark Crusade by Karl Edward Wagner, published by Warner Books.*



## Players create their own adventures in a down-to-the bone RPG.

**T**he *Sorcerer's Soul* from Adept Press is the second supplement for Ron Edwards' brilliant narrativist paper and dice role-playing game, *Sorcerer*. It is devoted to explicating the characters' Humanity attribute, but also includes rules for angels and introduces a new way of constructing adventures using relationship maps. Together with the first two books, *SS* gives players and Game Masters the tools to change the way they approach their campaigns.

On one level, the Humanity attribute in *Sorcerer* is a mechanic to limit the players, keeping them from summoning endless and ultrapowerful demons. On a greater level, how each group of players defines humanity determines what their campaign will be about. Humanity could be defined as sanity or honor

or innocence, just to pick the three different definitions used in the sample scenarios in the back of *SS*. Ideally, characters will have a view of themselves that corresponds to their humanity and the events of the adventure will challenge that view. Committing acts that cost the character Humanity should be felt by the player. The goal of *SS* is to play powerful, emotional stories—role-playing down to the bone.

Of course, powerful, engaging sessions are to gamers what tail winds are to pilots. Everyone wants them, but the trick is finding one. And that is where the idea of relationship maps helps. Instead of building a scenario around events, Edwards urges Game Masters to start with people and the most basic ways they are connected. As a starting place for casts, Edwards suggests borrowing from detective fiction novels. The borrowed cast of characters is then mapped in terms of its members' familial and sexual relations to each other. Once that is done, then background actions are introduced and the characters' hooks are fitted to the canvas. That done, the players' characters need only act and the nonplayer characters react according to their bonds and histories. Right off the bat the adventures have more meaning than the usual run of role-playing scenarios because each act of the characters brings them into conflict or alliance with someone who is someone else's brother, wife, lover, etc.

The thing that makes all three of the *Sorcerer* books worth the price of admission is that their techniques for bringing greater player control and thus greater enjoyment to role playing can be used with any rules system. Obviously it

works seamlessly with *Sorcerer*, but any game can benefit from relationship maps and the other techniques in the books. Most role-playing books are about worlds players would like to adventure in; *Sorcerer* is about adventures that players create for themselves.

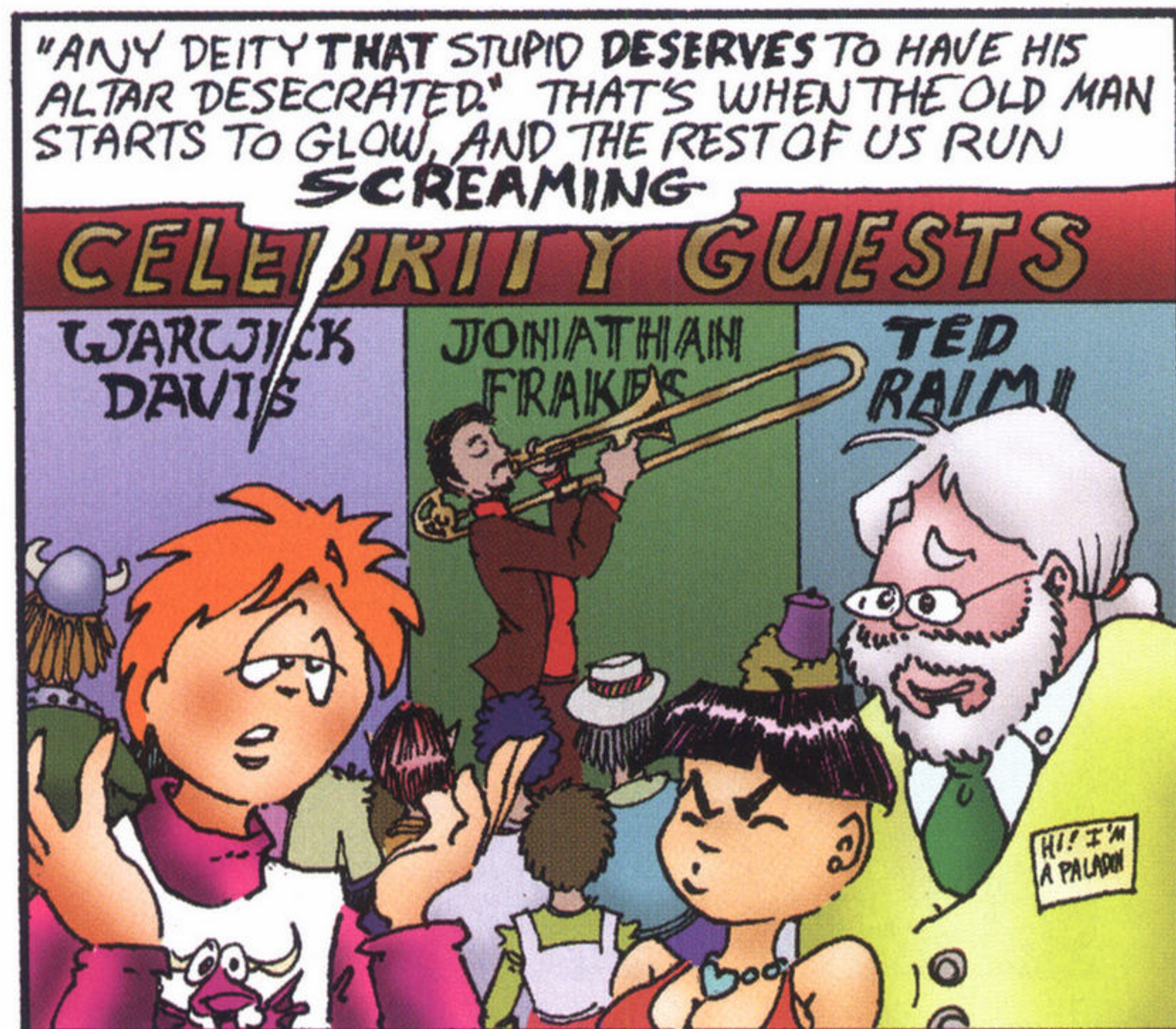
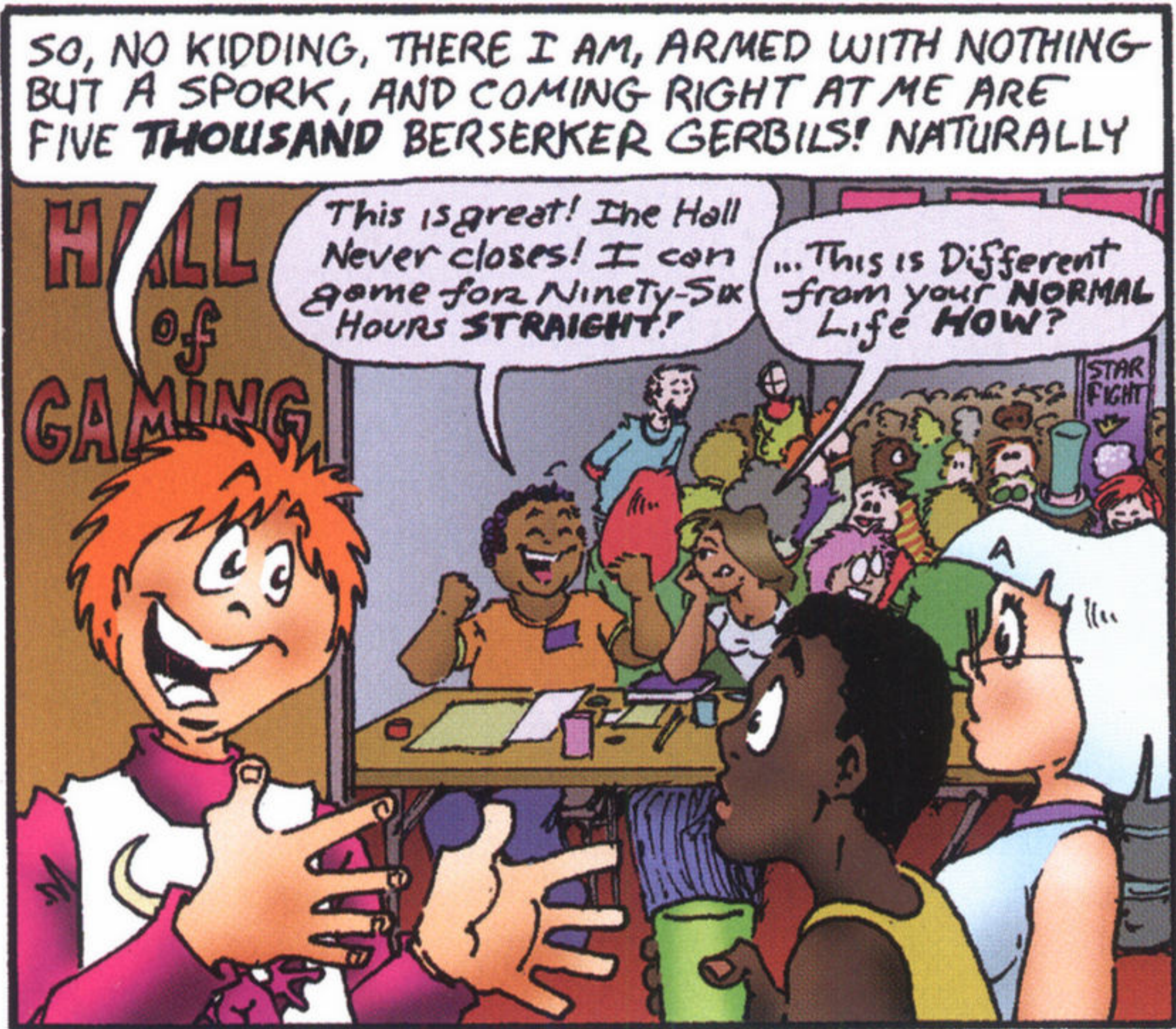
Speaking of worlds players would like to adventure in, White Wolf's original core rule book for *Exalted* told Game Masters how to run hopeful campaigns about superheroes breaking heads to help preserve the innocent in an ancient lost world inspired by anime and non-elfy/non-Europy fantasy novels. *Exalted: The Dragon Blooded* source book has all the information needed to let Game Masters run



Either speed or fighting skills will win a Roman chariot race in Circus Maximus for the Xbox.



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campaigns that are more familiar to the White Wolf faithful. *Dragon Blooded* is all about powerful, jealous characters trapped between webs of family obligation and national best interest.

When the godlike Solars who ruled the world's First Age were betrayed and destroyed, it was their servants, the demigodlike Dragon Blooded, who picked up the pieces and kept the empire going for another 750 years. The problem is that they were held together all that time by a single Empress and now she has gone missing. With no central authority to mediate and manipulate the various houses, the Dragon Blooded have fallen to fighting (openly and clandestinely) with each other, at great cost to the Empire. Characters can take the role of patriots, striving to hold the Empire together. They can be House loyalists trying to advance the interests of their families. Or they can be both by being sure that the best way to hold the Empire together is for their House to lead it.

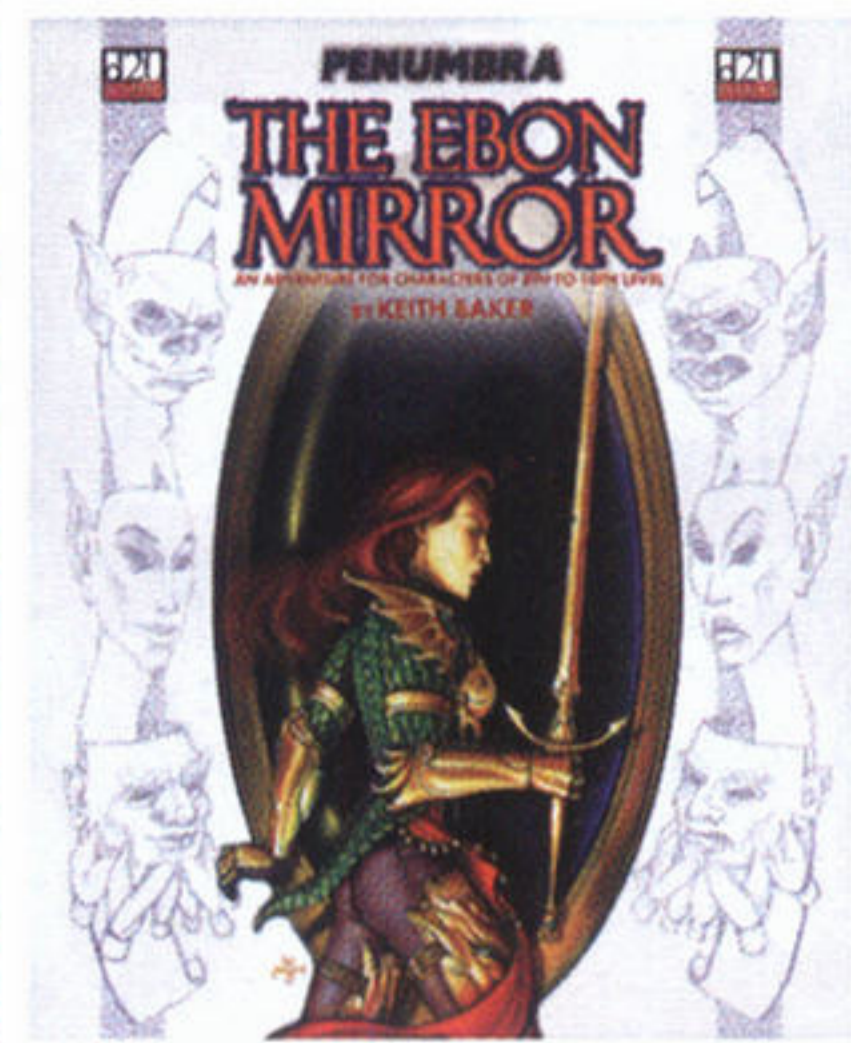
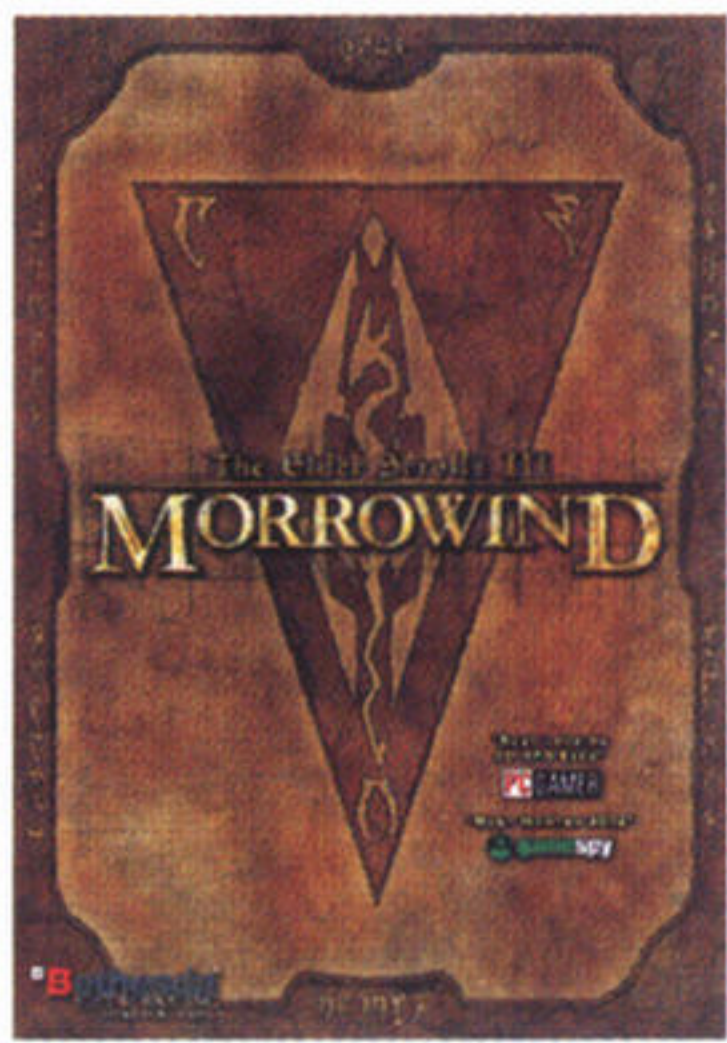
The *Dragon Blooded* source book gives its subject an even more detailed description than the Solars got in the core rule book. Chapters cover the interior of the Empire, the background on how the DB live their lives, how to create a DB character, and how to run a campaign based on DB characters. Three chapters and a hundred pages (a third of the book) are devoted to the Dragon Blooded's traits and powers and martial arts. There are text pieces and nonplayer character descriptions. All that is missing are some example characters with their statistics included and a sample adventure.

*Exalted* is a cool, heroic world that gets better delineated and more complex with each supplement. In the original book, the Dragon Blooded are cast as one of the villains, and that is personally where I would rather leave them, but the DB have more in common with traditional *World of Darkness* protagonists. White Wolf fans who have resisted *Exalted's* charms to this point may find what they like in this source book.

For a more traditional, more elfy/medieval take on role playing, check out *The Ebon Mirror* from Atlas Games *Penumbra* line of *Dungeons & Dragons* supplements. *EM* is a 96-page adventure module for 8th- to 10th-level characters.

At first the villains of the adventure appear to be the Crucible of Osai, a mystic order that wants to destroy "flawed" magical artifacts: both dangerous cursed items and frivolous magical objects. They want to keep the balance between matter and magic, so they hate any item that wastes magical energy.

While attempting to protect a chest of



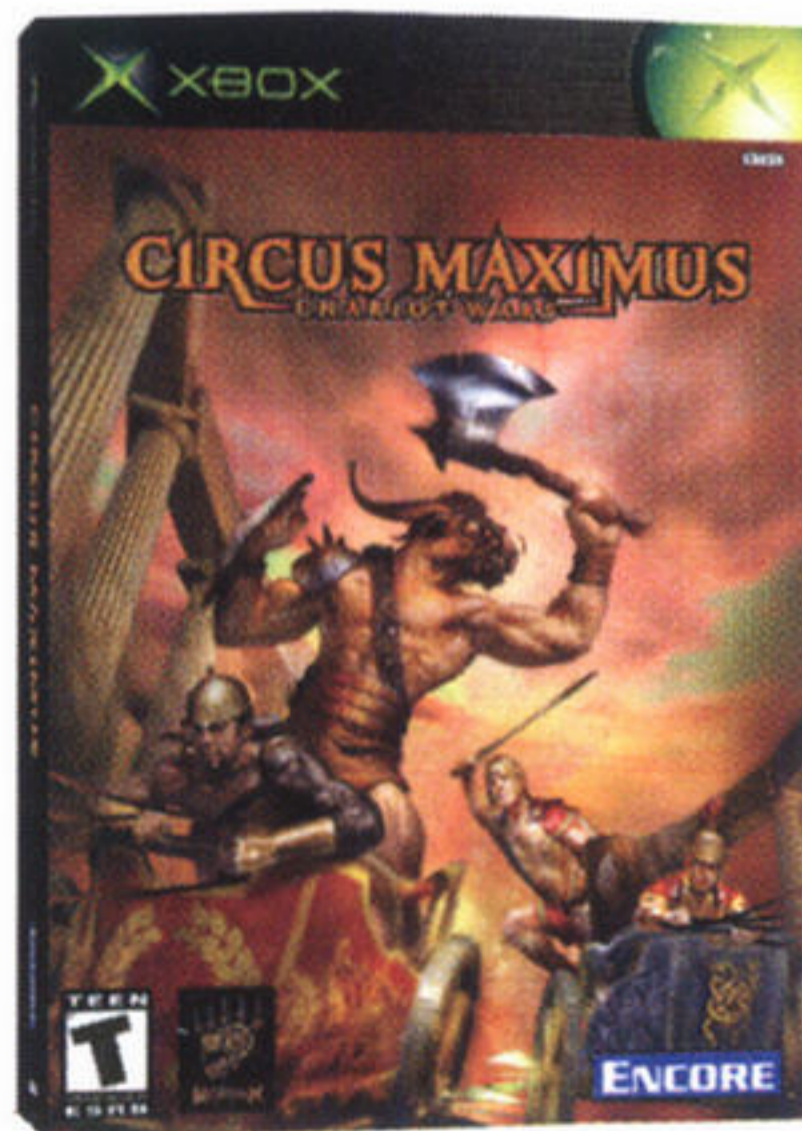
cursed items from the Crucible, the players' characters are drawn into a mirror world. A powerful, insane wizard has produced this pocket of space where reason and magic have been twisted. The characters find war-happy elves attacking peaceful orcs while evil halflings plot against kind goblins. Humans have become the most dangerous predators of all, and the party finds it is not greeted with open arms by the orcs, goblins, and ogres it finds itself allied with. The players' characters



have to get out of this mirror world before it corrupts them, a task made no easier by the transformation of their magic and weapons. The good news is that their chest of cursed artifacts is now quite useful.

All of this is pretty clever, and the module contains all the information needed to bring it to life. There are writeups of 10 new magic items and artifacts, including alternate rules for how they work in the mirror world. The undead of the mirror world are created by the gods of the orcs and goblins and sent back to protect them from the humans and elves. These sacred undead are given full-page writeups and are crucial to the story. Even though there are dungeons to be crawled, this is not the standard *D&D* adventure. It is an entertaining chance for players to see how the other side feels.

Programmers keep trying to bring the role-playing game experience to the computer with very mixed success. Since a computer can't create environments, characters, and dialogue on the fly the way a human Game Master can, programmers have to limit the experience in various ways. *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* from Bethesda Softworks Inc. is built with as



few limits as possible.

The game starts with the characters awakening to find themselves prisoners on a ship, being delivered into exile. Players spend the first few minutes walking off the ship and going to the courthouse. At the courthouse, they are asked a series of questions. Players choose the characters' sex, race, and astrological

sign directly. When it comes time to pick a class and alignment, they can either choose, or they can answer a series of questions that lets the game determine both for them. That done, they are kicked loose and sent on their own into the game world.

In the game world, the characters really are on their own. Bethesda Softworks claims there are over 3,000 nonplayer characters in the game, but after the initial character creation process, none is shoved down the player's throat. While there is a vague quest to follow if the players care to, there is nothing forcing them down that path. Players can wander about the map, going from town to town and encounter to encounter, talking to NPCs, learning about quests and news and gossip, picking the allies and enemies they want in the game. And if they ever get tired of the huge premade world, players can use the built-in editor to change the game around or create new maps

all their own.

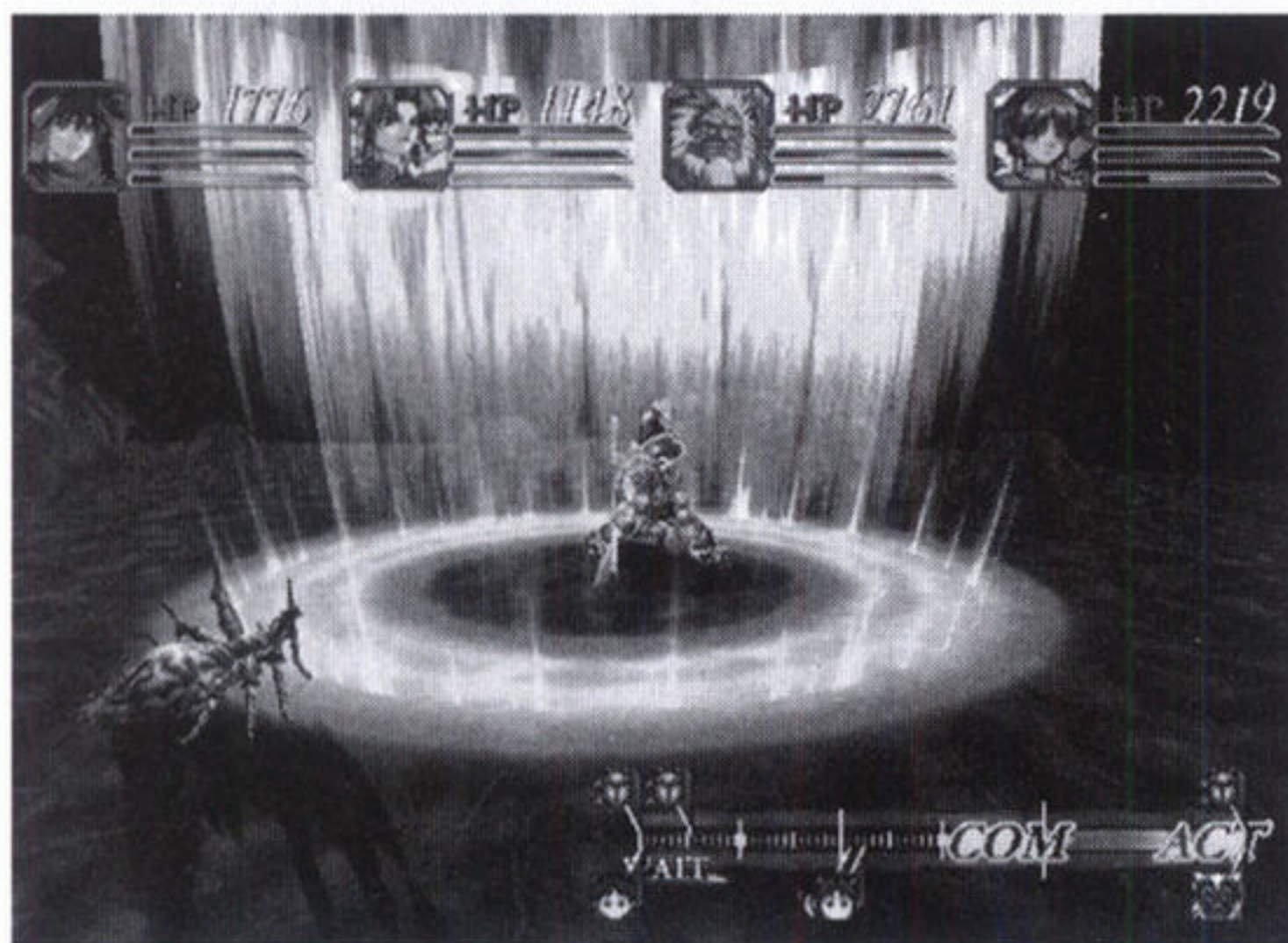
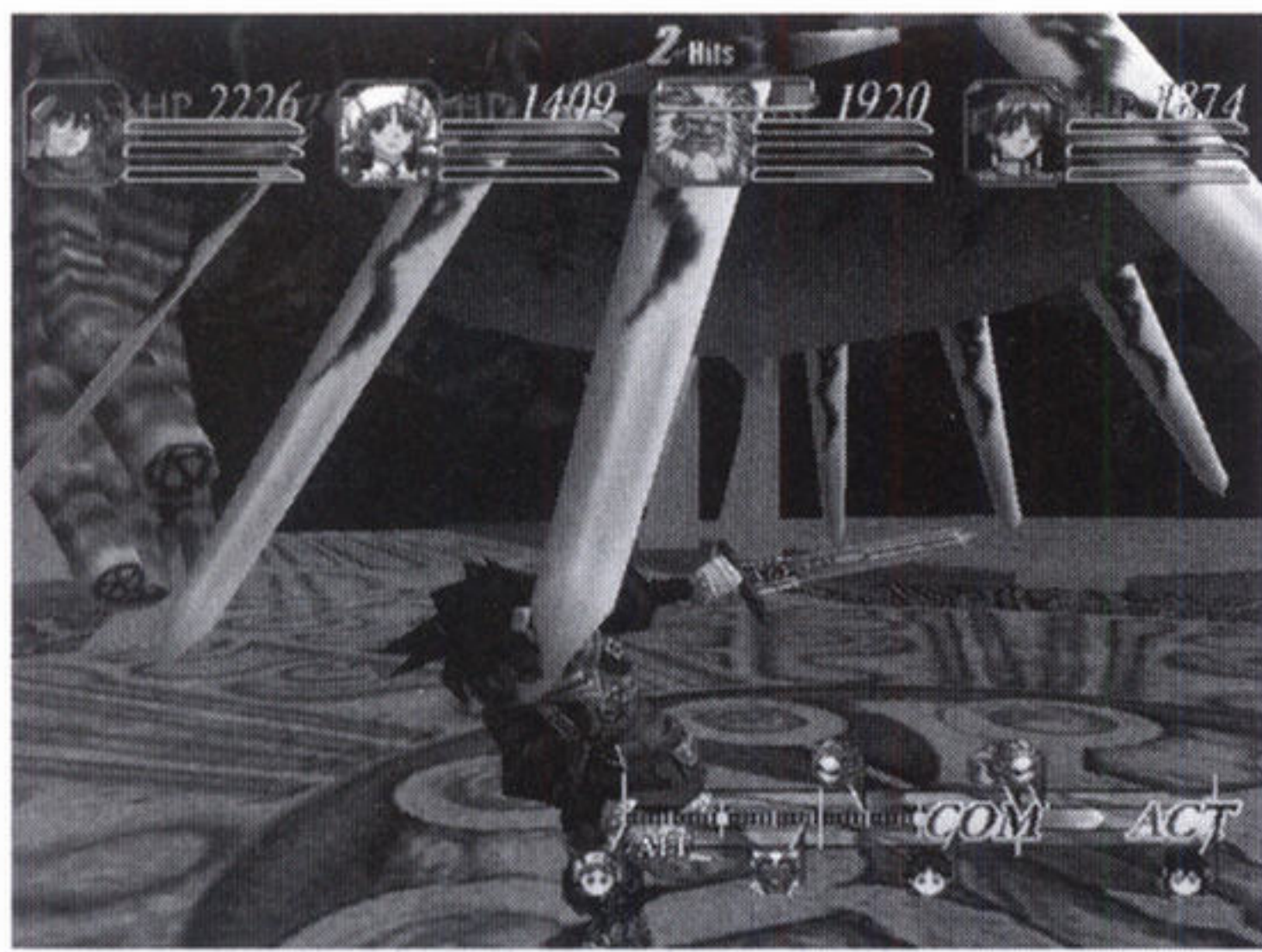
If *Morrowind* has any flaws it is the steep hardware requirements the PC version has (I couldn't get it to run on a PIII 750hz); these can be gotten around by buying the Xbox version. The only people who will dislike it

are those who don't like to be unfocused. Players who like to be set on a path and try to hurdle the challenges that crop up on it won't find *Morrowind* their cup of tea, but those players should give *Grandia II* a try.

*Grandia II* from Game Arts and distributed by Ubi Soft is a port of a video game originally released in Japan. Like *Exalted*, it is anime-inspired, although it is more on the cute side of anime than grimmer works that *Exalted* draws on. Unlike *Morrowind*, it will not tax a player's computer; *Grandia's* graphics look shockingly primitive next to the state-of-the-art rendering of *Morrowind*. Also unlike *Morrowind*, the player is never unsure of what to do next.

Combat highlights the differences between the two games. In *Morrowind*, combat occurs in real time, as part of the story. If the character is engaged in a conversation, that ends, but otherwise the battle occurs on the same location and from the same view as moving around did. Not in *Grandia II*. When characters that are going to fight meet, the action freezes and everyone transports to a new arena view that only vaguely resembles the





place where the characters made contact. In this arena the fight occurs in turns, with each side picking maneuvers and then watching as they are carried out. There are advantages to both of these methods; *Morrowind's* is more "real" since it lets characters maneuver and use their surroundings. *Grandia II's* allows for precision and planning.

Both *Morrowind* and *Grandia II* are worthy games. Which one players choose depends on their mood. Do they want to find their own adventures, or do they want to fight through the one handed to them?

*Circus Maximus* by Kodiack Interactive and from Encore Software Inc. for the Xbox is a combination chariot racing and fighting game. The player's chariot has both a driver and warrior on it and the player can direct either character. There is a co-op mode where one player controls the driver and the other the warrior, and there is the four-player option where the players control all four characters in a two-chariot race.

The races take place in a series of locales around the ancient Roman Empire, from a simple hippodrome to the rolling hills of Britannia. Similarly, drivers, warriors, chariots, and horse teams can be chosen from all over the empire and then mixed and matched as the player prefers. Most of the races are three times around the track, and it doesn't matter if the race is won on speed or fighting or both.

The learning curve in *CM* is all about mastering the controls. The A button gets the horses going. The chariots only go forward, so the left joystick controls turning left and right. On the hippodrome, players quickly learn that steering with just the joystick is not enough. Turns can be made sharper by pulling on the left or right triggers. They can be made so sharp, in fact, that the chariot turns over. This can be alleviated by using the right joystick to have the warrior lean into the turn. It is simpler than it sounds, but it is very helpful that the chariot resets quickly after each crash. 🐾

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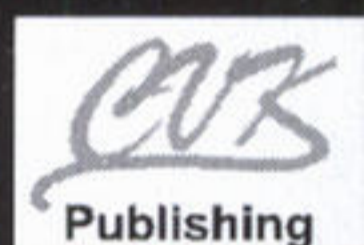
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**folkroots**

Continued from page 32

6th letter, signifying *liberty*.

The functions of chromosomes 16 and 17 seem to be inversions of the esoteric meanings of their Hebrew letter counterparts: memory, which is the ability to recall the past, as opposed to the ability to see forward; death, as opposed to immortality. Chromosome 22's function seems to be oddly parallel, and the transformation to the Roman alphabet brings up an incredible coincidence which hinges on the number 6 as well.

It should be no shock by now to learn that one of the techniques described in the *Sefer Yetzirah* involves the use of the Hebrew letter pairs AB through AK (the 1st through 11th letters) to create a golem and the pairs AL through AT (Aleph paired with the 12th through 22nd letters) to take the golem apart once again. This sounds remarkably similar to the "zipping" and "unzipping" of DNA in its replication process. And it just happens that the 12th letter, K, corresponds inversely to the function of chromosome 12, which in Ridley's book is called "Self Assembly."

What is one to make of these correspondences? I will leave the final interpretation to the reader. But what I've shown is that there are profound religious, mystical, and scientific reasons behind what, at first glance, seems to be a mildly interesting prevalence of the humans-created-from-clay motif in world mythology. These reasons could not be known until only recently, when advances in physics, biochemistry, and information theory provided the necessary scientific insights, only to validate previously "religious" or "mythic" explanations.

On the cutting edge of literary theory, one prominent idea is that everything is merely text; in the Judeo-Christian story of cosmogenesis, in the beginning was the Word; in Hinduism and Buddhism, creation began with the primal syllable; in astrophysics, one of the major Nobel Prize-winning discoveries of the past century was the three-degree background radiation in the universe, what we now know is the "echo" of the Big Bang, the sound that started it all. Perhaps that loud explosion was a word, after all.

When humans began their own creation of texts written not in pictograms, but in symbolic letters, around 5,100 years ago (according to current theories), their first medium was *clay*. Many of the oldest Mesopotamian clay tablets, which date back to approximately 3000 BC, happen to record creation myths.

My four-year-old daughter still has trouble pronouncing "mother," and when she's tired, she calls my dear wife "Mudder." I used to correct her, but I don't bother anymore. She's been onto something all along—it's one of those synchronicities you just come to accept when you begin to suspect that your life is a text. ☘

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Continued from page 37

Ortlinde, who manages to make Malcolm fall in love with her. But Ortlinde never counted on falling in love with Malcolm, and Wotan's plans go swiftly off track, leading the one-eyed deity to press a forceful attack. How Malcolm survives this overwhelming thrust will surprise you, as will his climactic decision about keeping the Ring.

The discovery of a Viking burial chamber in *Who's Afraid of Beowulf?* should be the pinnacle of the career of young American archaeologist Hildy Fredericksen. If only King Hrolf Earthstar and his crew were not still sleepily alive in the chamber, awaiting their destined resurrection to battle with the evil immortal sorcerer-king named Eric, who just happens to have invented computers as part of his scheme to control the affairs of modern civilization. Before you can say "Stockholm syndrome," Hildy is chauffeuring the rowdy Vikings around England and Scotland in their noble quest. Accompanied by two electricity-hungry, game-playing earth spirits named Zxerp and Prexz, Hildy and her compatriots wreak havoc among city dwellers and rural police, eventually sweeping up hapless TV producer Danny Bennett in their plots. A head-to-head battle between Eric and Hrolf might eventually settle the contest—and not for the better—except that no one reckons on Hildy's bravado.

Holt is the inheritor of Monty Python's gift for sharp, silly dialogue. His characterizations are deft and empathetic. Both Malcolm and Hildy are pleasant protagonists to share an adventure with, good-hearted but not sappy. Holt's godlings and archaic warriors are surprising mixes of the sensible and the daft. Like E. Nesbit, Holt can juxtapose the occult and the quotidian and make you truly believe in the tangibility and interaction of both aspects of the universe. And his rueful yet not hopeless sardonicism ("Danny Bennett's definition of an optimist was someone who has nothing left except hope...") ensures that his whimsy does not become cloying.

Anyone trying these two books will, like myself, be determined to track down Holt's others.

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***Ombria in Shadow***, Patricia McKillip, Ace Books, NY, hardcover, 298 pp., \$22.95.

The opening chapter to Patricia McKillip's latest dream-haunted, shadow-touched fantasy could stand as a lesson in how to propel a story swiftly and captivatingly out of the gate. In just a few pages she vividly establishes all the major characters, their relationships to each other, and pencils in her first sketch of the odd world they live in. She brings the curtain down on the status quo of the backstory and launches the upsetting events that will careen throughout the rest of the book. You can't ask for more than that

from a beginning, and such flair and expertise are testaments to McKillip's mastery of her story-telling voice.

The city of Ombria has just lost its reigning prince, leaving a child, Kyel, as heir. But Domina Pearl, otherwise known as the Black Pearl, an evil and ancient court figure, rules as Machiavellian regent. She exiles the dead prince's mistress, Lydea. She tightens her reins on the bastard contender to the throne, Ducon, an artistic soul who really has no ambitions to govern. With the aid of a mysterious historian, Camas Erl, the Black Pearl seems destined to squeeze Ombria like a ripe fruit. But she has not fully plumbed the motives and powers of a sorceress named Faey or Faey's servant girl, Mag. Among them, Faey, Mag, Lydea, and Ducon form a counterforce to the Black Pearl's schemes. But can they triumph before a legendary supernatural transformation overtakes the city?

As hinted at by this novel's title, the city of Ombria itself is perhaps the main character of this novel. A metropolis that exists as much below the surface as above, the city also features a shadowy doppelganger of itself aligned along other dimensions, perceived only by sensitives such as Mag and Ducon, whose unknown parentage links them. McKillip's depiction of the buried structures of Ombria, where Faey and Mag live, is spooky and alluring. The royal castle, too, boasts its share of secret passages and hidden doorways, recalling the kind of effect achieved by James Stoddard in *The High House* (1998). But McKillip doesn't stint on the human personages either. Her shifting focus on each member of the quartet ensures that each one comes off equal in stature. (The Black Pearl and Kyel, ostensibly at the center of affairs, are actually the least realized people here, just crucial tokens on the gameboard.)

McKillip's prose is always a delight, rich and sensual. She manages to sound at once archetypically lofty, in the manner of fairy tales, and also down to earth, as in the descriptions of Lydea's brief tenure as a barmaid. Not only does this tale feature a fair amount of swordplay and derring-do, but also philosophical asides on the nature of reality. The only thing missing is a mature romantic love among any of the protagonists. (Lydea's affair with the dead prince is in the past.) But even this absence is calculated, I'm sure, and does not mar this superb book.

***Fire Bringer***, David Clement-Davies, Firebird Books, NY, mass-market paper, 498 pp., \$6.99.

Surely tales of the lives of sentient animals among us form one of the oldest branches of fantasy literature. From the age of Aesop

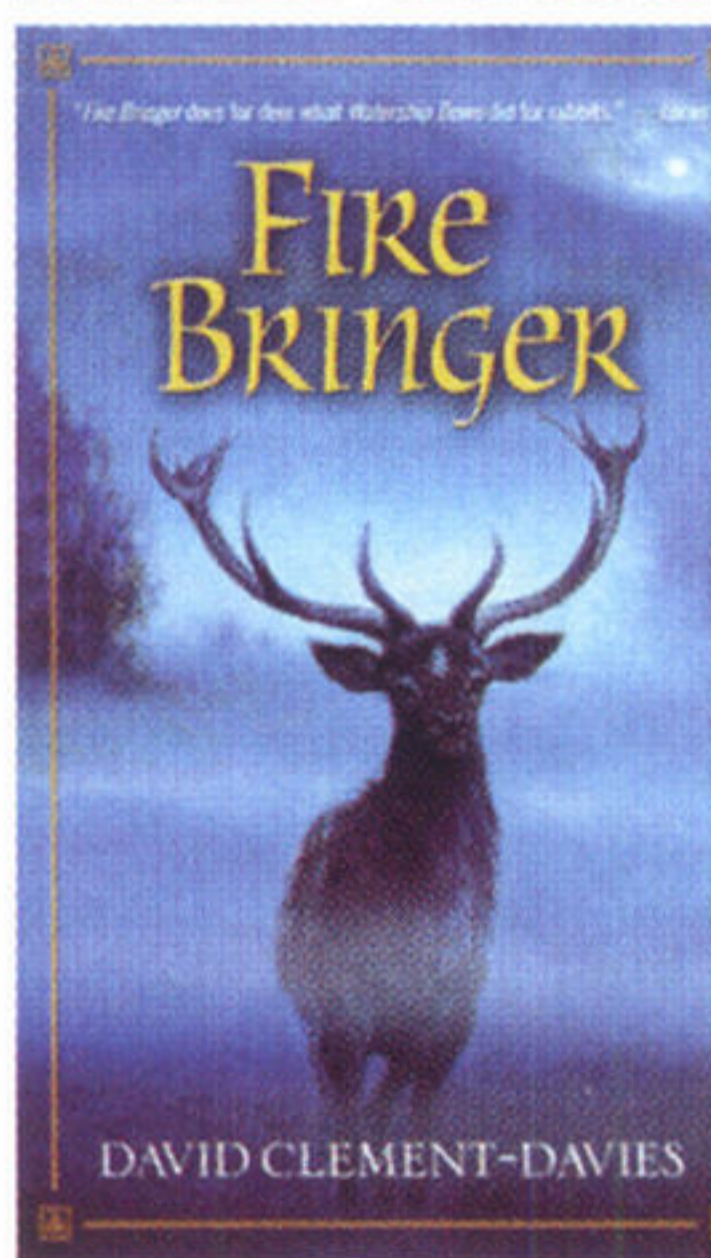
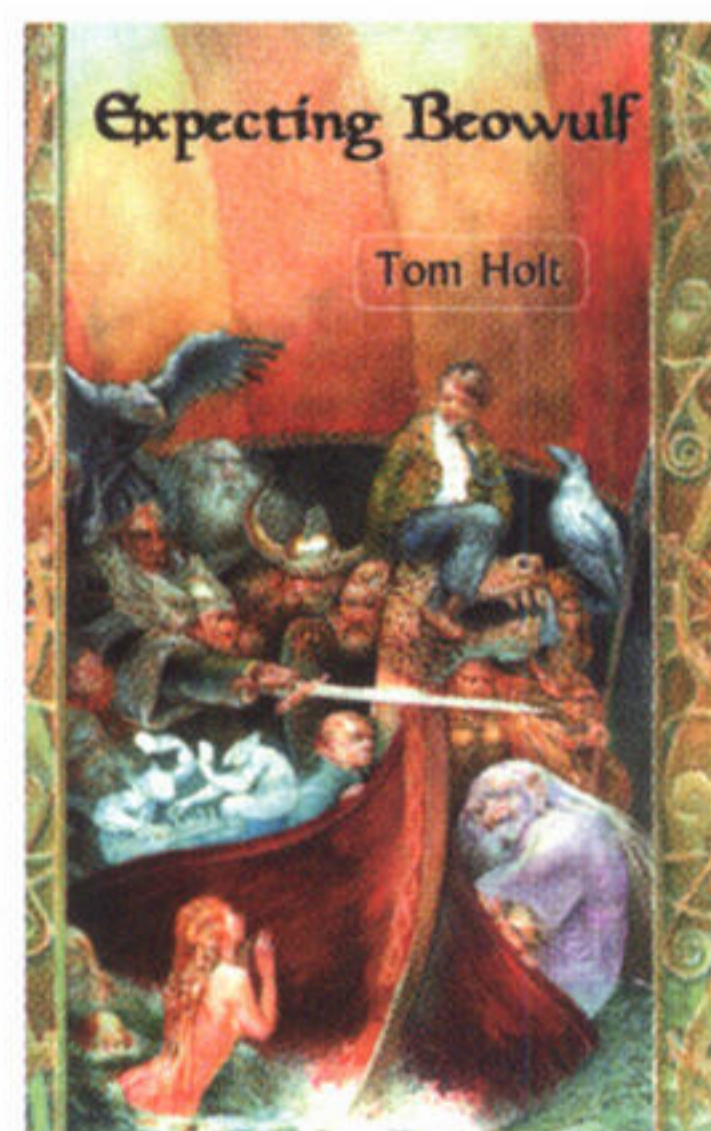
down to Richard Adams' *Watership Down* (1972), which singlehandedly triggered a renaissance of this type of fiction, the novel narrated from the intimate perspective of intelligent beasts has found a welcome audience among young and old alike. Of late we have seen stories involving badgers, foxes, cats, wolves, elephants, otters, and other quadruped friends. Now comes a splendid instance involving deer, namely the red deer of medieval Scotland.

A small, unexceptional herd has fallen under the authoritarian rule of a pernicious leader named Drail, and his one-eyed aide, Sgorr, who together have enough bad ideas and ambition to wreak havoc. The two stags have created a totalitarian system violating all the old customs of the herd. Quashing the last of the dissenters by murdering a noble captain named Brechin, they feel safe in extending their rule across the whole region, with the ultimate goal of ruling all deer—the Herla—everywhere. But one crack in their plans exists: Brechin's newborn son, Rannoch, with his curious birthmark, seems to be the destined fulfillment of an old Prophecy that threatens the evildoers. Smuggled out of the herd the night of Brechin's death, Rannoch and his compatriots

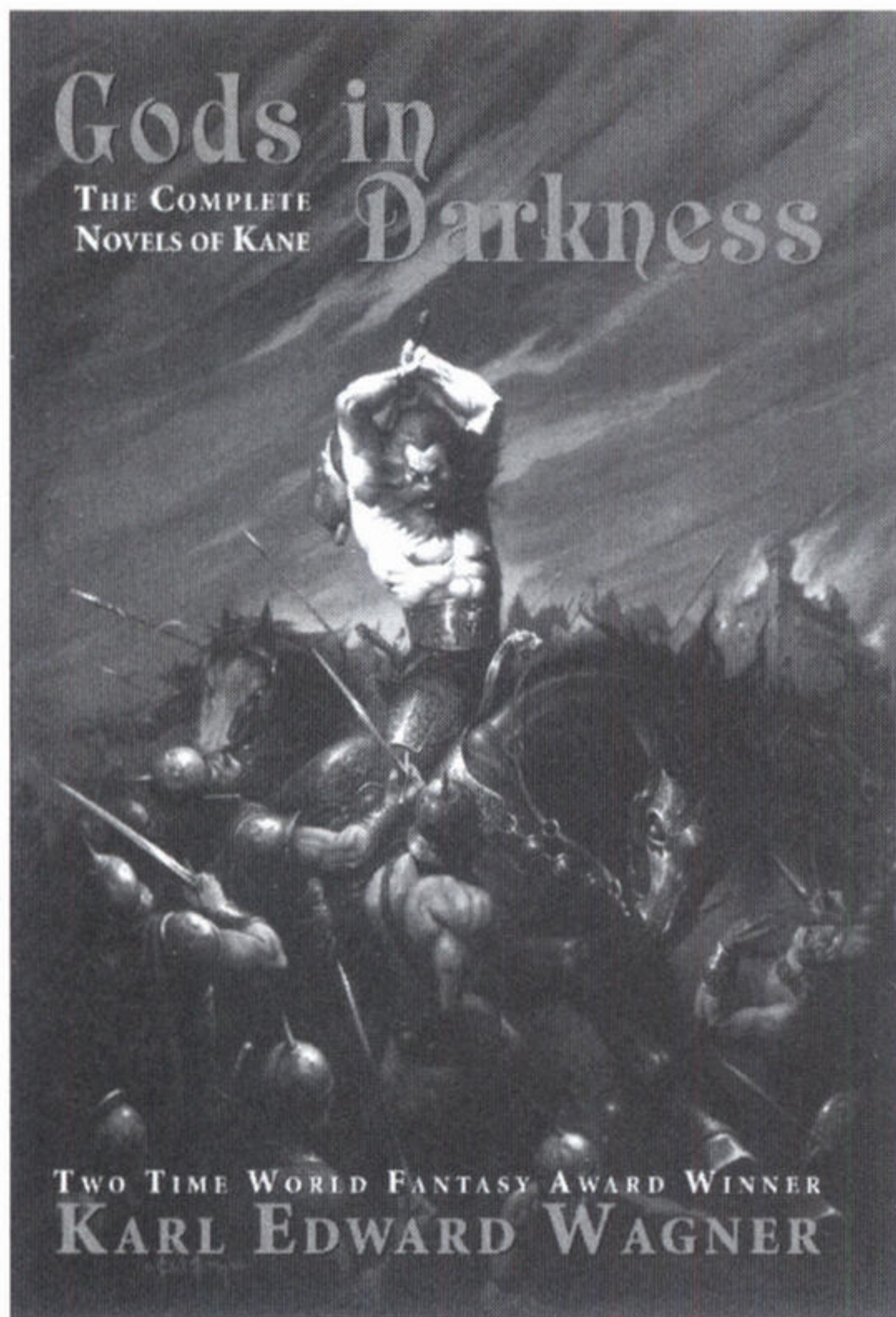
embark on a seven-year hegira across the land. Rannoch and his companions will meet other skewed Herla societies, interact with their fellow animals and humans, face privations and struggles, and lose friends to the struggle. Rannoch will eventually mature into the savior he was meant to become, but at a cost almost too high to pay.

In this sterling debut novel, Clement-Davies exhibits tons of maturity and flair. First off, he utilizes without stiffness the famous Joseph Campbell Monomyth for his story (or perhaps the allied structure formulated by critic John Clute: Bondage-Recognition-Metamorphosis-Eucatastrophe-Healing). This results in Rannoch's resonant resemblance to a score of other classic savior figures, from Christ on down. But Clement-Davies does not neglect the naturalistic elements of his tale. Deer physiology and behavior are honored, while the anthropomorphic layer—their speech, their myths, their emotions—is consistent with the scientific realities of their being. The author's old-fashioned yet welcoming prose style—direct address to the reader, blunt yet not burdensome infodumps—is balanced by a real poetry in his descriptions of the land. In short, this very fluid, captivating tale is a fine balance of reflection and action, speculation and observation, loss and triumph. Its lessons apply to our own lives as fully as they do to the rest of creation. 🐾

**Paul Di Filippo**



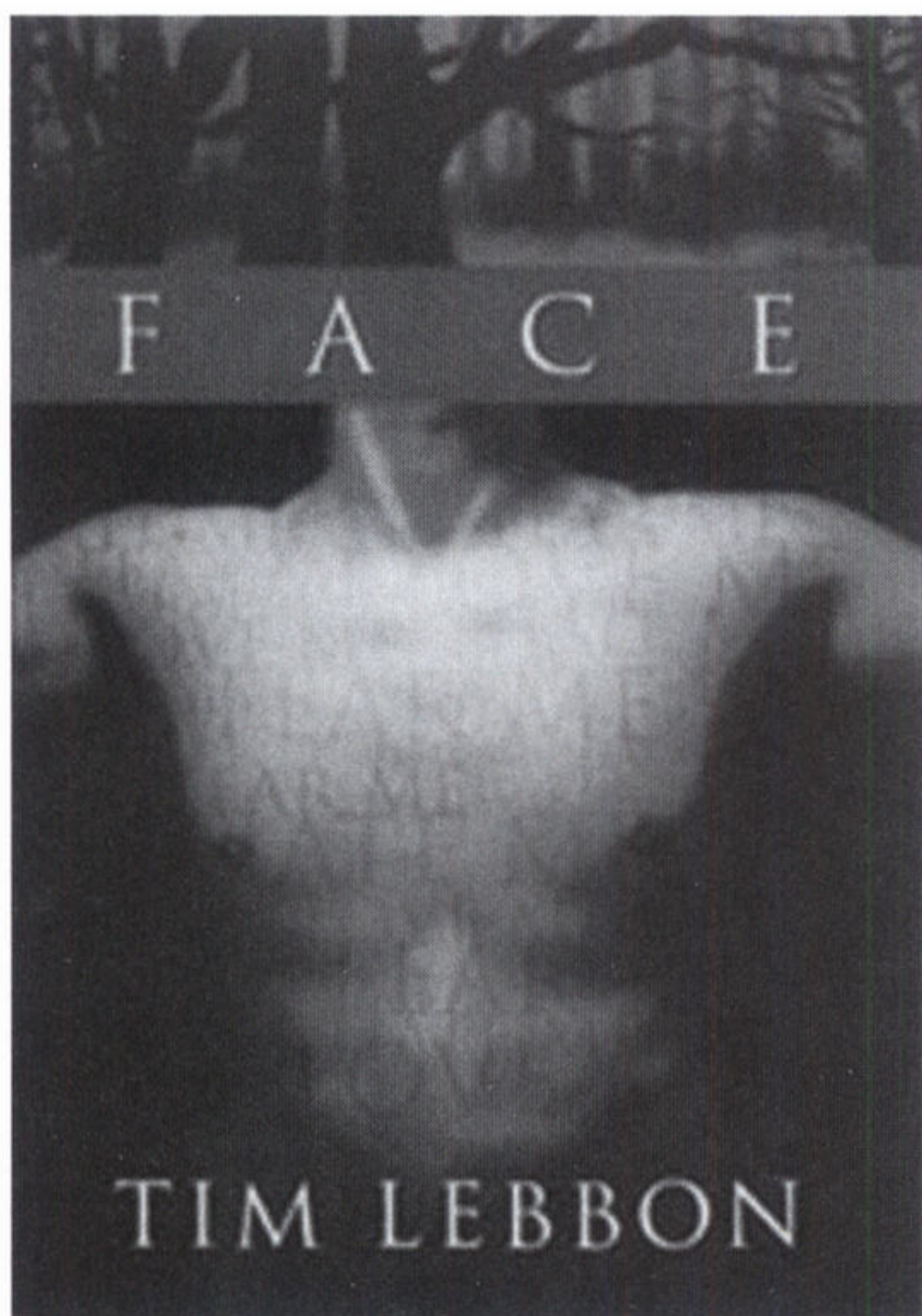




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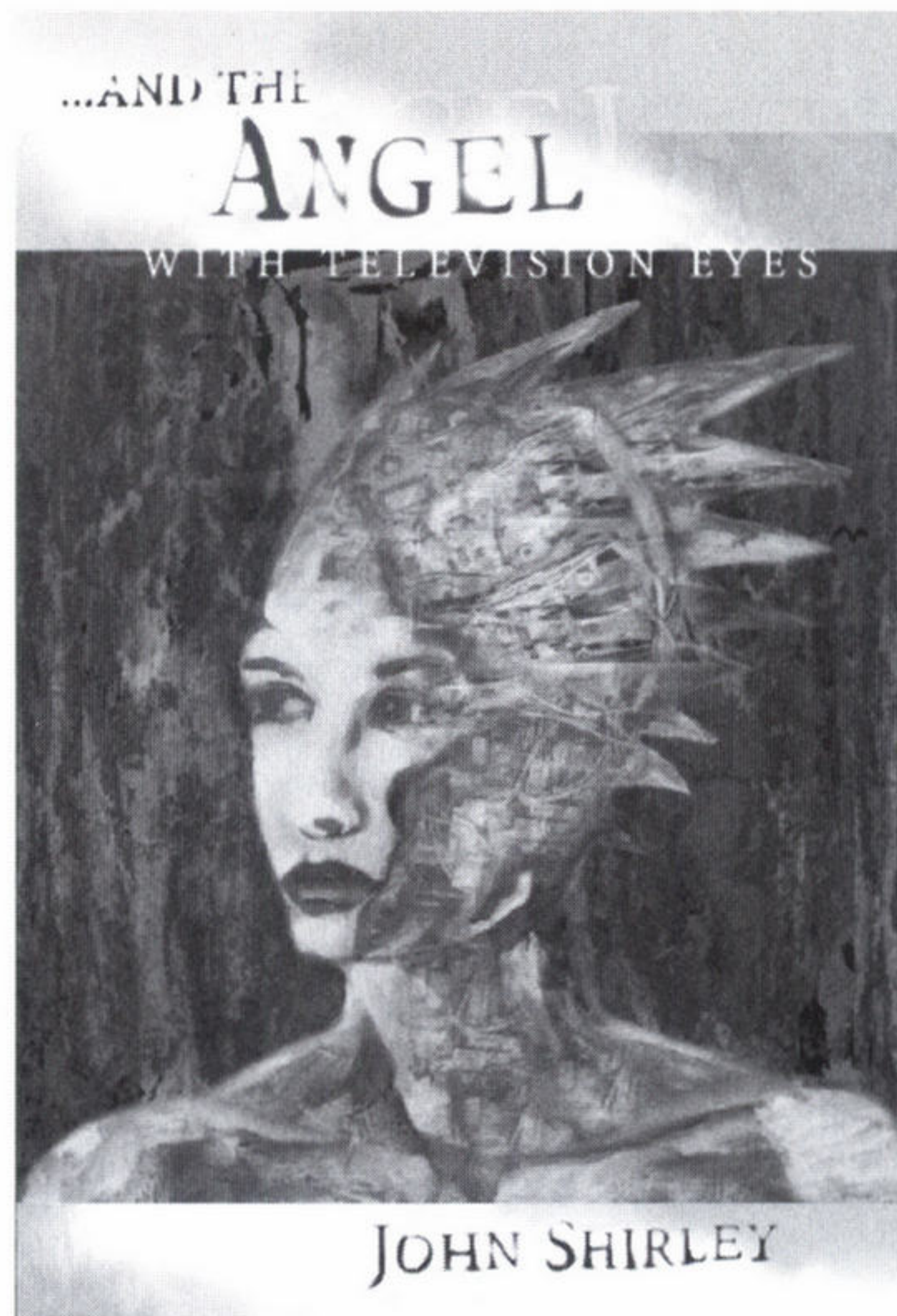
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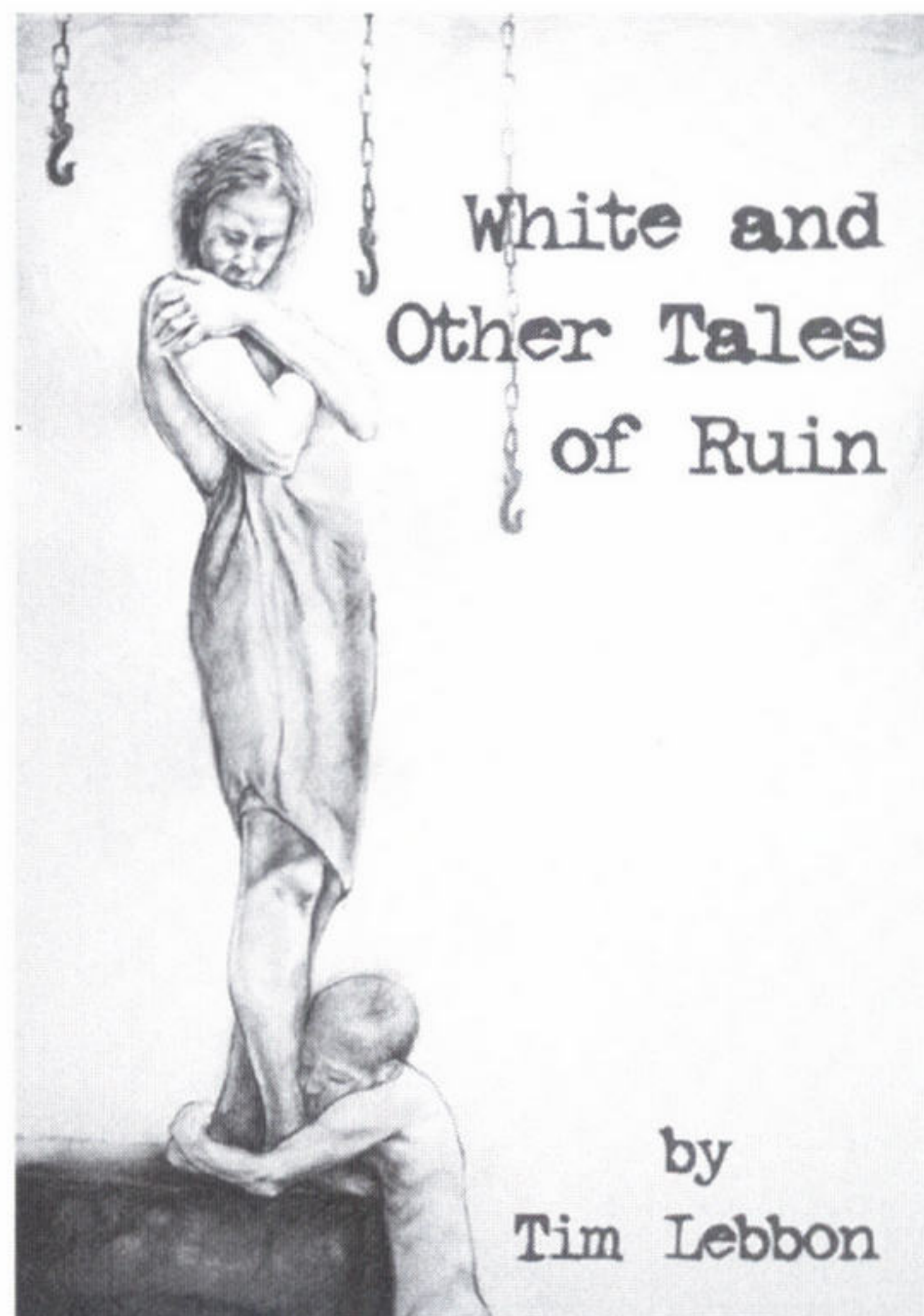
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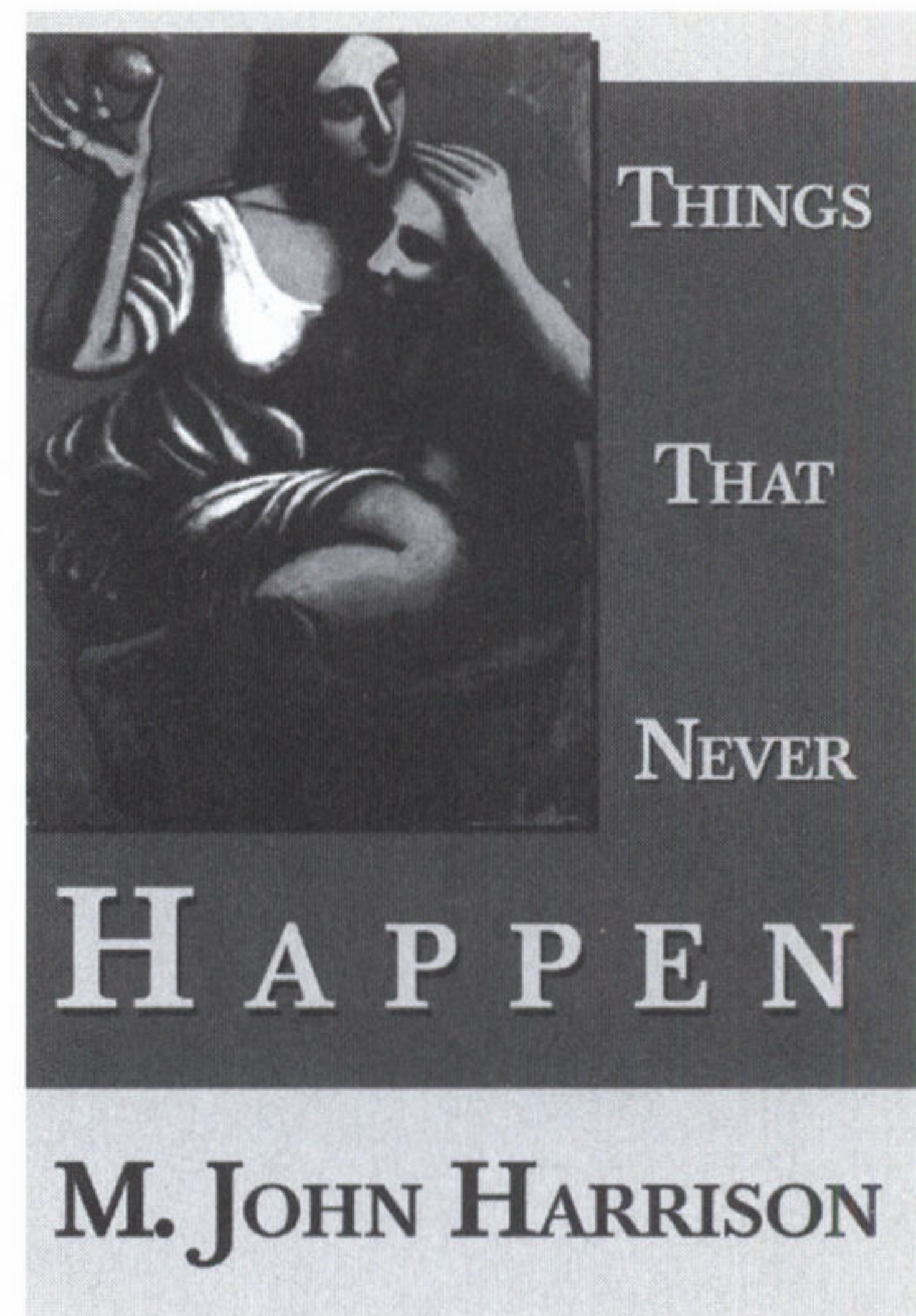
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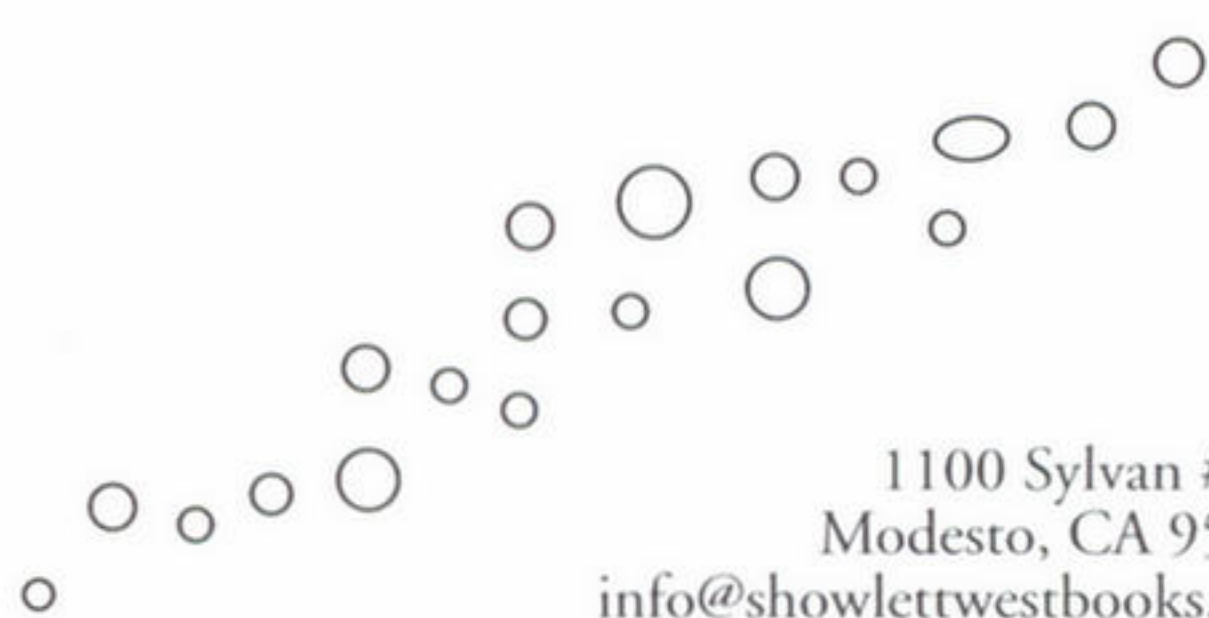
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**HEINZ INSU FENKL** is the author of *Memoirs of My Ghost Brother*, an autobiographical novel about growing up as a biracial child in Korea in the 1960s. The son of a German-American soldier and a Korean black-marketeer, he was raised in Korea, Germany, and the United States. He currently lives in New York with his wife, Annie B. Dalton, and their daughter.

**TOM GERENCER** is a chess-playing whitewater kayaker who has written "enough unpublishable dreck to wallpaper most of Ohio, including all the cornfields." He has also published stories in *Science Fiction Age*, *The Brutarian*, *The Orphic Chronicle*, and *E-Scape*. Tom collaborated on a story with Mike Resnick for Daw's *Oceans of Magic* anthology, and you can catch his upcoming tales in Tekno Books' *Men Writing SF/F as Women*, *New Faces in Science Fiction*, and at [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com). Tom attended the Clarion SF/F writer's workshop in 1999, and although the only dragons he has ever seen have been Komodos on the Nature Channel, he has developed quite a taste for a certain damsel recently ... Visit his Web site at [www.sff.net/people/tgerencer](http://www.sff.net/people/tgerencer). Read his other stories at [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com).

**KAREN HABER** is the author of eight novels including *Star Trek Voyager: Bless the Beasts*, co-author of *Science of the X-Men*, and editor of *Meditations on Middle Earth*. She reviews art books for *LOCUS* magazine and has profiled artists for many publications including *American Artist*, *Southwest Art*, *Science Fiction Age*, and *Realms of Fantasy*.

**MELISSA MIA HALL**'s career began in the 1980s with *Twilight Zone* magazine, edited by T.E.D. Klein, who called her Fort Worth's answer to Shirley Jackson. Since that time, the unrepentant Texan has been trying to recover from that scary comparison by publishing in numerous anthologies (Gahan Wilson's *Ultimate Haunted House*, Ellen Datlow's *Whisper of Blood*, Lisa Tuttle's *Skin of the Soul*), including a contribution to the book she also developed and edited, *Wild Women*, which was subsequently cited by Ed Gorman and Martin Greenberg as one of the Year's 25 Finest Crime and Mystery Stories. She has also collaborated with Douglas E. Winter, *Forbidden Acts*. Datlow and Windling have cited her work in Honorable Mention lists in their *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. When not reviewing and interviewing writers for *Publisher's Weekly*, Hall works on various writing, editing, and art projects.

**LAURIE HARDEN** was raised in Mountain Lakes and now resides in Boston. After attending Kansas City Art Institute for two years and majoring in painting, she changed majors to illustration and transferred to Rhode Island School of Design. Laurie graduated with a BFA in 1976 and moved back to the Boston area to freelance illustrate. Some of Laurie's clients include Grosset & Dunlap, HarperCollins, Cobblehill Books, Treasure Bay, ABC, CBS, *Redbook*, *Business Week*, *Scholastic*, *New York Times*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Time for Kids*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Science Fiction Age*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Asimov's*, and *Analog*.

**TIM PRATT** is a displaced Southerner living in the San Francisco Bay Area. During the day he works as an editorial assistant at *LOCUS*; by night he edits *Star\*Line*, the journal of the Science Fiction Poetry Association; and in between, he writes. Visit his Web site at [www.sff.net/people/timpratt](http://www.sff.net/people/timpratt)

Born in England, **FRASER SHERMAN** has lived in northwest Florida for 30 years, and works there as a reporter for the *Destin Log* newspaper. This is his first fiction sale since the eighties, having spent the intervening decade concentrating on nonfiction including articles in *Newsweek*, *Boy's Life*, and *The Writer*, and *Cyborgs*, *Santa Claus and Satan*, a book on made-for-TV science fiction, horror, and fantasy films published by McFarland & Co. last year.

**DARRELL SCHWEITZER** is the author of about 300 published fantasy stories, and a three-time World Fantasy Award finalist (for best collection and best novella). His three fantasy novels are *The White Isle*, *The Shattered Goddess*, and *The Mask of the Sorcerer*. Much of his best short fiction can be found in such collections as *Refugees from an Imaginary Country*, *Nightscares*, *Necromancies and Netherworlds*, *The Great Word and the Small*, *Transients*, and *Tom O'Bedlam's Night Out*. He is also co-editor of *Weird Tales* and author of nonfiction books on H.P. Lovecraft and Lord Dunsany. His previous appearance in *Realms of Fantasy* was "Bitter Chivalry," February 1999.

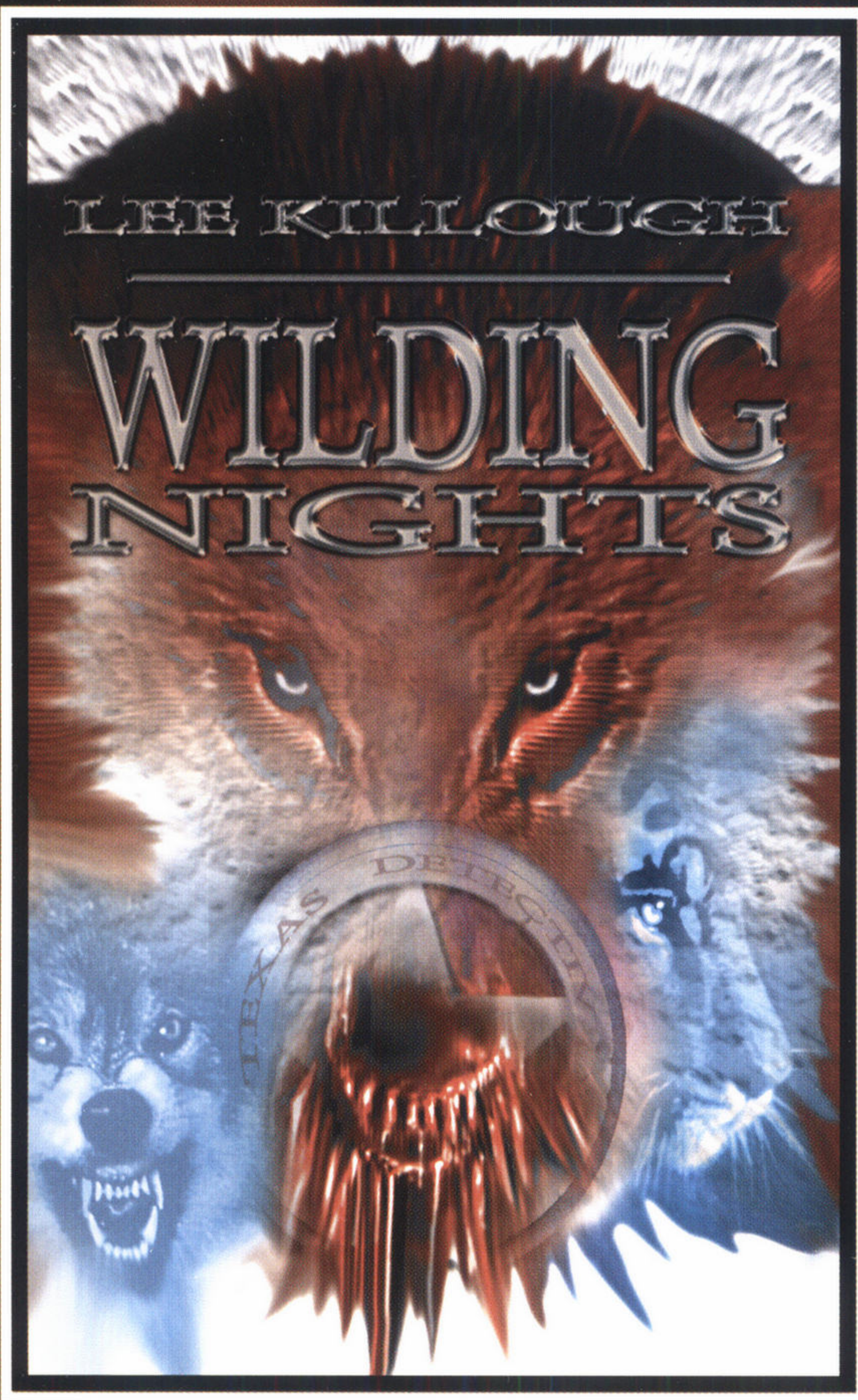
**CARRIE VAUGHN**'s stories have appeared in *Talebones*, *Weird Tales*, and *Sword and Sorceress*. She is a graduate of the Odyssey writing workshop and holds a Masters in English literature. All her spare time and money go to her Appaloosa mare, Rosie. See photos of Carrie and Rosie horsing around at <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/CLVaughn>.

**LIZ WILLIAMS** is the daughter of a conjurer and a Gothic novelist, and currently lives in Brighton, England. She has a Ph.D. in philosophy of science from Cambridge and her anti-career ranges from reading tarot cards on Brighton pier to teaching in Central Asia. Her novel *The Ghost Sister* was published by Bantam in July 2001. A *New York Times* "Notable Book" of 2001, it has recently been nominated for the Philip K Dick Award. A second novel, *Empire of Bones*, was published by Bantam in April 2002. Liz has had short fiction published in *Asimov's*, *Interzone*, *The Third Alternative*, and *Realms of Fantasy*, among others.





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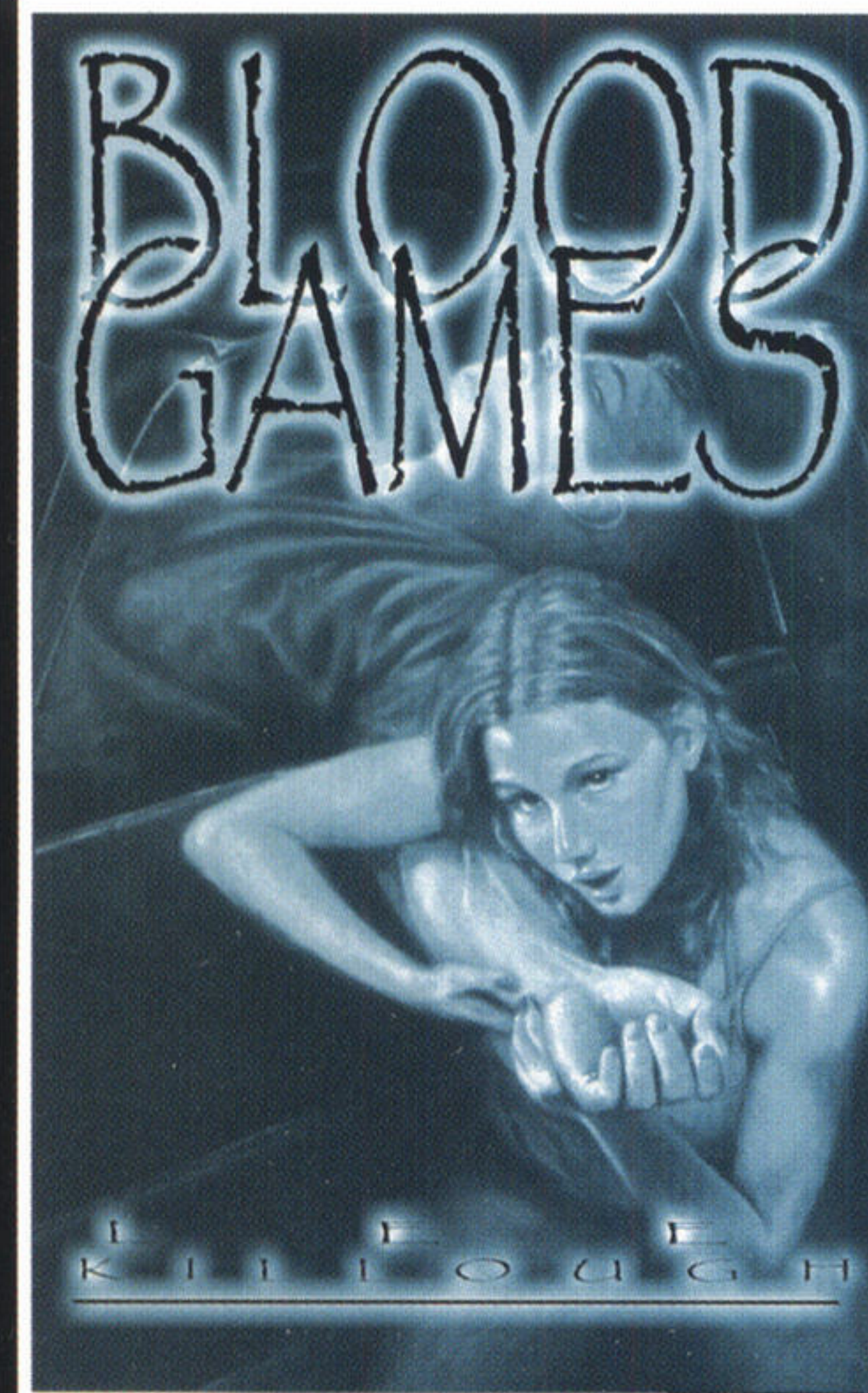
## WILDING NIGHTS

Homicide detective Allison Goodnight has a problem. One look at the mutilated corpse in her latest case tells her the victim has been killed by a werewolf. She ought to know; being that she herself is a werewolf!

It is urgent that she close this case before more people die and human memory of her kindred is awakened. Elusive, the killer is unknown to any of the local clans making the hunt for this rogue werewolf a concern amongst her people as well... added to the pressure of this case, Allison's new partner is watching her with an unnerving intensity. If he learns too much, she fears it may fall upon her to protect her people's secret from being revealed.

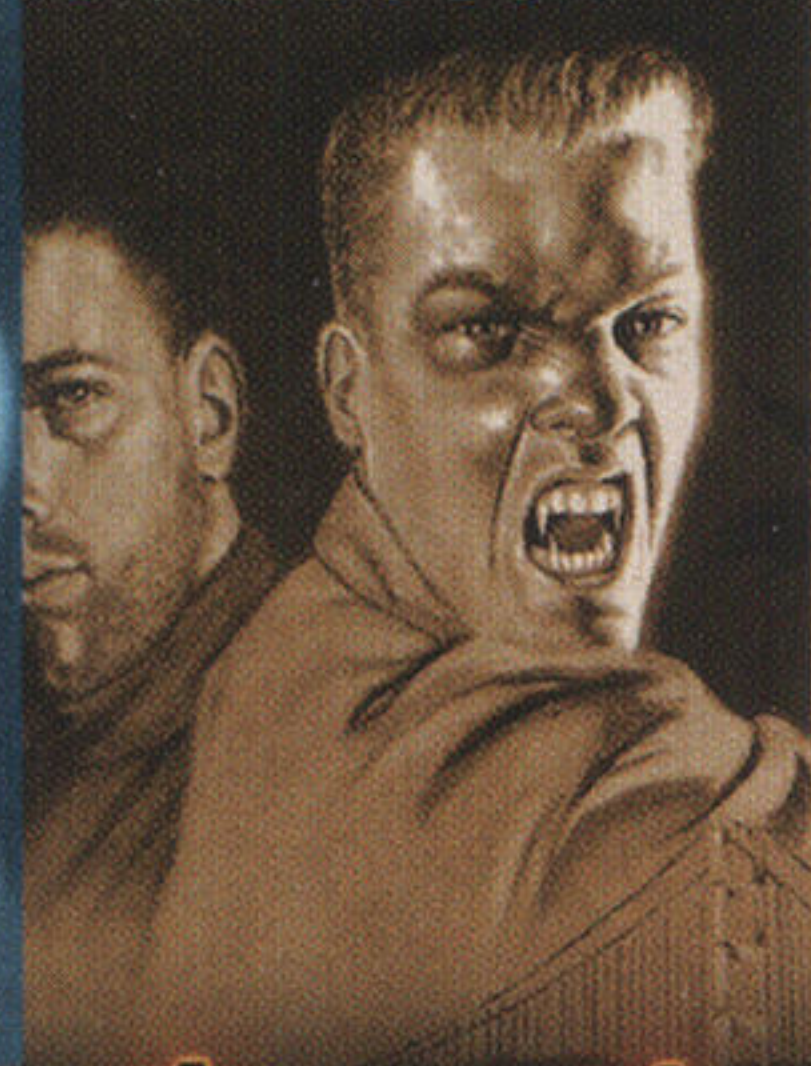
Zane Kerr has a problem.

Initially he was excited to be working with the detective having the highest clearance rate in the department, but Allison's secretive conduct in this new case disturbs him. And when the description of a mysterious blonde woman seen with the victim matches a number of Allison's relatives, and even Allison herself, he has to wonder if she is trying to protect, not catch, the killer. One way or another he is determined to find out.



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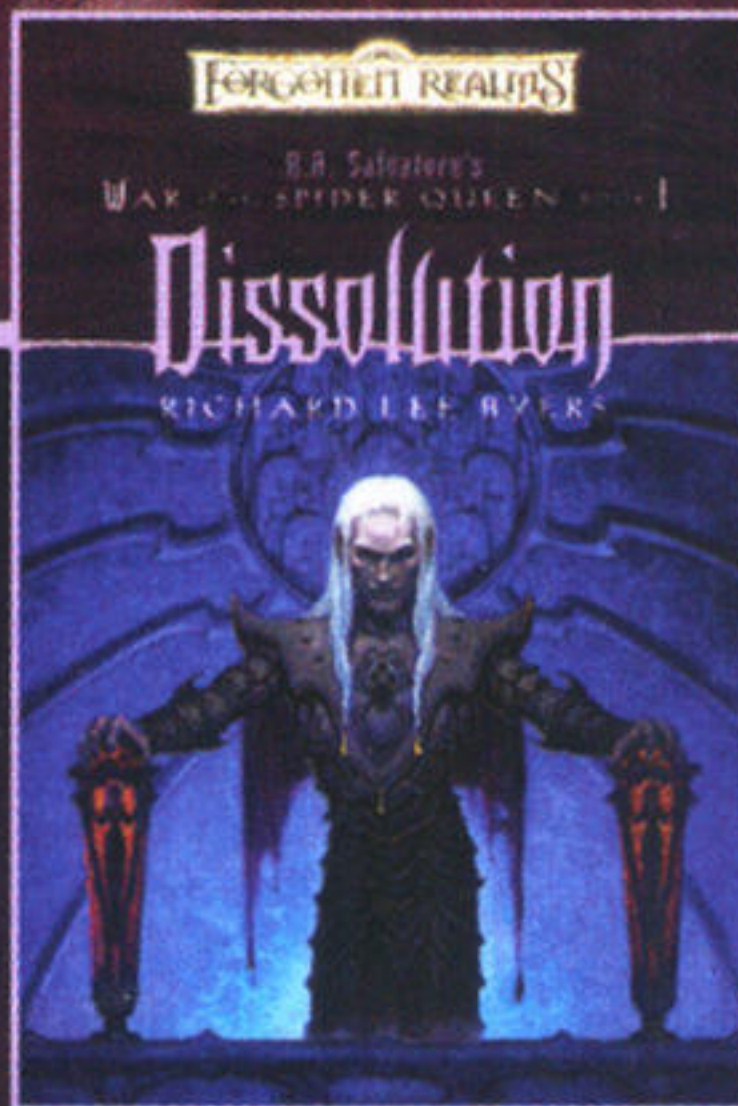


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