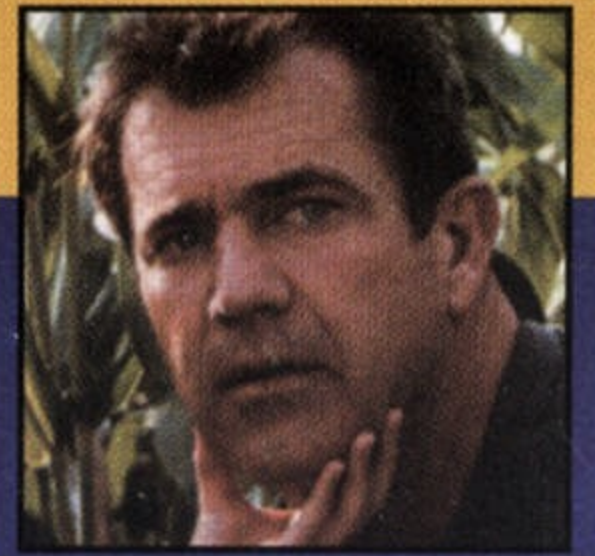


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**Naomi Kritzer**  
**Snow Witch**

**Bruce Glassco**  
**Man versus Pond**

**Superheroes**  
**Mark Bourne**

**Wizard Art:**  
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October 2002

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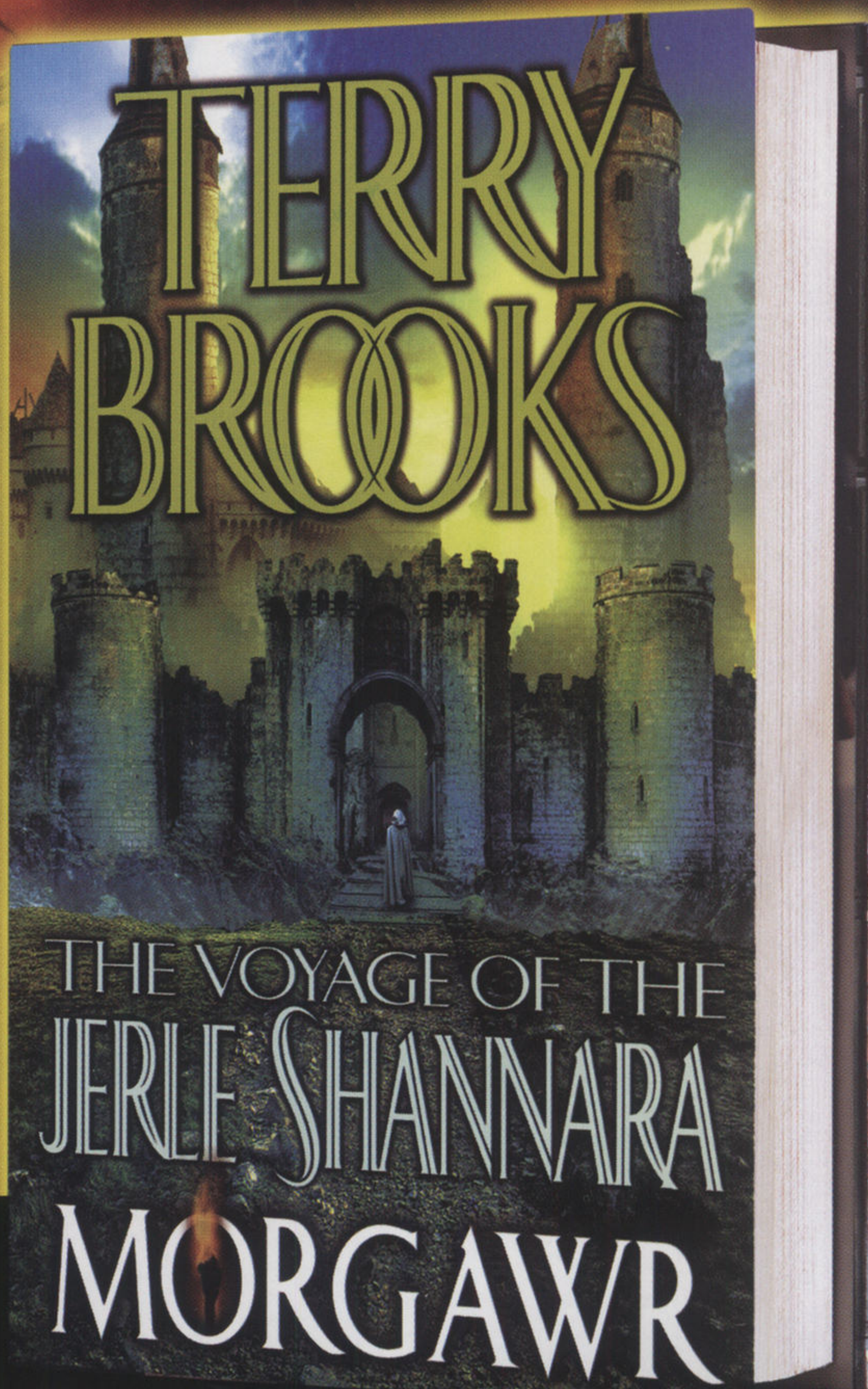
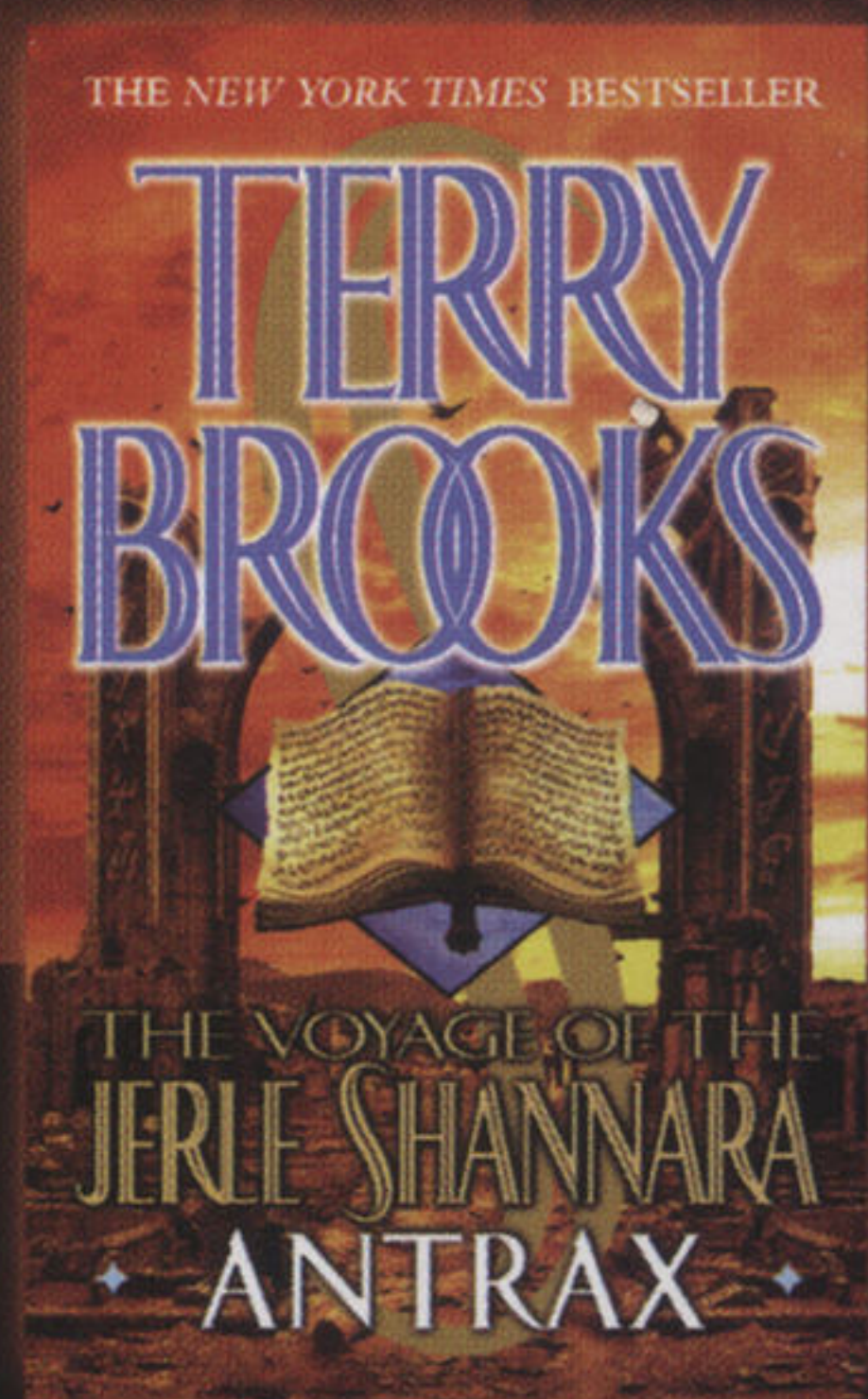
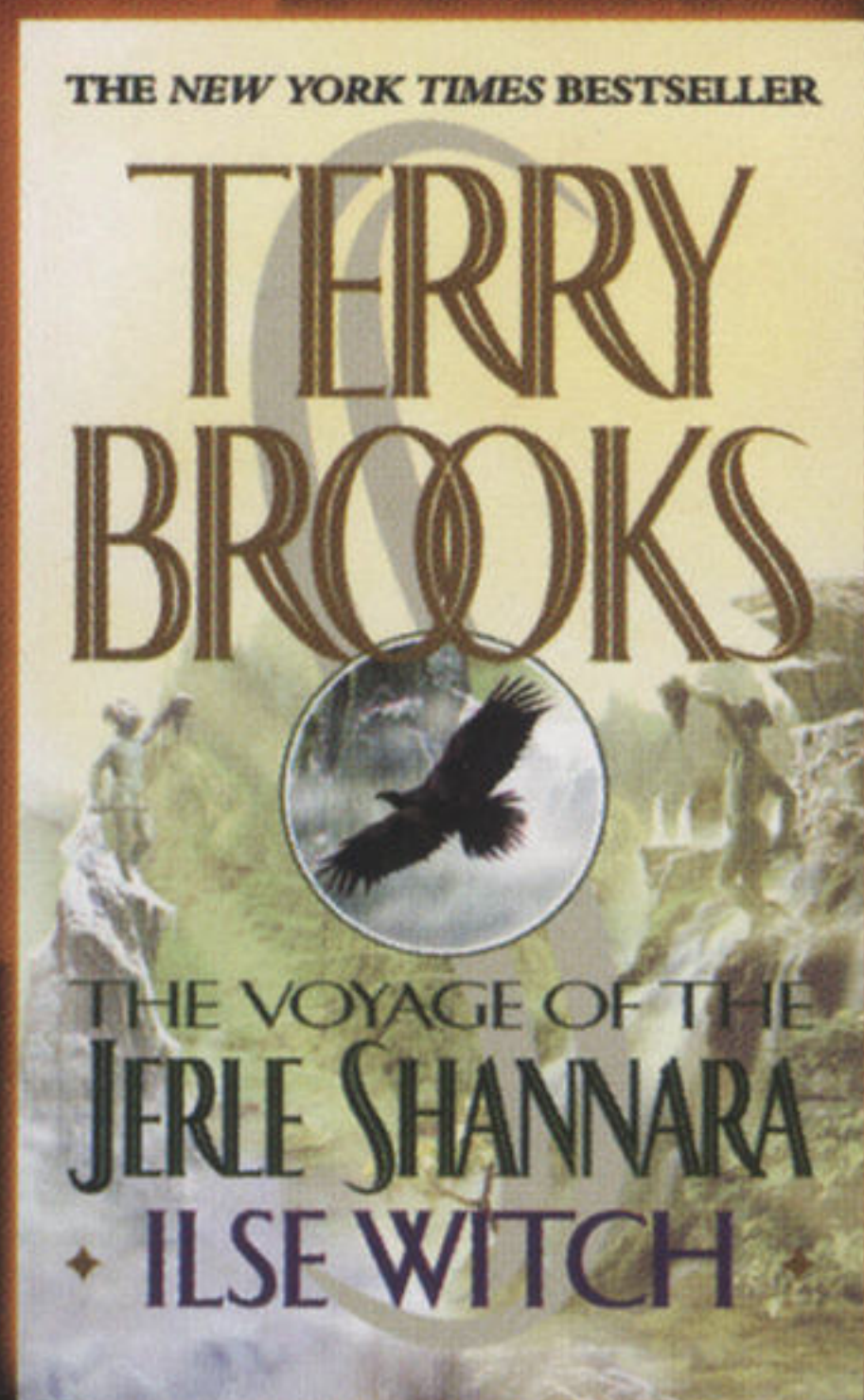


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**RIGHT:** The Berry Market by Omar Rayyan, who is the subject of this issue's Gallery.

**COVER:** A Secret History: The Story of Ash, ©1999 by Donato Giancola.

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A king, a kingdom, a lovely princess, and a terrifying beast. Have you read this tale before? I don't think so ...

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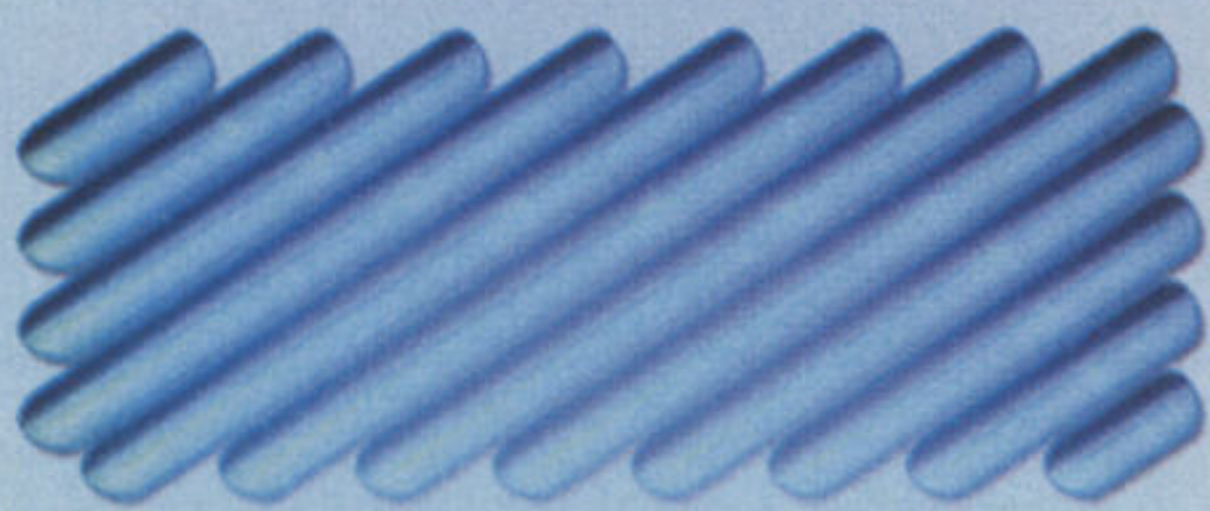


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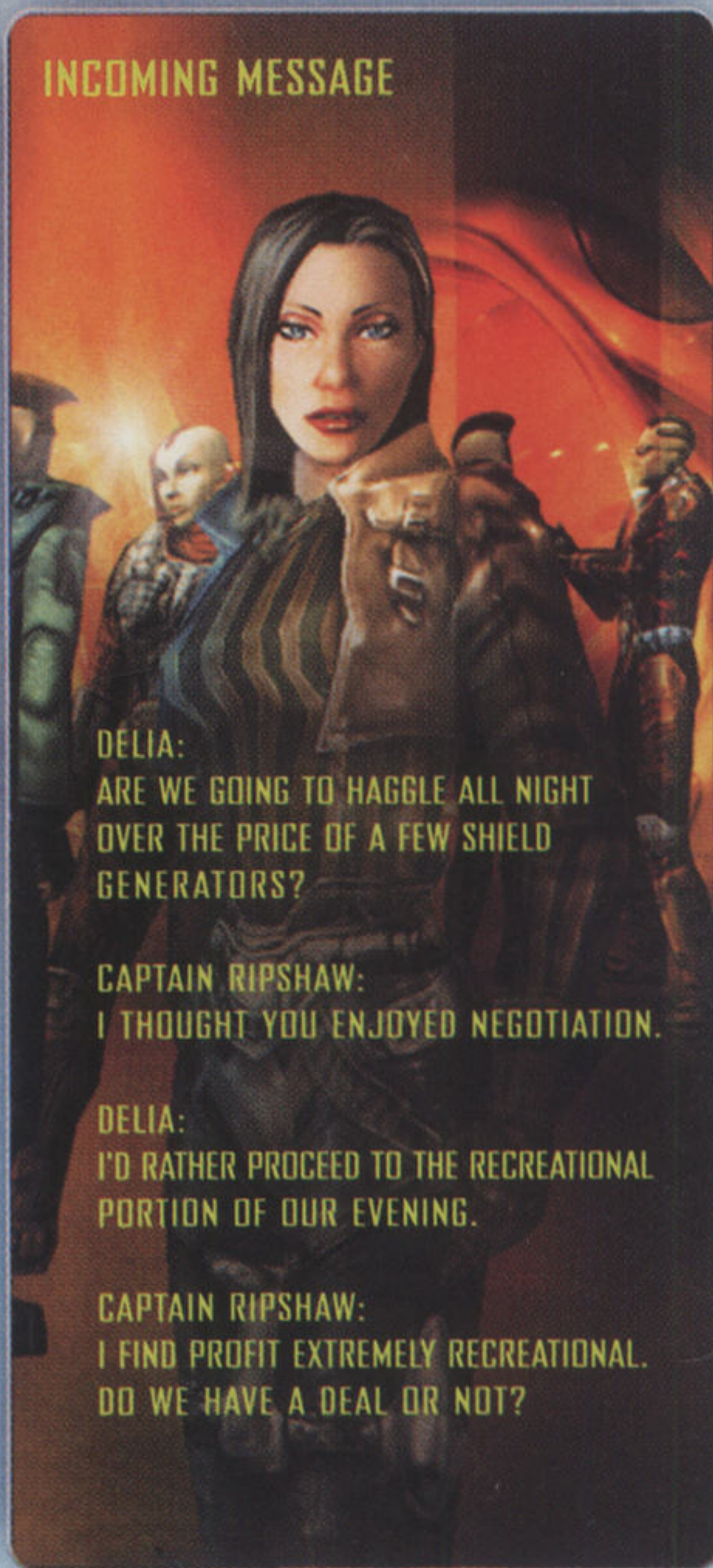
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GENERATORS?

CAPTAIN RIPSHAW:  
I THOUGHT YOU ENJOYED NEGOTIATION.

DELIA:  
I'D RATHER PROCEED TO THE RECREATIONAL  
PORTION OF OUR EVENING.

CAPTAIN RIPSHAW:  
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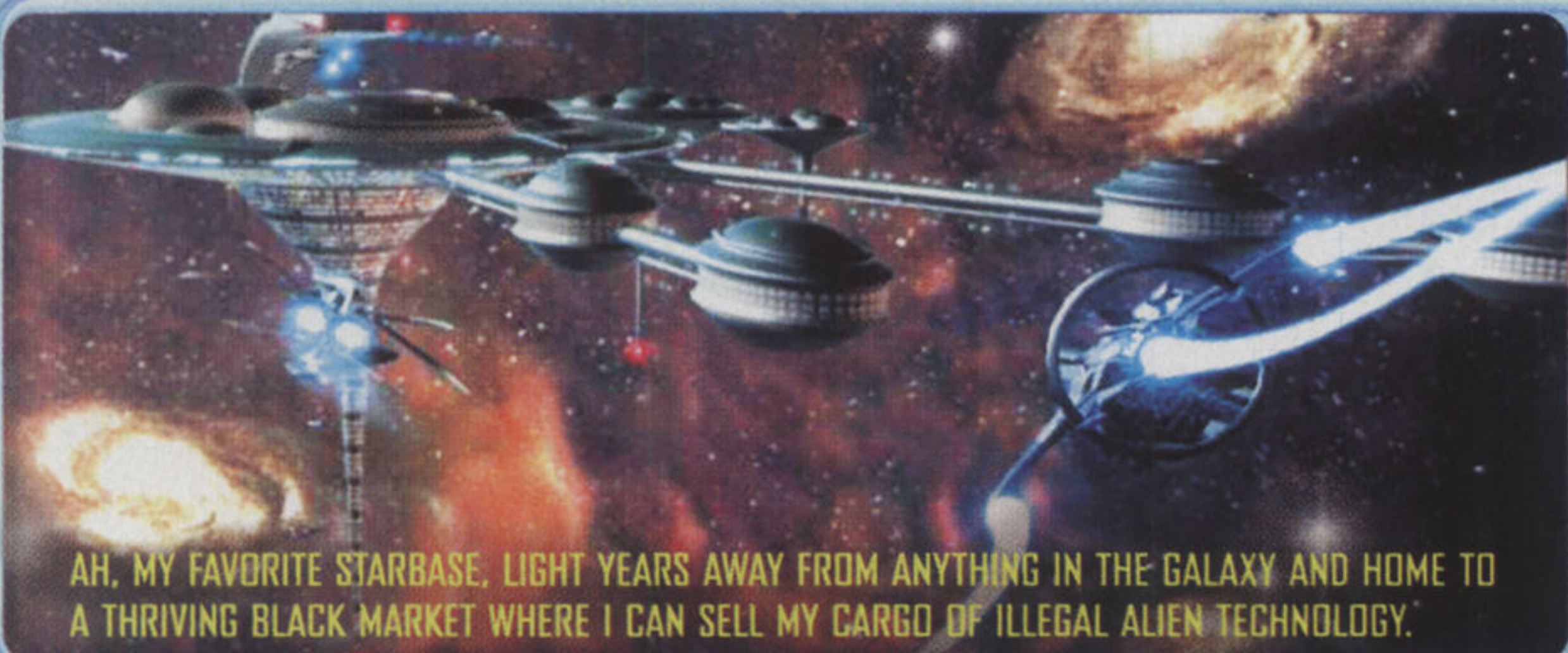
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CEV TAI NEBULA 128 X 15.34

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Dear *Realms*,

I must commend you on regularly capturing my enthusiastic attention over the past eight years. I have often debated the top fantasy movies with my friends who share interests in various aspects of fantasy. Needless to say, many of our top films did not appear on your master list and we were more than just a little surprised. I will not contest the merit of any of your selections, as I have enjoyed them all. However, in comparison to some other masterful films, there are a few of your choices which would not hold the top of the hill for long. Your readers know which ones they are.

As for the oversights, I was shocked to see no *Conan the Barbarian*, *Red Sonja*, or *Conan the Destroyer*. *Barbarian* is typically the number one movie on any list I've seen compiled, so its omission is particularly questionable. To further stir the pot, a few films such as *Dragonheart*, *Krull*, *The Sword and the Sorcerer*, *Legend*, and *Beastmaster* may need to have been considered some more. I'll grant you that it's hard to factor in classic stop-motion films like *Clash of the Titans* or *Jason and the Argonauts*, but they too deserve representation in the pantheon of fantasy cinema.

The next list you publish might warrant some broad disclaimers or better yet, a little consumer research. With that in mind, I challenge you to take a poll of your readers, providing a pool of movies from which to choose that includes your list, those I've mentioned, and others that exist so we may find out who the best of the best truly are.

With Best Intentions,  
Ben Clare

*That's the thing about "Best Of" lists—they always leave something out that should have been in, and put something in that's absolutely nuts and leaves you wondering where the reviewer's head is. Fun, huh?*

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

Although I'm not a longtime subscriber to *Realms*, I have been getting issues smuggled into prison ever since I stumbled across an issue in '95. As I'm sure you can imagine, *Realms* offers a much-needed escape from the harsh world in which I reside. Up until a few years ago, it was extremely difficult to receive *Realms* in my respective prison. Luckily (or more accurately, through litigation), this has changed. Now I'm a subscriber and plan to be indefinitely.

My point is, I've read *Realms* for years, and like Mr. McDougall, am disgusted with the audacity of some of the pompous so-called writers (like "Doc Nebula") who send you their guerrilla campaign letters railing

against the "injustice" of their manuscript's rejection. I am also at a loss as to why you even dignify those letters with a response, much less by justifying yourself. Most magazine editors today (all I've read) are as dry, heartless, and cynical as their respective magazines usually are. You, on the other hand, have always shown an endearing love for your contributors (published and rejected) and readers.

That the occasional maniac attacks you the way they do is infuriating. Through the years, reading *Realms*, I have wanted to figuratively mount my steed and race to your defense on numerous occasions. I have refrained, however, since I am but a humble page who has yet to earn a place in *Realms*. I am only now teething in my writing ambitions. I haven't even received my first rejection slip, mainly because I have yet to submit a piece due to the legal issues in my state dealing with inmates conducting business.

I haven't had the opportunity to read Harry Harvey's letter yet since I haven't received my April issue for some reason (I know it's not your department, I'm going to take it up with the Hart Building), but I doubt it's much different from all the other guerrilla letters. My suggestion is this: Deny those vagrants the recognition they seek with guerrilla letters by not addressing them at all. I'm positive the vast majority of your contributors fully understand and accept "the system." I expect to receive a number of rejection slips and will probably feel embarrassed if I don't receive a lot of them. Plus, common sense says any system has its occasional mistakes, misplacements, extended time lengths, and so on. Such is par for the course, and most know this.

Maybe "Doc Nebula" should deflate his unjustified ego and learn some respect. *Realms* is widely acknowledged as the best in its genre by far. That's not by accident, so keep up the good work Ms. McCarthy, your passion shows through.

Sincerely,  
Shane Warren  
Brickeys, Arkansas

P.S. Could you please tell Terri Windling millions love her, and we're begging she revitalize the Folkroots department she once ruled with a magic fist!

*Good news, Shane! Terri Windling is back in this issue with an article on Bluebeard!*

*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*

# REALMS OF FANTASY

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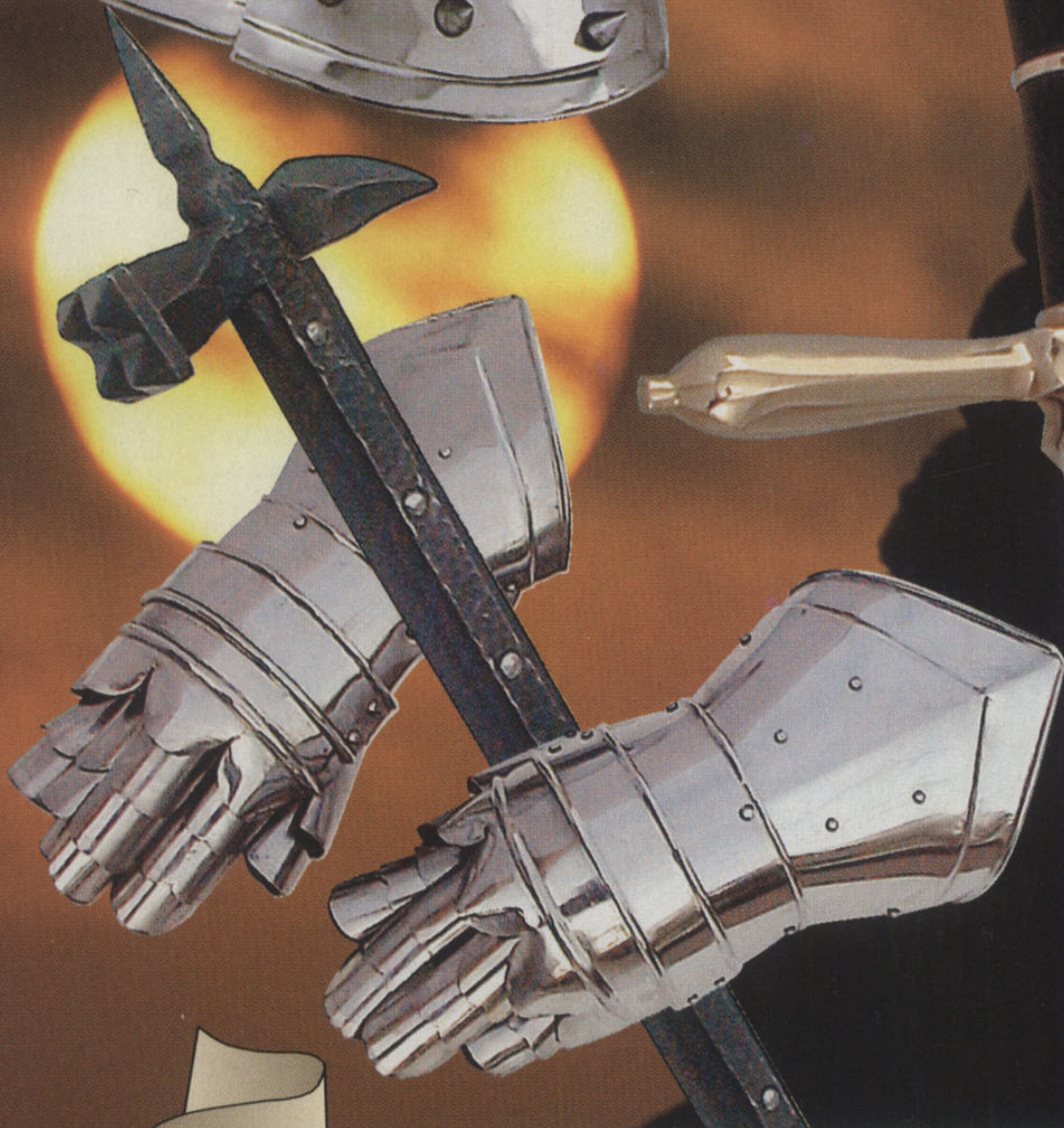
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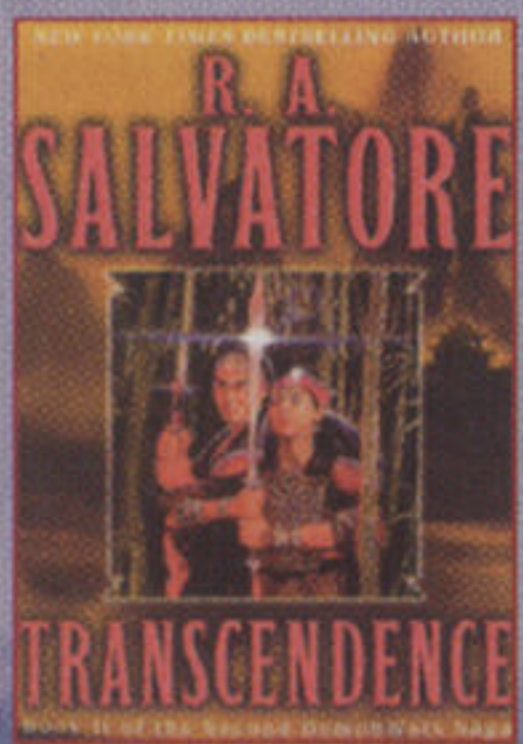
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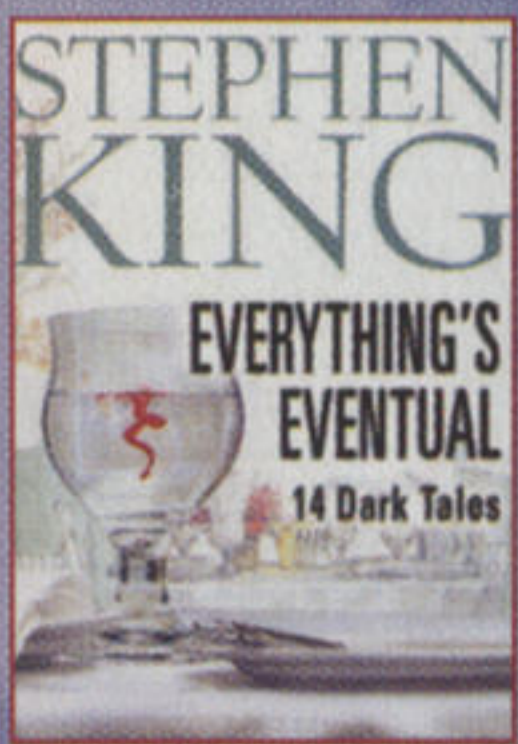
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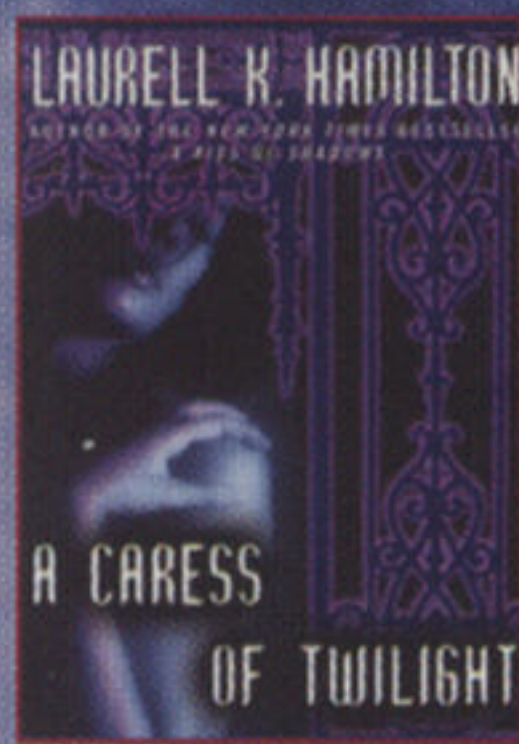
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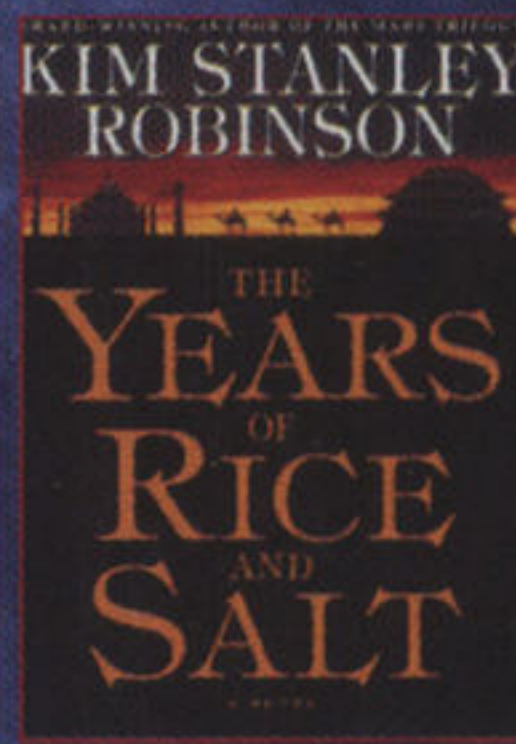
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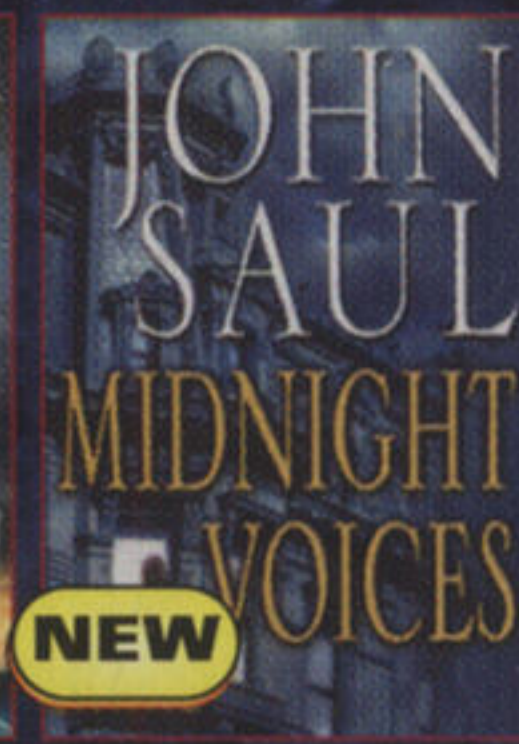
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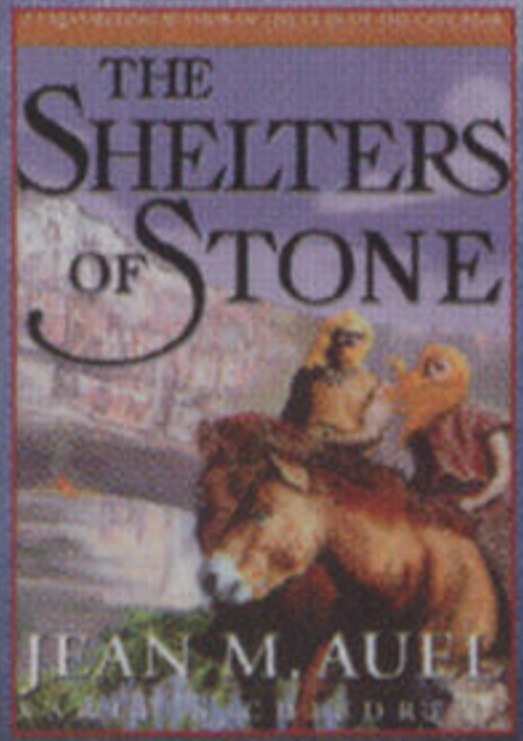
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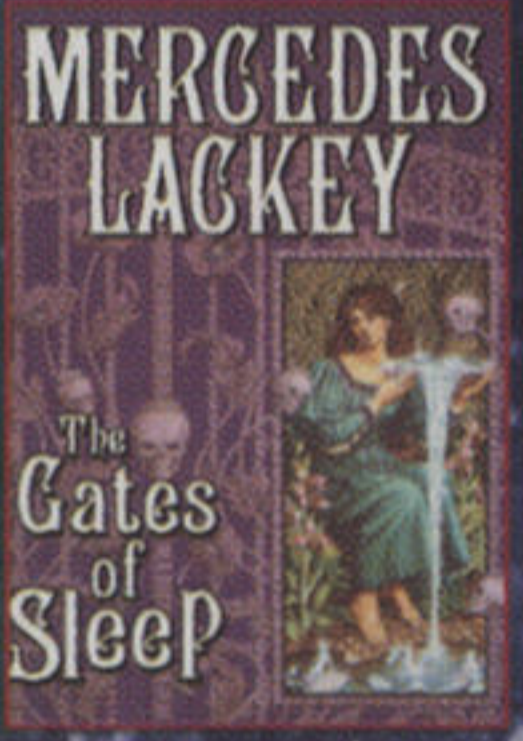
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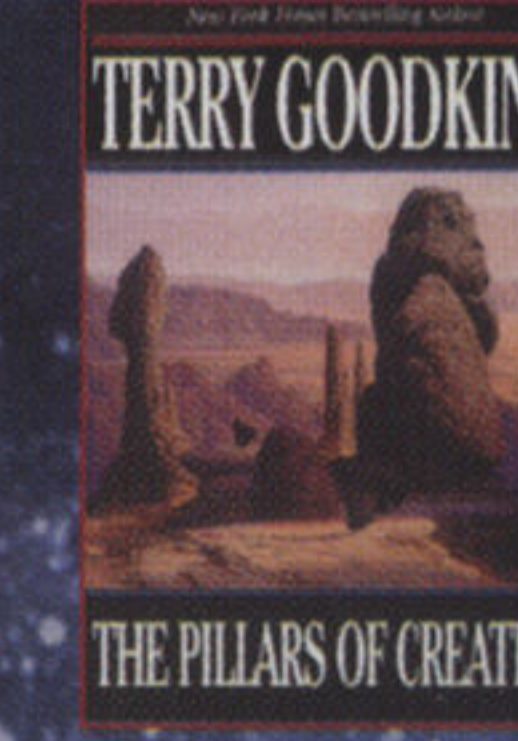
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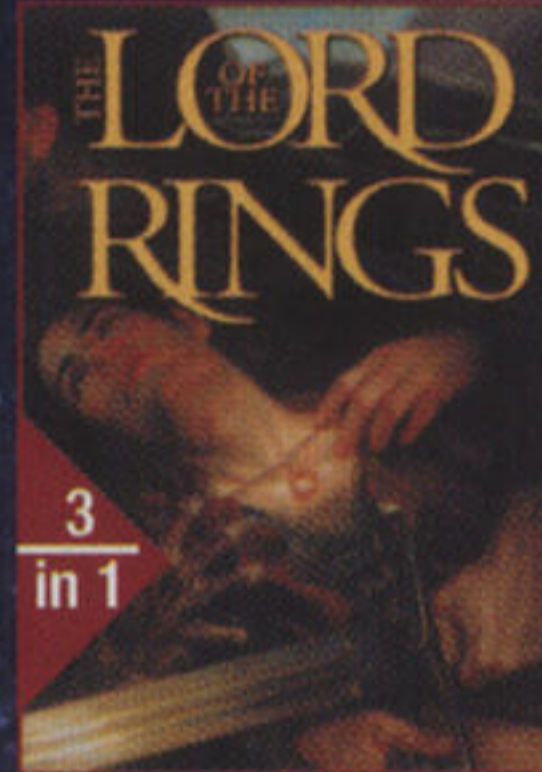


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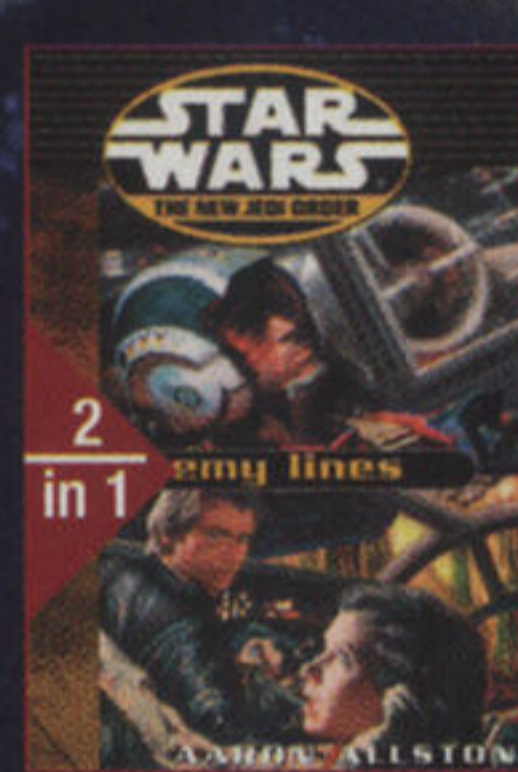


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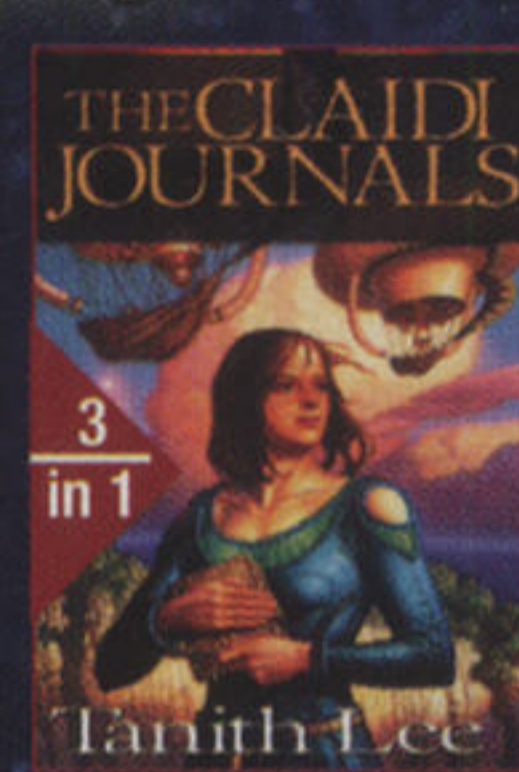
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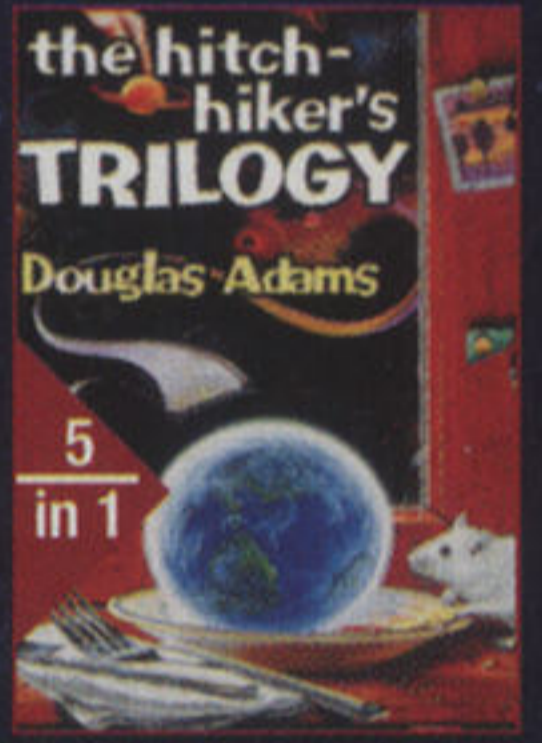
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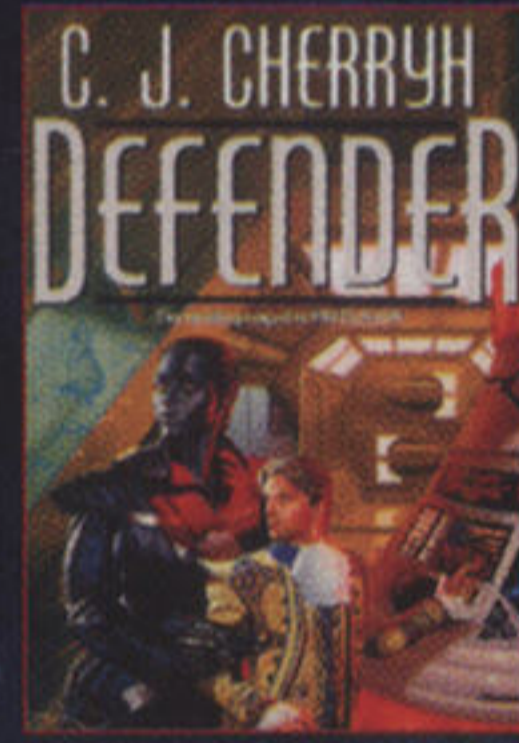
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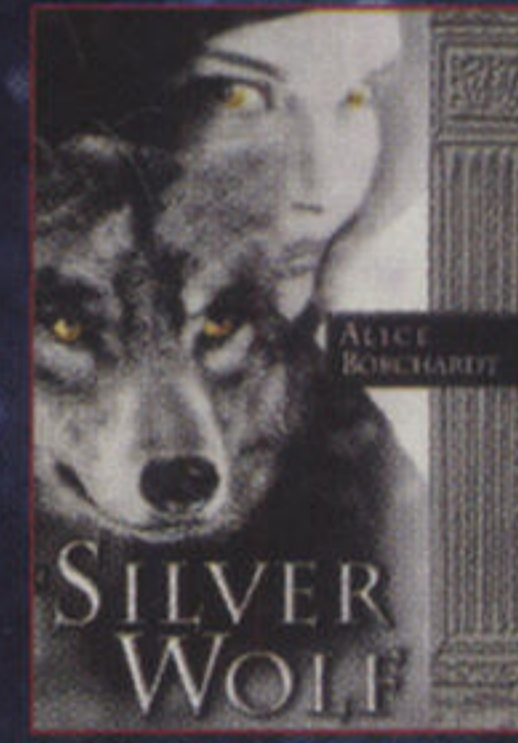
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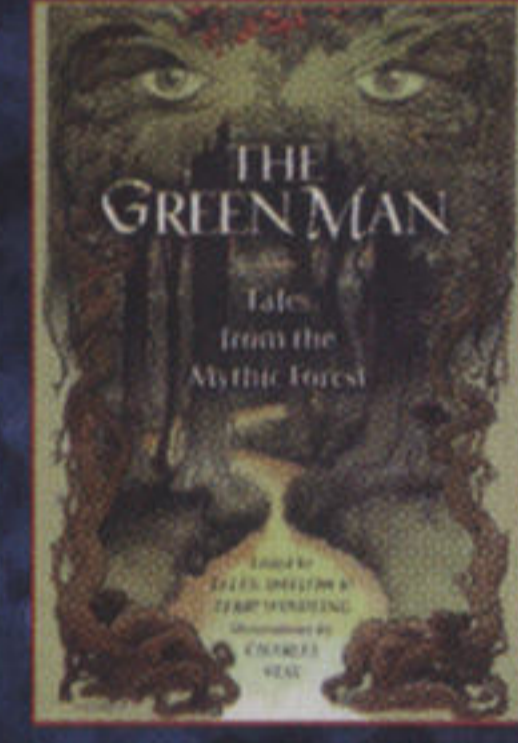
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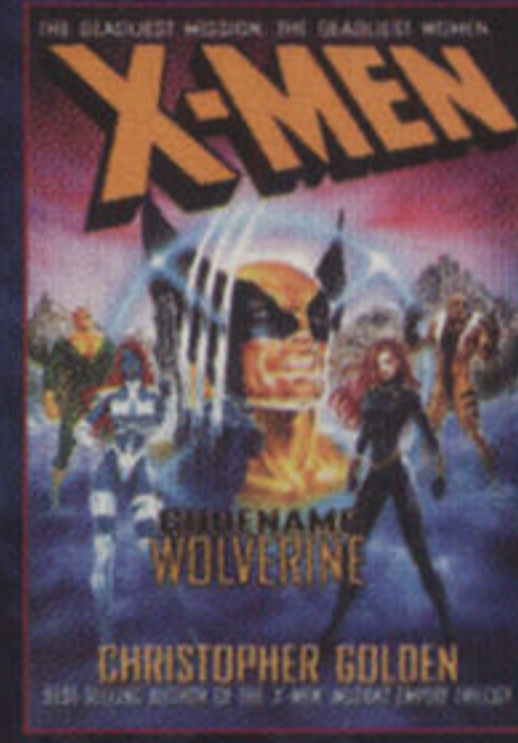
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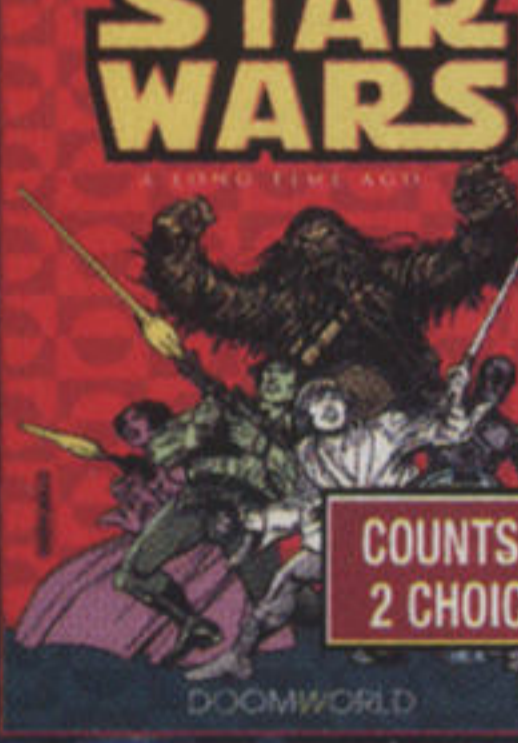
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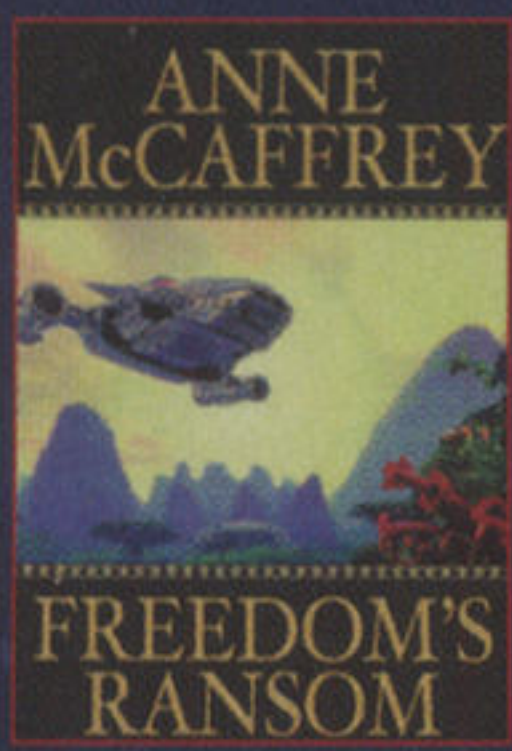
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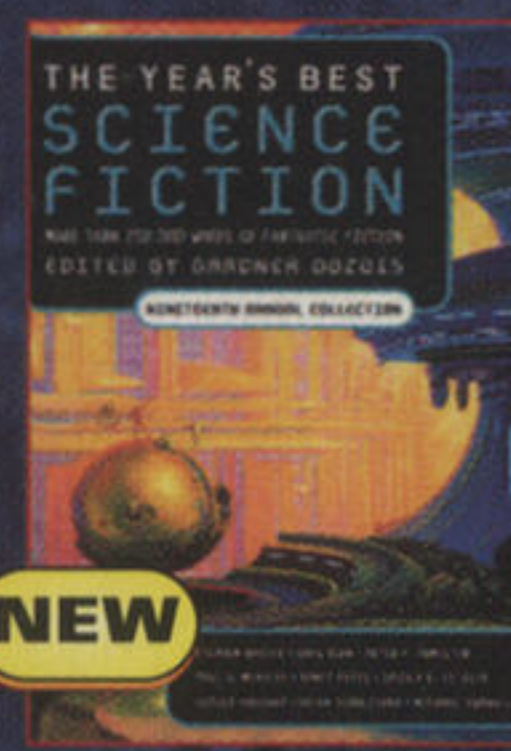
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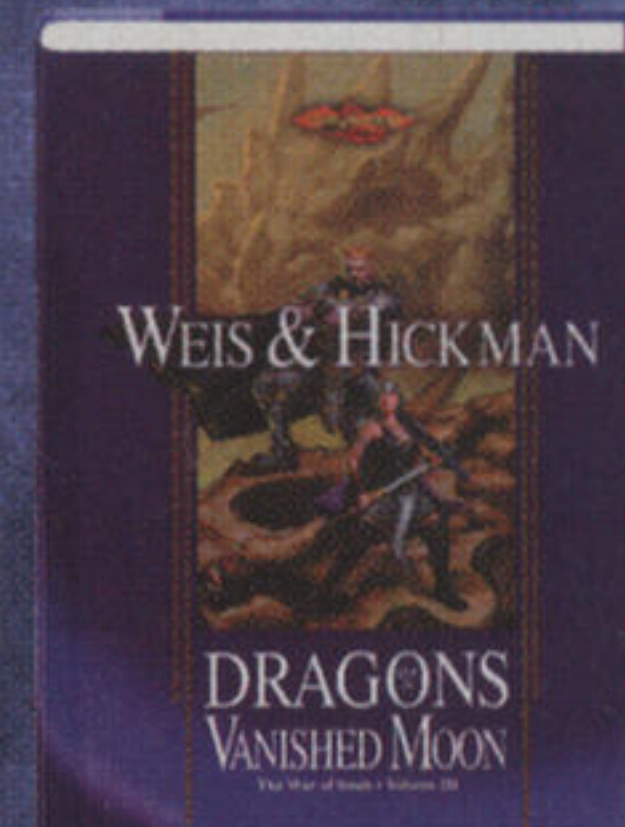
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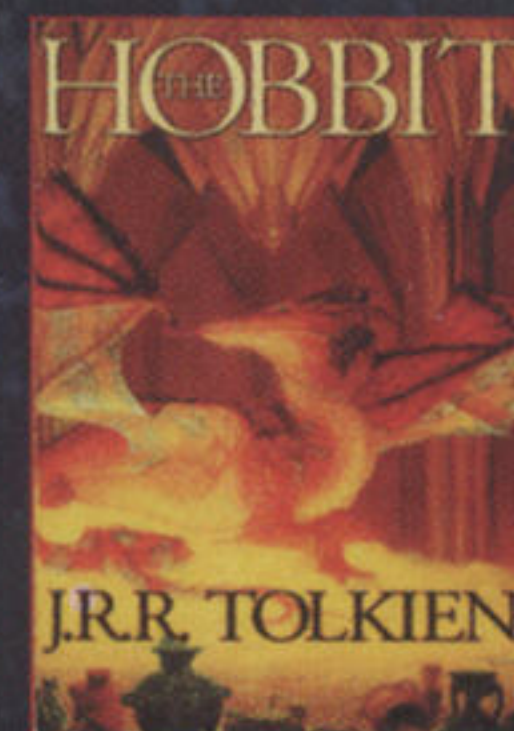
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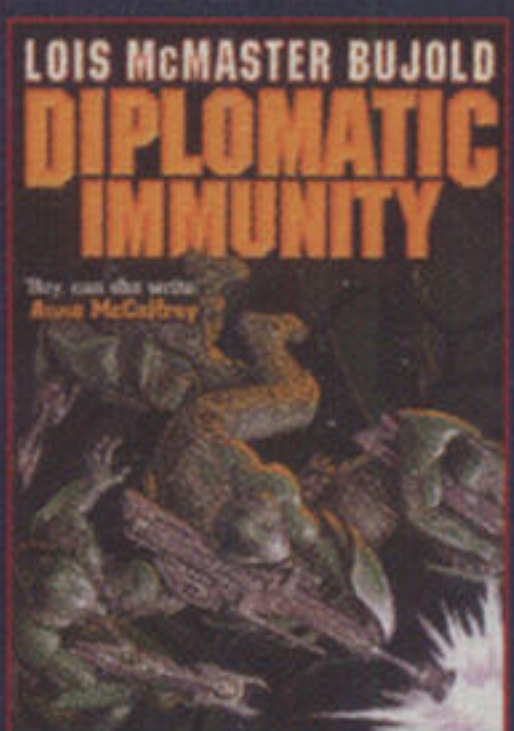
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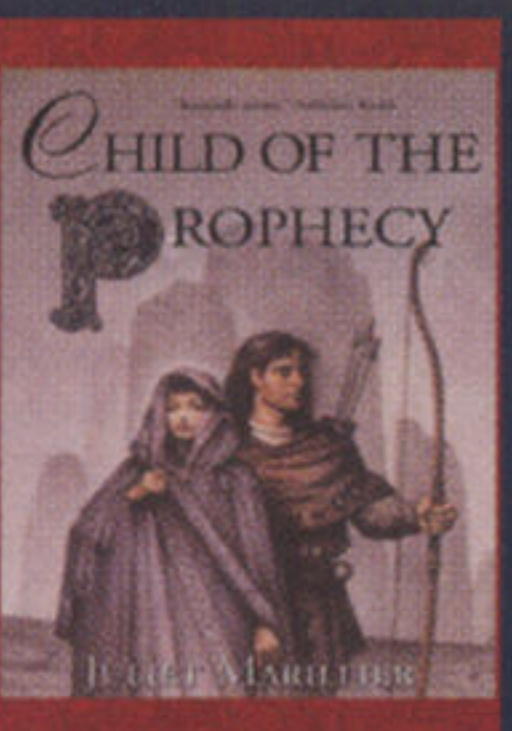
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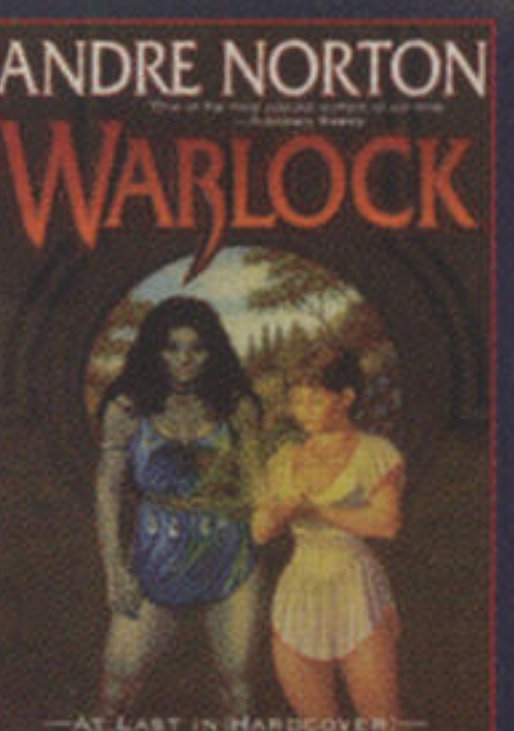
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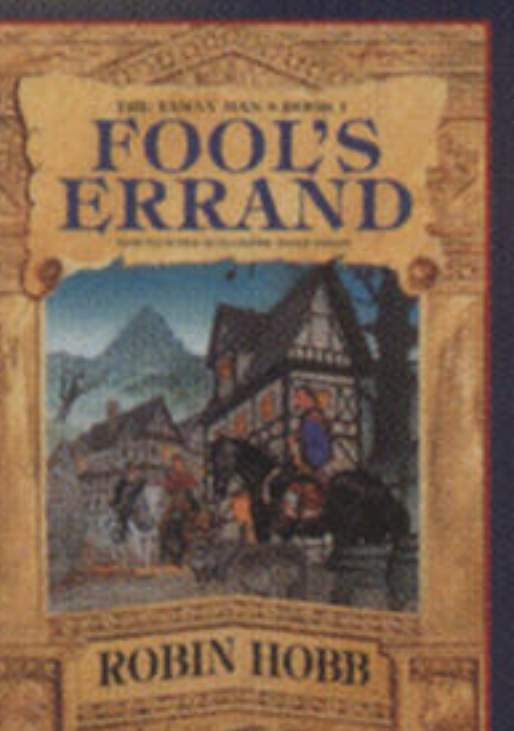
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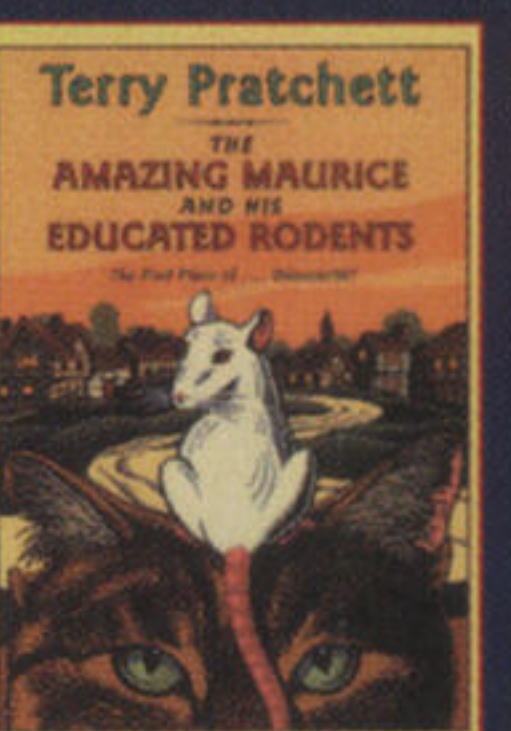
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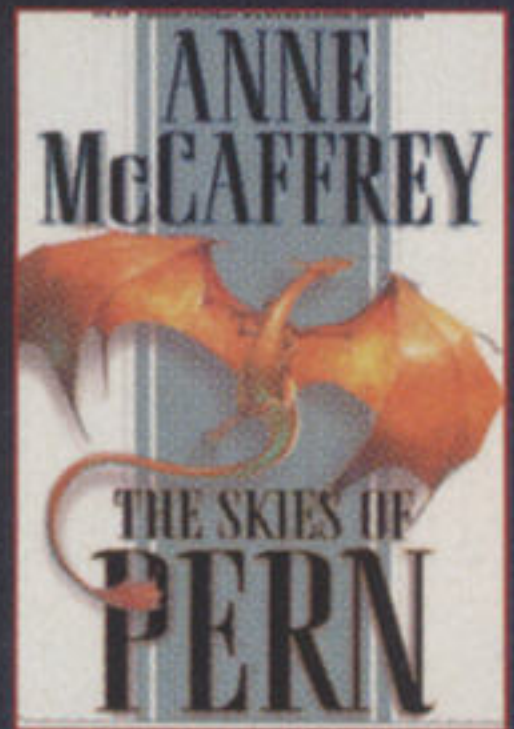
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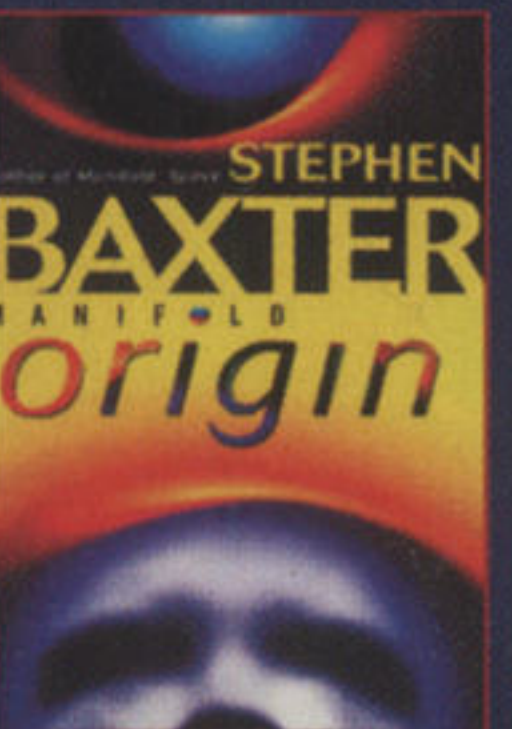
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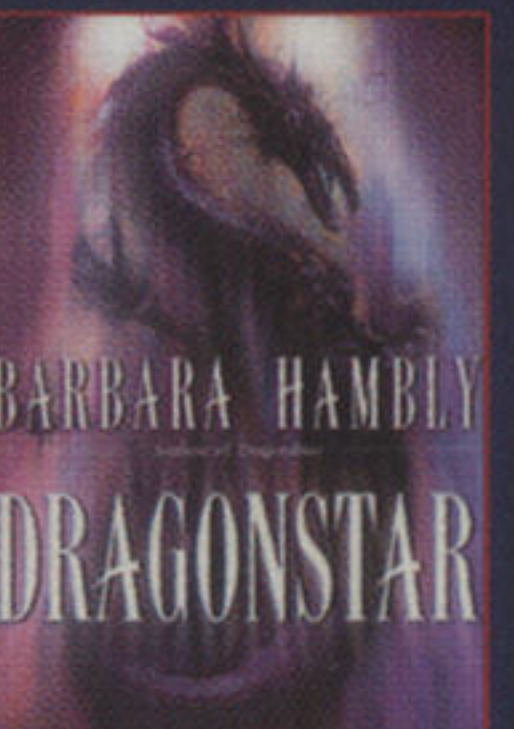
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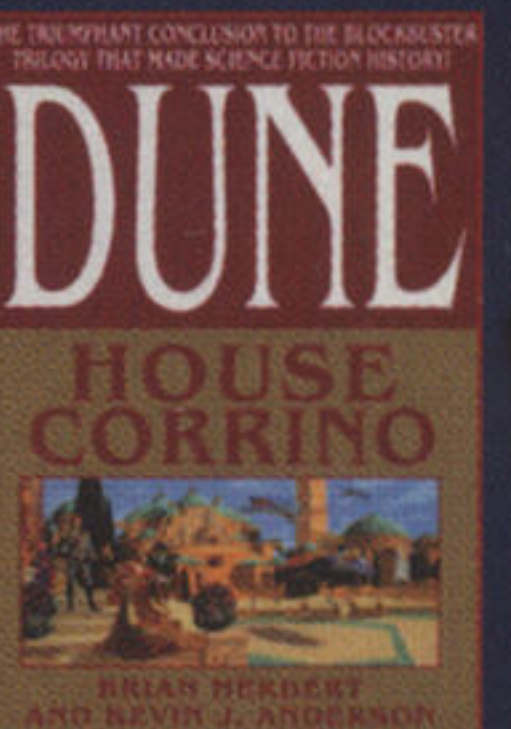
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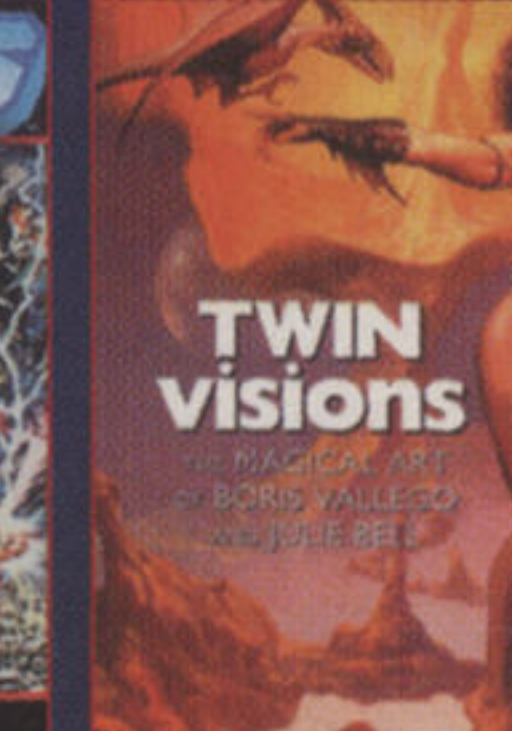
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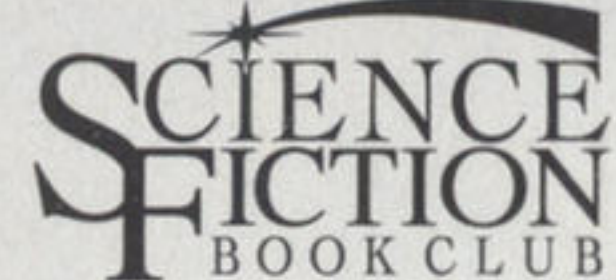


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## M. Night Shyamalan considers the origins and meaning of crop circles in *Signs*.

**M** Night Shyamalan has been compared to Alfred Hitchcock, in addition to other important filmmakers, such as Stanley Kubrick. Hitchcock specialized in thrillers and had a unique visual style. Shyamalan's films lean toward the supernatural and the mystical, and his visual style is just as distinctive as Hitchcock's, although much different and unique in its own way. And, like Hitchcock, Shyamalan appears in cameo roles in his films.

Hitchcock was a master of his craft, directing more than 60 films over the span of six decades, beginning with silent movies in the 1920s (when he was in his early 20s) and ending with *Family Plot* in 1976. His masterpieces include *Psycho*, *Rear Window*, *Notorious*, *Vertigo*, *North By Northwest*, *The Birds*, and *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Hitchcock's *Rebecca* won Oscars for Best Picture and Best Cinematography in 1940, along with a total of 11 nominations. Many of his films are about ordinary people who suddenly find themselves hurled into extraordinary situations. One of Hitchcock's trademarks was his

use of humor in the midst of dark and twisted situations.

Hitchcock was one of a kind.

In 1970, 10 years before Hitchcock's death, M. Night Shyamalan was born in India, then raised in Philadelphia. Like Hitchcock, Shyamalan directed his first feature film, *Praying with Anger*, when he was in his early 20s. Shyamalan actually traveled to India to shoot on location and star in the movie. *Praying with Anger* was released in 1992 and was welcomed with good critical reviews. However, distribution was limited, so few people saw it.

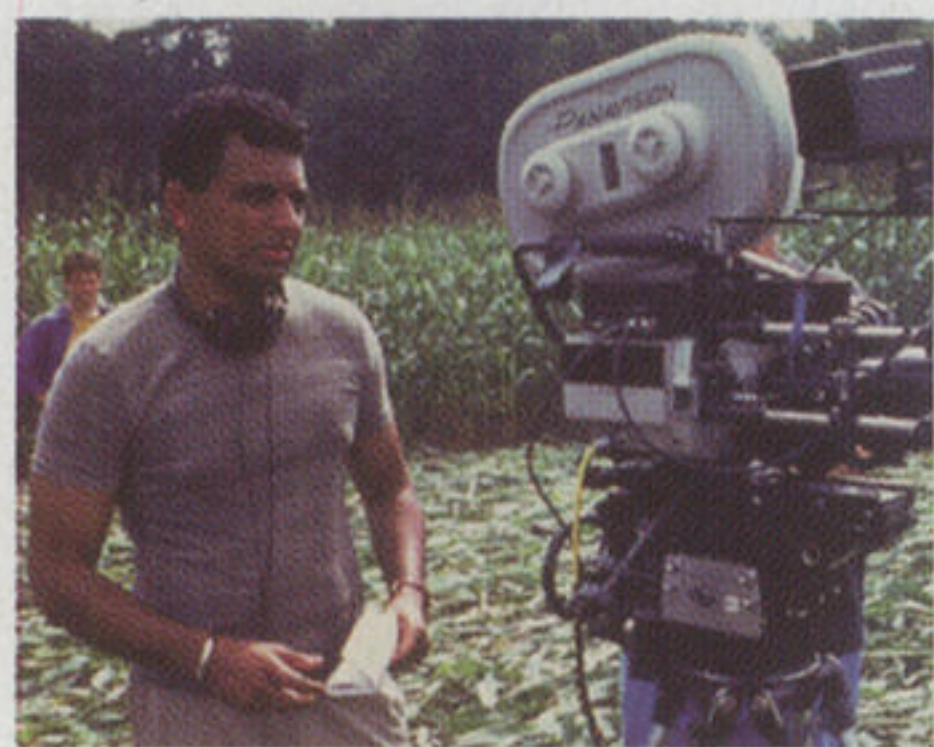
Six years later, his second film, *Wide Awake*, boasted a strong cast, including Rosie O'Donnell and Dennis Leary, but few people saw the

movie, despite good reviews. Shyamalan kept working, sometimes writing scripts for other people to direct. He wrote the screenplay for 1999's *Stuart Little*, and he's already credited with one of many writing credits for *Indiana Jones 4*, slated for a 2004 release. In the 1990s, his work was solid and well respected, but few people could have predicted what would happen next.

By the year 2000, the third film directed and written by Shyamalan received six Oscar nominations, including nominations for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Screenplay.

That movie was *The Sixth Sense*.

*The Sixth Sense* marked a leap in Shyamalan's writing. His first films were small stories. *Praying with Anger* is about a young man who returns to his native India and learns about the country's culture, which allows him a better understanding of his family. *Wide Awake* is a kid-friendly comedy about a boy attending Catholic school and mourning the recent death of his grandfather. They're specific stories about specific characters. He shows the audience how the main character experiences the world around him, but this approach leaves a story open to interpretation. If you've seen *Wide Awake*, you know its ending can be seen in at least two different ways. What really happened? That's up to you and how you



Mel Gibson and Rory Culkin are mystified by the crop circle in their cornfield.

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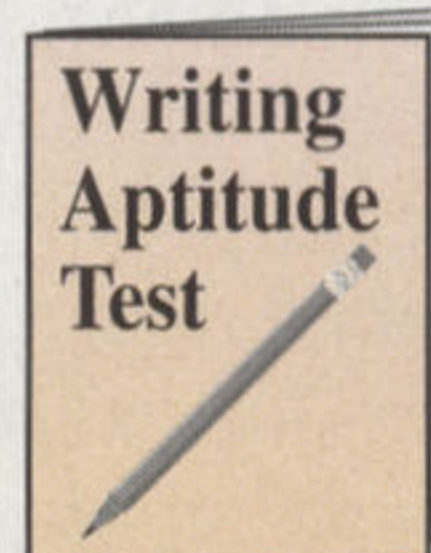
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According to the movie's Web site, crop circles have become more complex since they first appeared in 800 AD. Their designs often resemble maps of solar systems, and some even have fractal configurations.

choose to interpret the movie.

With *The Sixth Sense*, Shyamalan took a leap by presenting his view of the world instead of presenting one character's view. In *The Sixth Sense*, Shyamalan essentially shows us a world where ghosts are real. He shows us what they look like. He shows us what they want and why they're here. He draws a line in the sand and makes a very specific statement. He takes a stand and defines a world view. Shyamalan took the same approach in *Unbreakable* by showing us a world where comic book heroes and villains are based on real people who are just a little bit different from the rest of us.

Shyamalan has become one of a kind.

And now, in his new movie, *Signs*, scheduled for release on August 2 by Touchstone Pictures, Shyamalan will speculate about the mystery behind crop circles.

*Signs* centers on Graham (played by Mel Gibson of *We Were Soldiers* and *What Women Want*), a former priest who now lives and works on a farm with his two young children. As a man who's lost his faith, Graham is forced to come to terms with himself when circles begin appearing in his cornfields. The crop circles are signs ... but signs of what?

Maybe you've seen the trailer. It begins with an overhead shot of a triangular group of crop circles in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1975. Next is one large circle surrounded by a ring of smaller circles in Ajuntas, Puerto Rico, in 1991. A line of crop circles is shown in Ozora, Hungary, in 1992. Which brings us to the present day in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Graham, his children, and his brother (played by Joaquin Phoenix, who was nominated for a Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his work in *Gladiator*) discover a large pattern of circles in their cornfield. A narrator states that crop circles first emerged in the late 1970s—but now there's something new, something different, because it would take the coordination of hundreds of people in many countries to

explain the speed and quantity in which crop circles are now appearing. Graham wakes up suddenly in the night to find his daughter by his bedside. She says, "There's a monster outside my room. Can I have a glass of water?" We next see Graham walking across his kitchen floor at night, the floorboards creaking beneath his feet. He arms himself with a large kitchen knife, then uses it as a mirror, easing it into the narrow space beneath the closed pantry door, angling the knife to try to pick up a reflection of something that shouldn't be in the pantry, some kind of intruder. He sees jars of ketchup and mustard on the pantry shelves reflected in the knife blade. And then something pulls the knife out of his hand. The knife disappears beneath the pantry door. The narrator continues, saying there's only a limited number of explanations: Either the widespread appearance of crop circles is one of the most elaborate hoaxes ever created—or it's for real.

"Night's scripts and stories are very complex—they operate on many, many different levels," says producer Frank Marshall, who has produced nearly 60 films, ranging from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* to *The Bourne Identity*. About *Signs* Marshall says, "It really is Graham's quest to discover himself, to hopefully rediscover his faith. I think you can see the crop signs as two different things—that they're real or they're not real. You either believe in something or you don't believe in something. It's how he analyzes his belief, his faith. Are things a coincidence or are they real or considered a miracle?"

Which brings us back to Shyamalan's leap as a writer. Although *Signs* promises to deal with issues of perception and perspective, we can count on Shyamalan to treat us to a specific view of what exactly crop circles are and why they're appearing.

"I think *Night* is definitely presenting different worlds and characters operating within these worlds. That's very specific to *Signs*. I think there's a bigger picture.

"He just has a great eye. He has a unique vision of the world, and that's what's coming out; it's the way he sees the world. It's unusual and very creative and very artistic. He's a great writer and the translation to movies is extraordinary. That's his unique ability, to translate what he's put on the page to the screen. A lot of times you get a good writer but the writing doesn't necessarily get translated onto the screen. I think that's what's amazing about his work now."

Marshall laughs. "As a director, I'm very jealous of his being able to do both."

You've probably read about crop circles from time to time. A farmer suddenly discovers that his corn or wheat or barley has been broken and flattened by an enormous geometric design that looks like it's been pressed into the field.



The movie's Web site, [www.signs.movie.com](http://www.signs.movie.com), contains bits and pieces of information about crop circles if you hunt for them. Consider this: "As early as 800 AD, French literature mentions a warning sent out from the Bishop of Lyon to a local parish priest concerning devil worship amidst locals who were collecting seeds from flattened circles and using them for fertility rites. By the late 1970s, thousands of eyewitness reports had accumulated across the world that described crop circle formations in the shape of simple, yet precise circles. In the late 1980s, crop circle formations had developed from a simple circle to a multitude of circles. The variation in size and arrangement of the circles revealed increasingly more complex messages to eyewitnesses, scientists and researchers. The 1990s revealed the birth of fractal crop circle formations. These designs often resembled complex solar systems and insect-like shapes."

Fractals are defined as irregular curves or shapes that repeat in the same place but in different sizes. Think about paisley, as one example. Paisley is a fabric print made up of curved, abstract designs. Let's say you have a pair of paisley socks, and when you take a close look at them, imagine that you see the big paisley design is actually made of up lots of tiny paisley designs exactly like the big one, just on a smaller scale. That's a fractal.

But fractals in crop circles?

"As far as I know, the stuff that they're putting on the Web site is correct," Marshall says. "Isn't that wild?"

But while *Signs* focuses on the mystery of crop circles, it also focuses on one man and his family. Casting that family was an impor-

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TOP: Reflecting the humor in the film, Rory Culkin, Joaquin Phoenix, and Abigail Breslin wear tin foil hats to ward off alien invasion. BOTTOM: The family reacts to a noise upstairs.

tant task in making *Signs*.

One of Shyamalan's trademarks is his inclusion of children in his films. At least one child usually plays an important role in the story. As producer, Marshall invests an enormous amount of time scouting for child actors.

"I like to think that Kathy and I help," Marshall says, referring to his wife and fellow producer, Kathleen Kennedy. "We've had a lot of child actors in our movies, starting with *E.T.* It's a fun part of the process, trying to find kids that come along. We found Haley Joel Osment, who starred in *The Sixth Sense*."

Marshall and Kennedy go far beyond Hollywood to find young actors. When they search, it's long and thorough.

"It really is just a lot of hard work, sort of scouring the country, because there's a new generation every couple of years that fits into these age groups. It's looking at a lot of tapes, and doing a lot of readings. They're out there—you've just got to find them. We have casting calls all around the country, and we

have somebody who goes through those tapes and narrows it down. And then we start meeting and having readings and callbacks."

When George Lucas cast the original *Star Wars*, he'd see three actors at a time: a Luke Skywalker candidate, a Han Solo candidate, and a Princess Leia candidate. Lucas was looking for chemistry between all three actors, because he knew that chemistry (or the lack of it) could make or break the movie. When he saw Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, and Carrie Fisher audition together, Lucas knew he'd found the right combination.

Likewise, Marshall talks about the importance of casting the entire family for *Signs*.

"It's not just finding the right kid, it's putting the family together. It's finding both the boy and the girl together that work. That took four or five months. And meanwhile, we're trying to prepare the rest of the movie. There's a lot going on. There's a point in making a movie where everything's happening at once. I find it a really exciting part of the process.

"We were interviewing the boys and the girls at the same time so we could compare. It's pretty grueling. You have to be very careful not to second-guess yourself. These are pretty raw candidates. They haven't had a lot of experience, except for Rory, who had quite a bit. So you're trying to balance someone who has no acting experience but may appear fresh and new against someone who knows how the system works and knows how to act, but you don't then want to have someone who looks like they're acting because they're so young and they don't realize they get into different habits. It's grueling and it's painstaking, but I think between the four of us (Marshall, Kennedy, Shyamalan, and New York casting director Douglas Aibel), we were able to come up with a really good combination."

Graham's children are played by veteran actor Rory Culkin and newcomer Abigail Breslin. While Culkin has appeared in several movies, including *The Good Son* and *Richie Rich*, alongside his brother, Macaulay Culkin, *Signs* is Breslin's first movie.

"She's only 5 or 6. She hasn't had a lot of experience. She understands that people will ask her to do things over and over again and not to get frustrated. That's the hardest thing for a kid to understand. 'Why am I doing this again?'"

As producer, Marshall is on set while a movie is being shot to troubleshoot any problems that come up. Once on set, he sees the magic of the chemistry between actors that he's brought together for the film.

"It's the part I like the best," Marshall says about being on set. "It's the most exciting."

Marshall and Kennedy are mainstays of Hollywood. Individually, they've produced movies ranging from *E.T.* to *Snow Falling on Cedars*. Together, they produced *The Sixth Sense*, and now they've joined forces again for *Signs*.

"I think the greatest challenge is doing something new," Marshall notes. "It's easy to go down the same road and tell a story in the same way it's been told before, but Night likes to do things a bit differently. The challenge is having all these complex ideas come together in one movie. [*The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable*] are very sophisticated and complicated in their own way. There are a lot of different things going on. It's not just a straight-ahead thriller. It's always harder to do something different.

"It's a real audience ride. It's a rollercoaster. It's scary and funny and emotional. I think it's very, very satisfying by the end. I love seeing it with an audience. It's had three previews."

How have audiences responded?

"Fantastic! The audience is totally with the movie. You can hear a pin drop. The screams are big and the laughs are big. I think that's one of the things that Night put in this movie that hasn't really been in the other two—there's a lot of humor. You feel like this is a real family, and it's the way a real family would react.



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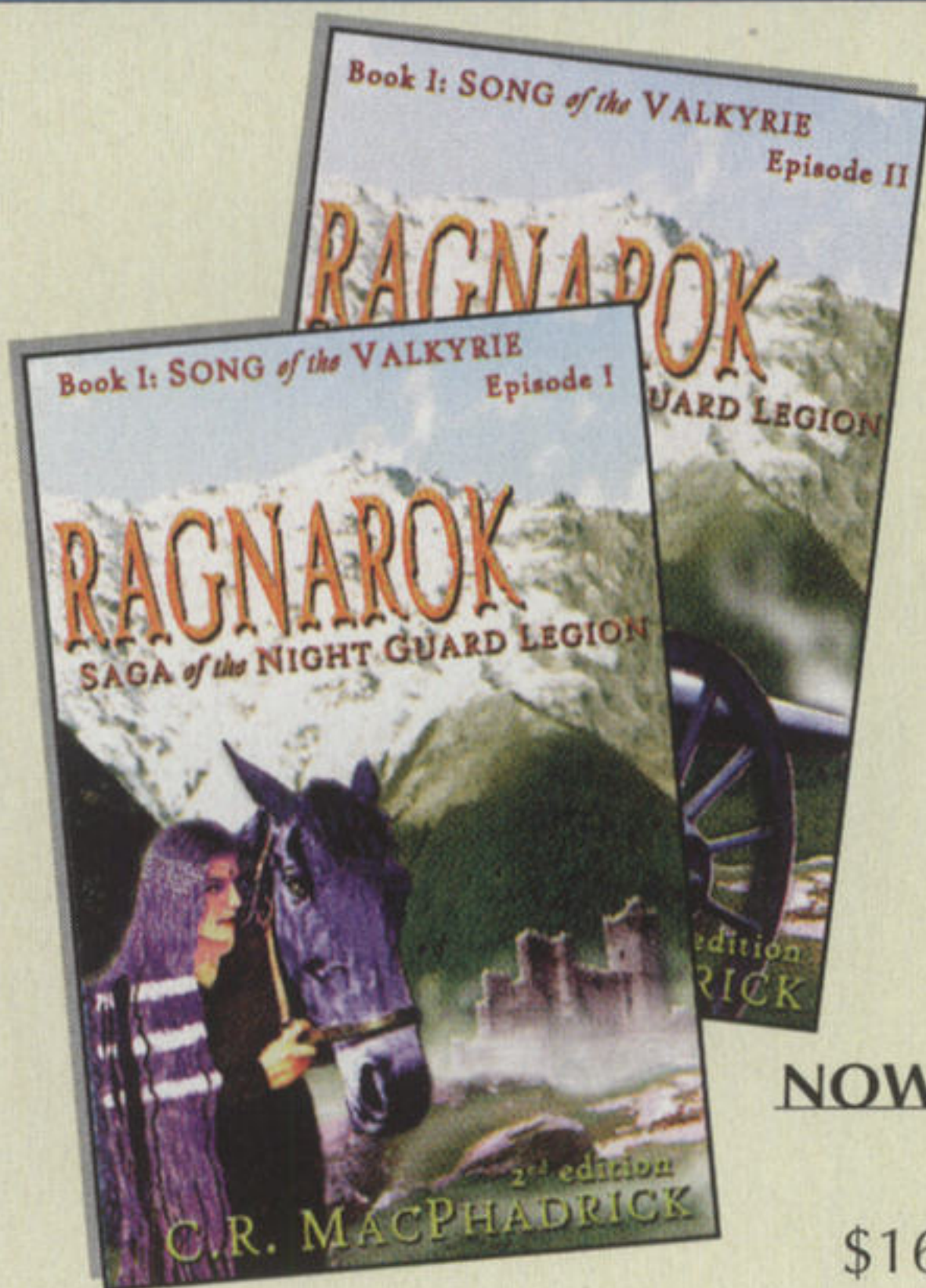
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"We don't take ourselves too seriously. A lot of times, in thrillers, I find that characters take themselves too seriously. We all like to joke around when things get a little bit scary. Sometimes it's a nice release to make a joke, and I think we have a lot of that."

Ironically, the production of *Signs* resonated with the sense of a real family responding to a time of crisis. The movie was scheduled to begin shooting on September 13, 2001.

"We took a vote on whether we wanted to start or not," Marshall says about the aftermath of September 11. "We'd all been together when it happened, and we decided that we would rather go forward than sit around and do nothing. There was more of a somber beginning to the movie than usual, but everybody bonded together in a different way. We felt, as a lot of people did, we didn't want this to stop us. We wanted to go forward and keep working together. We wanted to move forward rather than be paralyzed."

"Everybody went home, obviously, that day. Kathy and I were separated from our two young daughters, who were here in LA. We couldn't fly for almost a week. But then we had our filmmaking family, so we were with people we cared a lot about. It's always interesting to see how you react to a situation like that and what everyone finds precious and valuable. We were all a lot closer to each other, having gone through that. The anthrax stuff happened 15 miles away from where we were shooting. The post office was right up there on the border by New Jersey. There was a different feeling in what we were doing."

Will that different feeling show through in *Signs*? If we look closely, if we try to read between the lines, will we see a sense of family in the movie that's a little stronger because of the extraordinary circumstances the cast and crew faced while shooting the movie?

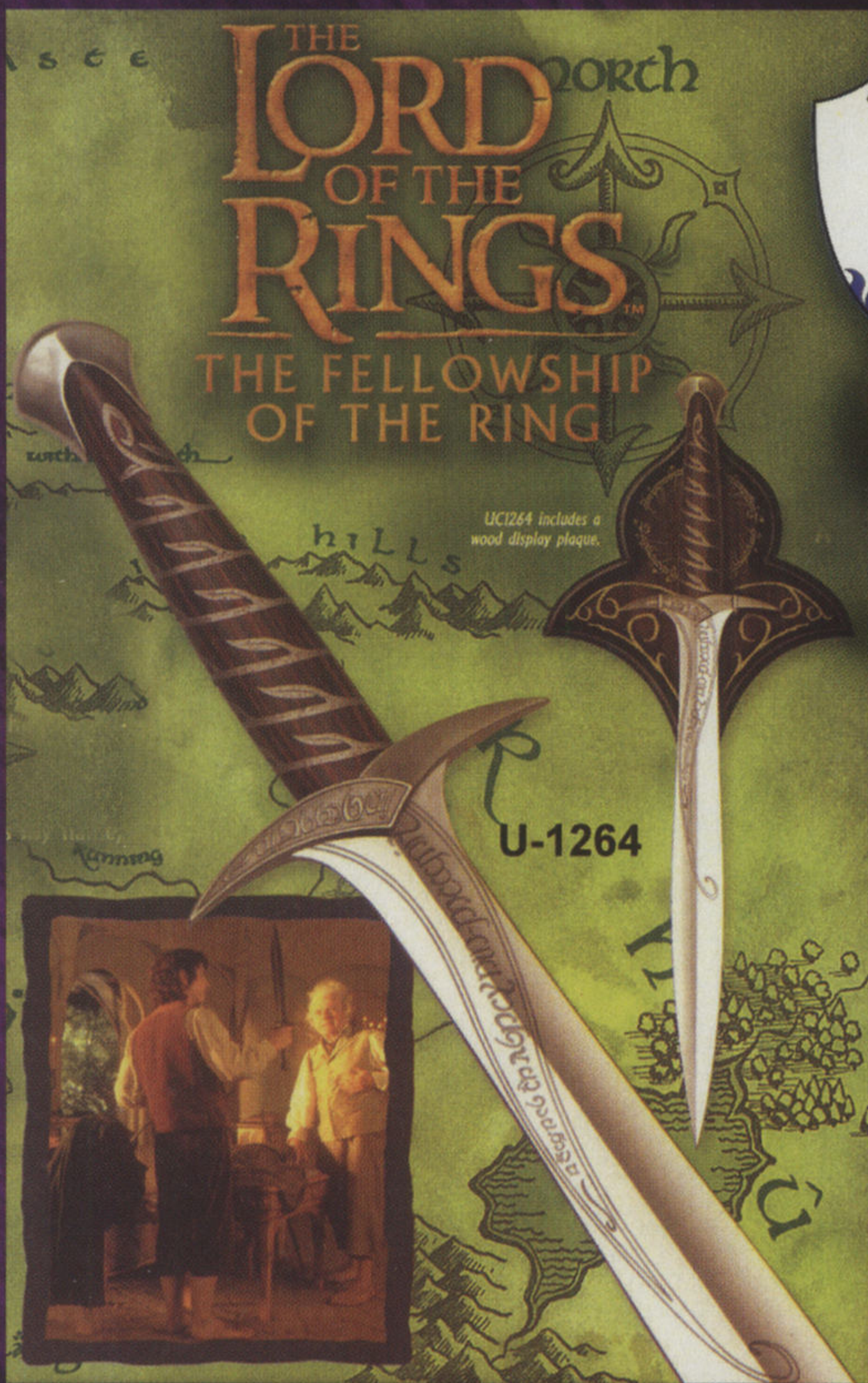
Those are questions that may only be able to be answered by each viewer. But there is one answer to a larger question that seems fairly certain.

If Shyamalan keeps growing in his craft, he's bound to become one of the most important filmmakers in history. *Signs* is the fifth film he's both written and directed, and he's only in his early 30s.

Consider this: Although Hitchcock did some writing in his day, he directed other people's screenplays. Although Hitchcock had directed more films by the time he was in his early 30s, it wasn't until his 40s that *Rebecca* landed 11 Oscar nominations—and *The Sixth Sense* garnered five Oscar nominations just two years ago.

But Shyamalan's films aren't just about box office and awards. As Marshall notes, there are many layers to Shyamalan's work.

"He's really an amazing filmmaker. His work is not superficial, it's very deep. He gets through to people on levels that they're not used to seeing in a movie. If you look at *Signs*, there are always different levels working." 🍌



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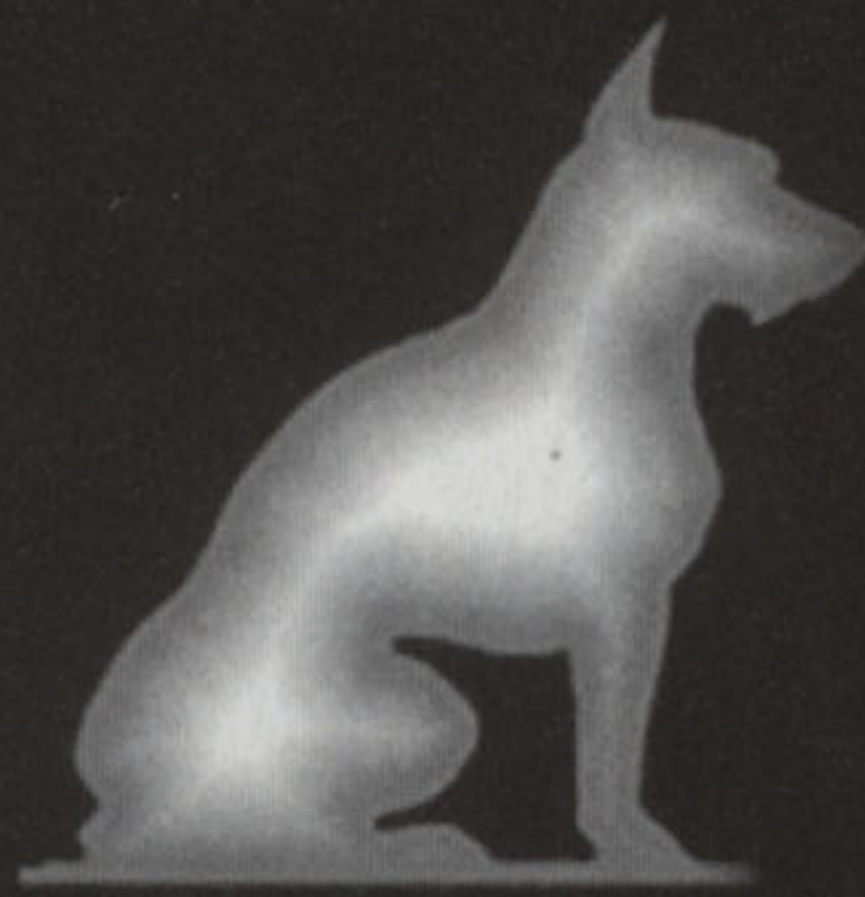
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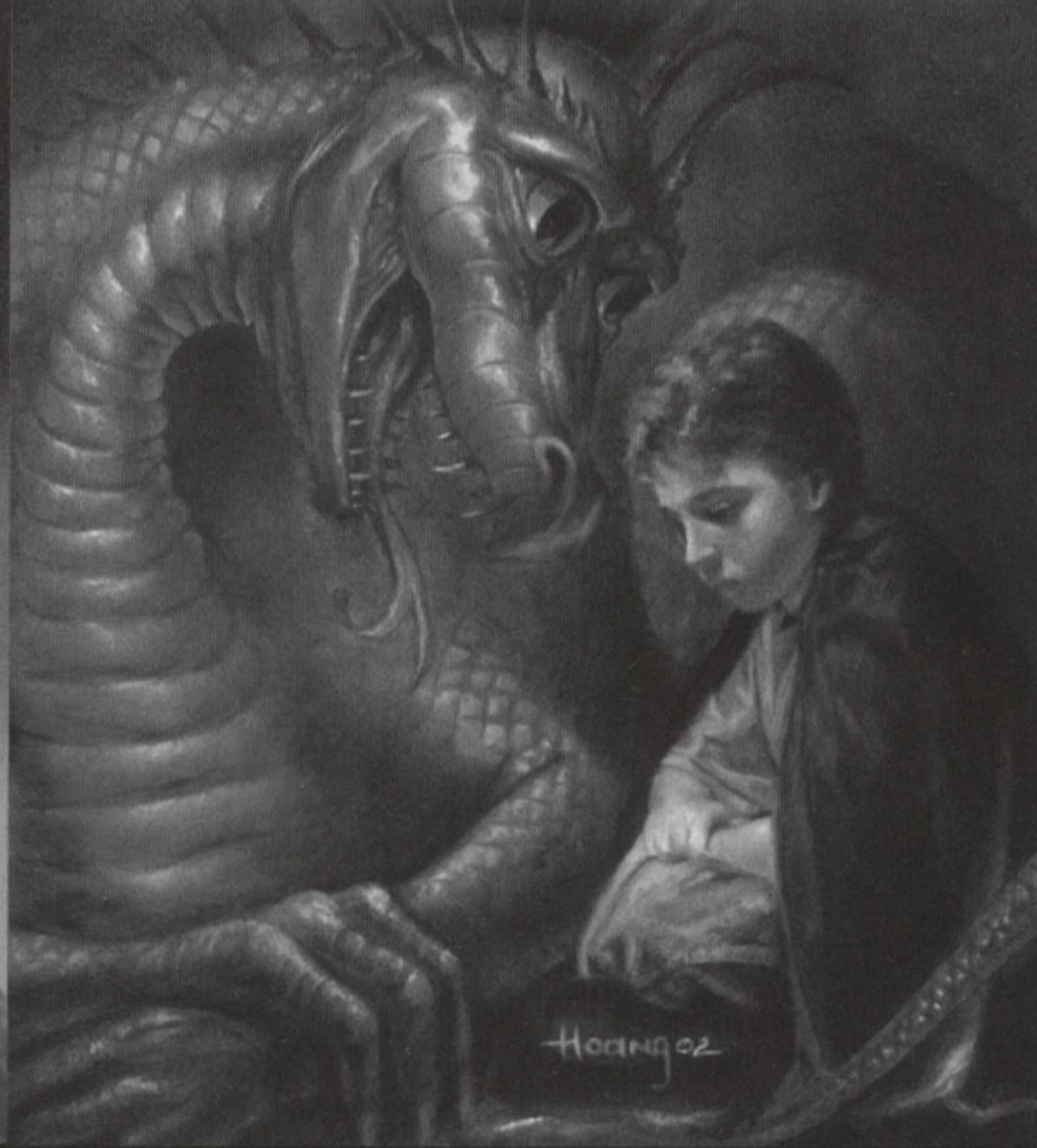
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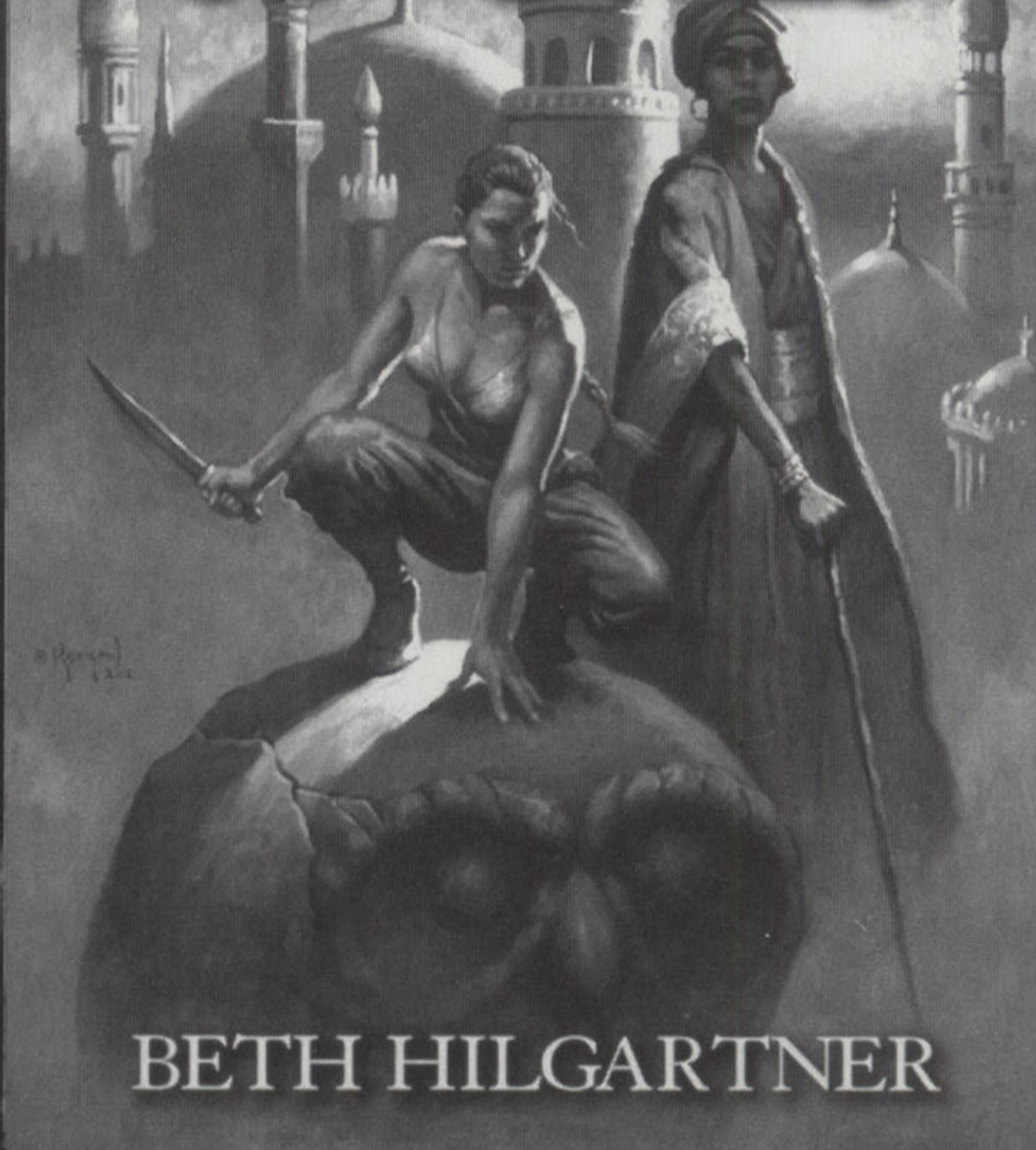
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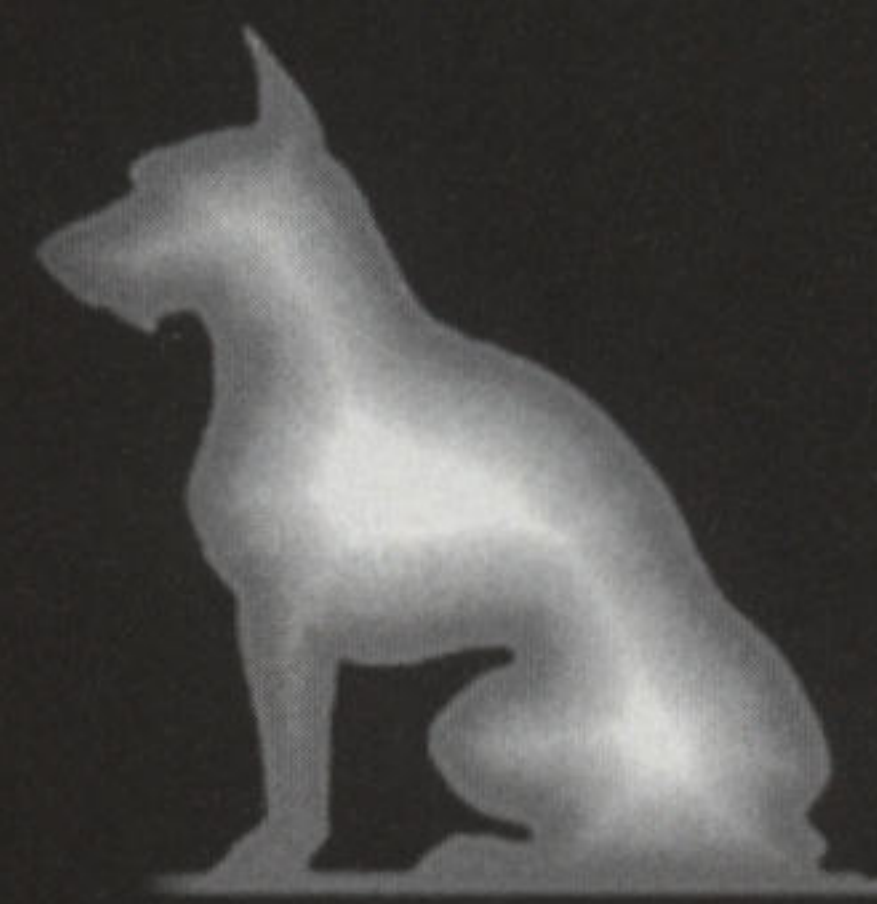
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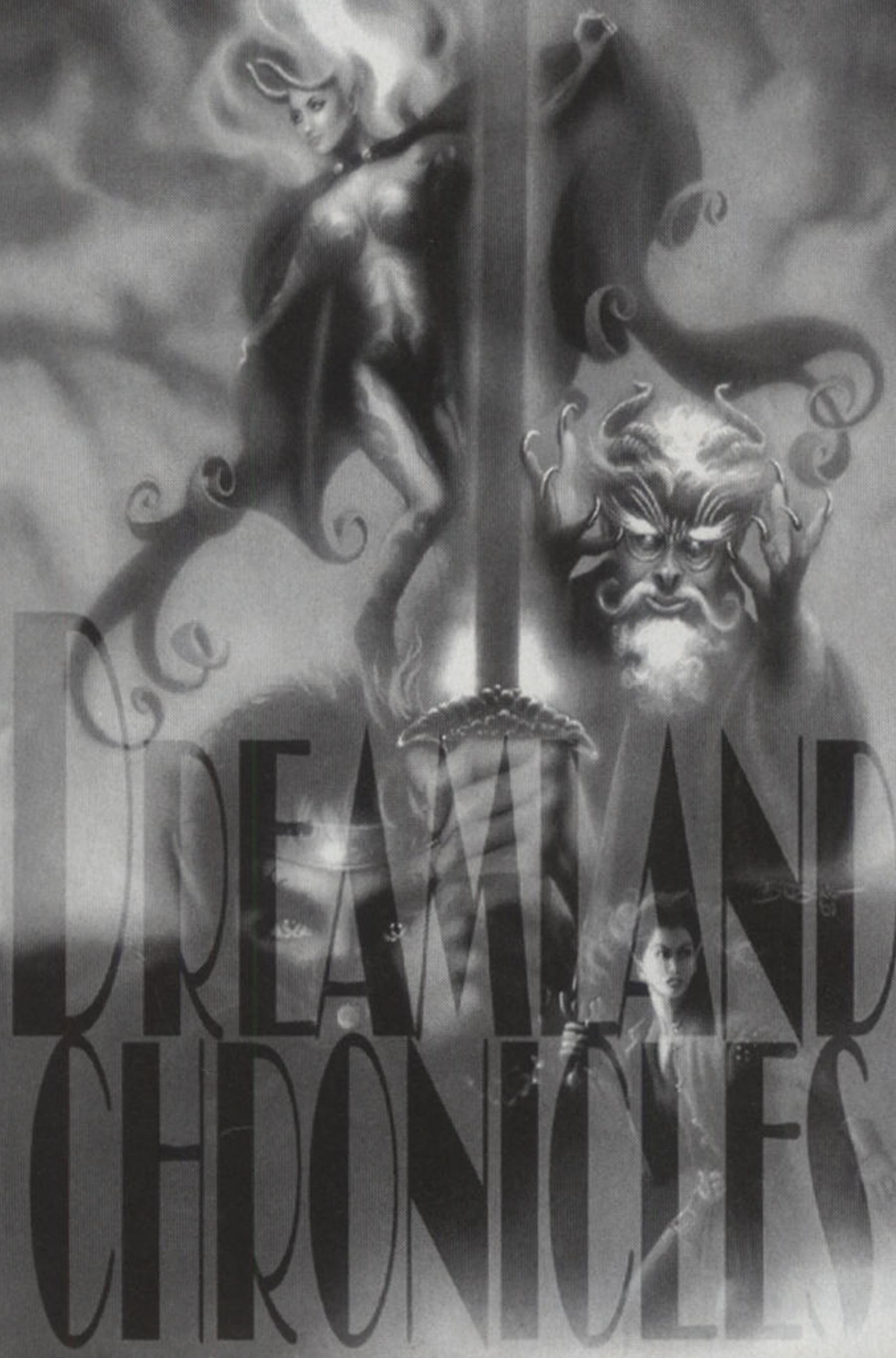
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## A cozy, old blues bar makes a delightful background for a haunting—or two.

One of the most satisfying subgenres in fantasy is that concerning urban bars or cozy small-town taverns or country inns: those places that are a warm glow in the night's darkness backed by the comforting sounds of human conversation or even—if one is particularly lucky—a little music to get the chilled heart pumping.

These places are among humankind's most generous inventions, for they offer the weary, lonely wanderer not only a place of rest and refuge from the cruel, cold city streets or the damp and frightening darkness of the forest, but they offer food and drink and the companionship of one's own kind.

Using a snug oasis as a background for bizarre and fantastic events works so well because the coziness of such environments contrasts so effectively with weird intrusion. The relaxation that comes from having found what one believes to be a safe place makes one all that much more vulnerable to startlement and fright.

*The Blues Ain't Nothin'* (by Tina L. Jens, The Design Image Group, Darien, Ill.; trade paperback, 208 pp., \$15.95) takes place in a very special kind of supposedly safe retreat: the Lonesome Blues Pub located in the Lincoln Park area of Chicago's North Side. In common with all the many other such institutions in that part of the world, it opens its doors to the public at 8 in the evening, starts the music at 9:30, lets the sets run on until 1:15, and then closes down at 1:30 AM.

When we first encounter this establishment it is run by Miss Sarah who has come to Chicago from Grand Detour—which I must say is a really great and authentically nutsy midwestern name for a little town—and who is the single mother of a delightful daughter named Little Mustang because her impregnator and husband-to-be was foolish enough to electrocute himself while celebrating their engagement by playing "Stormy Monday" on an electric guitar in the rain.

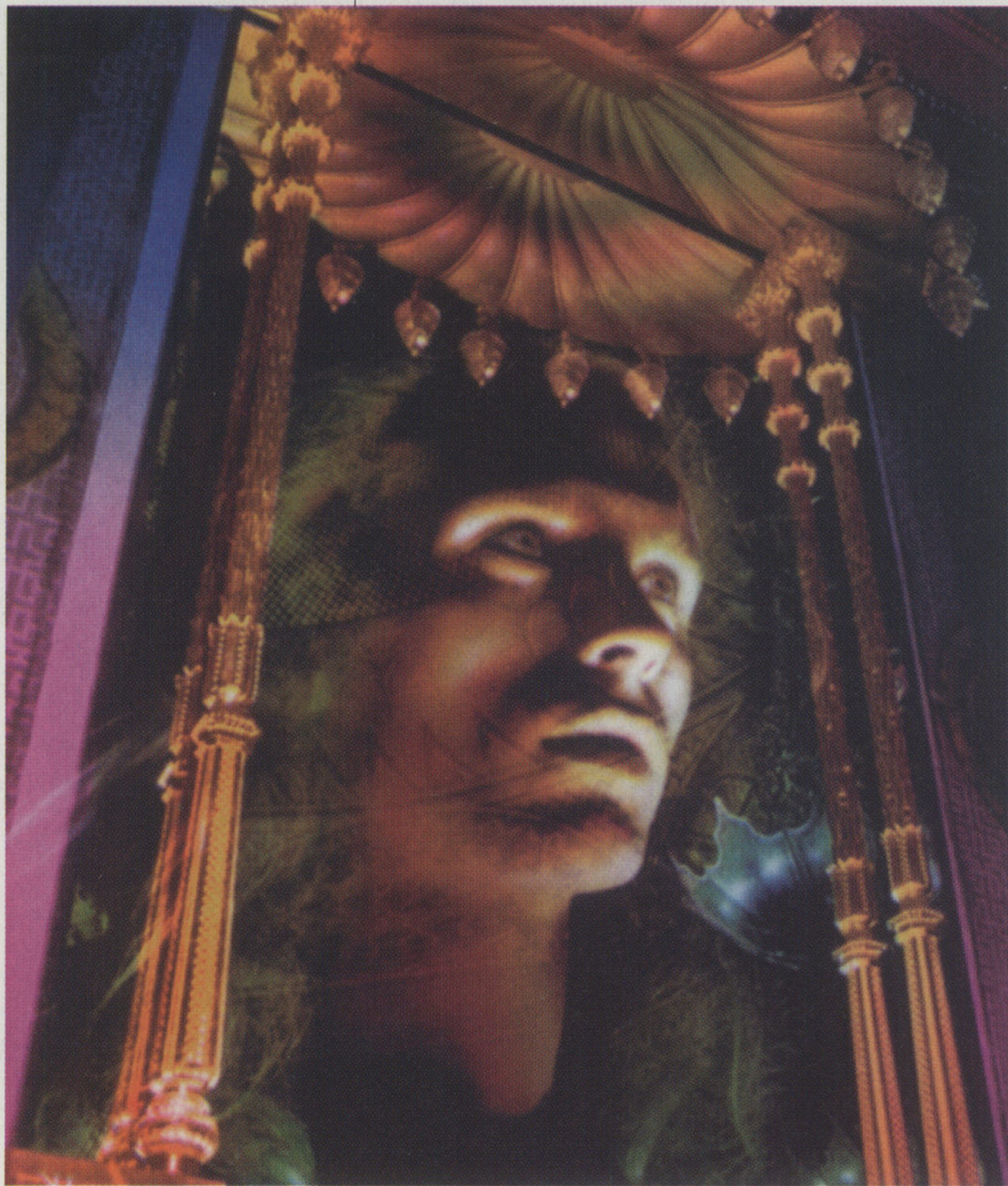
The clientele of the pub is a mix of trendy yuppies, partying youths, and elderly regulars known as the "felt hats," this latter group most outstandingly represented by such stalwarts as Old George and Ratman, who sit from opening to closing in chairs specially reserved for them sipping simple,

time-tested beverages and occasionally illuminating the bar's darkness by the soft flashings of their gold-capped teeth ("Can't be a proper blues person without a gold tooth.")

This colorful mixture of humanity is alternately firmly controlled and tenderly looked after by the pub's very large bouncer and doorman, Big Ray, and served drinks by waitresses who tend to date blues musicians pretty much because the two groups keep the same odd hours.

The thing that sets the Lonesome Blues Pub apart from its competitors is that the place is haunted, primarily and most noticeably by the ever unseen but palpably present phantom of Billy Jay Hawkins, most commonly referred to as Jayhawk, the best blues guitar player in Chicago until he tripped over his power cord and was impaled either by the microphone stand or the whammy bar on his guitar. Accounts vary.

Jayhawk is fond of Miss Sarah and in various kindly ways steps in for her dead husband who some-



J.K. Potter's stunning illustration graces the cover of *The Emperor of Dreams: The Lost Worlds of Clark Ashton Smith*.

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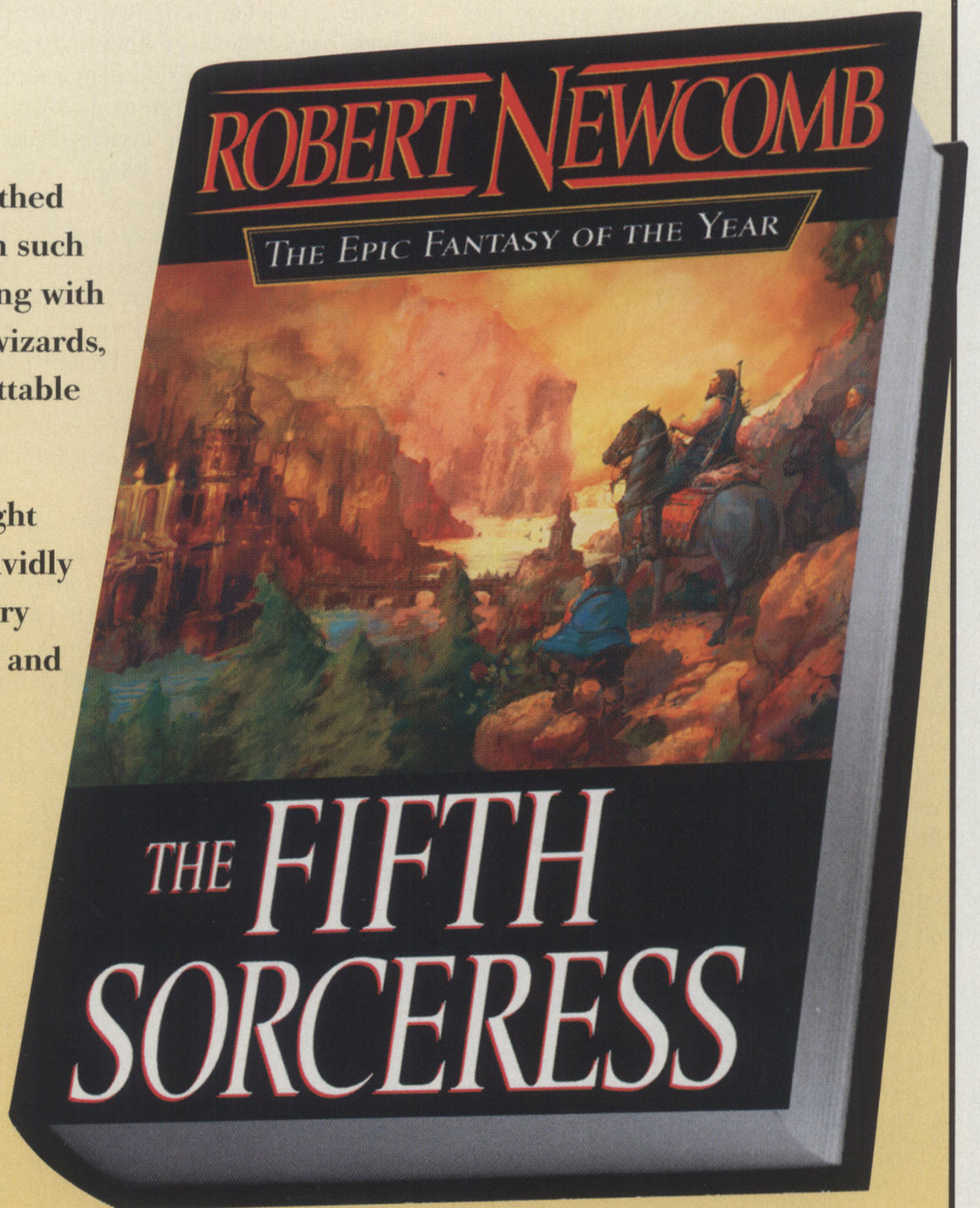
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how never manages to find his way back (a touch I found oddly logical), often handling the taped musical selections preceding the live performances and skillfully babysitting Little Mustang—witnesses observe that the bottle floating in air from which she sucked was carefully tilted in such a way that she wouldn't swallow air along with her milk. And Miss Sarah, as a return courtesy, insists that the lead of any group always play the first number of their opening gig on Jayhawk's beat-up black-and-white Fender guitar which always sits on its special spot on the stage because if you move the instrument it will always mysteriously return.

The various ghosts and demons that invade the pub are highly entertaining and range from types as sensational as a serial cannibal killer whose lyrics extend the blues into regions heretofore unexplored—

*Got your eyes on my dresser,  
Your heart on my kitchen sink.  
Your kidneys in my crisper drawer,  
What would the neighbors think?*

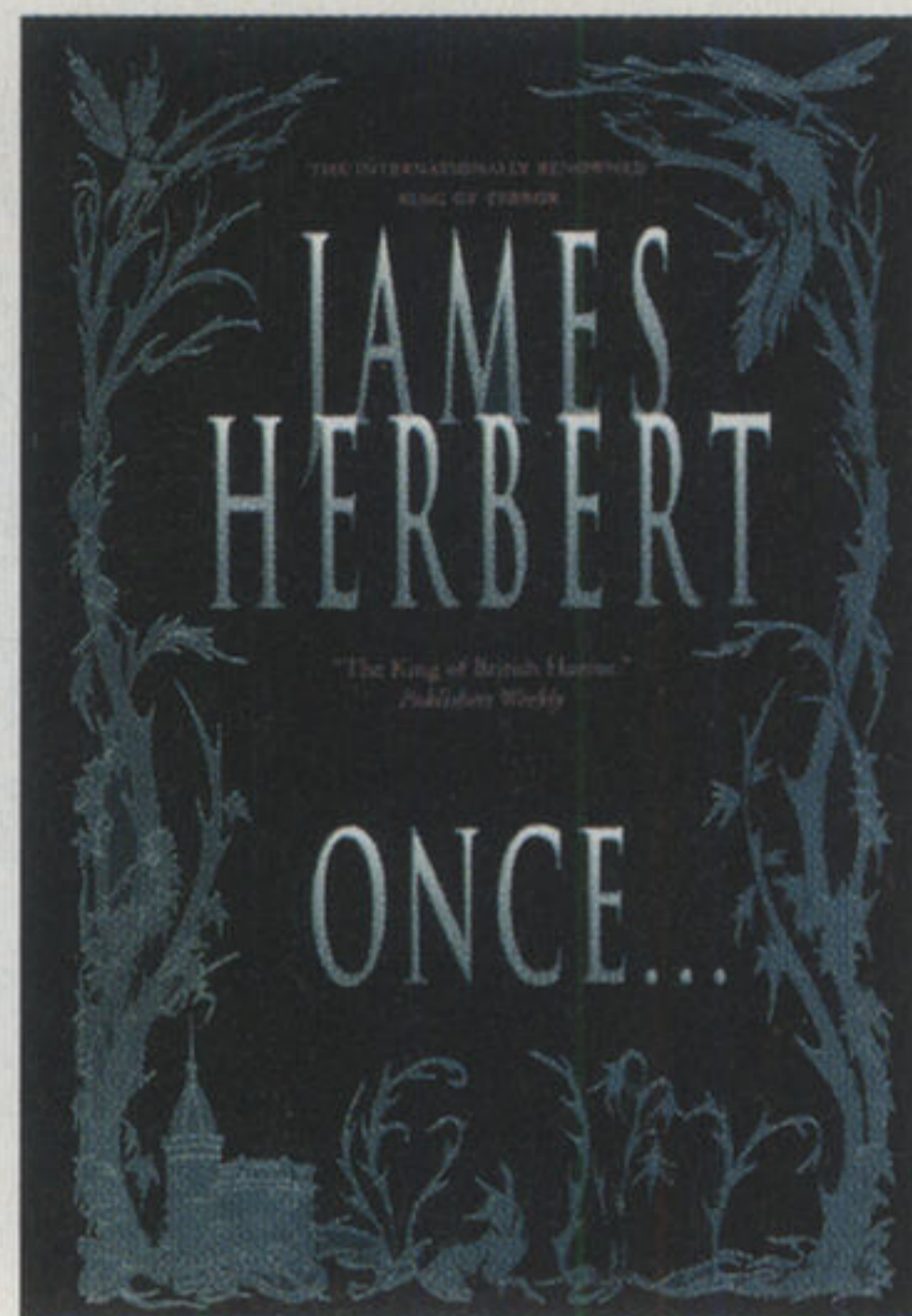
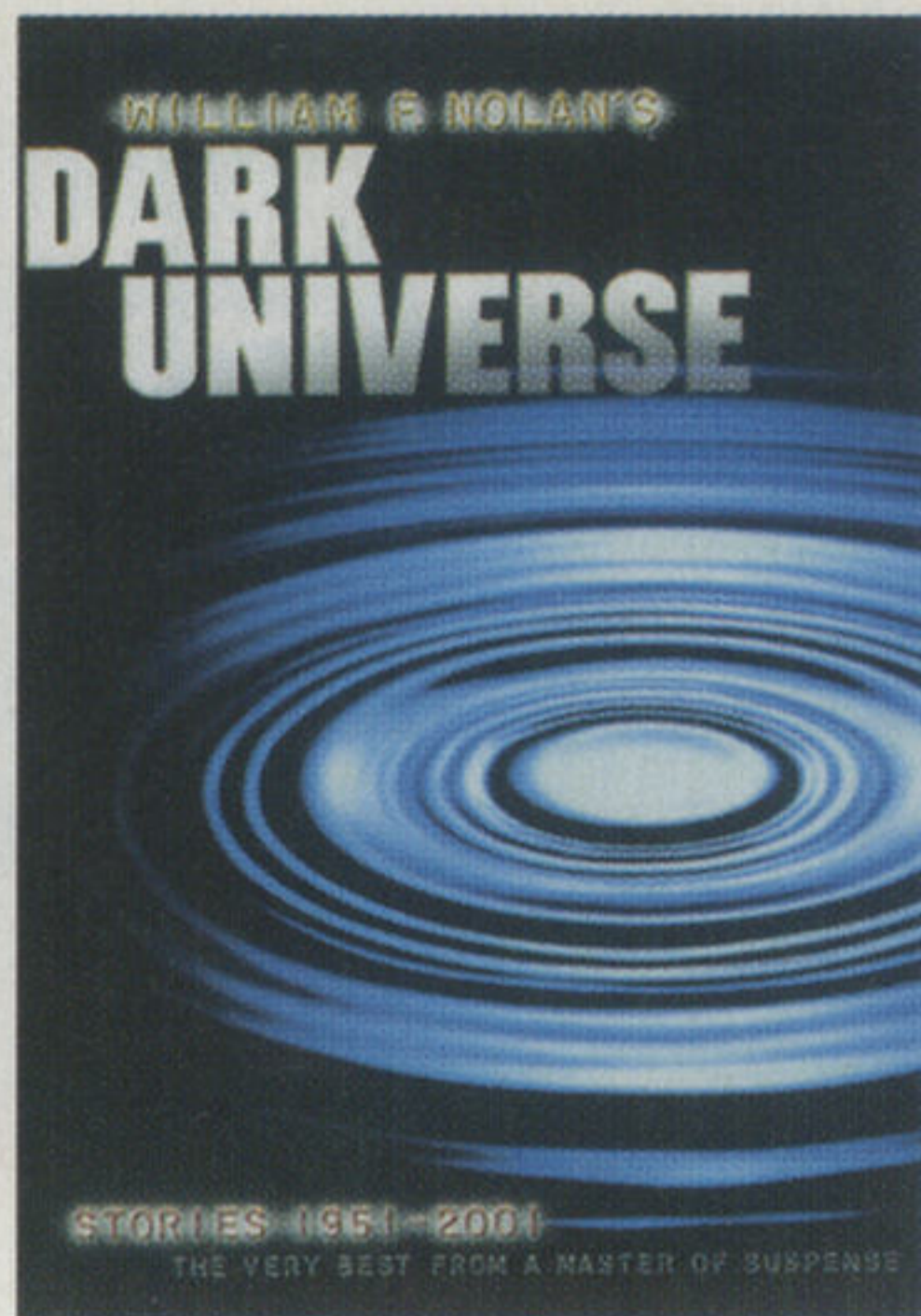
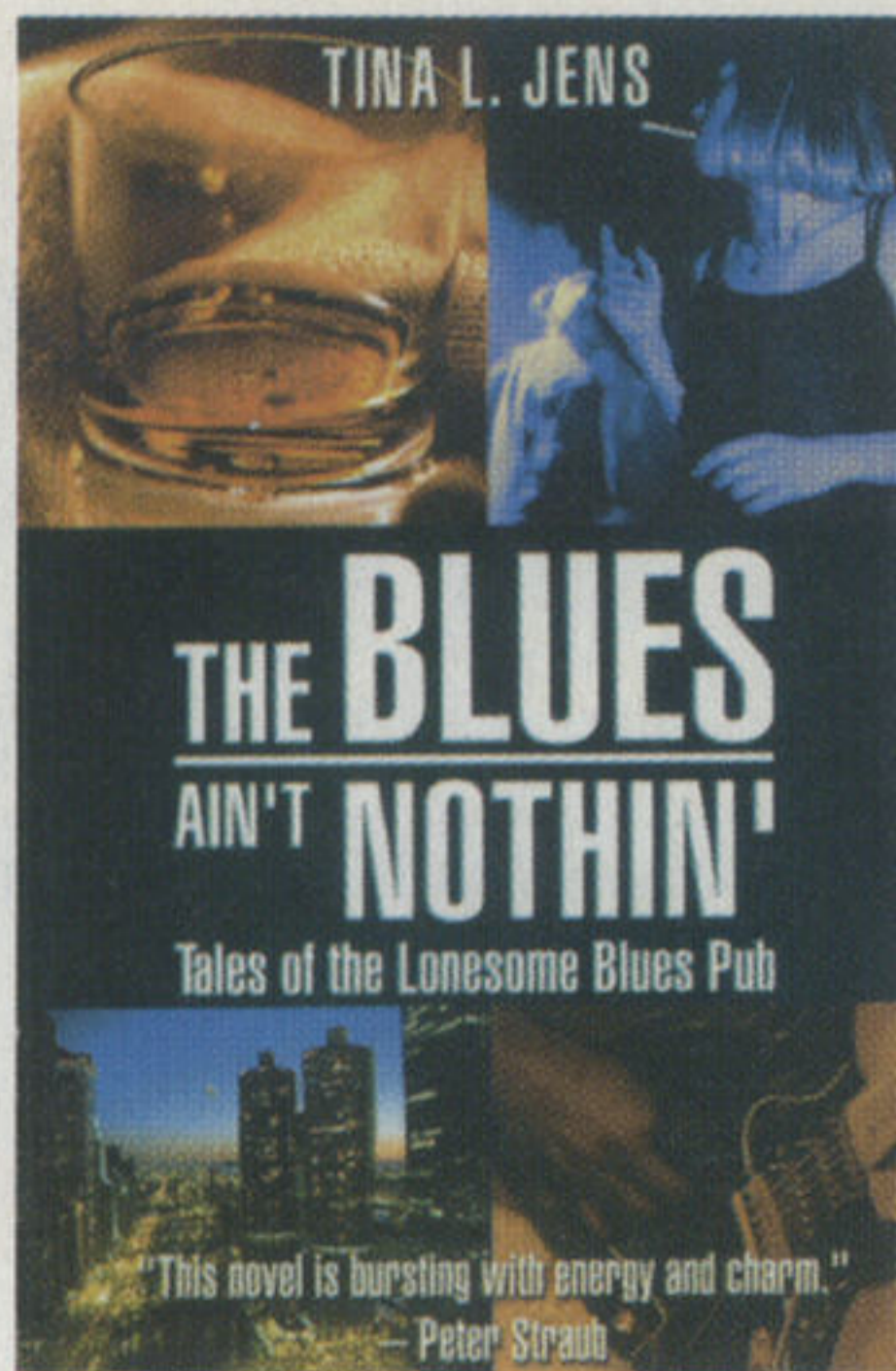
—to a gentle and convincing portrait of the ghost of the late, great Robert Johnson who made a deal with the Devil to be the greatest blues guitarist and singer ever and is still fleeing the hellhound that leaves round tracks exactly the size of an old 78 record and just as heavily grooved.

The cast includes all kinds of folk living and dead, real and made up. There is the spook of the legendary Memphis Minnie undimmed by death, the marvelous blues singer Liz Mandville Greeson who is happily still very much alive and you should hear her sing, and then there is Harpsicrazy, who is frightened of what he calls the rainbow rising in his mind for very good reason. The essential point is that if you read *The Blues Ain't Nothin'* you will not lack for interesting company.

A warm and delightfully entertaining novel and, as if that were not a generous enough gift to us all, Ms. Jens even provides the reader with a Recommended Listening List of blues singers' discs just in case you haven't heard the likes of Big Bill Broonzy, Big Time Sarah, Willie Dixon, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Tampa Red, and Marvelous Marva Wright at their thumping best.

It would be a great pity if you didn't take advantage of it!

**Dark Universe** (Stealth Press, Lancaster, Pa.; hardcover; 470 pp., \$29.95) is a treat, indeed: Forty-one stories by the truly wonderful William F. Nolan that have been selected by the author himself from 50 years of his writings, and each of them is preceded by a highly informative essay by the author



which not only provides you with deep insights into how the mind of a really, really good fantasy writer works, but will give you some idea as to how pleasant it is to meet this delightful and affable man. Do not skip them.

Nolan is one of the starring members of that doughty band of fantasy authors that has been labeled the "Southern California Group," and includes such awesome creators as Ray Bradbury, Richard Matheson, Charles Beaumont, and Robert Bloch. These people have influenced every living soul in our culture hugely via films and television shows and novels and short stories containing notions that, even if unseen in their original movies or unread in their original books, have bent the minds of us all by having transformed themselves eerily into urban myths, not to mention suburban myths and little-town myths. Believe me, these guys have scared you silly from when you were a baby.

These people mostly grew up in the weird terrain of the Midwest and one way or another (predominantly because of the lure of Hollywood moolah) drifted westward to find themselves wandering in the lower, sun-baked, and earthquake-shaken reaches of our southwesternmost state. They gravitated toward one another for company and to bounce their odd notions off of other midwestern heads in order to see how they'd resonate and—though each one of these authors is a complete original, not to say an eccentric—there is a definite shared feel about their work that has enormously influenced and will doubtless continue to influence, American fantasy.

The marvelous, from-the-heart introduction written by Christopher Conlon is touchingly honest and direct in its gratitude toward these writers, Nolan in particular, for having been desperately needed friends for the sort of lonely child he used to be. Adrift in a society that doesn't really seem to make any sense, considered odd and unsatisfactory by those who bore them, such children ache for some kindly verification, and people like William F. Nolan give it to them, and in generous quantities, bless their hearts.

This book is so packed with marvelous stories that I'll make no serious attempt to pluck out my favorites. However, I'll be happy to mention three especial beauties (because I can't help myself!) provided you fully under-

stand the choice is based on wild impulse, is in every way arbitrary, and that it misses many others I'd have listed if this were Tuesday instead of Thursday.

"Lonely Train A'Comin'" is a glorious example of Nolan's what-the-hell-let's-give-them-everything-I've-got approach which concerns the tracking down and marvelously satisfying destruction of the sort of

super-duper, way over-the-top monster that could only function in a place as vast and empty as the great Southwest. If you aren't anxiously squirming in your seat as this one reaches its climax you really ought to consult a doctor. It is also one of the short stories that nurtured the development of *Helltracks*, one of the author's best (which is saying something!) novels.

In his introduction to "Saturday's Shadow," Nolan unequivocally states that he believes this is one of his top stories and it's this reviewer's opinion that he's absolutely right. The ambience of the tale comes out of that almost spiritual love of movies most of us seem to share (and of which Nolan could well qualify as one of its highest priests) and is a grand paean to it, but it is also an astute and terrifyingly steady look into an all-too-common kind of madness that you hope never to encounter, especially in yourself. Also this one's so big it's got King Kong doing a cameo!

"The Party" has been officially listed by *Newsweek* as one of the seven outstanding horror stories of all time (you never know who'll notice) so it's got to be good. But (seriously, folks) beware, because if you do read it you will henceforth find an extremely creepy feeling now and then steal over you when attending certain kinds of social functions. Really. This is a serious warning.

Get hold of this book.

**The Emperor of Dreams; The Lost Worlds of Clark Ashton Smith** (Gollancz Books, London; trade paperback; 580 pp.; 7.99 pounds U.K.) is a collection of some of the works of one of the best fantasy writers ever, edited by Stephen Jones, a member of that tiny band of anthologists whose work is so reliably good that you automatically reach out and grab hold of any new volume spotted if you are wise.

The book leads off with a highly appropriate quote from one of Smith's poems, "The Hashish Eater," follows with his essay "On Fantasy," and after a complete presentation of another poem, "Song of the Necromancer," which is also marvelously apt, launches into an enormous selection of Smith's unique and truly magical stories.

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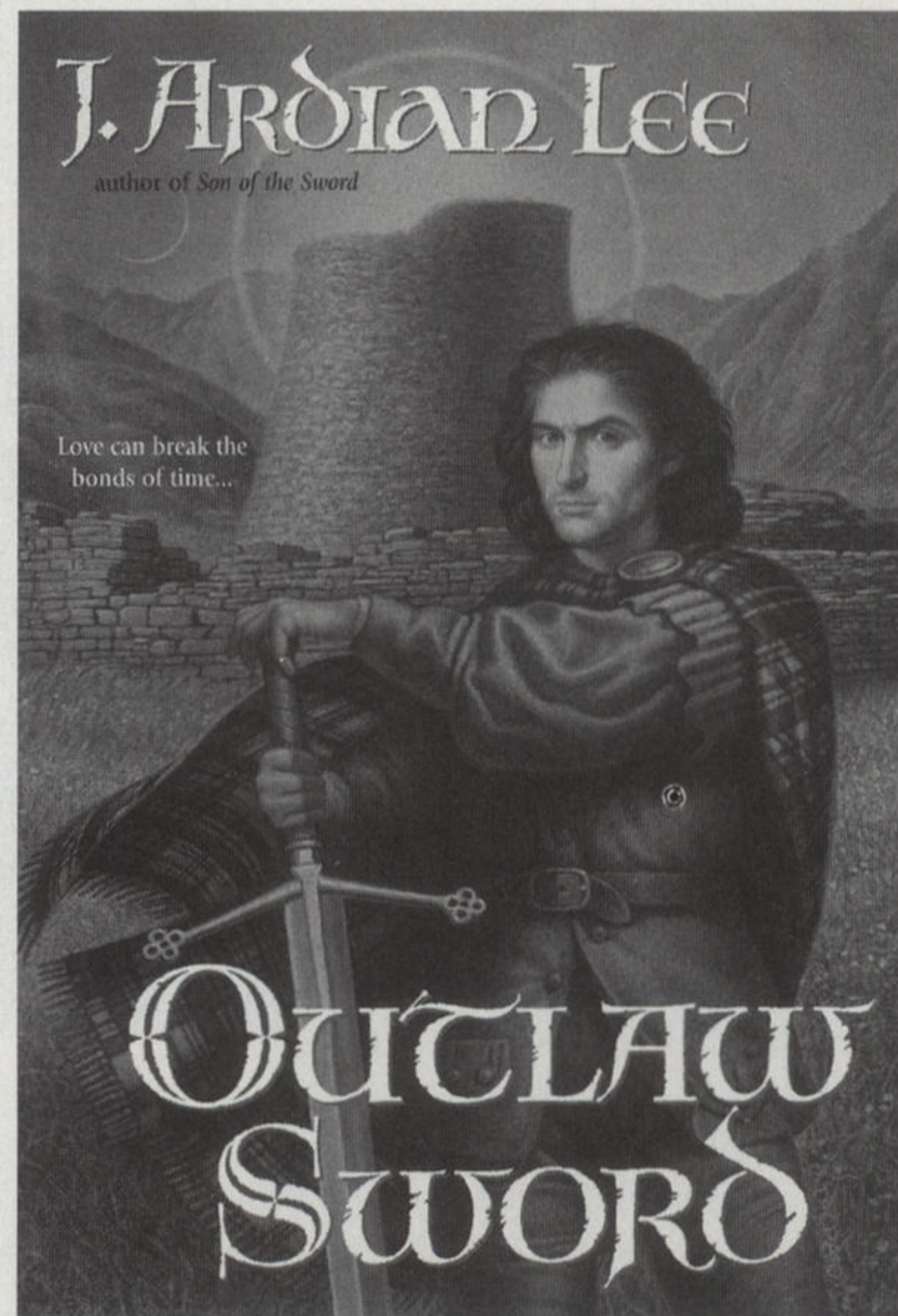
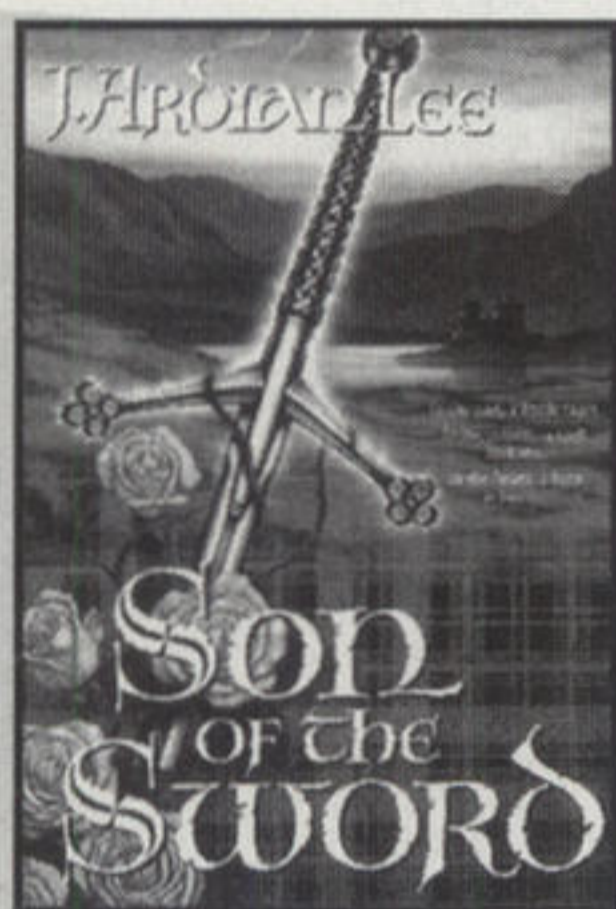
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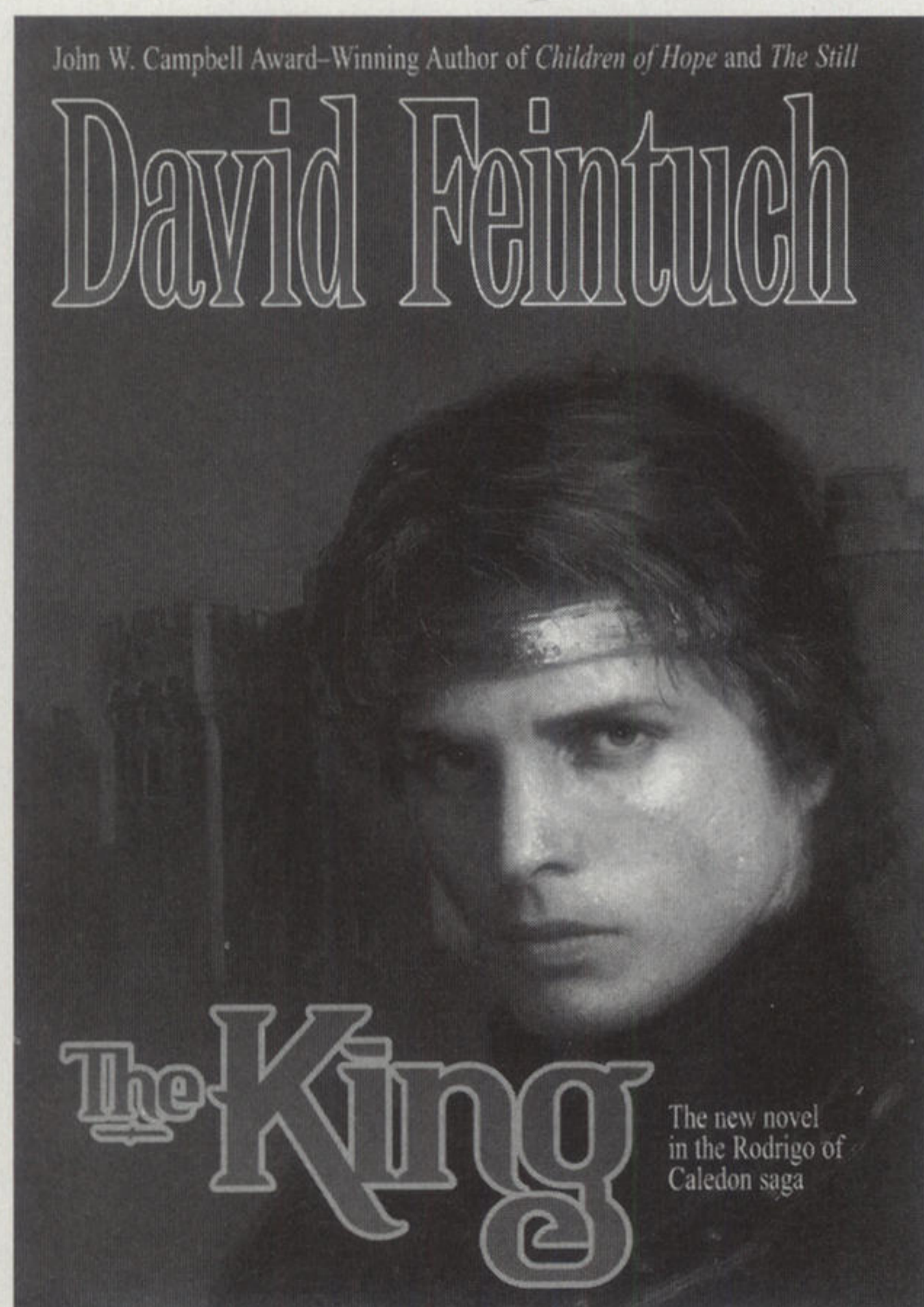
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to the heretofore unexposed, and will hopefully lure them into demanding exposure to more of the same. I fear I must announce that it is damnably easy to be among the unexposed as, in spite of much effort on the part of many brave souls, Smith's work has as yet had nothing remotely approaching the vast posthumous fame granted to his friends and passionate admirers of his work, H.P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard.

The fiction selection starts with "The Ninth Skeleton," which is the first short story he sold to *Weird Tales* and which appeared in its September 1928 issue; it ends with "A Good Embalmer" from *Strange Shadows*, which was published in 1989 and which will probably be (barring some amazing stroke of luck) the last collection of undiscovered Smith material. These first and last tales bookend what is probably the best sampling of Smith's short fiction ever published between two covers.

If you have not read any of Clark Ashton Smith's astoundingly weird fantasies, which is sadly highly likely (see earlier comments), I must humbly confess that any attempt on my part to convey the depths of the wonder in them to you will likely fail because it is Clark Ashton Smith who is the magician and not I.

He is the one who can open your eyes to strange places such as Averroign, the medieval, vampire-infested realm that never existed even though in certain parts of present-day France bits and pieces of it can still be detected in certain currently existing castles and vistas if you know where and how to snoop. Only he can lead you through the howling northern winds to ancient Hyborea with its shaggy, fur-wrapped wizards and icy

monsters, or sail you across the sea to glittering Poseidonis (also known to the uninitiated as "Atlantis"). And it is most certainly only Smith himself who can reveal his greatest masterpiece by illuminating the last feeble rays of a sick and dying sun so that it can reveal to you the doomed, final, solitary island of Zothique where mankind's sorry, scurvy tale has withered to its final days and where, wincing away from the scorn of sneering gods, it seeks comfort and companionship from walking corpses raised by necromancy.

If, as I pray may happen, you do get this book and read these truly marvelous stories and are enraptured by Smith's genius, you will find that the Afterword by Jones not only gives you a solid basic overview of Smith's life and struggles and how the world dealt with him and he with it, but you'll also be presented with a detailed treasure map which will show you how

to locate and explore more of his marvelous lost worlds.

I do hope Jones's solid presentation of this author's work in *The Emperor of Dreams* will at last give dear old Ashton Smith the nudge toward the larger attention he's been deserving all these years! But I doubt it.

**Gahan Wilson**

**Once...**, James Herbert, Tor Books, NY, hardcover, 384 pp., \$26.95.

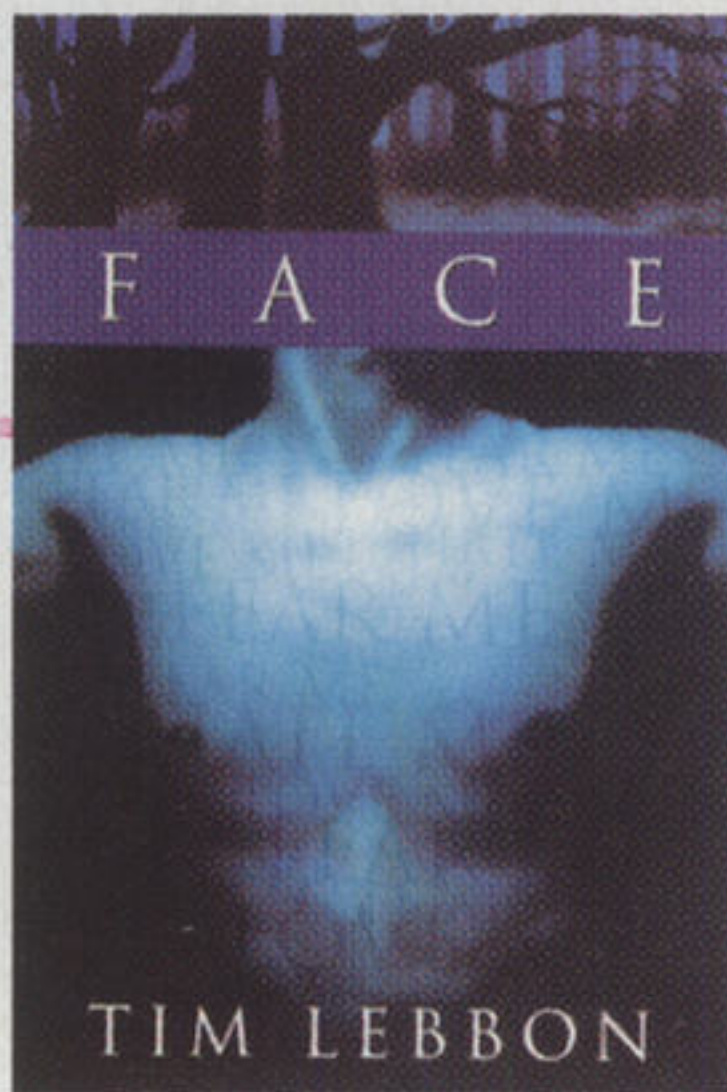
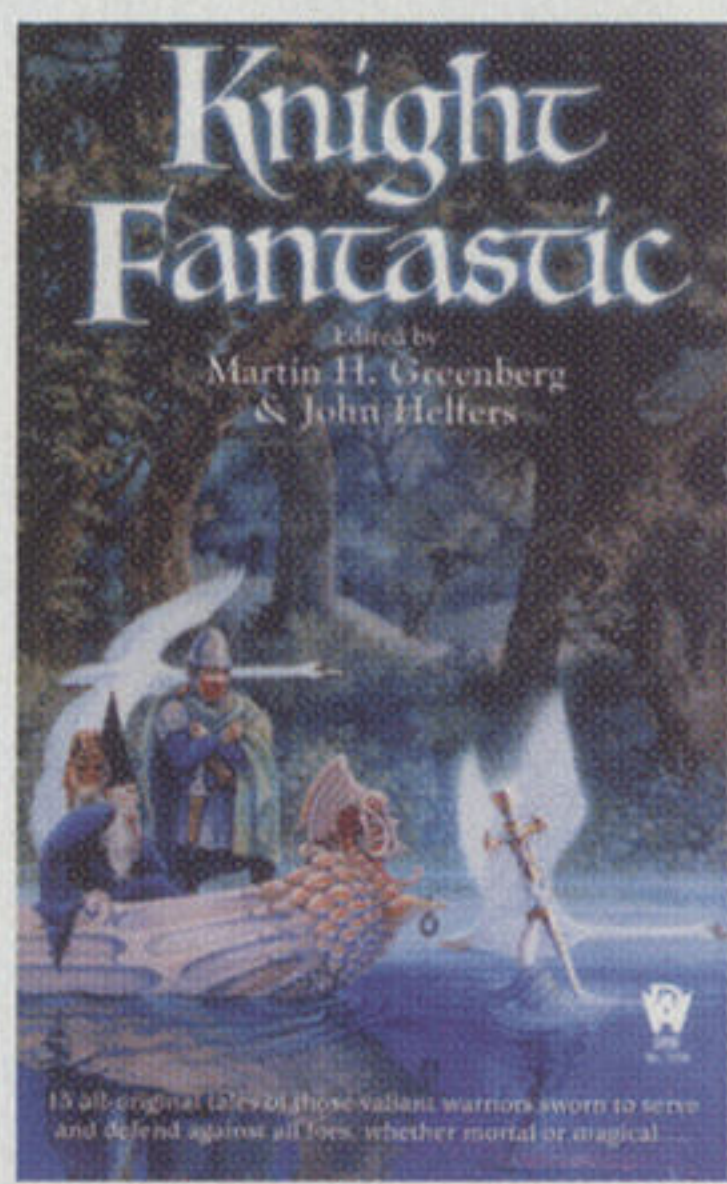
Many classics of premodern literature offer wonderful templates that the current-day writer of fantasy can adapt to his or her concerns. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; Cervantes' *Don Quixote*; Voltaire's *Candide*—all of these books contain resonant structures and images

that lend themselves to modern or postmodern storytelling, with an emphasis on the fantastic. And surely no work has been more inspirational in this way than Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Detailing the interface between fairies and mortals, and the resultant comedy, chaos, and pain, Shakespeare's play remains a cornucopia of ideas and scenes that later writers have played upon.

The latest effort in this tradition is from a writer more usually associated with straightforward horror fiction, James Herbert. But in this book, Herbert reveals that he can deal with more ethereal and delicate concerns as well. Which is not to say that evil and suffering and a climactic assault by malign forces do not all play a part in this tale.

Of course, Herbert's title is meant to conjure up the phrase "Once upon a time." But Herbert subverts our expectations right off the bat by making his first sentence "Once upon a death." The death in question—a near-death experience, actually—happens to our youthful protagonist, Thom Kindred, who is stricken by a brain hemorrhage. Seeking to recover from his stroke, Thom retreats from London to his childhood home, the estate known as Castle Bracken, where he was raised as the son of the tutor to the estate's heir, Hugo Bleeth. Now Hugo is tending to his dying father, Sir Russell. Sir Russell's nurse, Nell Quick, is enlisted to look after Thom at Little Bracken, the secondary house. But Nell proves to be a malign force in the situation at Castle Bracken, and Thom is soon at peril of his life. He'd be in a hopeless situation, were it not for the existence of the *faerefolkis*.

The lands of Castle Bracken are alive, you see, with the traditional range of fairies, sprites, gnomes, brownies, elves, and other supernatural creatures. But only Thom can see these inhabitants, a birthright from his dead mother, who was other than she seemed. As Thom is tutored in the cosmic realities by a sexy undine



## Gene Wolfe Is Reading ...

Two books, and they have much in common as well as interesting differences: *Stranger Things Happen* and *Meet Me in the Moon Room*. Both are single-author collections. Both were published in trade paperback by Small Beer Press. Both are largely fantasy, and both favor contemporary settings. Both are stunningly good.

Both are by writers most of us had never heard of not long ago, writers whose wings have only just dried. I believe this is Ray Vukceвич's first book. I know *Stranger Things Happen* is Kelly's first, and she's still quite young.

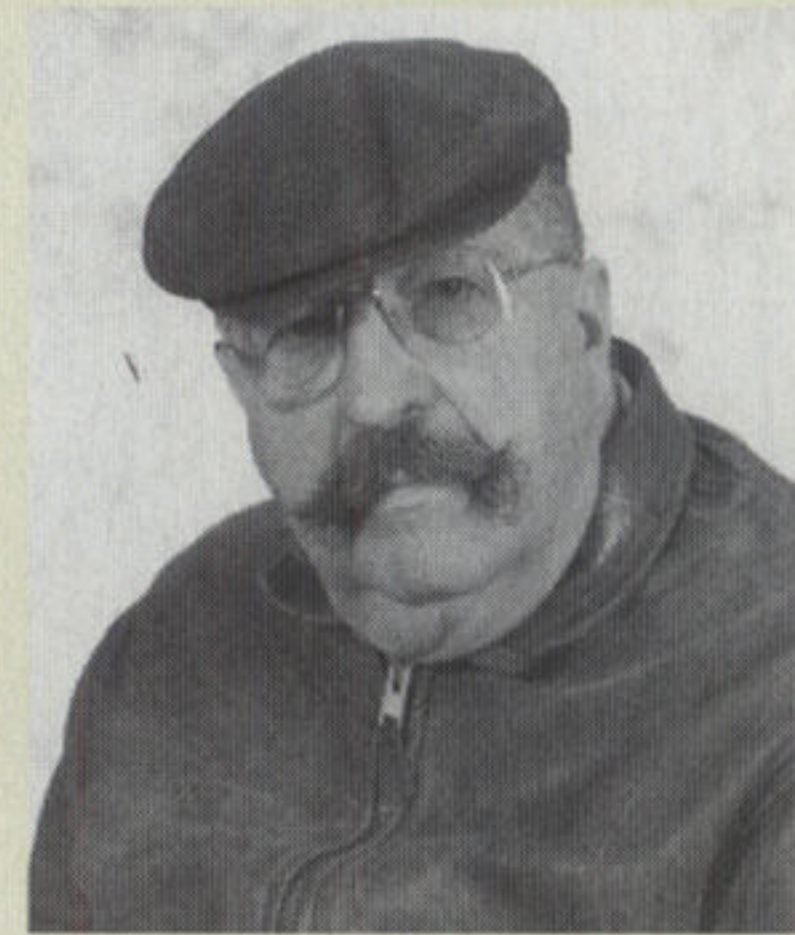
The differences. One is that I have met Kelly Link and like her. That does not mean that I automatically like her stories; the writers I like in person but do not like to read would fill a bus. Kelly's stories flow. The language is colorful and graceful. The concepts are frequently amazing. Best of all, a Kelly Link story always has an ending that surprises and delights me. (I foresee the end of most of the stories I read without difficulty.)

Is Ray Vukceвич a male Kelly Link? Almost, but not quite. He

writes nearly as well, but there is a film noir brutality. Kelly writes sensual Wizard of Oz. Ray writes whacked-out Maltese Falcon. His stories are brief—dark munchkins of literature. (There are 33 stories in *Meet Me in the Moon Room*; 11 in *Stranger Things Happen*.) Ray's endings are as surprising as Kelly's, but they do not so much delight as stun.

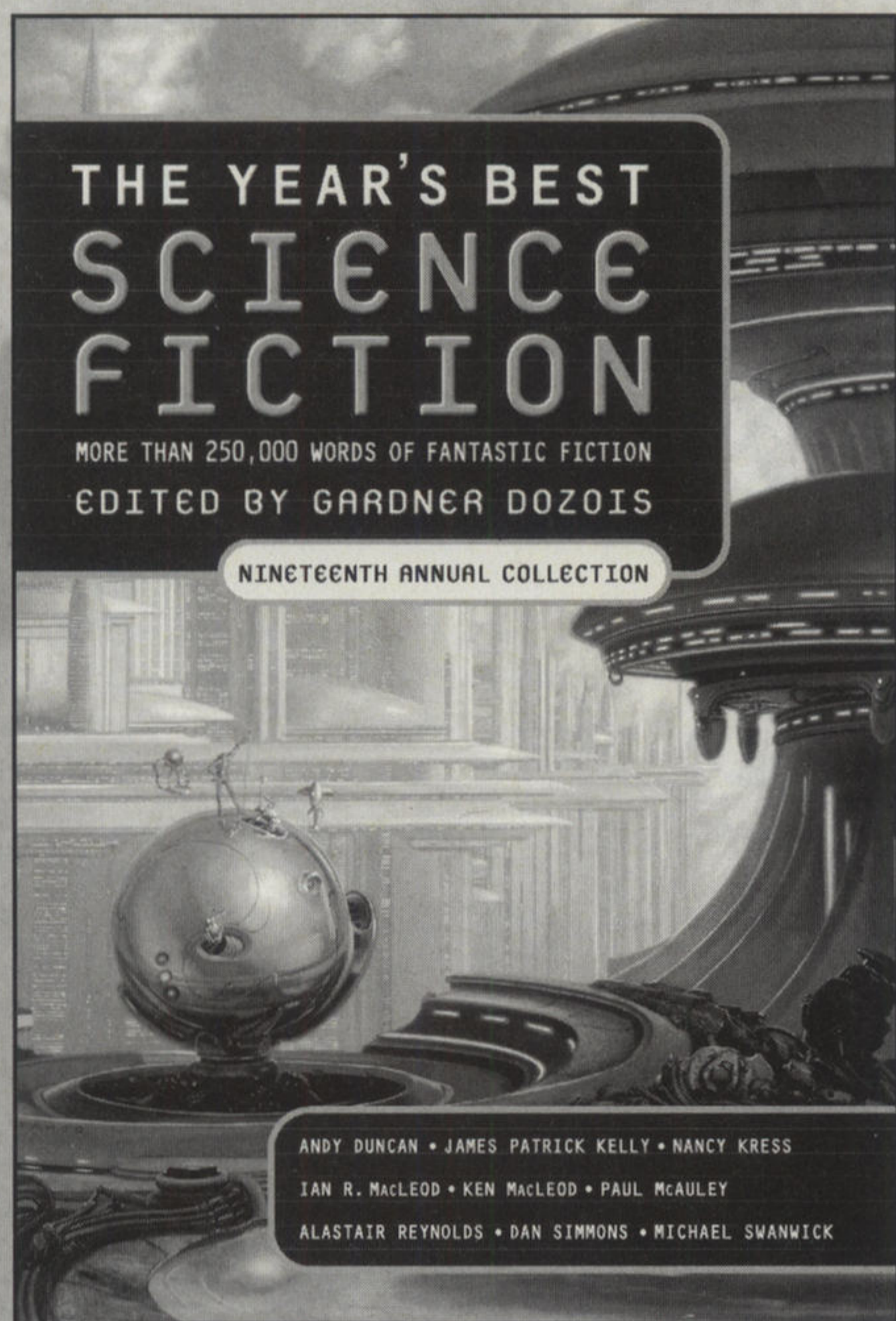
Let me make this as plain as possible, because it may seem that I'm putting Kelly down. She deserved every plaudit she's received, and more. She is a writer sprung full grown from the head of Zeus, one of our very best. When I spoke to her at the World Horror Convention, I felt honored.

But Kelly has the applause. Ray has not, yet deserves it just as much. He has an imagination like no other, and his title story, "Meet Me in the Moon Room," is one of the finest short stories I have ever read. Period.



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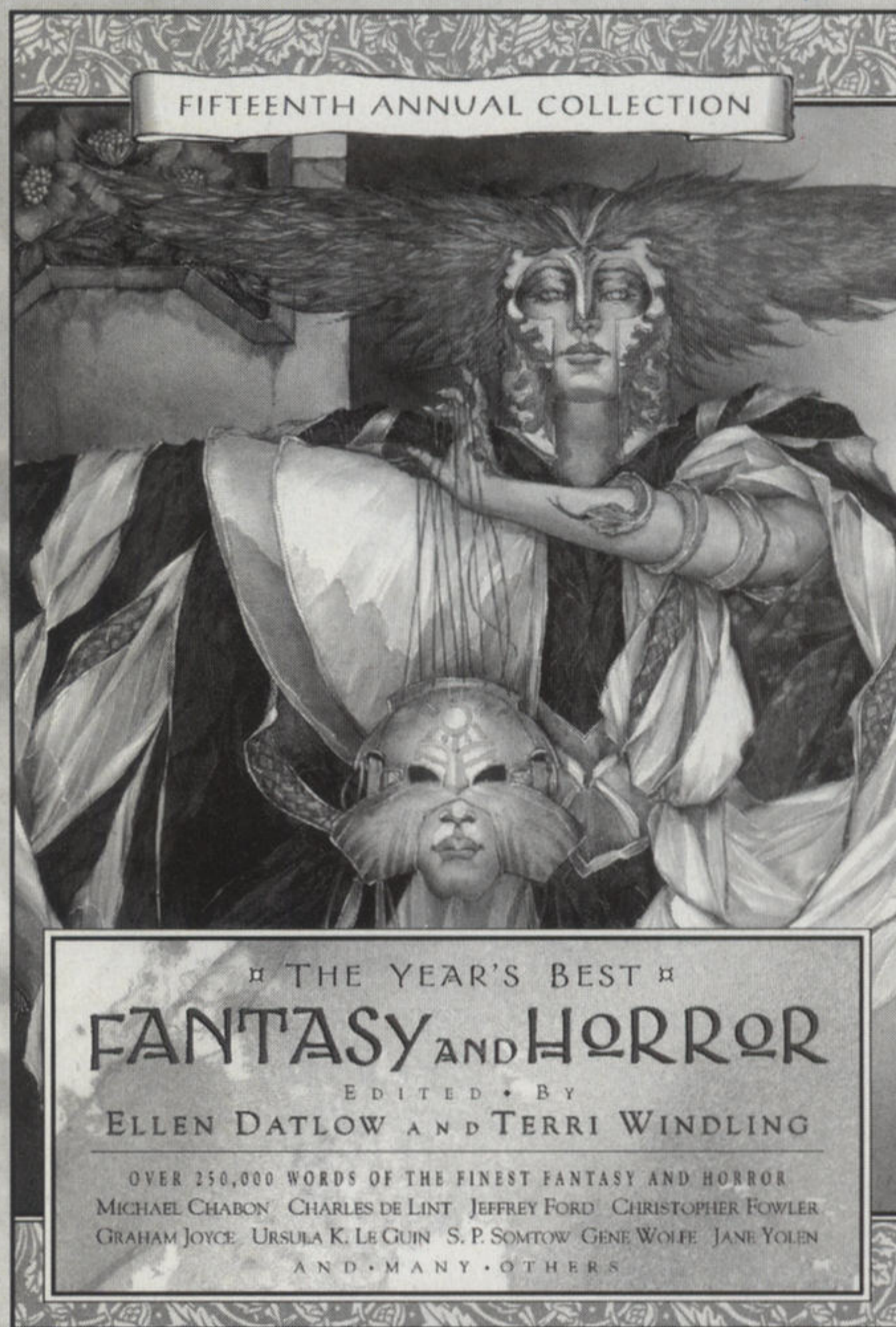


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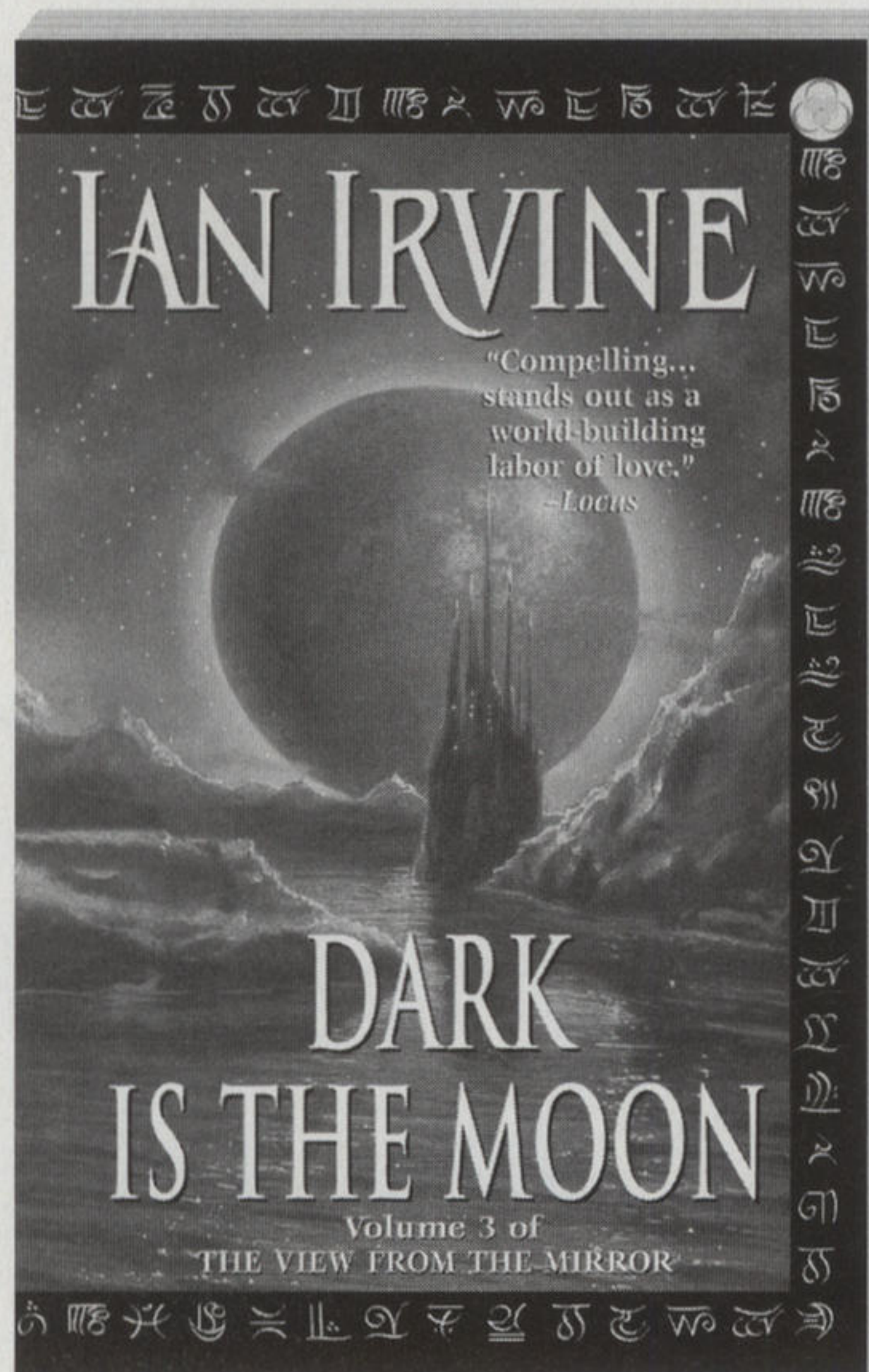
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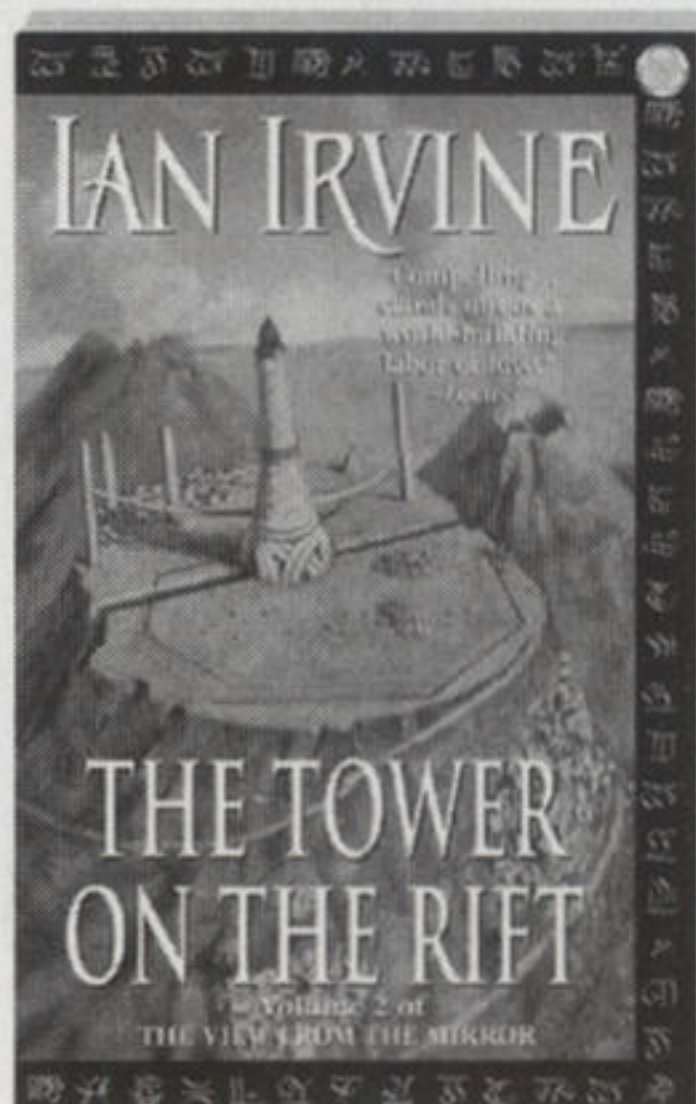
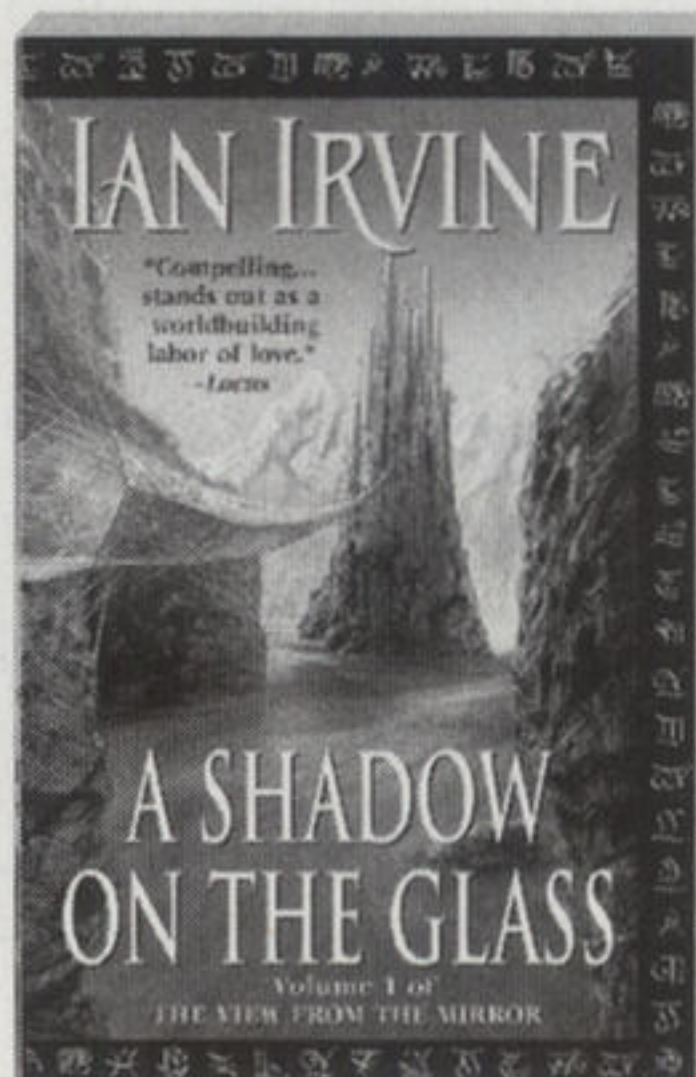
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named Jennet, the narrative becomes a race against time, for Nell's plots are meant to culminate in several deaths.

Herbert exhibits a flair for evoking the beauties of nature. His loving, lavish descriptions of the lush countryside make the reality of the *faerefolkis* more tangible somehow, as if these beings were the natural manifestations of the Earth. His depiction of evil is equally strong, although I fear that his portrayal of Wicca as a fount of destruction will earn him some kicks from all the white witches out there. And Thom—who might, with his wounded nature, recall another Thomas, namely Stephen Donaldson's *Thomas Covenant*—emerges as a quite believably flawed hero.

At first I fancied this book was going to evolve along the lines of John Crowley's masterpiece, *Little, Big*, especially since the opening setups of a young man journeying to a country estate are identical. But Herbert's narrative time frame is only a week, not the generations of Crowley's work. And Herbert is more concerned with sheer suspense than with the ineffable inebriation and melancholy that preoccupies Crowley. But as Shakespeare reminds us, "Comparisons are odious." Herbert's novel is a fine book all on its own.

**Face**, Tim Lebbon; Night Shade Books, Newberg, OR; hardcover, 247 pp., \$27.00.

Tim Lebbon's short stories have exhibited an admirable subtlety of intention and effect, eschewing any clichéd horror gross-outs for more ethereal frights. In this new novel, however, he ventures into territory that shares more with conventional stalker/slasher tales before finally descending into a Grand Guignol climax. While his language and storytelling skills and characterizations remain prominent, I can't say the book impresses me as much as his earlier work.

The small English family of Dan, Megan, and daughter Nikki is valiantly struggling to remain intact. Having moved to a country home after Megan suffered from urban violence, the family has pasted over its hurts without healing them. Husband Dan feels ineffective for not having protected his wife. Megan, meanwhile, has retreated into a timid religiosity. But it's bored and chafing-at-the-reins 17-year-old Nikki who lights the fuse that eventually explodes their lives. When Dan picks up a scarred, menacing hitchhiker named Brand, Nikki's subliminal attraction to the sexy bad man allows Brand an opening into their lives. A supernatural spirit of free-floating aggression, Brand will stalk the family over the next few days, popping up spectrally and physically until forcing an ultimate bloody confrontation.

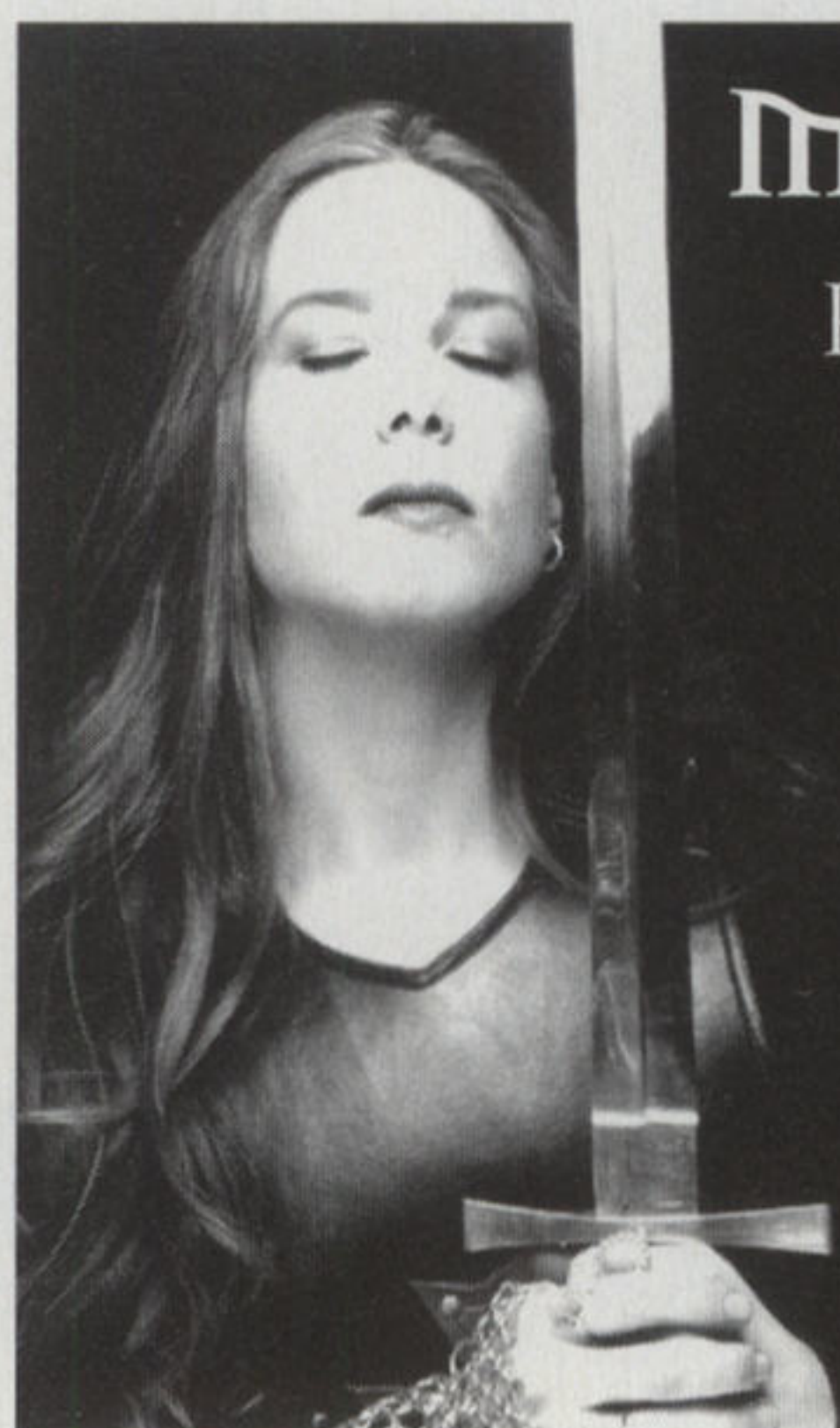
Brand's appearance at Easter adds an ambiguous coating of symbolism to this story, and Nikki's quasi-psychic hormonal vibes riff on the poltergeist phenomenon among adolescents. (Perhaps she actually created Brand?) But basically the sheer meaninglessness of Brand's attacks—made explicit during the

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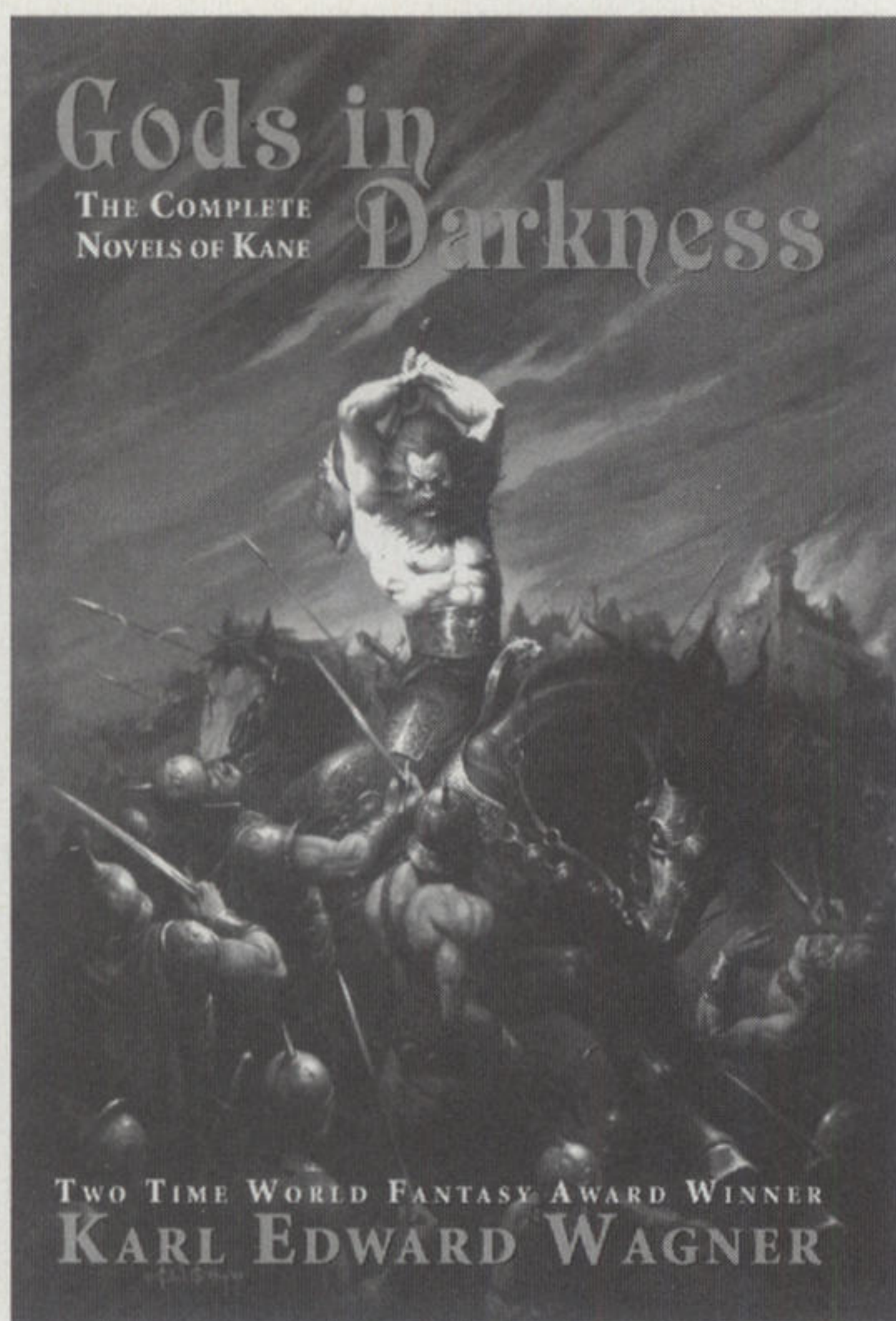
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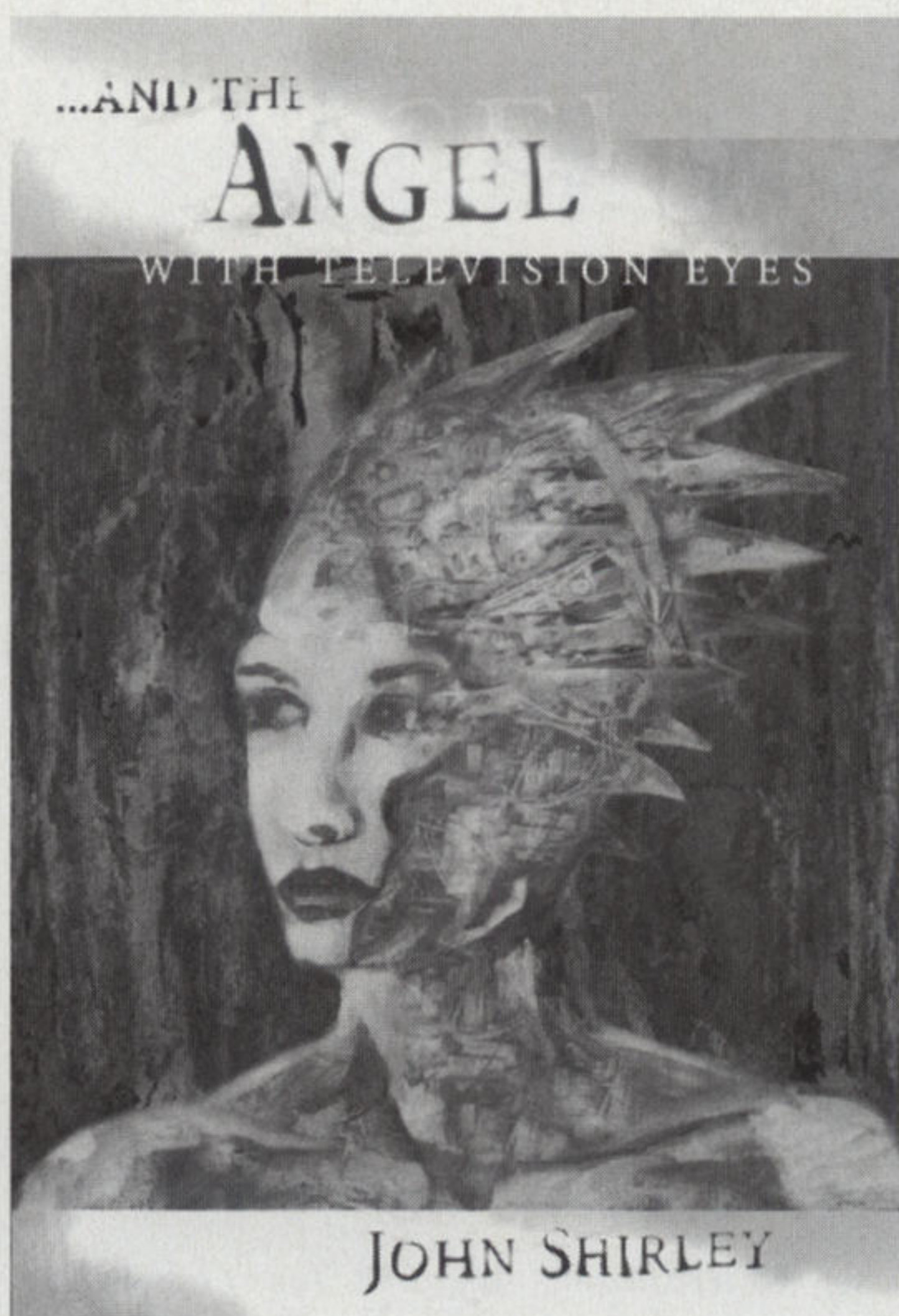
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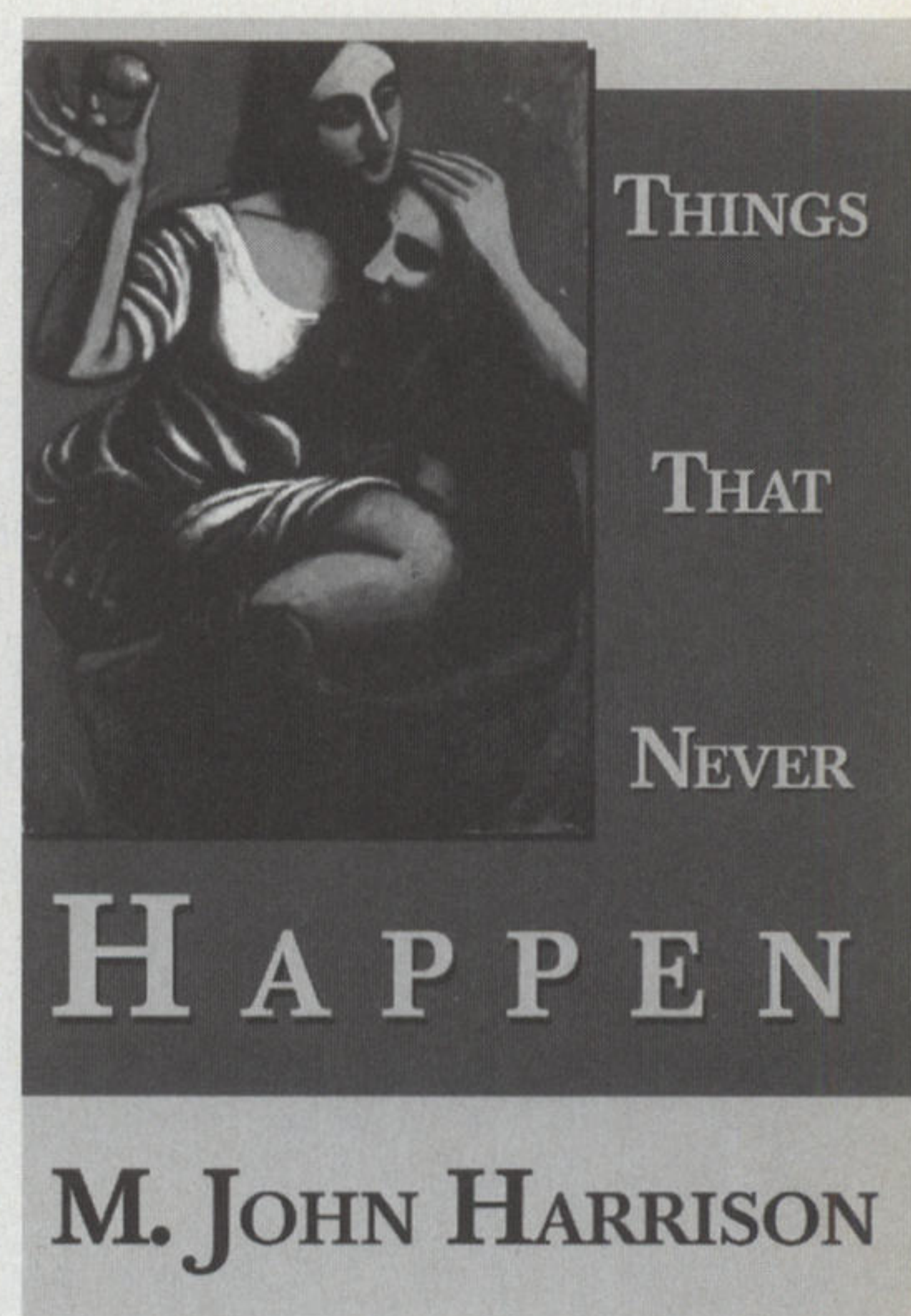
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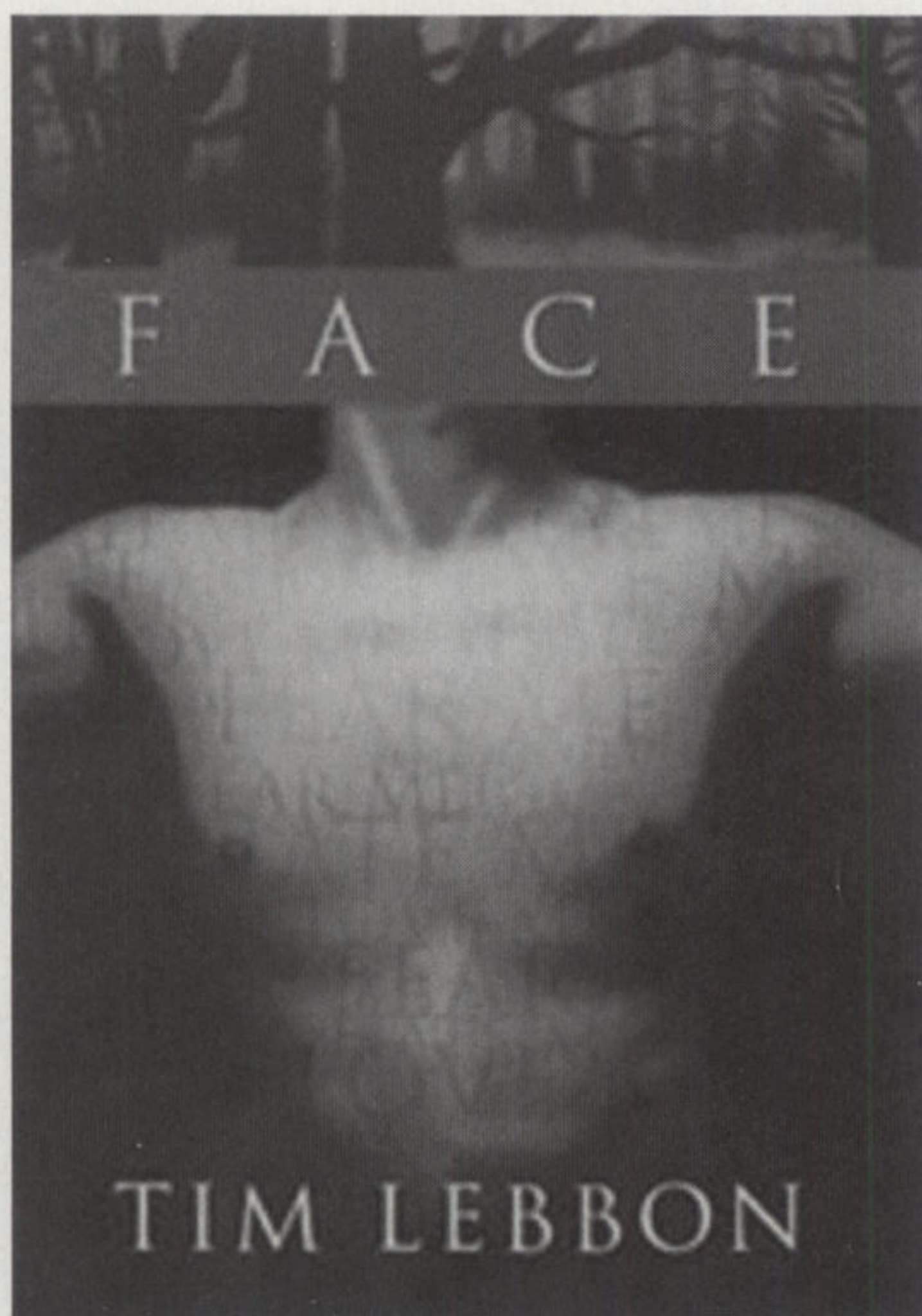
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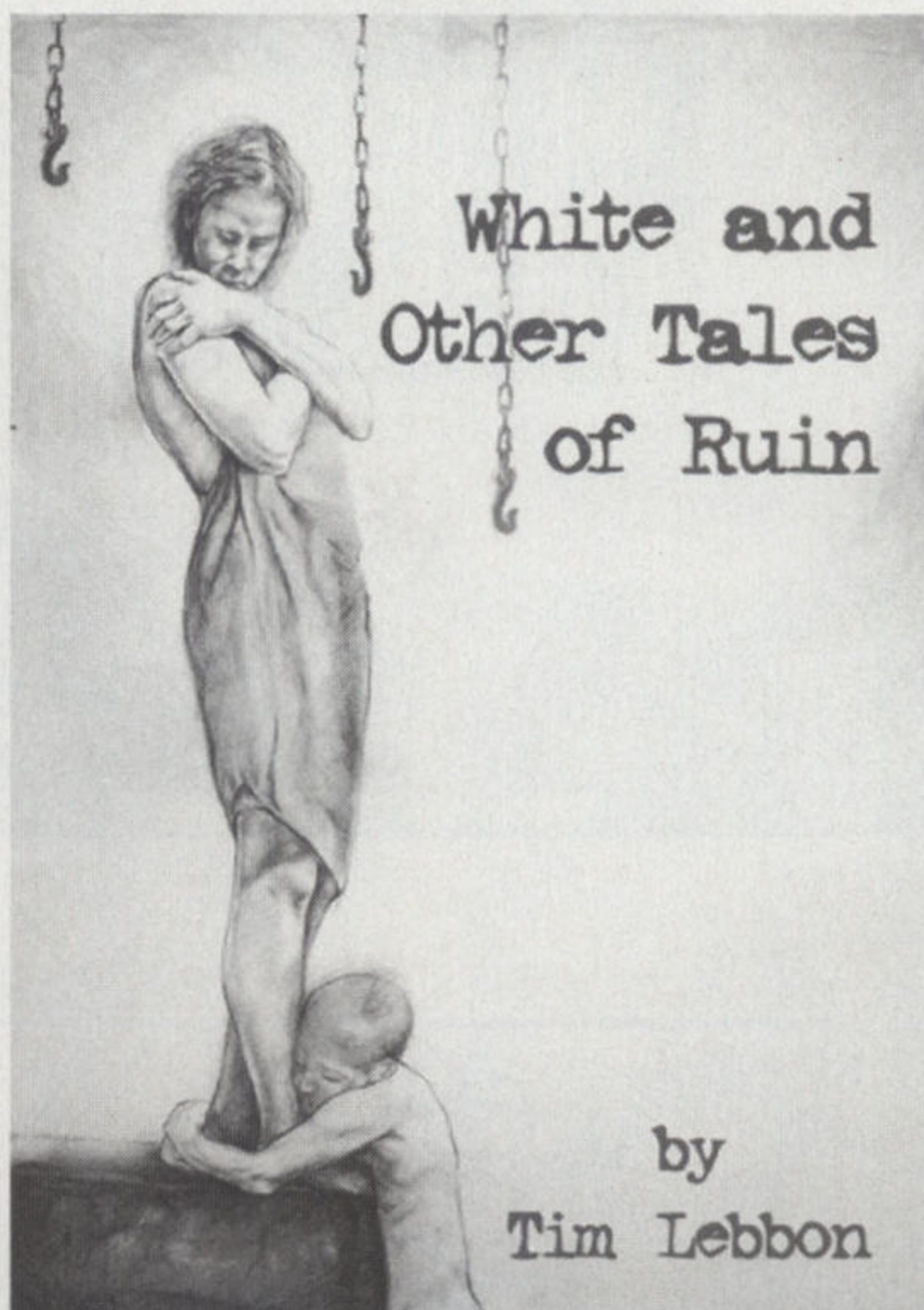
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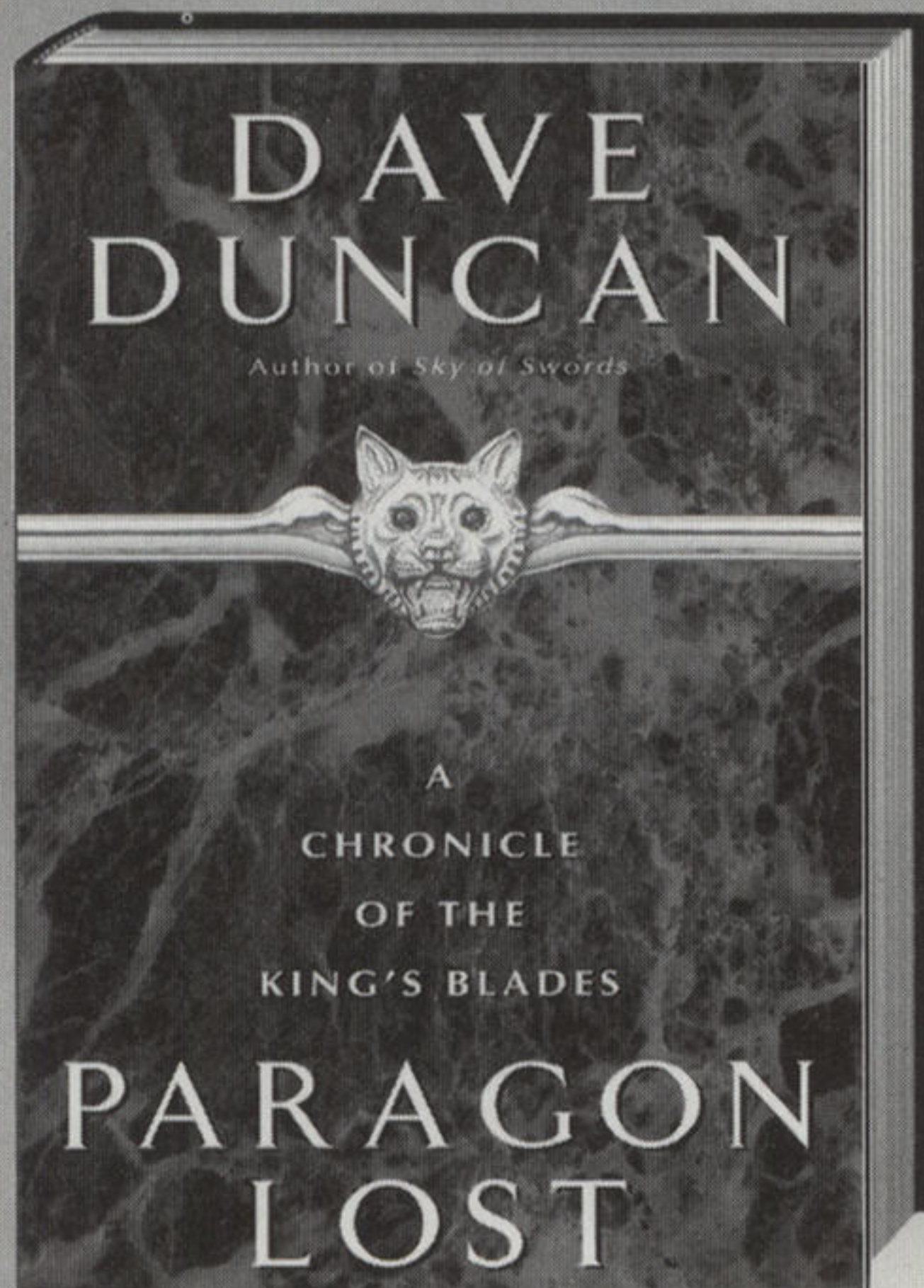
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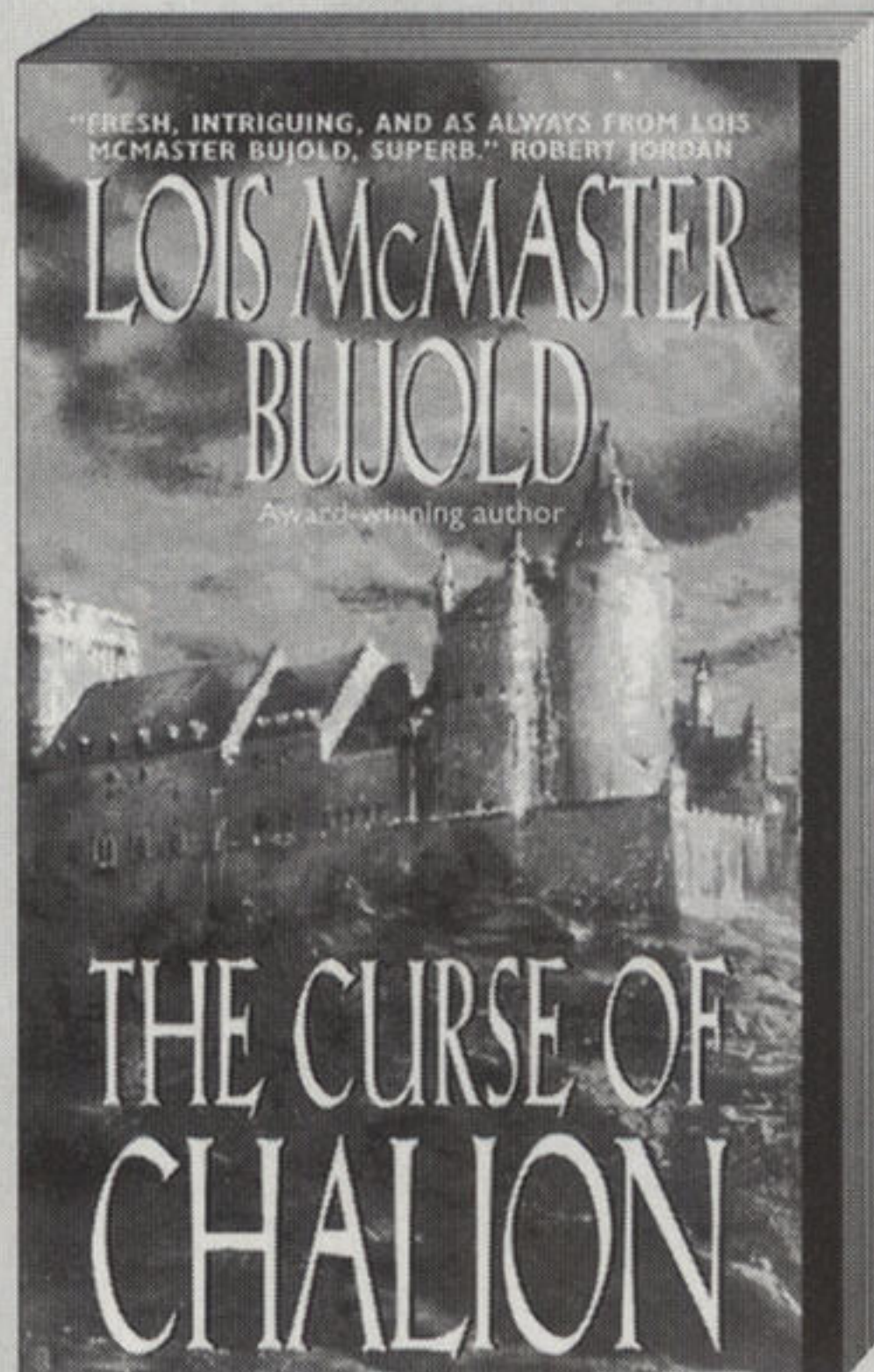
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climax by Brand himself—renders the tale rather arbitrary, without any larger resonances. Given the lack of a larger spiritual or occult or ethical framework, we might as well be reading the tale of a family randomly crushed by a landslide. Lebbon's portrayal of Nikki and her peers is the best part of this novel, but that's all mainstream material. On the supernatural side, despite all his knife work, Brand just doesn't cut it.

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*Knight Fantastic*, Martin Greenberg and John Helfers, eds., DAW Books, NY; mass-market paper, 317 pp., \$6.99.

These theme anthologies from DAW always offer an intriguing grab-bag of stories ranging from excellent to fair. As David Pringle, editor of the UK magazine *Interzone* has commented, because they arrive roughly on a monthly basis, these books constitute a kind of magazine in their own right. As with any magazine, you'll encounter issues that soar and others that crash.

The current volume resides somewhere in the middle of the quality range. There are no award winners here, just some very enjoyable adventures centering on the codes of chivalry and the men (mostly men) who embody them, along with a few tepid entries. I'll highlight just some of the winners here.

The book opens with two rarities: first up is "Rodergo's Song," a literal ballad by Jane Yolen with accompanying music by Adam Stemple. Fairly slight storywise, it deserves credit for uniqueness of form. Next comes one of Andre Norton's all-too-infrequent short pieces, "Red Cross, White Cross," which details the tug between family and duty. "The Cross of God" by Brendan DuBois adds a clever time-travel twist to the Crusades. Rosemary Edghill and India Edghill fashion a great humorous alternate universe where private eyes are replaced by "public wands," one of whom happens to be an ex-knight. Josepha Sherman's "Knight Mare" features a talking mare who's as clever and knightly as her rider. And Nina Kiriki Hoffman shows us a rescued maiden who's surprisingly ungrateful in "Faint Heart, Foul Lady."

Curiously, these 15 stories split almost exactly in half along historical/imaginary lines, if we count Camelot as a "real" venue. I'd say the historical ones derive more strength from familiar roots, with the Knights Templar being big favorites among this crowd. Sadly, with a couple of exceptions, women get short shrift in this volume. And although John Helfers in his introduction hints at the survival of knightly virtues in modern times, not one writer was inspired by the topic to venture outside medieval or faux-medieval settings. Such unconventional examinations of what it means to embrace the way of the knight would have added some welcome variety to this volume.

Paul Di Filippo

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## The tale of Bluebeard has had many incarnations and interpretations.

Although based on older folk tales of demon lovers and devilish bridegrooms, the story of Bluebeard, as we know it today, is the creation of French writer Charles Perrault—first published in 1697 in his collection *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (*Stories or Tales of Past Times*). Perrault was one of a group of writers who socialized in the literary *salons* of Paris, creating among them a vogue for literature inspired by peasant folk tales. These new stories were called *contes des fées*, from which our modern term “fairy tales” derives—but the *contes des fées* of the French *salons* were intended for adult readers.

“Bluebeard,” for example, has little to recommend it as a children’s story. Rather, it’s a gruesome cautionary tale about the dangers of marriage (on the one hand) and the perils of greed and curiosity (on the other)—more akin, in our modern culture, to horror films than to Disney cartoons. The story as Perrault tells it is this: A wealthy man, wishing to wed, turns his attention to the two beautiful young daughters of his neighbor, a widow. Neither girl wants to marry the man because of his ugly blue beard—until he invites the girls and their mother to a party at his country estate. Seduced by luxurious living, the youngest daughter agrees to accept Bluebeard’s hand. The two are promptly wed and the girl becomes mistress of his great household. Soon after, Bluebeard tells his wife that business calls him to take a long journey. He leaves her behind with all the keys to his house, his strong boxes, his caskets of jewels, telling her she may do as she likes with them and to “make good cheer.” There is only one key that she may not use, to a tiny closet at the end of the hall. That alone is forbidden, he tells her, “and if you happen to open it, you may expect my just anger and resentment.”

Of course, the very first thing the young wife does is run to the forbidden door “with such excessive haste that she nearly fell and broke her neck.” She has promised obedience to her husband, but a combination of greed and curiosity (the text implies) propels her to the fatal door the minute his back is turned. She opens it and finds a

shuttered room, its floor awash in blood, containing the murdered corpses of Bluebeard’s previous young wives. Horrified, the young wife drops the key into a puddle of blood. Retrieving it, she locks the room and runs back to her own chamber. Now she attempts to wash the key so that her transgression will not be revealed—but no matter how long and hard she scrubs it, the blood stain will not come off. That very night, her husband returns—his business has been suddenly concluded. Trembling, she pretends that nothing has happened and welcomes him back. In the morning, however, he demands the return of the keys and examines them carefully. “Why is there blood on the smallest key?” he asks



Despite lack of evidence in Perrault’s story, Edmund Dulac depicted Bluebeard in Turkish garb, making him a foreigner.



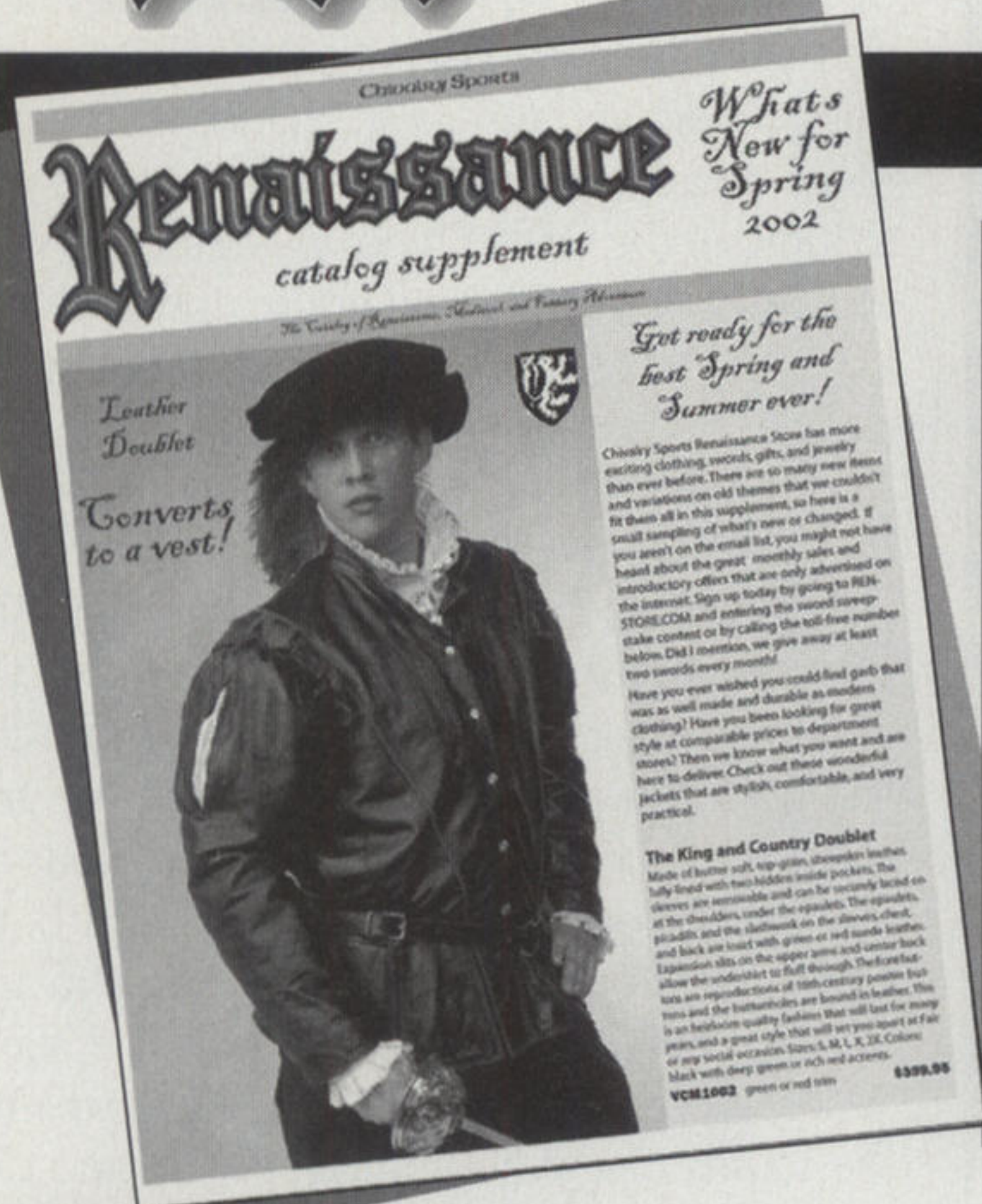


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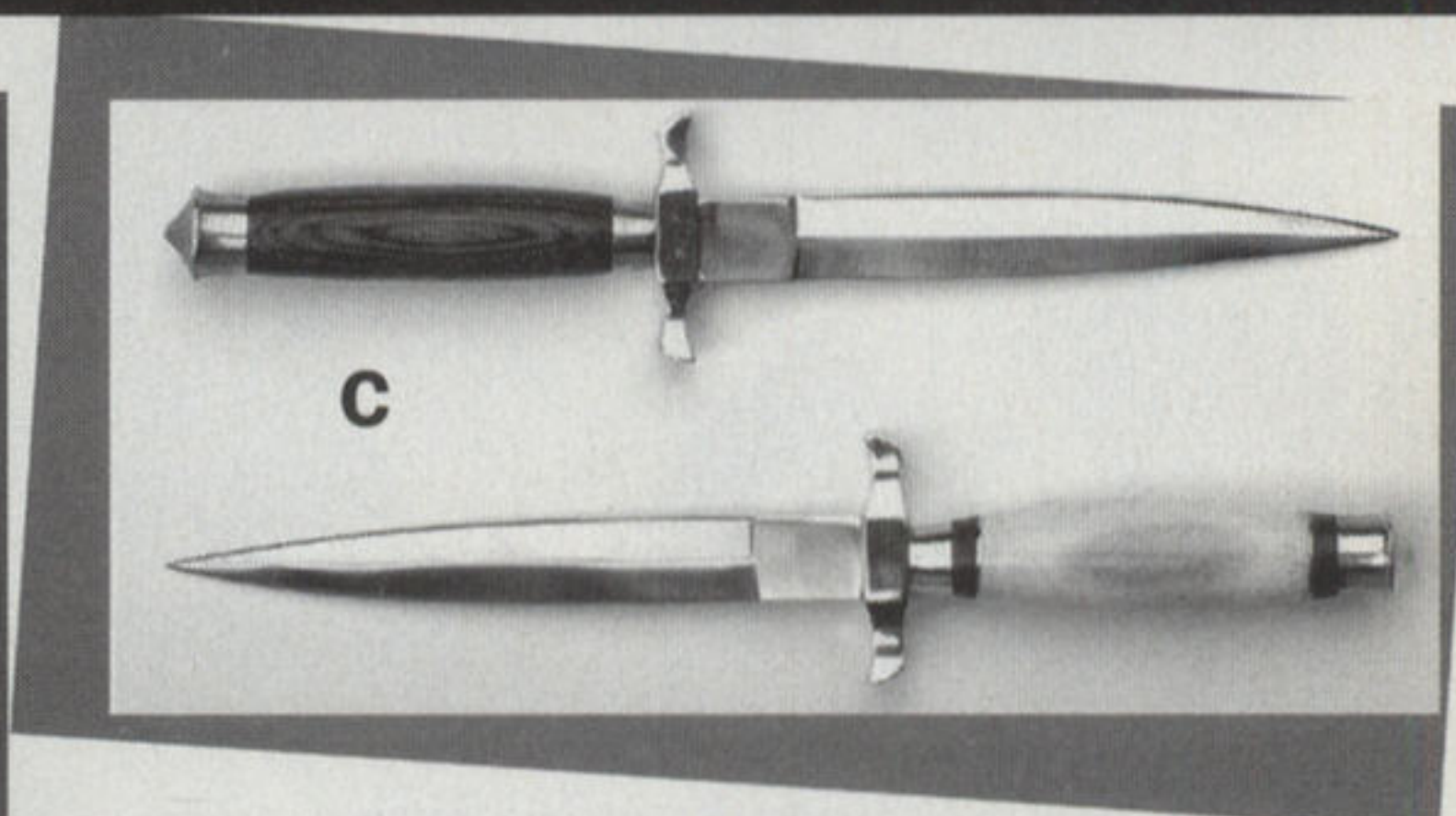
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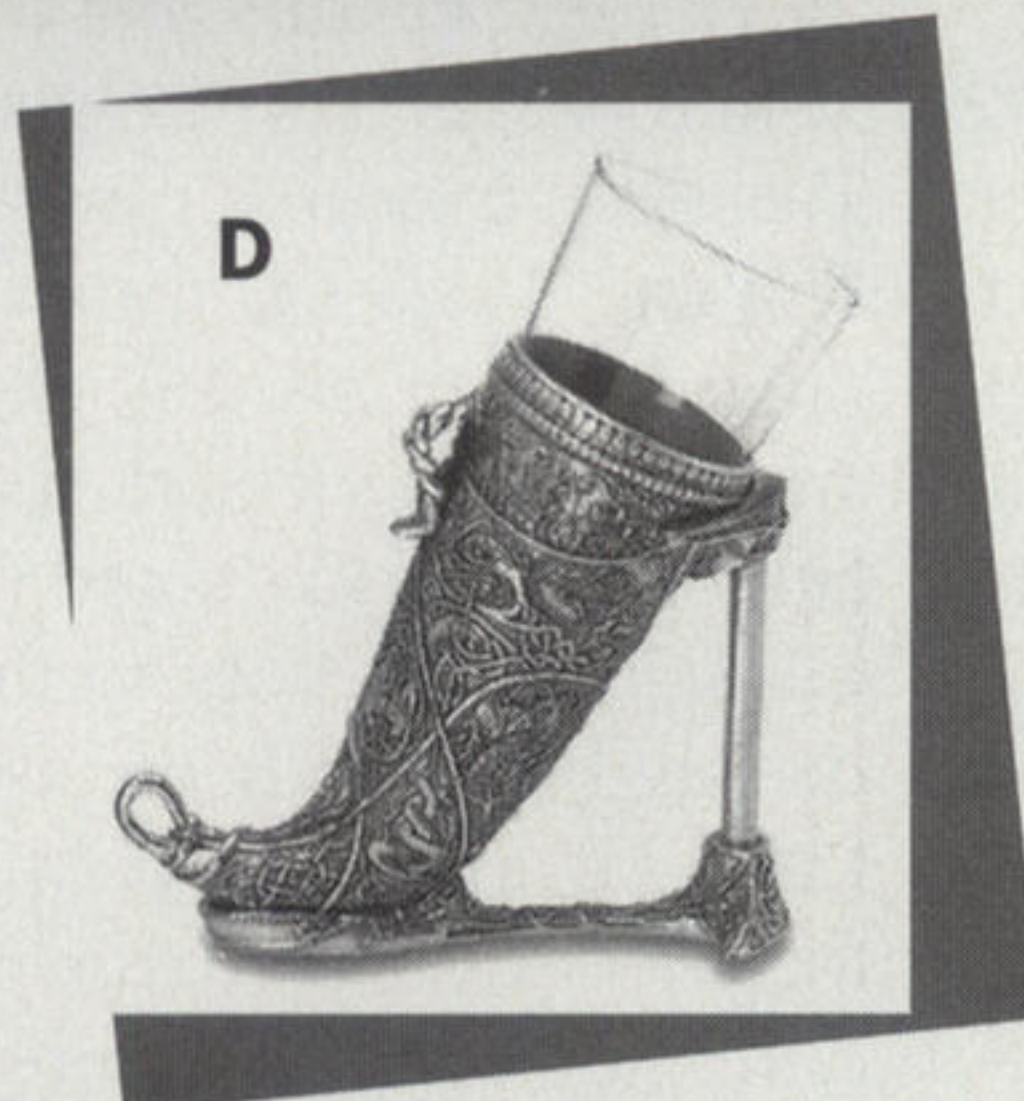
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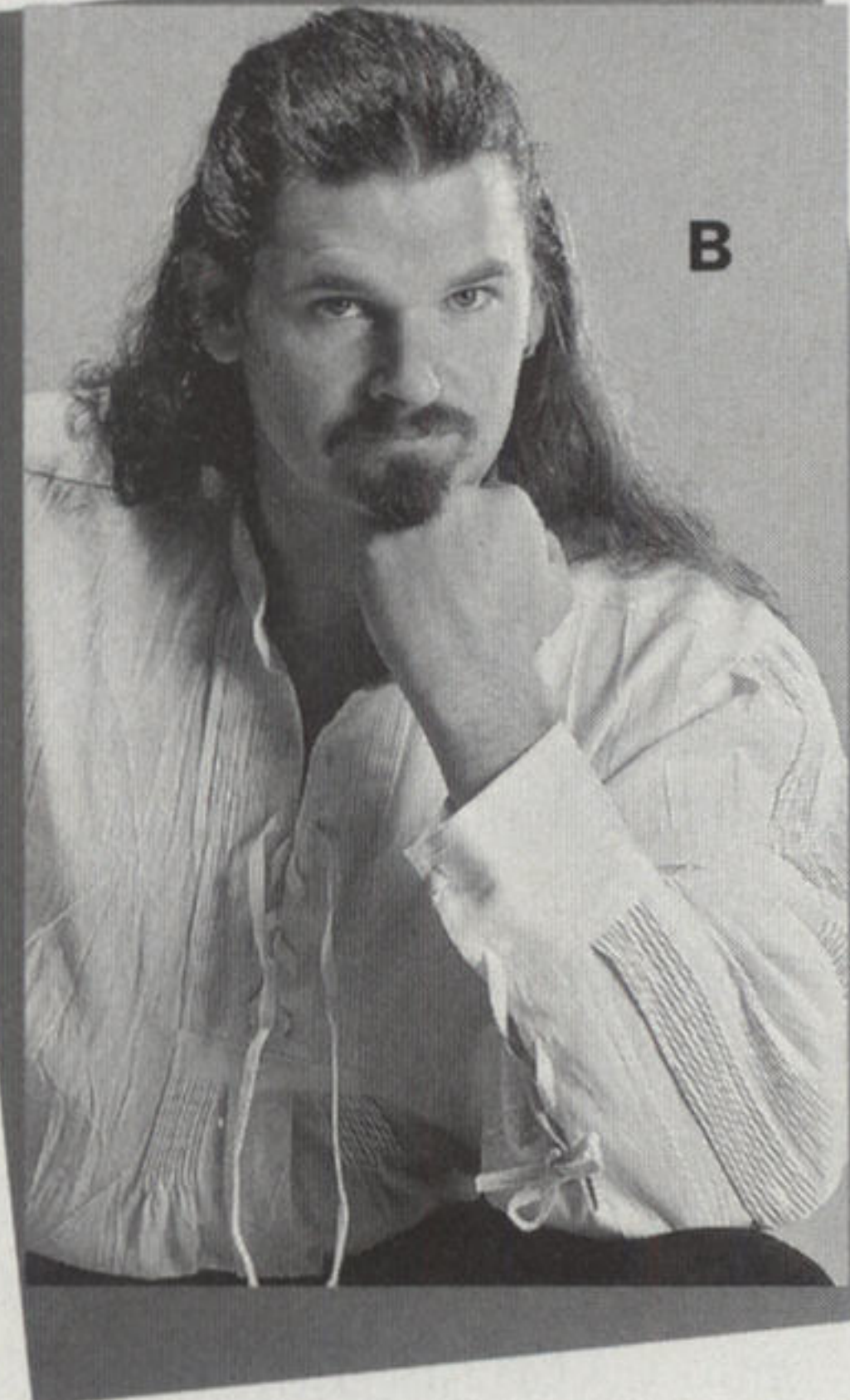


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*Bluebeard (Richard Burton) charms Elga (Virna Lisi) in the 1972 film directed by Edward Dmytryk. The story continues to be a popular subject in literature, opera, and film.*

her craftily. Bluebeard's wife protests that she does not know how it came to be there. "You do not know?" he roars. "But I know, Madame. You opened the forbidden door. Very well. You must now go back and take your place among my other wives." Tearfully, she delays her death by asking for time to say her prayers—for her brothers are due to visit that day, her only hope of salvation. She calls three times to her sister Anne in the tower room at the top of the house ("Sister Anne, Sister Anne, do you see anyone coming?"). And at last they come, just as Bluebeard raises a sword to chop off her head. The murderous husband is dispatched, his wealth disbursed among the family, and the young wife is married again, Perrault tells us, to "a very worthy gentleman who made her forget the ill time she had passed with Bluebeard."

This bloodthirsty tale is quite different in tone from the other tales in Perrault's *Histoires* (the courtly confections of Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, etc.), and its history has been a source of debate among fairy tale scholars. Some assert that Perrault was inspired by the historical figure of Gilles de Rais, a 15th-century marshal of France and companion at arms to Joan of Arc. After driving the English out of France, this martial hero returned to his Breton estate where, a law unto himself, he practiced alchemy and dark magic while young peasant boys began to disappear across his lands. Rumors swirled around de Rais and when, at last, the Duke of Brittany intervened and investigated, the remains of over 50 boys were dug up in de Rais's castle. He later confessed to sodomizing and killing 140 boys, although the actual number may be closer to 300. De Rais was simultaneously hanged and burned alive for these crimes in 1440.

There is another old Breton tale, however, that relates more closely to the Bluebeard

story: that of Cunmar the Accursed, who beheaded a succession of wives, one after the other, when they became pregnant. Cunmar was a historical figure, the ruler of Brittany in the mid-6th century, but the legend attached to him has its roots in folk tales, not history. The story concerns a nobleman's daughter, Triphine, the last of Cunmar's wives. Heavily pregnant with his son, she enters Cunmar's ancestral chapel where she is warned of her fate by the blood-stained ghosts of his previous wives. She flees to the woods, but her husband pursues her, cuts off her head, and leaves her to die. Her body is found by Gildas, the abbot of Rhuys, who is destined to be a saint. Miraculously, he reattaches the head and brings her back to life. The pair follows Cunmar back to his castle, where Gildas causes the walls themselves to crash down on the murderer. Triphine's son is safely delivered, given to Gildas and the church, and Triphine devotes the rest of her life to prayer and performing good works. Eventually, she too is sainted (depicted in religious statues and paintings as carrying her own severed head)—while the ghost of Cunmar continues to haunt the country in the form of a werewolf. The Bluebeard parallel becomes stronger yet when one considers a series of frescoes depicting Triphine's story in the Breton church St. Nicholas des Eaux. One panel of these medieval paintings shows Cunmar handing a key to his young bride, while another shows her entering the chamber where his previous wives are hanging.

It's possible that Charles Perrault knew the story of Cunmar the Accursed, using details from it to color his own. Or it may simply be that he knew other similar stories from French and Italian peasant lore, with their wide range of "monstrous bridegroom" and "murderous stranger" motifs. Indeed, these motifs are ones

we find in folk traditions around the world. But in marked contrast to Perrault's "Bluebeard" (the best known of such tales today), in the old peasant stories the heroine does not weep and wait for her brothers' rescue—rather, she's a cunning, clever girl fully capable of rescuing herself.

In the German tale called "Fitcher's Bird," collected by the Brothers Grimm, the Bluebeard figure is a mysterious wizard disguised as a beggar. The wizard appears at the door of a household with three beautiful, unmarried daughters. He asks the eldest for something to eat, and just as she hands the beggar some bread he touches her, which causes her to jump in the basket he carries. He spirits the girl away to his splendid house and gives her keys to its rooms, but forbids her, under penalty of death, to use the smallest key. The next day he sets off on a journey, but before he leaves he gives her an egg, instructing the girl to carry the egg with her everywhere she goes. As soon as he leaves she explores the house, and although she tries to ignore the last key, curiosity gets the better of her and she opens the final door. Inside she finds an axe and a basin filled with blood and body parts. In shock, she drops the egg in the blood, and then cannot wipe off the stain. When the wizard comes home, he demands the return of the keys and the egg, and discovers her deed. "You entered the chamber against my wishes, now you will go back in against yours. Your life is over," he cries, and cuts her into little pieces.

This sequence of events is repeated with the second daughter, and then with the third. But the youngest girl is the clever one. She puts the egg carefully away before she enters the forbidden chamber, determined to rescue her sisters. Inside, she finds her sisters chopped up into pieces. She promptly gets to work reassembling the body parts, piece by bloody piece. When her sisters' limbs are all in place, the pieces knit themselves back together and the two elder girls come back to life with cries of joy. Then they must hide as the wizard returns. He calls for the youngest and asks for the egg. She hands it over, and he can find no stain or blemish on it. "You have passed the test," he informs her, "so tomorrow you shall be my bride." The girl agrees that she will wed the wizard, under this condition: "First take a basket of gold to my father. You must promise to carry it on your back, and you mustn't stop along the way. I'll be watching you from the window." The two elder girls are hidden inside the basket, beneath a king's ransom in gold. The wizard picks it up and stumbles off, sweating under his burden. Yet every time he stops to rest, he hears one of the sisters say: "I see you, I see you! Don't put the basket down! Keep moving!" Thinking it's the voice of his bride, the wizard continues on his way—while the youngest girl invites the wizard's friends to a wedding feast. She takes a skull from the bloody room, crowns it with garlands of flow-

ers and jewels, and sets it in the attic window, facing the road below. Then she crawls into a barrel of honey, cuts open a featherbed, and rolls in the feathers until she's completely disguised as a strange, white bird. As she leaves the house, she meets the wizard's equally evil friends coming toward it. They say to her:

"Oh Fitcher's bird, where are you from?"

"From feathered Fitcher's house I've come."

"The young bride there, what has she done?"

"She's cleaned and swept the house all through;

she's in the window looking at you."

She then meets the wizard himself on the road, and these questions are repeated. The wizard looks up, he sees the skull in the window, and hurries home to his bride. But by now, the brothers and relatives of the three young girls are waiting for him. They lock the door, then burn the house down with all the sorcerers inside. (The unexplained name Fitcher, according to Marina Warner, "derives from the Icelandic *fitfugl*, meaning 'web-footed bird,' so there may well be a buried memory here of those bird-women who rule narrative enchantments.") "Fitcher's Bird" is similar to the Italian story "Silvernose," as related by Italo Calvino in *Italian Folktales*. In the Italian version, Silvernose is actually the devil in disguise.

"The Robber Bridegroom" is another classic fairy tale about a murderous stranger. It, too, can be found in Germany, Italy, and in vari-

ants around the world. One of the most evocative of these variants is the English version of the story, in which the Bluebeard figure is known as Mr. Fox (or Reynardine). A girl is courted by a handsome russet-haired man who appears to have great wealth. He is charming, well mannered, and well groomed, but his origins are mysterious. As the wedding day grows near, it troubles the girl that she's never seen his home, so she takes matters into her own hands and sets off through the woods to seek it. In the dark of the woods, she finds a high wall and a gate. Over the gate it says: "Be bold." She enters, and finds a large, dilapidated mansion inside. Over the door it says: "Be bold, be bold." She enters a gloomy hall. Over the stairs it says: "Be bold, be bold, but not too bold." She climbs the stairs to a gallery, over which she finds the words: "Be bold, be bold, but not too bold, lest your heart's blood should run cold." The gallery is filled with the body parts of murdered women. She turns to flee, just as Mr. Fox comes in, dragging a new victim. She hides and watches, horrified, as the girl is chopped to bits. A severed hand flies close to her hiding place, a diamond ring on one finger. She takes the hand, creeps out the door, and runs home just as fast as she can. The next day there's a feast for the wedding couple, and Mr. Fox appears, looking as handsome as ever. He comments, "How pale you are, my love!"

"Last night I had a terrible dream," she says.

"I dreamed I entered the woods and found a high wall and a gate. Over the gate it said: Be bold." She proceeds to tell him, and the assembled guests, just what she found inside.

"It is not so, nor it was not so, and God forbid it should be so," said Mr. Fox.

"But it is so, and it was so, and here's the hand and the ring I have to show!" She pulls the severed hand from her dress and flings it into her bridegroom's lap. The wedding guests rise up to cut Mr. Fox into a thousand pieces.

An Indian version of the tale has the daughter of respectable Brahmans courted by a man who is actually a tiger in disguise, anxious to procure a wife who can cook the curry dishes he loves. It is only when the girl is married and on her way to her husband's house that she learns the truth and finds herself wife and servant to a ferocious beast. She bears him a child, a tiger cub, before she finally makes her escape. As she leaves, she tears the cub in two and hangs it over the flames so that her husband will smell the roasting meat and think that she's still inside. It's an odd little tale, in which one feels sneaking sympathy for the tiger.

In various "demon lover" ballads found in the Celtic folk tradition, the Bluebeard figure is the devil in disguise, or else a treacherous elfin knight, or a murderous ghost, or a false lover with rape or robbery on his mind. In "May Colvin," False Sir John rides off with a

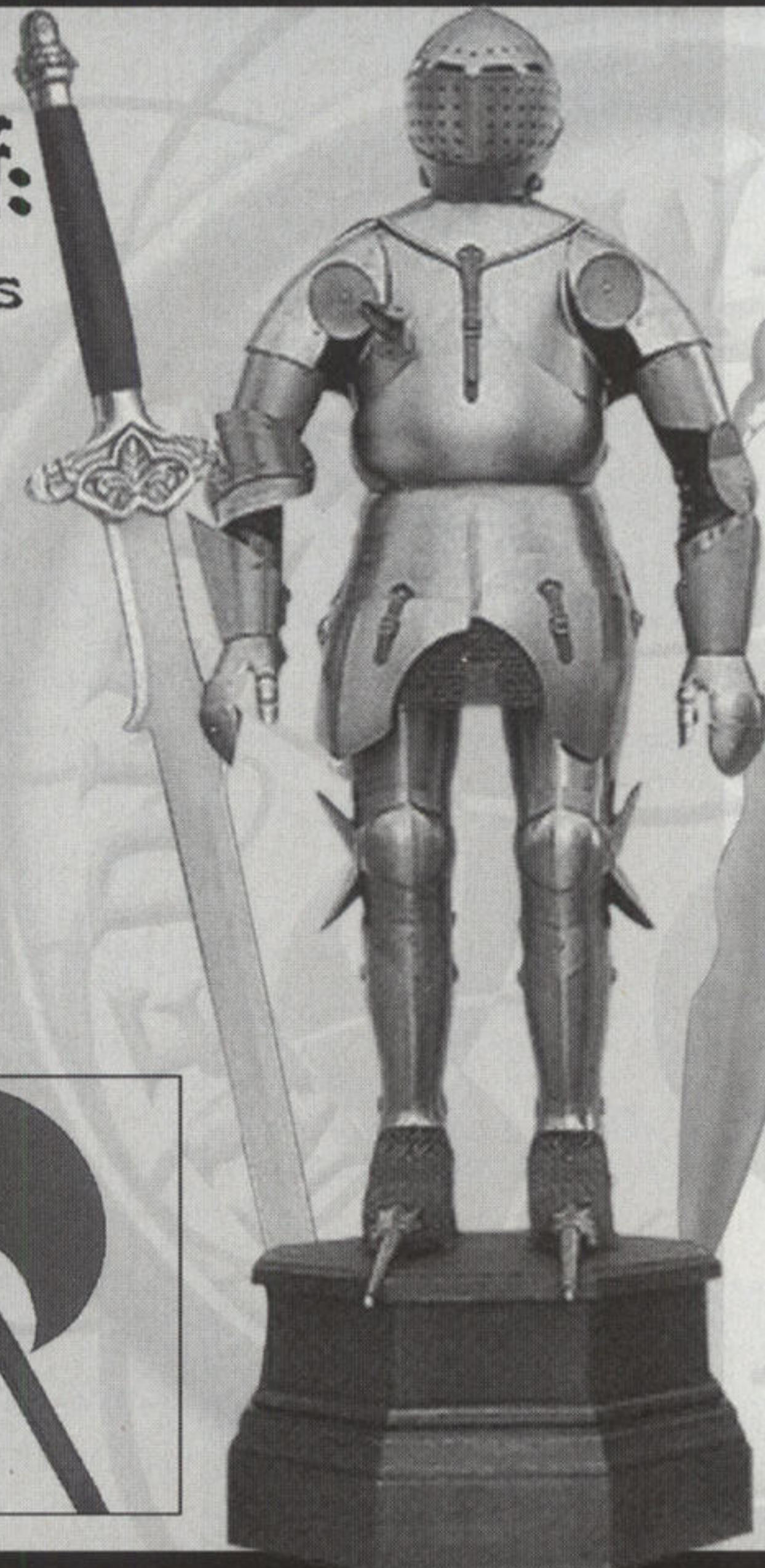
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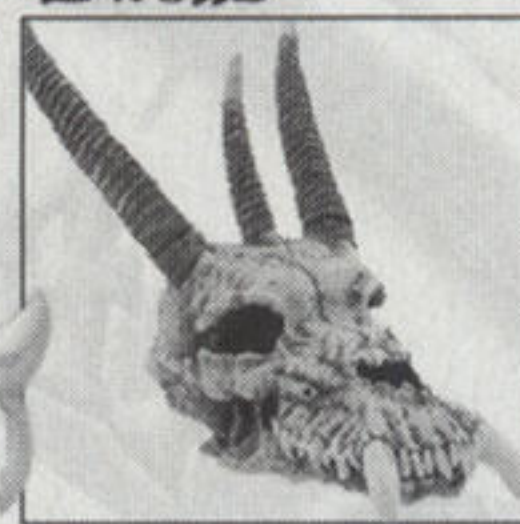
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nobleman's daughter, May, whom he's promised to marry, but when they reach the sea, he orders the maiden to climb down from her horse, to take off her fine wedding clothes, and to hand over her dowry. "Here I have drowned seven ladies," says he, "and you shall be the eighth." May begs him, for the sake of modesty, to turn as she disrobes. And then she promptly pushes him in the water to his death.

In a Scandinavian version of this ballad, a nobleman's daughter is courted by a handsome, honey-tongued, false suitor who promises to take her to the fair if she meets him in the woods. Her father will not let her go, her mother will not let her go, her brothers will not let her go, but her confessor gives permission, provided she keeps hold of her virtue. She finds her suitor in the woods busy at work digging a grave. He says the grave is for his dog, but she protests that it is too long. He says the grave is for his horse; she says it is too small. He tells her the grave is meant for her, unless she consents to lie with him. Eight maidens has he killed before, and she shall be the ninth. Now the choice is hers—she must lose her virtue or her life. She chooses death, but advises her false suitor to remove his coat, lest her heart's blood spatter the fine cloth and ruin it. As he takes it off, she grabs the sword and strikes his head off. The head then speaks, instructing her to fetch a salve to heal the wound. Three times the girl refuses to do the bidding of a murderer. She takes the head, she takes his horse, she takes his dog, and rides back home—but as she goes, she encounters her suitor's mother, his sisters, his brothers. Each time they ask, "Where is thy true love?" Each time she answers, "Lying in the grass, and bloody is his bridal bed." (In some versions, the entire family is made up of robbers and she must kill them too.) She then returns to her father's court, receiving a hero's welcome there. But in other "murderous lover" ballads, the heroines are not so lucky. Some meet with graves at the bottom of the sea, others in cold rivers, leaving ghosts behind to sing the sorrowful song of their tragic end.

Charles Perrault drew a number of elements from folk tales and ballads like these when he created the story of the urbane, murderous Bluebeard and his bloody chamber. Like the devil in the Italian tale "Silvernose," Bluebeard is marked by a physical disfigurement—the beard that "made him so frightfully ugly that all the women and girls run away from him." Like Mr. Fox, his wealth and his charm serve to overcome the natural suspicions aroused by his mysterious past and the rumors of missing wives. Like the false suitors, he seduces his victims with courtly manners, presents, and flattery, all the while tenderly preparing the grave that will soon receive them. Perrault parts with these older tales, however, by apportioning blame to the maiden herself. He portrays her quite unsympathetically as a woman who marries solely from greed, and

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who calls Bluebeard's wrath upon herself with her act of disobedience. This is absent in the older tales, where curiosity and disobedience, combined with cunning and courage, are precisely what saves the heroine from marriage to a monster, death at a robber's hands, or servitude to the devil. Perrault presents his Bluebeard as a well-mannered, even generous man who makes only one demand of his wife, marrying again and again as woman after woman betrays this trust. Only at the end of the tale, as the bridegroom stands revealed as a monster, does Perrault shift his sympathy to the bride, and Bluebeard is dispatched. Perrault ends the tale with a moral that stresses the heroine's transgressions and not her husband's, warning maidens that "curiosity, in spite of its appeal, often leads to deep regret." In a second moral, Perrault remarks that the story took place long ago; modern husbands are not such "jealous malcontents." Jealous malcontent? "Homicidal maniac" would be a better description. Again Perrault's words imply that despicable as Bluebeard's actions are, they are actions in response to the provocation of his wife's behavior.

Another departure from the older folk tales is that Bluebeard's wife (like the other fairy-tale heroines in his *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*) is a remarkably helpless creature. She does not outwit Bluebeard herself, she weeps and trembles and waits for her brothers—unlike the folklore heroines who, even when calling brothers to their aid, have first proven themselves to be quick-witted, courageous, and pro-active. As Maria Tatar has pointed out (in her book *The Classic Fairy Tales*), "Perrault's story, by underscoring the heroine's kinship with certain literary, biblical, and mythical figures (most notably Psyche, Eve, and Pandora), gives us a tale that willfully undermines a robust folkloric tradition in which the heroine is a resourceful agent of her own salvation."

As the 18th and 19th centuries progressed, retellings of Bluebeard increasingly emphasized the "sin" of disobedience as central to the story—a subsequent version was titled *Bluebeard, or The Effects of Female Curiosity*. As fairy tales became an area of scholarly inquiry in the 19th and 20th centuries, folklorists pounced upon this theme in their analysis of the tale—and took it one step farther, suggesting that Bluebeard's wife's disobedience was sexual in nature, the bloodstained key symbolizing the act of infidelity. (Never mind the fact that there are no other men in the whole of Perrault's tale until those convenient brothers come thundering out of nowhere to save her.) Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim was one of the critics who read Bluebeard as a tale of infidelity. In his flawed but influential book of the 1970s, *The Uses of Enchantment*, he pronounced "Bluebeard" "a cautionary tale which warns: Women, don't give in to your sexual curiosity; men, don't permit yourself to be carried away by your anger at being sexually betrayed." But as nov-

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elist Lydia Millet has pointed out in her essay "The Wife Killer" (published in *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall*), "Blue Beard wanted his new wife to find the corpses of his former wives. He *wanted* the new bride to discover their mutilated corpses; he *wanted* her disobedience. Otherwise, he wouldn't have given her the key to the forbidden closet; he wouldn't have left town on his so-called business trip; and he wouldn't have stashed the dead Mrs. Blue Beards in the closet in the first place. Transparently, this was a set-up."

Marina Warner, in her excellent fairy tale study *From the Beast to the Blonde*, suggests another way to read the tale: as an expression of young girls' fears about marriage. Perrault was writing at a time, and in a social class, when arranged marriages were commonplace, and divorce out of the question. A young woman could easily find herself married off to an old man without her consent—or to a monster: a drunkard, a libertine, or an abusive spouse. Further, the mortality rate of women in childbirth was frighteningly high. Remarriage was commonplace for men who'd lost a wife (or wives) in this fashion, and ghosts from previous marriages hung over many a young bride's wedding. (Perrault and other writers in the fairy tale *salons* were firmly against arranged marriages, and this concern can be seen in the subtext of many fairy tales of the period.)

Another aspect of the Bluebeard story that we see increasingly emphasized in later retellings is xenophobia, with the brutal bridegroom betrayed as an Oriental. There is nothing in the text of Perrault's tale (except that extraordinary beard) to indicate that Bluebeard is anything but a wealthy, if eccentric, French nobleman; yet illustrations to the story—from 18th-century woodcuts to the famous Victorian illustrations of Edmund Dulac—depict Bluebeard in Turkish garb, threatening his bride with a scimitar. It must be remembered that "Arabian Nights"-style fairy tales were enormously popular in Europe from the 18th century onward, yet none of the other tales in Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* were given this Oriental gloss as persistently as Bluebeard. Both horrible and sensual (all those wives!), Bluebeard is perhaps a more comfortable figure when he is the Other, the Outsider, the Foreigner, and not one of us. And yet, it's the fact that he *is* one of us—the polite, well-mannered gentleman next door—that makes the story so very chilling to this day.



*The murderous Bluebeard wields his scimitar in another illustration by Edmund Dulac. OPPOSITE: Young women are able to overlook Bluebeard's appearance in favor of his great wealth, with deadly consequences.*

While tales like "Beauty and the Beast" serve to remind us that a monstrous visage can hide the heart of a truly good man, Bluebeard shows us the reverse: A man's fine façade might hide a monster.

"Bluebeard" remained well known throughout Europe right up to the 20th century, inspiring new tales in its turn, as well as dramas, operettas, and countless pantomimes. William Makepeace Thackeray published a parody of Bluebeard called *Bluebeard's Ghost* in 1843 that chronicled the further romantic adventures of Bluebeard's widow. Jacques Offenbach wrote a rather burlesque operetta titled *Barbe-bleu* in 1866. In 1899, the Belgian symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck wrote a libretto entitled *Ariane et Barbe-Bleu*, set to music by Paul Dukas and performed in Paris in 1907. Maeterlinck's version, written with the aid of his lover, the singer Georgette Leblanc, combined the Bluebeard story with elements from the myth of Ariadne, Theseus, and the Minotaur. In this sad, fatalistic version of the tale, Ariane, the last of Bluebeard's brides, attempts to rescue his previous wives and finds them bound by chains of their own making to Bluebeard's castle. *The Seven Wives of Bluebeard* by Anatole France, published in 1903, retold Perrault's story from Bluebeard's point of view, portraying the man as a good-hearted (if somewhat simple-minded) nobleman whose reputation has been sullied by the duplicitous

women he's married. Bela Bartok's opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1911), libretto by Bela Balasz, presents a brooding, philosophical Bluebeard, reflecting on the impossibility of lasting love between men and women.

As fairy tales were relegated to the nursery in the 20th century, "Bluebeard" was seldom included (for obvious reasons) in collections aimed at children. And yet the story did not disappear from popular culture; it moved from the printed page to film. As early as 1901, George Méliès directed a silent film version titled *Barbe Bleu* which manages, despite cinematic limitations, to be both comic and horrific. Other film treatments over the years included *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* in 1938; *Bluebeard* in 1944; Richard Burton's *Bluebeard* in 1972, and *Bluebeard's Castle*, a film version of Bartok's opera, in 1992. In addition to direct interpretations of the Bluebeard legend, Maria Tatar makes a case that Bluebeard is a precursor of cinematic horror. "In 'Bluebeard,' as in cinematic horror," she

writes, "we have not only a killer who is propelled by psychotic rage, but also the abject victims of his serial murders, along with a 'final girl' (Bluebeard's wife), who either saves herself or arranges her own rescue. The 'terrible place' of horror, a dark, tomblike site that harbors grisly evidence of the killer's derangement, manifests itself as Bluebeard's castle." Marina Warner concurs. "Bluebeard," she notes, "has entered secular mythology alongside Cinderella and Snow White. But his story possesses a characteristic with particular affinity to the present day: seriality. Whereas the violence in the heroines' lives is considered suitable for children, the ogre has metamorphosed in popular culture for adults, into [the] mass murderer, the kidnapper, the serial killer: a collector, as in John Fowles's novel, an obsessive, like Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Although cruel women, human or fairy, dominate children's stories with their powers, the Bluebeard figure, as a generic type of male murderer, has gradually entered material requiring restricted ratings as well."

Indeed, for modern prose versions of Bluebeard we must go not to the children's fairy-tale shelves, as we do for other stories by Perrault. We must go to the shelves of adult literature, where we find a number of interesting retellings. Foremost among them is Angela Carter's splendid story "The Bloody Chamber," published in her short-story collection of the same name, in which the author

gives full rein to the tale's inherent sensuality, and expands the role of the bride's mother to wonderful effect. *Bluebeard's Daughter* by Sylvia Townsend Warner is a wry, sly, elegant tale about the daughter of Bluebeard's third wife, with her own abiding interest in the locked room of her father's castle. Margaret Atwood's fine story "Bluebeard's Egg," published in her collection of that name, is a contemporary, purely realistic tale of marriage and infidelity which draws its symbolism from both "Bluebeard" and "Fitcher's Bird." Gregory Frost's inventive new novel, *Fitcher's Brides*, also draws liberally from both these tales, setting the story in upstate New York in the 19th century, at a time when religious fervor, doomsday cults, and experimental utopian communities were widespread. His Bluebeard figure is a calculating, controlling preacher named Reverend Fitcher. *Bluebeard* by Kurt Vonnegut and *The Blue Diary* by Alice Hoffman are both contemporary novels that make use of symbolism from the fairy tale in intriguing ways. Vonnegut's book is the tale of an artist with a secret in his potato barn; Hoffman's novel is the study of a seemingly perfect man with a mysterious past. "Bones," by Francesca Lia Block, is a brief but thoroughly chilling take on the Bluebeard story, concerning a lonely girl and a wealthy young man in the LA hills. It was first published in her fairy tale collection *The Rose and the Beast*. Neil Gaiman draws upon Robber Bridegroom leg-



ends and the English tale of Mr. Fox in his haunting prose-poem "The White Rose," first published in the fairy-tale anthology *Ruby Slippers, Golden Tears*. Bluebeard poetry ranges from Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Bluebeard" (*Renascence and Other Poems*) to Anne Sexton's "The Gold Key" (*Transformations*) to Gwen Strauss's "Bluebeard" (*Trail of Stones*).

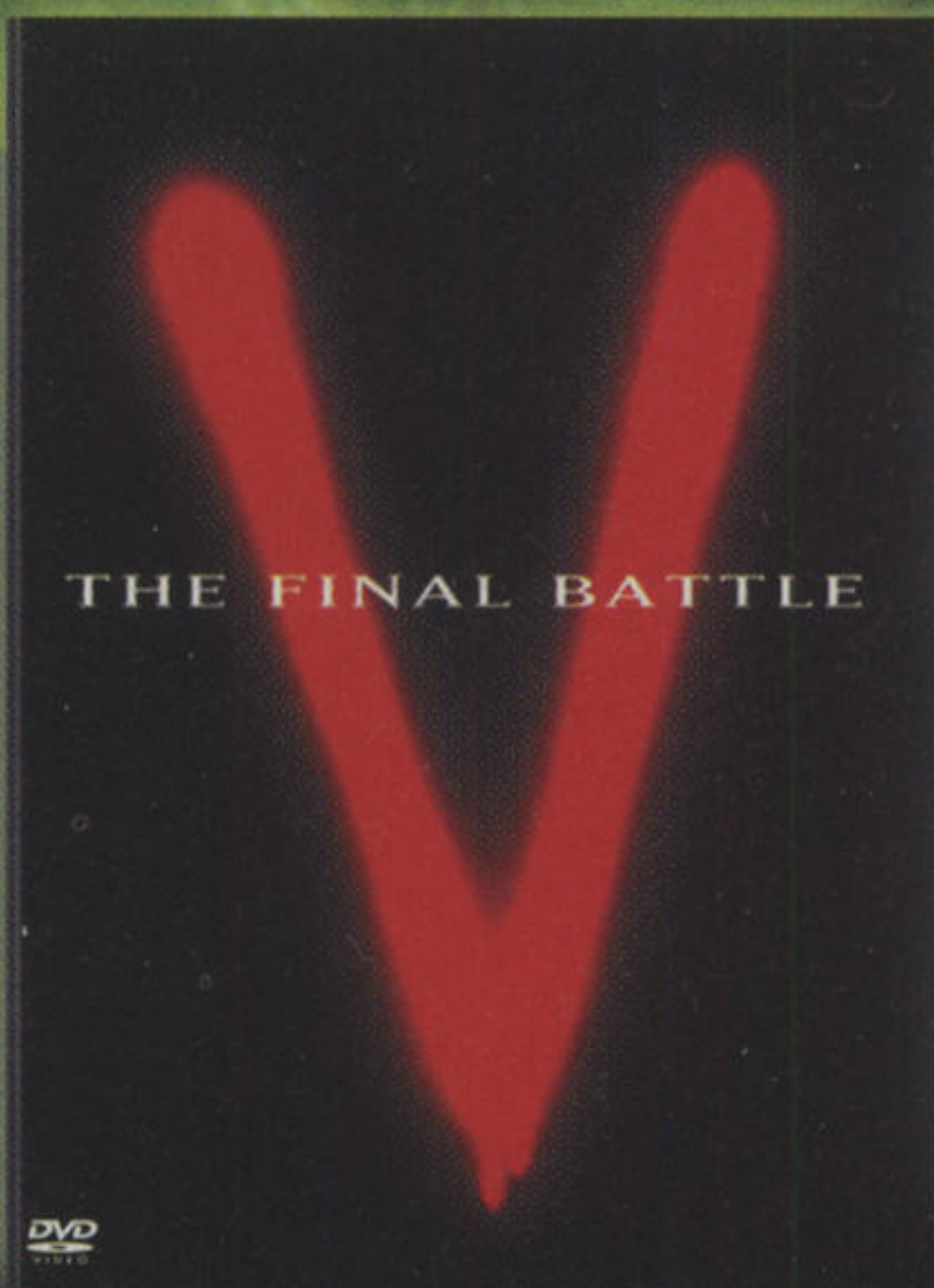
In "The Wife Killer," Lydia Millet reflects on Bluebeard's potent, enduring allure. "Blue Beard retains his charm," she writes, "by being what most men and women feel they cannot be: an overt articulator of the private fantasy

of egomania ... he is the subject that takes itself for a god. He is omnipotent because he accepts no social compromise; he acts solely in the pursuit of his own satisfaction." She goes on to comment that "between an egotist with high expectations and a sociopath stretches only the fine thread of empathy and identification." "Bluebeard," Millet reminds us, is a story about illusion, transgression, and the dark side of carnal appetites. It cautions us to beware of strangers in the wood ... and of gentlemen in the front parlor.

To learn more about "Bluebeard" and other tales, and to see classic Bluebeard illustrations, visit the SurLaLune Fairy Tale Pages Web site edited by Heidi Anne Heiner: [www.surlalune.fairytales.com](http://www.surlalune.fairytales.com). For further reading on the subject, I recommend the following books: *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, by Marina Warner; *Spells of Enchantment*, edited by Jack Zipes; *The Classic Fairy Tales*, edited by Maria Tatar; and *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore Their Favorite Fairy Tales*, edited by Kate Bernheimer, as well as Danielle M. Roemer's fascinating article "The Contextualization of the Marquis in Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber'" in *Marvels and Tales: Journal of Fairy-tale Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1998. ♣

Many thanks to the folks on Surlalune discussion board for their input into this article.—T.W.

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# ACTION FIGURES

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*Are you really a hero if nothing can touch you?*

*Are you really weak if too much does?*

*Don't worry—you're only human.*

**F**rom the 55th floor of a high-rise construction project, the city is a 3-D maze of steel and glass and traffic.

Thirty seconds after the 6 o'clock whistle blares, Tony Ottavino has already secured the welding tools and signaled to Carello down on 50 to bring them down. Time to knock off for the day. It may be July and hot as hell down on the streets, but up here with the birds and the view, the breeze is strong and cool. Tony unwraps a Butterfinger bar, carefully folds the wrapper before placing it in his pocket, and sits on an I-beam next to Frank Stropaugh, who, 55 stories above the streets, stares out into empty space toward downtown.

Tony watches Frank's eyes move left, then right, then up, down, and back up again, tracking. Tony looks with him, then sees what Frank sees. "Oh," he says. "Huh." Frank just keeps staring. Frank is like that.

After about three minutes, Tony points toward where they're looking and says, "My kid did a report about him in school last week. My daughter, Jennifer, you met her. She says he's six-feet-four, has black hair, turquoise eyes like Barbie's, and always tells the truth. Ain't that the cutest thing?"

As if snapping out of a trance, Frank turns and says in that way he has, "You're full of shit. He's six-feet-six, can change his eye color just by thinking about it, and isn't bound by your narrow definition of morality."

# “IF HE CAN DO ALL THIS SUPERMAN SHIT AND IT DOESN'T

“Ooooh. There you go again with your new college book crap. I'm just sayin' what my kid said she learned in school is all. I tell ya, from up here I feel like I could fly and bend steel bars between my teeth and save whole towns from, y'know, hurricanes and shit. Yeah. But y'know, he's not really anything special. When you get right down to it, where it really counts, he's just a guy like me and you.”

“He's an *alien*. From another *planet*. He's plenty different from you.”

“That *ain't* what I'm talking about,” Tony says. Frank is a good guy, but sometimes he comes off real snotty. He goes to some community college at night and sometimes puts on airs. He's 41, but he works out and still has the kind of good looks that women like. Always did, to hear him tell it. Sure can handle an arc welder, boy.

Tony shakes his head and laughs.

“What?” says Frank.

“Don't that knock the shit out of them monsters-from-space movies. He looks like us. No tentacles or one eye or shit. My daughter, she watches that *E.T.* video every time she's at my place. Now look at that guy. Does he look like E.T.? No sir, not a bit. Looks like you and me. You see *Independence Day*? That Will Smith is pretty good. Don't like Jeff Goldblum, though.”

“How come?”

“You know. He's too ... I don't know. Just never worked for me, is all. Always plays the same character.”

Frank nods. “I heard he fucked Geena Davis.”

“Who, *him*?”

“No, Jeff Goldblum.”

“Jeff Goldblum was *married* to Geena Davis, Professor.”

“No shit?”

“No shit. So yeah, they probably fucked once or twice.” Tony likes that he called Frank “Professor.” You know, to show the uppity son of a bitch. Tony bites off a dangling chunk of Butterfinger goodness. “She's too skinny for me.”

“Geena Davis.”

“Yep. I like 'em big enough to hang onto.”

Frank smirks. “She'll be sorry to hear it.” He laughs and Tony laughs with him.

Tony finishes his candy bar and wipes his hands on his pants. “Now *he's* tall.”

“Who?”

“Jeff Goldblum.”

“Oh. Uh huh.” Frank's eyes follow a purplish streak above the river docks. “Makes you wonder.”

“What?”

“If there were any black people on his planet.”

“Whose planet?”

“Who the fuck do you think? Or Asian types. Or even what religion he is. I mean, to us he's like some kind of god or something. So what's God like to him? Or is he an atheist? And if he's an atheist, is he really the kind of all-powerful being we want being taught to our children in school? The waters run deep once you stir them.”

“The waters, Frank, are full of shit.” Tony cocks his head toward the flying figure silhouetted against the sky. “Him? Heh. He's probably Jewish. Wouldn't that be a kick in the balls, huh?”

view down Broadway has Nicole thinking about Lego towers and, what with all those cars ant-marching in 6 PM gridlock, a science video she saw in fourth grade. Turning 30 in three weeks and four days, she hasn't thought of those things in, like, 20 years. She doesn't know why she's thinking of them now. Especially now.

The condo used to belong to Nicole's father. When his cancer finally took him, he left what he called his “summer cottage” to her. More, she suspected, out of guilt than of genuine fatherly love. It was a token salve, an attempt to heal physical wounds that vanished long ago, and nonphysical ones that hadn't. She never visited her father in the hospital. By that time it was far too late for him to decide to become her hero.

Late afternoon sun hits the mirrored surfaces of high-rises throughout the midtown district. A quarter mile to the east, a new office building is going up. The construction crew started work last fall, using explosives to bring down the old warehouse that had been there forever. Nicole has already forgotten what the warehouse had looked like. Now the new building is 53, 54, 55 stories tall, higher than where she's standing looking out the window. Girders like bones are being manipulated into position. Some jut out into empty space far above the streets. She can barely make out the shapes of two men sitting on the girders. They are big men, but they look tiny from this distance. One of them is good-looking in a rugged sort of way, tanned and muscular from working outdoors. His hands are large and rough, with a scratchy callous on the right palm.

There hasn't been a cloud in the sky all day and it's hot. Nicole unbuttons the top of her powder blue Saks blouse. Sure, the air conditioning is on, but it's hot anyway. She stares out the window another moment, then loosens another button. Her right bra strap bites into her shoulder, so she pulls it down toward her elbow. Her bra is that nice peach one she bought at a Victoria's Secret in an instant of impulse. She had walked in front of the Victoria's window display on Broadway six times before going in. Coming out, she felt her heart beat so hard she had to stop and press her forehead against the wall outside the store. Now she's wearing that nice peach bra in her late (ha) father's condo, and it's hot, and she loosens another button.

Outside, a moving flash of color catches her attention. In the middle distance, among skyscrapers that had been the tallest in the world back in the '30s, or was it the '40s?, a man-sized bullet circles and darts and dives among the steel and glass and traffic, doing what he's done for so long that Nicole rarely notices him anymore.

**F**ROM THE TINY “BALCONY” OF THE TOTH-FLOOR APARTMENT, the former Patricia (“not Patty”) Dabrowski looks west across the river into the city's famous skyline. For months now she's been watching a high-rise going up, girders like toothpicks being swung into place, the pinpoints of arc welding like tiny suns. Patricia has lived here enough years she can name every one of those skyscrapers. From the inner boroughs you can tell the weather or the purity of the air by how visible the windows are on those clean and gleaming façades. A little ways beyond the construction site, a high-rise apartment building glows golden and silver in the 6 PM summer sun.

In her left hand hangs a cigarette, more ash than paper. With her right she raises a glass of Scotch—the good stuff, from the “private stock” her husband won in a bet and hides in his bottom dresser drawer. The bottle she's forbidden to open. She raises the glass, looks

**F**ROM THE WALL-SIZED PICTURE WINDOW IN A CONDO on the 40th floor of a high-rise apartment building, come Sunday night the view of Fourth of July fireworks over the East River will be splendid. Nicole says to herself: *It'll be a damn shame to miss that.* The

# (COST HIM ANYTHING, WHERE'S THE HERO IN THAT?)”

over its rim, finishes her third round. Ice a half-hour old rattles, and through the glass's bottom the city skyline goes all wavery and distorted and melty.

She puts the glass down next to the potted plants and tosses the cigarette over the railing. She watches it fall, watches it carried on a breeze half a block before landing on the sidewalk near the liquor store. Patricia turns, supports herself on the sliding door's frame, and steps back into the apartment. The air conditioning is still out so the place is hot and smells like socks.

Should she fix another drink, or wait a while before finishing off his precious bottle? It's Friday so he'll be home his regular time unless he stops to talk or have a beer before catching the subway. She looks at the clock above the couch. 6:05. There's time.

In their bedroom she puts on her favorite fancy dress, the one she keeps in the thin plastic wrap from the dry cleaners so it doesn't get all dusty in the closet. It's burgundy with black trim, just enough classy and just enough sexy. She used to feel so good in that dress. Now she looks in the dresser mirror and loathes the fat woman staring back at her. Sometime over the past 12 years, she can't figure out exactly when, this fat woman replaced the former Patricia Emily Dabrowski.

She remembers what it feels like to be in love. She read in a magazine that falling in love was exactly like being hit by a bus: It happens when you're not looking and afterwards you either go to heaven or end up in a body cast eating whipped shit through a straw. She thought that was funny at the time. She's realized that somewhere during the past 12 years, when she wasn't paying attention, she got moved out of heaven and put into that body cast.

She smoothes the dress against her body with her hands, feeling beneath the fabric every curve of flab along the way. She's a cow. It's amazing she can still fit into the dress at all. With age she's gone soft, all loose-fleshed and pale. It's normal, it happens to everyone. She hates her thighs most of all. Dimpled and pasty. Like bread dough. To think she wanted a baby through those thighs. It wasn't her fault she couldn't. What would she look like now if she'd done that?

It's easy to remember why she fell in love with him. He had strength, both the inner type as well as the outer type. He was quiet, which she always took as a sign of inner depths. He wasn't rich, but she never had a chance to know what that might be like anyway. She had been alone and lonely and years of therapy had not changed that.

Somewhere along the way she has failed him. He says so every time he tells her she needs to lose weight, every Wednesday night when he comes home after midnight smelling of that other woman. Not that he's been able to be a man in their bed anyway. He hasn't gotten it up for 10 months, ever since that trip to the bank he still refuses to talk about.

Patricia rubs her red-rimmed eyes with a wrist that she notices is puffy and veined, then goes back to the living room. The dress makes a *whoosh-whoosh* sound with her footsteps. She thinks of her senior prom 25 years ago. Bobby Reyerson had gone with her. He told her she was beautiful and she let him feel her breasts. Wonder what happened to him? That new young clerk at the market has eyes for her, that's for sure. Lately she responds to his subtle flirting by flirting right back. What would the bastard think of that, huh?

She sits on the couch—*whoosh!*—and shoves aside a clutter of magazines. A razor blade and a pile of cuttings spill onto the freshly vacuumed carpet. They're pictures and articles neatly sliced from the

daily paper or from *People* and *Newsweek* and *MetroToday* and even a *National Enquirer* she picked up at the market just for the fun of it. It's a girlish hobby, she knows, but lots of people do it and it isn't that silly really, no more than collecting baseball cards or recipes. Still, she hides them from her husband, who more and more lately flies into a fitful rage or a sulking silence whenever she cuts and sorts them in front of him.

From the photos an oh-so-handsome face stares right at her. Beneath his obsidian hair, those intense clear eyes focus on her above his flawless white teeth and perfect jaw. He can melt steel girders with those eyes. That image makes her laugh and almost fall off the couch.

Then she sees the letter on the coffee table and all laughter leaves her. Its two neatly typed pages have been torn in half and Scotch-taped back together. She had started drinking while sticking the tape on, and the corner of one page is still wet from a little spill. Her hands had been shaking.

She doesn't feel like reading the letter for a third time. Instead she finds the TV remote and presses On. An evening news report about a school bond proposal. She picks up the VCR remote, presses Rewind until the machine stops, then hits Play. For the second time today the crude video plays on the 25-inch screen. The sound is poor, but that doesn't matter. Her face emotionless, Patricia manages to watch the tape for almost six minutes before throwing up.

**O**H, HE'S SUCH A HERO!" TONY SAYS. He gestures with his hands for dramatic effect. "He stops a 747 from crashing and it's all 'My hero!' He catches those crooks in Jersey by freezing that lake solid and it's 'He's so brave and courageous!' Or, like last week, he strolls as calm as you please into a burning building and rescues a couple dozen welfare mamas and their brats and everybody's all 'Ooooooh! He's so wonderful and daring and our capital-fuckin'-H Hero!"

Frank nods. "Mmm," he says. A pigeon lands on a girder below their feet. Frank watches how it sticks its head under a wing when it's scratching an itch.

"Look," Tony says a little louder. "The way I see it is, if he can do all this superhuman shit and it doesn't cost him anything, where's the hero in that? He stops a runaway subway from going kablooy, but he doesn't break a sweat, so how is that any more heroic than me saving an anthill from being stepped on?"

The pigeon flies off again. Frank studies the way it banks in the air. "I hear he's gay," he says.

"Who?"

"What do you mean 'who'? *Him.*"

"Him? No way." From 55 stories above the pavement, Tony looks all around over the city before whispering, "Where'd you hear that?"

"People. It makes sense. He could have any girl he wants, right? He could have, you know, Pamela Anderson, or even the Penthouse Pet of the Year."

"Did you see that video with Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee? *Man.*"

"See there, that's my point. That guy can have any woman, *any* woman *at all*. But do you ever—*ever*—see him with a fine babe on his arm?"

"Or more than one. Man, I'd like that."

"Right. But no, you don't see that with him. Nobody does. Why do you think that is?"

Tony starts to speak. Stops. He rubs something off the tip of his nose and says, "Just because we don't see it don't mean it's not true."

Frank checks his watch. 6:20. The sun is setting into the top of that high-rise apartment building a quarter-mile to the west.

Tony thinks, rather triumphantly, that the conversation has concluded.

Finally, Frank says, "Well, I've seen him up close. So I have my reasons for certain conclusions."

This gets Tony sitting up straight. "Oh, yeah. Heard about that. What, some sort of terrorist thing or whatever, right?" He is alarmed by Frank's reaction: tense and rigid, a vein bulging in the neck, and for a second he's afraid that Frank is angry with him.

Frank looks away from Tony. After a while he says, "Bank job. But they were terrorists, yeah. Had more heavy artillery than the Montana Militia. You should've seen the Heinsbaum MR-70 the leader was carrying. It was a beauty, all right."

"So, what happened? Did you get to talk to, you know—? Did he shoot those lasers from his eyes or what?"

was full of old ladies and little kids. One ricochet and *bam!* That's the end of one valued customer."

Tony exhales as if he's exhausted from the experience. "But no one got hurt, right?"

"Yeah," said Frank. "But that's not the point."

"And he caught the bad guys, right?"

"Of course he did. What else he gonna do?"

"Did you get a good look at him?"

"Sure. He shook my hand before he left and said it's people like me that make his job easier."

"Was he sweatin'? Did he have a scar where the bullets hit him?"

Frank pauses. "No."

"Then there's what I'm sayin'. He ain't no hero if he's not in any danger himself. However, you, my friend, were a hero for even thinkin' about taking those bastards out. You coulda done it, then you woulda been on the news and in the papers. But for that guy—"

## A SMEARY STREAK OF COLOR BLEW LIKE A BENIGN TORNADO THROUGH THE ROOM.

"Well, first off you got to know that he wasn't there until late. I mean, those sons of bitches had their firepower out and could've wasted everyone in the room before he showed up. In fact, one more minute and I would've taken out the leader myself. While everyone else was on the floor all scared and sweatin'—"

"I'd be shittin' my pants."

"They had everybody on the floor, and they *thought* I was harmless like the rest of 'em. That was their first mistake. I learned a few handy tricks in the army—"

"Like what? What tricks?"

"How to kill a man before he knows you're even there. How to move fast, like a cat—"

"What, Special Forces? Commando training?"

"Something like that. Anyway, there I was, on the floor but all crouched and ready to spring into action. I mean, all those people were counting on me, you know? It was all up to me and I had this plan where I'd get the leader in a headlock, take his gun and put the barrel to his fuckin' head and tell his goons to back off and drop their weapons."

"Shit, Bruce Willis oughtta play you in the movie."

"Well, that's what I *would've* done if that son of a bitch hadn't flew in and fucked it up."

"That bastard."

"Boy, I was ready and had everything under control."

Tony knuckle-punches Frank in the shoulder. "Now *that* woulda been heroic."

"Damn right."

"You coulda got yourself killed. But you risked your life anyway and didn't need that guy comin' in and messing up your plan."

"Hell, he coulda caused more danger just by showing up. One of the shooters opened up on him with a machine gun."

"No shit?"

"What if one of them bullets hit somebody else, huh? The place

"—it was nothing special."

"Exactly. That's what I'm sayin'."

Frank watches the sun disappear behind the apartment building. He studies its backlit façade, and Tony tries to figure out what Frank is looking for down around its 40th floor. Tony gives up when Frank says, "I think he's a fag."

"How can you tell?"

"The way he looked at me when he shook my hand. All intense like."

"Yeah, that's happened to me. Gives me the creeps."

"But with this guy, what can you do?"

"Nothin'."

"Damn right. Just ignore it."

Tony nods. "Yep. Besides, what's with that outfit?"

"That too."

"Dead giveaway."

**N**ICOLE DOESN'T FEEL GOOD ABOUT MAILING THAT FIRST VIDEOTAPE. But it was the right thing to do. There is pain, and then there is pain. Her conscience would have never stopped speaking if she hadn't made the copy and put it in yesterday morning's mail. She got his real address by calling his boss at the construction site and saying she was his long-lost sister in the city for a surprise visit. She's never been an "other woman" before.

The second tape she's making now, this one won't be mailed to anyone.

She first met him last autumn in the least romantic of places: the teller line at the bank during an armed robbery. She was there to make a transfer from her savings account to her checking account. The ATM was out of order, so she had to come inside and deal with people. He was two strangers ahead of her, waiting to deposit a paycheck. He was good-looking in a rugged sort of way, tanned, and

obviously worked outdoors. His hands looked large and rough and that aroused her a little. Tiny fantasies, nothing more, just like everyone has. Even now she has to rationalize the events that led to her, at this moment, preparing the second videotape.

Like all bank lines, this one moved with annoying slowness. *Hurry up!* she thought at the old ladies and wrinkly men standing in front of the tellers. She knew it wasn't their fault but it felt good to think that anyway. Two strangers ahead of her, Mr. Outdoors shifted his weight from his left foot to his right. Nice butt in those jeans.

Then somebody screamed.

The first robber's face was hidden behind a plastic Charlie Chaplin mask. He shouted that everyone should lay on the floor *now*. You mean *lie*, Nicole said in her head. A panic reaction. With everyone else she dropped to the floor, palms flat on the cool tiles. Her heart hurt in her chest. Her brand new powder blue Saks blouse was getting dirty.

The masked robber was armed with what looked like an ultra-modern machine gun, one of those new military things as portable as a toy but *very* real and deadly. She'd seen one like it in a spy movie. Another man, she couldn't see him, shouted that everything would be all right as long as everyone cooperated. A third voice mumbled something incoherent to the second. How many were there? Nicole heard the metal-on-metal rattle of armaments. They demanded access to the safe deposit boxes. *Fast!* shouted Machine Gun Man.

Fingers brushed her right hand. Mr. Outdoors lay near her, crying and mumbling *Don't shoot me don't shoot me please don't shoot me*. His hand twitched as he gulped down sobs, his fingers accidentally touching hers. His eyes were clenched shut, so he did not notice her. She could smell his sweat. During the next few minutes, when fear came close to taking over her consciousness, she concentrated on the lines of his face and focused with absolute intensity on what she imagined his voice was like.

Wind mussed her hair. Wind? She looked away from Mr. Outdoors and turned her head slightly, just enough to look up and see *him* standing before Machine Gun Man. His tights and cape looked more impressive in real life than they did on TV or in magazines. The muscles beneath the tights bulged in beautiful smooth lines like a Renaissance statue. His black hair glistened under the fluorescent ceiling lights. He was superb. His gaze was coolly fixed on Machine Gun Man.

*Pow!* His left arm moved so fast the air snapped. At that same instant a gunshot exploded behind her. You couldn't tell which happened first: the gunshot or the blurred flash of his arm. Didn't matter—his left fist was extended at shoulder height, and he opened his fingers and dropped a flattened wad of lead to the cool tiles, inches from Nicole's right hand.

A smears streak of color blew like a benign tornado through the room for four seconds. On the fifth second, five plastic-masked men sat unconscious and propped doll-like against the wall of teller stations. Their weapons had been pretzel-twisted together and placed near the security guards who, Nicole found out during that evening's news, had been sleep-gassed before they could take action. The hero helped the bank manager and the elderly patrons to their feet, told everyone that the danger was past and everything was fine, then flew out the front doors and up out of sight. A wailing police siren grew nearer.

Minutes later, she asked Mr. Outdoors if he was all right. He turned away from her, hiding his face and wiping it with his hands. Then he turned to her and said yes. She said she was too, covering the anxiety and fear that still dug its teeth into her. His hand still shook. She surprised herself by reaching out and patting it and telling him that she sure was glad that was all over. He nodded. She said her name was Nicole. He told her his was Frank. His voice was deeper than she had imagined. When she noticed his wedding ring, her heart sank a little. *Figures*.

Now, today, 10 months later, Nicole stands half-naked looking out the window through a video camera mounted on a tripod. She aims

the camera on the two tiny men on the high-rise girder. She zooms the lens until the features of the bigger man are almost recognizable.

**P**ATRICIA WATCHES THE VIDEO, THE ONE SHE RECEIVED IN THE MAIL, watches its entire 40 minutes for a third time, although now her finger is on the Fast Forward button a lot. She compares her body to the younger woman's on the tape and it doesn't make her feel one way or another. The tape is not particularly flattering to Frank, who's put on the pounds in spite of his time at the gym and on the job. Frank's pride in his body was part of what attracted her to him 12 years ago. Patricia studied psychology during the two years she went to college, so she understands these things. Psychology and counseling, because she'd wanted to help women who were like herself. Well, a lot of plans can get pissed away over 12 years.

The video had been his idea, she's sure of that. He had suggested similar "spice" to her more than once after he bought that damn camera. She always said no. It was sick for him to even think it. Well, he finally found a tootsie willing to be immortalized (as well as other things) on tape for him. According to the time stamp, they recorded these activities three weeks ago. A Wednesday night, of course. It's in a private bedroom, a fancy city high-rise (the curtains aren't completely closed, probably an extra kick). From the few moments of conversation before they begin, it's clear that they've been here before.

She watches impassively. It's as if both figures moving on the screen are strangers. Sometimes Frank brings home tapes from the adult video rental place down the block, and that's fine (she considers herself broad-minded) though two or more strangers going at it on the TV screen just doesn't do it for her. Now in this one, the lighting is bad and the single unmoving camera makes it all that much more tacky and amateurish.

And what do you know? The son of a bitch manages to get it up again. Though it's obvious what does that for him: power games and displays of macho dominance. Patricia almost feels sorry for that young thing with her husband. He always did like asserting his "alpha" qualities. For years after their marriage, Frank had occasionally hinted at new kinds of "play" during their own love-making. She gently refused, finding no pleasure in that sort of power shifting. Recently she talked him into taking one of those magazine personality quizzes. It had dubbed each of them a "warrior" and they both had a good chuckle over that. Privately, it confirmed what she has come to believe: that she has changed during the past 12 years. Her dependence on pills and hotlines and the wrong men has been over for—for a long time now. She enjoys realizing that.

With her he could, when he tried, be genuinely tender and giving and sharing. There's none of that on display here. Watching, Patricia feels nothing. Certainly not surprise.

She doesn't bother to rewind the tape when it's over.

**M**Y DAUGHTER, JENNIFER," TONY SAYS, "SHE GOT AN A ON HER REPORT. She cut pictures of him from magazines and made a ... what's she call it? ...a collage. You shoulda seen it. She just loves him."

Frank grunts, dismissing Tony with a sound. Tony sees that he's touched a nerve. "She says she's going to marry him. Is that cute or what?"

Frank says nothing, but his face goes hard and Tony changes the subject. "My little girl. Sure is growing up. Things have changed since her mom and me divorced. Yeah. Everything has. Things would be different now." But Frank isn't listening. Instead, he's looking out over the city. Tony waves a hand out toward the south, toward the crowded heart of the metropolis. "Makes you wonder what he does on his days off. You know, they say he lives a double life, as a real person with a

*Continued on page 85*



SOMETIMES LOVE CAN THAW AN ICY HEART AND BREAK THE CHAINS OF



# IN THE WITCH'S GARDEN

By Naomi Kritzer Illustration by Web Bryant

*Inspired by "The Snow Queen" by Hans Christian Andersen.*

**I** heard the girl before I saw her: dry, hopeless sobs from a child unused to having anyone pay attention to her tears. "Hush," I called softly, breaking through the brush to reach her. Someone from the station might still hear her, and come after her.

"Who's there?" she cried out. "Help me, I'm lost."

I used my knife to cut away the last of the bushes. She drew back in fear when she saw me, and tried to struggle to her feet, but fell back in pain. She must have sprained an ankle when she fell down the embankment. "Don't be afraid," I said, and gave her my most reassuring smile, but the sight of my missing front tooth only frightened her more. When I knelt by her side, she overcame her fear enough to touch my gray braids with a fingertip. She had never seen gray hair before, as all the adults in the station maintained the appearance of youth—or so I was told by my mother, when she warned me not to go near the vast, dark building so close to our valley.

"Who are you?" she whispered. "Can you help me get home?"

"I am not from your station," I said, as if that wasn't obvious. "But I can take care of you. Climb on to my back." She wrapped her legs around my hips, and her skinny arms around my neck. "I'll take you to *my* home."

She was as light as a flower—11 years old, I guessed. I broke into a trot once we reached even ground; the more distance I could put between her and the station, the better. I had always wanted a child of my own, but no matter how many men I seduced, I never managed to make one. Now the Goddess had sent me a child. "Don't worry," I whispered. "I will be a good mother to you."

"What?" she said.

ENCHANTMENT. SOMETIMES IT TAKES SOMETHING A LITTLE STRONGER.

## "MY SWEETHEART AND I, WE WERE IMPROVED BY THE SCIENTISTS ...

"I said, did you have a mother back in the station?"

"No," she said. "I'm a made-child, not a born-child. I have no parents."

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Gerda. Do you want to know my number?"

"No," I said. "There are no other Gerdas here; we don't need numbers. My name is Natalia."

"The Natalia my age isn't very nice," Gerda said. "But the 10-year-old Natalia, she isn't so bad."

"There are no other Natalias here, either," I said, and shook my braids so that the beads strung on them clacked against each other.

Over another hill, then down into my valley: a cottage surrounded by a garden. Gerda looked around in wonder. As a station child, she would have found any garden strange and impressive, but my garden—inherited from my mother, who was also a witch—truly was strange: I grew an orange tree and a lemon tree, and the rosebushes and hydrangeas bloomed in the spring when the hills beyond my garden were still covered in a deep layer of snow. The creek that flowed through my garden never froze. My magic was not perfect, but it served me well. I carried Gerda into my cottage, and set her down in my chair.

"I'll make you something to eat," I said, and put a pot on the stove, with dried corn kernels in it. "Tell me how you came to leave the station, Gerda."

"My friend, Kai—he's the 11-year-old Kai—a few days ago he went to look for the edge of the station. He wanted to look at the outside, even though that's forbidden. Now the Snow Queen has taken him." The first kernel of corn in the pot popped, and Gerda jumped at the sound. "What is that?"

"Popcorn," I said. Another kernel popped, and she jumped again. "It's just the sweet center of the corn; the warmth of the fire helps it burst out of its prison. We'll eat it in a moment—serves it right for seeking to change its nature. Go on about Kai."

"They told us never to speak his name again. The Snow Queen takes only disobedient children, so he must have deserved what he got. But he's my friend. So I thought I'd look for the edge of the station..."

"Just to take a look outside, like Kai?"

Gerda shook her head. "I thought maybe he'd gotten lost in the station."

The popcorn was almost done. I shook it a few more times and took it off the stove, then sprinkled it with a pinch of salt and set it on the table. "Eat. It's very tasty." Gerda looked at it dubiously, then took a single fluffy kernel and crunched into it. Her face brightened and she took a handful. I wet a cloth in cold water and then sat down at her feet, easing off her shoes. They were bright red and gave off an acrid odor. Her left ankle was swollen and bruised; I wrapped it in the cool cloth and drew the footstool over for her to rest it on.

"What happened then?"

"Someone began to follow me. I was afraid; I was in a forbidden corridor. A *really* forbidden corridor. I started running, and I pushed on a door and found myself—"

"Outside."

"Yes. They always told us we would die if we went outside. It's safe only inside the station. Is that true?"

"No, it isn't true," I said. "I've lived outside my whole life, and I'm not dead yet."

"Then perhaps Kai isn't dead, even if he stumbled out like I did," Gerda said. "Have you seen Kai?"

"I saw no boy leave the station," I said. "If I had, I would have brought him here, just as I brought you."

She looked down at the last of the popcorn and her eyes grew suddenly wide. "Are *you* the Snow Queen?"

I chuckled. "If I am, it's a good thing you were disobedient, isn't it? Haven't I been kind to you so far?" But her eyes were still wide

and afraid, so I said, "No, I am not the Snow Queen. I am only Natalia, a gardener and a witch. Finish the last of the popcorn, now. Your ankle needs rest, and so does your heart. I'll give you some tea and put you to bed."

I would need the second bed, I thought, as I heated the water; I would bring my mother's old bed down from the attic. I sweetened the tea of forgetfulness that I brewed her with wild honey. "You'll wake when you're ready," I said as I gave her the cup. Gerda drank the tea, and closed her eyes and slept, right there in the chair.

**T**he forgetfulness herbs are not perfect; if something reminds you of what you've forgotten, the spell can be broken. So while Gerda slept, I took my scissors and cut away her dress, her stockings, and even her underwear.

Around her neck was a snug cord strung with a metal chip: G2117F, it said. Her tag. I studied that for a long time; I was unfamiliar with the magics used by the station scientists, and if I cut that cord away, I wasn't sure if it would hurt her. I tugged at it a bit, and by and by the cord stretched until it was loose enough that I could slip it over her head. When she was naked, I wrapped her in a blanket and lay her on my bed. I bundled up her clothes and her shoes and that tag and put them away in the attic of my cottage.

Gerda's hair and skin smelled like the chemicals she washed with, so I warmed water and steeped marigolds and rose petals in it, and bathed her with that until she smelled like me. While she slept, I made her a dress, so that she would have something to wear when she woke. I disapproved of children wearing shoes, but her feet were delicate and fragile from her life on the station, so I also made her a pair of sandals.

When Gerda woke, I smiled at her and said, "Are you feeling better, my darling?"

Gerda blinked. "Who are you?" she said.

"I'm your mother, sweetheart," I said. "You've been very ill. Don't worry; everything will come back in time."

If Gerda had been a born-child and not a made-child, it's possible that the forgetfulness herbs would not have worked at all. But she remembered no other mother, and so she accepted my word when I said I was she. And I discovered (as I had suspected) that I could be an excellent mother: patient, loving, and affectionate, much as my own mother had been. As the spring and summer passed, I taught Gerda the names of all the plants and trees in my garden (pretending, of course, that I was reteaching her what she had forgotten). I showed her how to brew an herbal tea that would stop a woman's labor if it was too early, or calm someone crazy with fear, or cure a cold. To toughen her feet, I encouraged her to kick off her sandals whenever she pleased, and by the time I could smell the tang of frost when I left my valley, the sandals were gathering dust under her bed, forgotten.

Gerda told me sometimes that she still didn't remember anything from before her sickness. I always sighed and shook my head and said that perhaps those memories were gone forever, but Gerda wasn't to worry; we would create new memories together.

Then I got sick.

Gerda put me to bed, and brewed me teas to bring down my fever and ease my aches and pains. She had learned well, and in a very few days I felt much better again. But I was weak and fussy, the way people often are when they're getting over being sick, and Gerda thought she'd look for the candied orange peels that we had made a few months earlier; those, she thought, would perk me up.

The candied orange peels weren't in the kitchen. Gerda tried the cabinets in the herb-drying room, but they weren't there, either. Nor were they in the coldhouse, nor the root cellar, nor the pantry. Dozing in my bed, I could hear Gerda looking for something. Then I heard the creak of the ladder to the attic. I could have shouted "No!



# US AND OUR CHILDREN, WE'RE THE ONLY TALKING CROWS IN THE WORLD."

Stop!" and invented some excuse for her to not go up there, but in truth, after all those months, I half believed myself that I had borne Gerda from my own womb and raised her from her infancy.

I heard Gerda's footsteps, but something was different about them. She set a jar by my bed, and I looked over: the orange peels. Then I saw a flash of red: the shoes. On her feet.

"Mother," she said. "Where can I find the Snow Queen?"

I closed my eyes and turned away from her. "I should have burned those clothes," I said. "But I was afraid the smoke would poison the hydrangeas."

"The Snow Queen," Gerda said. "I'm only angry because I was looking for Kai, and now—I don't even know how much time has passed."

"Eight months," I said.

"Now how am I going to find him?"

"There is no Snow Queen," I said. "It's a story told to frighten the station's children. To keep them from trying to go outside."

"Kai must be somewhere," Gerda said.

"If I'd seen a boy leave the station, I'd have brought him here—I told you that."

"Would you have dosed him with tea, and told him he was your son?" Gerda asked.

Still facing the wall, I smiled a little. "Maybe," I said. "What I really wanted was a daughter."

"Do you know anyone else who might have taken him?"

I shrugged. "There are settlements to the south and the west. Perhaps he found his way to one of those."

Gerda kissed my cheek. "I have to go look for Kai, Mother," she said. "Will you help me find him?"

Tears welled up in my eyes. "I can't leave my garden," I said. "If I leave my garden, the orange trees will die, and the lemon trees, and the roses ... it's almost winter. Without my magic, the garden will turn cold. Can't you wait until spring?"

"It's already been too long."

"If you must go," I said, "take my heavy cloak, the one hung by the door. There's magic in the wool, and it will keep you warm. Also—" I reached under my own collar, and drew out a claw on a leather thong. I pulled it over my head and gave it to Gerda. "Keep this with you. When you are ready to come back, speak my name three times and hold this in the palm of your hand. The claw will point back to my house."

Gerda hung the claw around her own neck.

"Good luck, stolen daughter. Come back to me soon."

I did not tell Gerda that the claw would let me scry her. After all, my mother hadn't told me that either, when she gave me the claw to wear. What mother would?

**I**walked Gerda to the edge of my valley and stood and watched her as she headed west. The station was to the north, but she didn't head toward it. Kai would not be there, and no matter how hard she knocked, they would not let her in.

When the curve of the hill took her out of my sight, I headed back to my garden. Though my valley stayed warm, the trees knew when it was winter, and it was time to clean up the leaves. I raked them into a bin to rot until spring, when I'd use them to enrich the soil and keep the new plants moist. Even the roses had dropped their leaves, and I carefully gathered up the last of the rose blossoms to dry in my house.

As the setting sun plunged my valley into shadow, I went inside and put my kettle on the stove. My house seemed very cold without Gerda; her empty bed seemed to take up far too much space. I poured hot water over dried rose petals and orange peel to make tea, and then poured more hot water into a blue clay bowl. I set the bowl on my table, wrapping myself in my shawl and sitting down to stare into it.

As the steam dissipated, I saw Gerda.

She sat on the side of a hill—I could make out no landmarks that would tell me where. She had not built a fire, but simply wrapped herself up in my cloak. The hood was thrown back, as if she were a little warmer than she might like.

I watched as she unfolded the kerchief of food and had something to eat, choosing the foods that would go stale the fastest. Just before it grew too dark to see her, she broke off a tiny piece of the candied orange peel and put it in her mouth, tears rolling down her face as she ate it. I hastily got up to get myself more tea, and when I returned to the scrying bowl, it was too dark to see anything.

**M**y scrying showed me nothing but Gerda walking across treeless fields for three days. At dawn on the fourth day, however, I sat down with my morning tea and my scrying bowl just in time to see a huge black crow dive down and wake her. "Good morning," the crow said.

I nearly spilled my tea. I'd heard stories about the tribe of talking crows, but they'd never come anywhere near my valley—so far. Gerda rolled over and blinked up at him with equanimity. "Good morning to you, too," she said. Her voice was a little hoarse from disuse, and she cleared her throat.

The crow ruffled its feathers. "You say that like someone who *expects* to be greeted by a crow," he said.

"Natalia doesn't let crows into her garden. I've never met a crow before."

"Never met ...! You must be from the station," the crow said.

"Yes!" Gerda sat up so sharply that the crow took an alarmed hop backward. "Yes, and I'm looking for a boy who also came from the station. My friend, Kai."

The crow put his head to the side. "A boy. A stranger?"

"Have you seen someone?"

"Maybe. Maybe. There's the boy who married the Princess. He might be your Kai."

Gerda's eyes grew large and she pushed herself to her feet, gathering up the cloak in her arms. "Can you take me to him?"

The crow launched himself into the air with a raucous caw, then settled onto Gerda's shoulder. "Toward the sun," he said. "Oh, and just so you know? Crows don't *normally* talk. My sweetheart and I, we were improved by the scientists in the town. Us and our children, we're the only talking crows in the *world*. You were *supposed* to be startled when I talked to you ..."

**T**he crow directed Gerda to a path through the grasslands; then the path opened up and led to a wide road of hard-packed dirt, and the road led to a town. I recognized the town when I saw it. I had traveled there once, during the summer when I could leave my garden for a week without harm to it. The scientists in the town made seeds that grew unnaturally well and potions to heal grievous wounds. I had gone to their auction and concluded that they had nothing my magic could not do for me, but others paid a small fortune for the scientists' tricks. I didn't trust the scientists, but they had some congress with the station. It was possible they might be able to help Gerda.

The crow directed Gerda through the streets to the laboratory—a large cottage with walls made out of sheets of black metal. It looked like the station, but much smaller. There were steps leading up to the front door.

"This is where the Princess lives," the crow said. "And the young man she married. Just knock on the door and ask for him."

Gerda climbed the steps and knocked, and the crow launched himself from her shoulder into the sky, with a caw that sounded like a cackle. A moment later a young woman opened the door. "Yes?"

Who are you?" she said.

Gerda opened her mouth, then hesitated. The woman prompted her with an impatient noise. "Is Kai here?" Gerda asked.

"Kai? I don't know a Kai. I'm sorry, but I'm quite busy. Are you with a caravan? You look a bit young to be on your own. Tell your caravan we hold open hours at noon daily. It's not noon yet. Good day."

The door closed.

Gerda looked around, but the crow was nowhere in sight. Her chin trembled, and she clenched her teeth. She trudged back down the steps and sat under a maple tree, wrapped up in my cloak. Open hours at noon; it looked as if she intended to simply wait until then.

Noon. That was hours away. I could safely leave Gerda, I thought, and dashed outside to work in my garden. I had noticed while raking that my herb bed was looking dry. I drew water from the well and sprinkled it over the rosemary and thyme, the basil and oregano, the lemongrass and St. John's Wort. There was a little water left in my pitcher when I had watered everything that looked thirsty, and I brought it inside to heat for the scrying bowl as the sun neared its zenith. Gerda was still sitting patiently where I'd left her. Other people had also gathered outside the laboratory: a dozen men in coats sewn from rabbit pelts; a man and a woman in black wool cloaks; an ancient man in rags, with a gnarled walking stick and a polished wood bowl. They waited a few paces away from the door, the men in fur talking quietly among themselves in a language I didn't understand. A man in ordinary clothes strode into the laboratory, and a handful of scientists came out, dressed from head to foot in white—white linen dresses, white wool scarves, white fur boots.

At noon, the door opened. The woman who had spoken to Gerda earlier came down the steps to the road. Before, the woman had been wearing a stained white linen coat; now, she had garbed herself head to toe in white fur. "I am Lovise," the woman said. "Personal representative of the Principal Research Scientist. We have a variety of fine items for purchase today." She gestured, and a boy with the glazed stare of a frag pushed a wheelbarrow out from the side of the laboratory.

"Our first item for sale is a box of seed corn," Lovise said. "Specially bred to germinate, grow, and produce corn in just two months. Like all our seed, this corn carries the laboratory's guarantee. Are there any questions?"

One of the men in fur asked, "Will it regerminate?"

"No, of course not," Lovise said. "But you can come buy more from us next year." I snorted in disgust; typical of the scientists and their tricks. The men were grumbling, as well, and Lovise fell back a step. "If you want corn that will regerminate, you can trade for seed with one of the communes. But their corn will take five months." The grumbling quieted. "The price today is just 10 gold dollars for a box with a hundred seeds."

From the wheelbarrow, the boy held up two carved wooden boxes, one in each hand.

The men in fur conferred for a moment. Then one said, "We'll take 10 boxes." He had a leather drawstring bag at his waist, which he unlooped and loosened; he began to count out a hundred gold coins for the boy. The man and woman in black had no interest in seed corn.

"Finally, we have a brand-new item today," Lovise said. The boy took the wheelbarrow back inside and returned with a dog on a leash. It was a Siberian husky, and the boy had a bit of trouble controlling it; the dog wanted to run away from him. I felt sorry for the dog, though the boy was not being cruel to him; he was simply keeping the dog on the leash, when the dog really wanted to run.

"The enhanced sled dog," Lovise said.

"Does he run faster?" one of the men in fur asked.

"No," Lovise said. "He talks." She turned to the dog. "Show them, Flagstaff."

The dog, giving up on getting away, threw himself down onto the snow in disgust. "What do you want me to say?" he said.

"Tell them you're a good dog."

The dog rolled its eyes. "I'm a good dog," he said. He glanced over at Gerda and winked at her. Gerda grinned a little in spite of herself. I thought that I'd steal the dog if I could; he deserved better than the scientists.

The men in fur coats laughed. "Thanks but no thanks, Scientist Lovise," one of them said. "We've seen the talking crows. Is he going to be like the talking crows?"

"No," Lovise snapped. "Like the corn, he can't reproduce. Not without help, anyway."

The men in fur laughed harder. "Poor fella," one of them called to the dog. "If you can get away from the scientists, come and live with us. We'll treat you right."

The dog looked like he was going to say something, but then thought the better of it.

"That's all for today," Lovise said, and the men in fur and the couple in black cloaks started back down the road, away from the laboratory. The man in rags approached the doorstep; at Lovise's signal, the boy brought out a pot of steaming soup and ladled soup into the man's bowl. The man bowed his thanks, and turned away as well. Lovise started back up the steps.

"Wait!" Gerda called.

Lovise turned. "You again?" she said. "What do you want?"

"The crow sent me here," Gerda said. "He said—"

"The crow sent you?" Lovise said. "Well, *that* explains a great deal. You'd better come inside." She held the door open for Gerda; Gerda ducked under the woman's arm and went inside. "Those crows were a mistake," Lovise muttered in disgust.

The inside walls of the laboratory were smooth and bare, painted as white as winter snow, and the lights were too bright. Lovise led Gerda to a parlor, sat her in a chair by the wood stove, and gave her a bowl of soup. Gerda ate it quickly, and I thought with a pang that I should have insisted that she take more food with her.

"Now," Lovise said. "What was it that the crow told you?"

"I'm looking for a friend of mine," Gerda said. "A boy named Kai." She stumbled over what she was trying to say, paused for a breath, and started again. "We both came from the station. The crow that woke me up this morning said that I might be able to find Kai here—that the Princess took a husband last week, and it might have been Kai."

Lovise took Gerda's empty bowl and set it aside. "There isn't anyone here called 'Princess'—he meant the Principal Research Scien-

## "SHE'S A FRAG. AN AUTOMATON. SHE DOESN'T KNOW ANYONE."

"Our next item today is antibiotic ointment." At Lovise's gesture, the boy held up a glass vial with a cork stopper. "To keep infection from an injury, wash the wound, then rub this in and cover with a clean bandage. You can also buy soap from us, but we are the *only* source for this particular ointment. Fifty gold dollars for a vial."

This was what the couple in black had come for. They stepped over to the boy and counted out 50 gold coins. I snorted again, but a little less derisively. I'd heard some stories about this ointment that would make me consider buying it, had I anything close to 50 gold dollars.

tist, Lise. She did take a husband last week, but he came from our rival laboratory; we are hoping to cement an alliance. It's highly unlikely that her groom is the boy you're seeking, but let me take you into the lab for just a moment and you can tell me for sure."

Before Gerda could go into the lab, Lovise dressed her carefully in a long white linen coat; Gerda took off her shoes and put on booties made of white fur, and Lovise put a knit mask over her nose and mouth. Then Lovise led her in. The lab had no windows, but the light was even brighter there than in the hall. All the furniture

inside was shiny polished metal, and there were a lot of complicated arrangements of glass beakers and glass tubes. Glassy-eyed servants attended to much of the apparatus. In one corner, under the counter, Flagstaff was caged, his chin resting on his shaggy forelegs. His tail thumped once when he spotted Gerda.

"There," Lovise said, and pointed.

Gerda looked at the young man, just beyond the servants. Her face fell, and I knew it could not be Kai even before she shook her head.

The young man turned and saw her. "Who's she?" he asked Lovise.

Lovise looked down. "Excuse me for disturbing you, Lead Scientist Kjeld. This girl came from the station, and she's looking for another child. Someone told her that you might be him."

"You've made her cry," Kjeld said. He pulled his mask off and took Gerda's hand. "From the station, she said? Come on, little girl. Let's go sit down."

Gerda sat down beside him on a chair made out of a sheet of shiny metal, bent into a chair shape. At his encouragement, she told him all about Kai, and how the Snow Queen had taken him. Kjeld seemed very interested, though he was most interested in ordinary life in the station; she described the children's quarters, the commissaries, the Keeper who took care of the children, the Director who told them that Kai was gone forever. "But don't you have parents?" he asked. Gerda shook her head, no. She was a made-child. Kjeld asked if the station had any labs like this one, but Gerda had never seen one. He seemed very disappointed about that, and I swore under my breath, taking care not to disturb the water. He didn't really care about Gerda; he just hoped she'd know some of *their* research secrets to tell him.

Gerda's gaze kept straying to one of the glassy-eyed servants. "Magda?" she said under her breath at one point.

"What?" Kjeld said.

"That girl over there, I know her."

"No, you don't," Kjeld said. "She's a frag. An automaton. She doesn't know anyone. She probably just looks like your friend."

"No, I'm sure I know her," Gerda said. She stood up and approached the girl, Kjeld following her warily. "Magda?" she said loudly, but the girl didn't look up.

"She's a *frag*," Kjeld said. "Didn't they have frags on the station?"

"Of course," Gerda said, and her worried eyes went back to Kjeld. "They cleaned and cooked and some of them even helped take care of the made-children. But Magda wasn't a frag, she was a made-child, like me."

Kjeld looked at the frag, and Gerda, and then averted his eyes. "Well, that must not be your friend, then," he said, and hustled Gerda out of the lab.

"I guess I'll be going," Gerda mumbled once they were back out in the hallway.

Kjeld shook his head. "Oh, you can't leave now," he said. "There's a storm coming—didn't you see the clouds? It's going to snow quite a lot."

"But if Kai isn't here—"

"Aren't you listening? If you leave now, you'll freeze to death. Come on, we'll let you sleep in the parlor tonight."

"Stay where you are," I whispered, staring to the west where she'd headed. "Let them give you their hospitality. I trust winter weather even less than I trust the scientists."

**M**y magic kept my valley warm through the winter, but of course I couldn't entirely keep out the weather—my plants needed rain to survive. I typically experienced a bad winter storm as a hard, cold rain, and this rain was particularly hard. I pulled my shutters closed before going to bed, and lay awake in the darkness, listening to the rain pounding on my roof and thinking about Gerda. Only a week or two before my illness, we'd climbed up onto the roof and repaired all the leaks, preparing for winter. I should have been glad that we'd done it, but now all I could think about was how maybe overexerting myself that day was what had made me ill ... and how much I wished Gerda were here now. I turned my face toward her empty bed; even with the racket the storm was making, the house seemed too quiet. Finally I lit a candle and filled the scrying bowl again, but I saw nothing but darkness, and heard Gerda's peaceful long breaths. After that, I was finally able to sleep.

In the morning, the storm had blown over. Beyond my valley, I could see the glint of deep snow on the hills. Within my valley, the stone I used as a doorstep glistened with moisture, and the rose trellis had been knocked down by the storm. I spent some time putting it back up and trimming back the broken parts of the rosebushes; they were clearly affronted by the harsh weather, but they'd survived worse.

When I'd done what I could for the roses, I went back in and poured fresh water into the scrying bowl. The sound came through first—a piercing scream. My blood ran cold, and I gripped the scrying bowl in my hands, willing Gerda to be all right.

"Kjeld!" Gerda wailed, and I heard a door slam. The steam cleared, and I saw Kjeld and Lovise facing each other, Lovise's hand gripping Gerda by the base of the neck.

"*Spying*," Lovise spat, shoving Gerda to the floor.

Gerda shook her head, widening her eyes in mute appeal toward Kjeld. Kjeld licked his lips and looked back at Lovise. "Why do you say that?"

"I caught her in the lab—the *research* lab."

"Why were you in there, Gerda?" Kjeld asked.

Gerda sniffled. I hoped that neither Kjeld nor Lovise could sense how deliberate that sniffle was. "I was looking for the lavatory," she said. "Kjeld showed me where yesterday, but I got confused in the hallways."

My grip tightened on the bowl. She was lying; Gerda had an excellent sense of direction. And the station was nothing *but* hallways. What *was* Gerda doing in that lab? Looking for Kjeld? Looking for the frag she'd spotted the day before? Either way, she was more devious than I'd given her credit for.

"Lovise, be reasonable," Kjeld said. "She's a child. It takes years of training to make heads or tails of our research—yes, I said 'our' research, I'm part of this lab now. Unless she's been raised from birth to be a perfect spy—and if that's the case, can't you think of a dozen things she's done wrong by now? She wanted to leave last *night*. In

## SHE PROBABLY JUST LOOKS LIKE YOUR FRIEND."

"But—"

"You can go on once the storm is past." Kjeld's hand had closed tightly on Gerda's wrist, and she reluctantly followed him back to the parlor with the wood stove.

Gerda wouldn't freeze to death—not in my cloak—but it would be just as well for her *not* to be caught out in a storm. Was it really about to snow? I left the scrying bowl and stepped out of my cottage to look at the sky. Sure enough, though the sky had been blue earlier, I could see clouds gathering beyond the hill to the northwest.

the storm."

"You should have let her."

Kjeld threw up his hands in disgust. "Lovise, you have formaldehyde in your veins instead of blood. Let her leave? In the storm? She's a *child*."

"You're just hoping to get useful information from her."

"Well, and I'm not saying I'll complain if she has anything for us. But—"

There was a knock at the door; Lovise answered it and had a quiet

conference with another white-coated woman. She closed the door deliberately and fixed her gaze on Gerda. "There has been a theft," she said. "Flagstaff is missing."

Kjeld burst out laughing. "Are you going to blame that one on the girl, too? By all means, search her pockets. I'm sure she's got the dog hidden in one of them."

But looking at Gerda's face, I thought that she probably *did* know something about the missing dog. Why on earth? Was it tenderheartedness, wanting to free the dog from slavery as she'd freed herself from the station?

Lovise said, "Let's continue this discussion elsewhere." Kjeld obligingly stepped out, and Lovise locked the door behind her, leaving Gerda in the room where they'd been arguing. Gerda briefly pressed her ear to the door, but they must have moved too far away to be heard, because a moment later she dropped with a sigh into the chair, fingering the claw she wore around her neck. It was a small, boring room. Gerda stared at the floor and waited.

I should go out and finish cleaning up from the storm, I thought. But the last time I left Gerda, I came back to find Lovise furious enough to wring her neck. It was pure superstition to think that watching would make any difference, but I am a very superstitious woman, so I stayed where I was and watched Gerda as she waited. And waited. And waited.

Finally Kjeld returned. "I think it's best we get you out now," he whispered. "The weather looks clear, and I've got your cloak and a pair of snowshoes. Follow me."

Gerda followed Kjeld through a dingy back hallway and out into the snow. I was shocked to see that the sun was setting; had I been sitting and watching Gerda all day? Kjeld gave Gerda her cloak and helped her put the snowshoes on.

"Head for my family's lab," he said. "They're a two-day walk, due east. If the crow finds you again, tell him they'll pay well for bringing you to them; he'll know how to get there." He tucked a small

"Yes," Gerda said.

The dog did not start off at a walk and then work up to a run; instead, he broke instantly to full speed, stretching out his wolflike limbs to tear like the winter wind across the snowy fields. Gerda almost lost her grip on the sled, but she tightened her fists and quickly became accustomed to the dog's pace. He slackened to a trot after a few minutes and said, "Ah yes, I still need to ask. Which way?"

"North," Gerda said, and the dog wheeled north across the hills.

**I** woke to the late-morning sun, my cheek resting against my kitchen table. The scrying bowl was cold against my hand. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes hastily and heated water for tea and scrying, then realized that I could still see Gerda in the murky depths of the bowl. I sat down to look. She was still on the makeshift dogsled; the dog was still running, pulling the sled over hills blanketed with deep, white snow.

I changed the water in the scrying bowl and got myself something to eat. I checked; still running. I went out quickly to check on my garden, then came back in; still running. I couldn't bring myself to spend more than a few minutes on any task; I kept darting inside to check on Gerda. Finally I saw that they had spotted a hut built of cinderblocks. There was a chimney at one end, and a plume of smoke curled out. "Stop," Gerda said to the dog. "If there *is* a Snow Queen, maybe the person who lives there knows where to find her."

The woman who lived in the hut was an old Hmong woman—a hermit, like me. She was tiny, shorter than Gerda, though not at all bent over, and she didn't speak much English. She could see that Gerda was hungry and cold, though, and that the dog was hungry and thirsty. Without speaking, she brought out a bucket of melted snow for the dog, as well as some meaty bones to gnaw on, and she led Gerda into her hut to sit by the fire and drink sweet tea.

"Kai?" Gerda said. The old Hmong woman blinked at Gerda slowly, then smiled and shrugged, shaking her head to say that she

## "I KNOW OF NO MAGIC THAT CAN RESTORE A SOUL, ONCE IT'S BEEN

notebook into her pocket. "They'll be most interested in this, as well as in anything else you have to tell them. Good luck."

Was Gerda spying? For Kjeld? That made no sense, either. But she nodded, and tromped off with her back to the setting sun, struggling a little with the snowshoes. As soon as the laboratory had disappeared behind a rise, she dropped to a crouch and whistled, a long low note.

A few minutes passed. She whistled again.

She sighed deeply and stood up.

Then—a high answering howl. Her face brightened. And there, across the snowy hills, came the dog.

"All right," Gerda said. "I freed you. Now take me to Kai."

"I didn't say I knew where Kai was," Flagstaff said. "But I do know that it gets colder as you go north, and anyone called a *Snow Queen* must live somewhere very cold. I can take you north. I can take you all the way to the ice wall."

"What good will that do me?" Gerda said. "I don't believe there ever was a Snow Queen; it's just a story told to frighten the made-children."

"Suit yourself," Flagstaff said. "Is there somewhere else you'd like me to take you? To the rival laboratory, perhaps, like Kjeld wants you to do?"

Gerda sighed deeply.

"You'll need a sled for me to pull," Flagstaff said. "Creep back to the village after the sun sets and you'll find one you can steal."

Gerda did just that, finding a small dogsled in an unlocked shed after the last window in the village went dark. The dog told her how to hitch him up, and then told her to wrap herself warmly and hold on tight. "Are you ready?" he said when she was settled.

didn't understand. "Snow Queen?" Gerda tried. The Hmong woman shook her head again. Gerda stood up and tried to pantomime. "A grown lady ... with children. A woman who steals children."

"Child-stealer?" the Hmong woman said suddenly in English.

Gerda nodded her head, her eyes widening with surprise. "Tell me where," she said.

But the Hmong woman didn't want to. She shook her head and pursed her lips. Finally she said, "You go to Norse woman." She took Gerda out of her hut and pointed north. "Norse woman, she tell you."

"Thank you," Gerda said. She finished her tea and went back out to the sled.

Hours passed. I forced myself to go out to my garden—I had weeds to pull, slugs to pick, vegetables to harvest, but every time I stepped away from the scrying bowl I found myself panicking and rushing back only moments later. Finally, Gerda and Flagstaff came to another hut. This one was also built out of cinderblocks, but snow had been packed all around it like an igloo, to keep it warm. There was a pen in the yard with a high fence, with a dozen other huskies inside—but these were ordinary huskies, not talking huskies. When they saw Gerda and Flagstaff, they all began to bark at once. Gerda knocked on the door. When the door opened, she fell back a step; it was so warm in the hut, the Norse woman went naked. She had tattoos of blue vines winding across her breasts, and a sunburst design around her navel, half hidden by the folds of her belly. She looked Gerda up and down for a long moment and then said to the dog, "You had better stay outside. It's very warm inside and you wouldn't be happy. But I'll send the girl out with food and water for you."

"Thank you," Flagstaff said.

"You though, girl, you can come in."

Gerda went into the house and almost immediately had to wipe sweat from her forehead and cheeks. She hung my cloak on a hook and rolled up her sleeves. The Norse woman watched her with a raised eyebrow.

When Gerda had given the dog food and water, and untied his harness, the Norse woman gave her a bowl of fish soup, and a mug of coffee with whiskey in it. She finished her own meal quickly, and then took out a long pipe, which she lit quietly while Gerda finished the soup. The house filled with curling feathers of smoke.

"Now then," she said, when Gerda had finished eating. "What brings you here?"

"The Hmong woman who lives over the hills to the south said you might be able to tell me where to find the Snow Queen," Gerda said.

"I don't know a Snow Queen," the Norse woman said. She pulled her legs up to cross them over each other, then leaned forward to pick up her pipe, and began to refill it.

"The child-stealer," Gerda said. "Do you know where I can find a child-stealer?"

"Ah," the Norse woman said. "So that's what you meant." She lit her pipe again and sat back, studying Gerda with bright eyes through the haze of smoke.

"I'm really looking for my friend Kai," Gerda said. "We used to live in the station, and then Kai disappeared ... and they said the Snow Queen took him, because he was disobedient. But I'm sure they told everyone the Snow Queen had *me*, and I was perfectly safe, living with Natalia. Anyway, Flagstaff brought me north ... and the Hmong woman said you could tell me about the child-stealer, so ..." She slumped backward, and I thought how exhausted she must be.

"Do you want to go back to the station once you've found your friend?" the Norse woman asked.

"Oh no," Gerda said. "I want to go back to Natalia. If I do find Kai,

Was she coming back to me? No, no, it was too good to be true. As dusk fell, she saw the station on the horizon. That was where Flagstaff barked.

"You're going *there*?" he said. "Then you're going alone. Do you know what they do to talking dogs?"

"Just a little closer," Gerda said. "I can walk the rest of the way."

"Wait!" I shouted, in my hut, knowing that she couldn't hear me. "Why are you going *there*? They won't let you back in. Even if they do, do you think they'll be *happy* to see you? Do you think Kai is *there*?"

The dog consented to take her a little closer, then stopped again. "This is as close as I'm getting," he said.

"Then thank you, for all your help," Gerda said, and cut the harness so that the dog could go on his own.

"Thank you again for freeing me," Flagstaff said, and turned north again.

I watched Gerda, unbelieving, as she circled the station once. There were doors in it, of course, as well as the one she'd escaped through, but they were all sealed tight, with no handle on the outside. Why was she going back there? That ancient tag the Norsewoman had shown her—what could it have meant to her? I tried to think through this logically. Sixty years old. The Norsewoman might be that old; she looked older, but she also smoked a pipe. I was 50, though I didn't look it except for my hair. *Of course*, I thought. The Norsewoman had once been a made-child herself. She had escaped from the station, just as Gerda had. But what did that have to do with Kai?

I paced my hut. If I left my valley, now, it was just possible that I could make it back with Gerda before the creeping cold killed my warmth-loving trees. But if Gerda resisted—

She was still watching the doors. Waiting to see if they opened, perhaps. Why didn't she at least come home to see me? I knew the answer to that, a moment later—she knew she wouldn't have the heart to leave me again.

## TAKEN. AND I'VE NEVER HEARD OF A FRAG BECOMING WHOLE AGAIN."

I want to bring him to live with us."

*She wants to come back to me!* I realized that the blood was pounding in my ears, and my head was spinning with relief—Gerda would come back.

The Norse woman smiled. "In that case ..." She took a long draw from the pipe. "I think if you'll think about it, you'll realize that you already know where Kai must be."

Gerda shook her head. "No," she said. "I don't know."

"I'll show you something." The Norse woman opened a chest, and took something from the bottom of it, which she handed to Gerda. "Do you know what this is?"

It was a metal tag: F2168F. "This is the Fjerra tag," Gerda said. "Fjerra from ... 60 years ago."

"That's right," the Norsewoman said. "How do you suppose I came to have it?"

Gerda looked at the tag, and then at the Norsewoman. She swallowed hard.

"The hard thing is, child," the Norsewoman said, "the Snow Queen comes for all the made-children in the end. Whether you're good or bad, obedient or disobedient. Now do you know where Kai is?"

Without a word, Gerda stood up and went back out to the dog.

**I** don't see why we're going south again," Flagstaff complained. "Because that's where Kai is," Gerda said.

Toward noon, she used the claw that I had given her, holding it in the palm of her hand and saying "Natalia, Natalia, Natalia." A tiny wisp of a breeze ruffled Gerda's hair and turned the claw slightly. "That way," Gerda said to the dog.

Gerda had taken her shoes, but left her own tag behind—it was in my attic. I climbed up the ladder and found the tag quickly in the dark corner where I'd hidden her clothes. Then I looked one shelf down. And found it: another tag.

N2178F.

Forgetfulness tea is not a perfect spell. Of course, it all came back.

My Kai had been a year younger than me—oh, and it was the Lars, not the Kai. The Kai of my year was a dullard, a blue-eyed boy who'd never asked a question more complicated than "where is the bathroom" in all his years. Lars had been far too clever, like me, and far too stubborn, like me, and one day he had simply not been there anymore. I had gone to look for him and had found my way to the outside. Like Gerda, I had quickly gotten lost; like Gerda, I had been found by the witch of the garden. Like Gerda, I had been adopted.

I didn't have the heart to look to see if my mother had had a tag too.

I flung my second-best cloak around my shoulders and hurried out of the house. I had to talk to Gerda. It didn't matter if my garden died; even if Gerda refused to come with me, at least I'd know I'd tried.

**G**erda was still perched behind her rock when I arrived. Her face blossomed into a smile when she saw me. "Mother! What are you doing here?" "My magic told me you were close by," I said, truthfully. "But your garden—"

"I'm going to hurry back there." I squatted beside her. "But I wanted to tell you, I realized what happened to Kai." She turned toward me. "Gerda, I realized something while you were gone. I realized that I, too, am a made-child who escaped from the station.

*Continued on page 86*

# HALF OF THE EMPIRE

*By Bruce Holland Rogers*

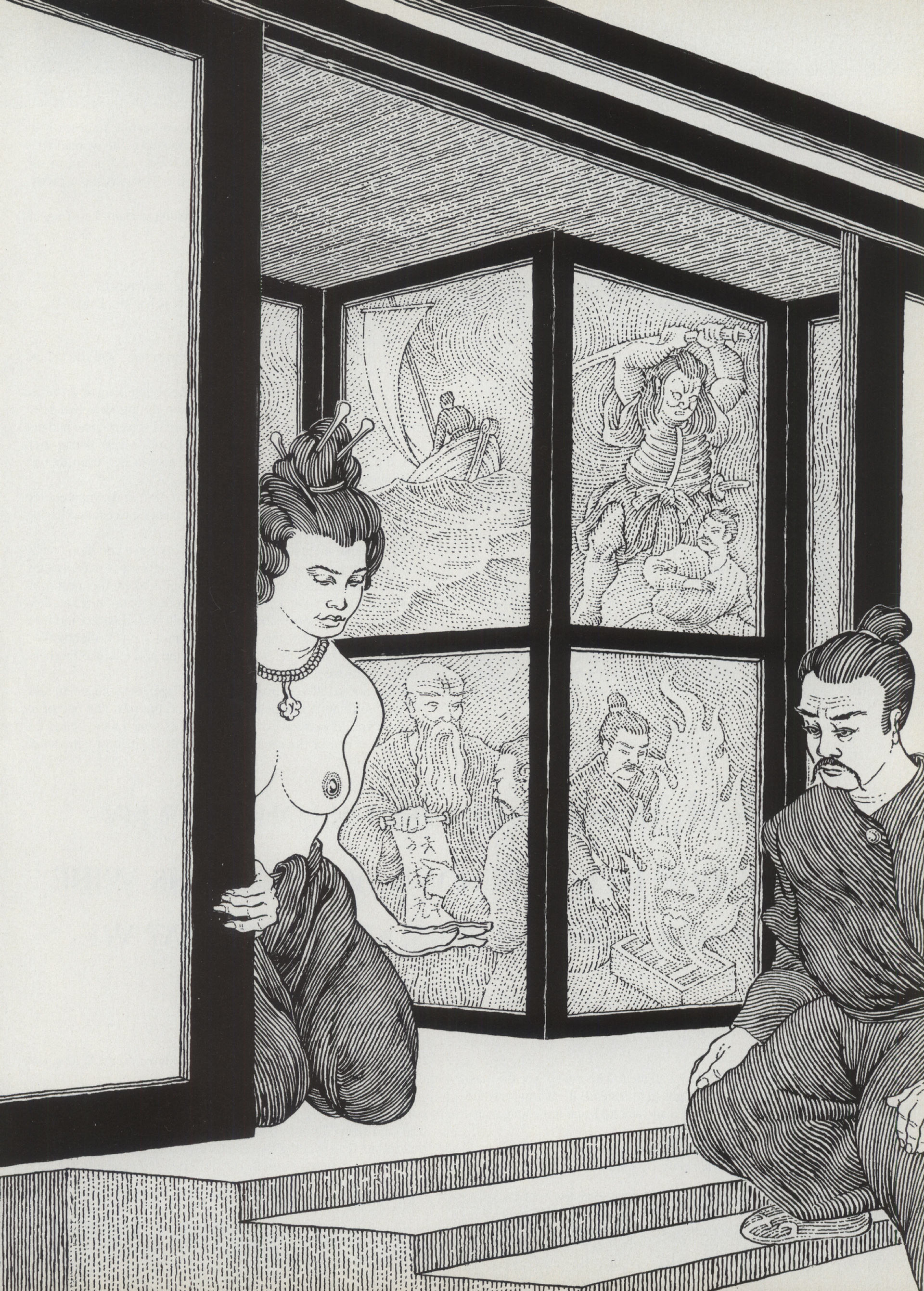
*Illustration by Mahendra Singh*

*Sometimes  
knowing the  
true value of  
a prize is even  
more valuable  
than the  
prize itself.*

**A** young man from a fishing village once went to the Capital to see what he would see. He left his little boat hove up on stony ground beneath the docks, and he gave no thought to the possibility that someone might steal it. He wandered the streets from the fish market to the workshops and foundries, on toward the farm markets and dry markets. The smells of vendors roasting nuts or searing meats made his mouth water, but he had no money. He had only salted fish in his pouch, and after he ate that he was still hungry. Although his stomach growled, he savored the smells more than most men with money would have enjoyed the tastes.

As he went farther and farther from the sea, he marveled at the clothes that grew finer and finer and the manners that were more and more refined until he scarcely knew his own countrymen. He kept going as the streets widened and led into the hills toward the marvelous white palace, which he stopped to admire for a time. The sun sank low in the sky, and a haze settled over the city. When the young man looked back at the way he had come, he could not see the sea.

As night fell, golden lanterns glowed on the streets. The paper windows of the houses were lit from within. There was no beauty like this in his village, though his village was comfortable enough and had a beauty of its own. He had planned to sleep beneath his boat, but with no waves beneath his feet and the stars hidden from view, he had turned so many times that now he had lost his way.



He knocked at a door, thinking that he would ask his way to the docks. He forgot what he meant to say, though, when the woman who answered was the most beautiful he had ever seen. For all her beauty, she looked sad, and her eyes were red as if from crying. Although she appeared to be no older than he was, she met his stare, and when he did not speak she said, "Why have you come?"

The young man said, "To, ah, to see ... the master of the house."

"You will regret it," the woman said. She began to weep. "You should turn around and go right back the way you came."

"But I can't," the young man said.

"Because you are so very brave," the woman said. "I know."

"Bravery has nothing to do with it," the young man said. "I'm lost is all."

**T**HE WOMAN'S WEEPING CEASED. She looked surprised. Indeed, she would have looked no more surprised if the young man had suddenly turned himself into an eel. "No one has ever said that before." Then she frowned. "But you aren't prepared. You're empty handed and perhaps empty headed as well. Are you sure you want to see the master?"

"I am sure."

She led him down a corridor and to a screen. Then she withdrew. As she went away, he could hear her weeping again. "She seems to have sorrows and worries aplenty," the young man said. "I wish I could do something for her." Then he slid the screen aside and stepped into the room behind it.

In the middle of the room sat a giant roasting meat over a brazier. He wore armor and two swords. When he saw the young man, he stood up, unsheathed the longer sword, and said, "Why have you come?"

"To see the master of the house. Are you him?"

"I am the master's captain, and to see him, you must come through

wanted to see the city, and now that I have seen it, I am ready to go home. But I got lost. When I came to the door, the woman who answered was so beautiful that I forgot what I had meant to say and asked to see the master. That woman is as sad as she is pretty. Do you know why?"

"She weeps for the men who come seeking to claim her. They all die in this room at my sword."

"And have many such men come?"

"Dozens and dozens for years and years."

"I see why she's sad. They must love her very much."

"It's the power they want, for her dowry is half the Empire."

"She's a princess, then?"

"I am surprised that you hadn't heard."

"I'm not from around here," said the young man. "Will you tell me the story?"

The giant lowered his sword. He and the young man sat on either side of the brazier, and the giant told how the princess had been enchanted by the master, who was a powerful sorcerer. She had not aged, but neither had she loved. Several times a year young men from the great cities of the Empire came to win her, even though every suitor before them had died.

"She is very pretty," the young man said, "but at the moment the thing I am most interested in is getting something to eat and having a warm place to sleep."

"This is quite irregular," said the giant, "but since you didn't really come to fight me, I suppose it would be all right if you stayed as my guest." He drew the shorter sword and used it to cut the meat from the bone, and he gave a portion to the young man. They ate, then sat talking into the night about how to fight with a sword and how to cast a net. "Ah, how this makes me long for my soldiering life," the giant said, "when we would drink wine and talk like brothers, knowing that we might die the next day."

"That's not so different from life in my village," the young man said, "where we drink rice wine by the fire, and the next day one of us may drown." They spoke of wines, then, of which were better, the dry ones of rice or the sweet ones of fruit. The talk of wine made

**"AH, HOW THIS MAKES ME LONG FOR MY  
SOLDIERING LIFE, WHEN WE WOULD DRINK WINE  
AND TALK LIKE BROTHERS, KNOWING THAT WE  
MIGHT DIE THE NEXT DAY."**

me. Prepare yourself."

The young man said, "If I have to fight you in order to see the master, I might as well pass the night here instead. It's warm with the brazier burning." The meat sizzled and smoked, and the young man's stomach growled.

"But haven't you come to see the master?"

"To tell you the truth, it's only by chance that I came here. I

them as drowsy as a drink of wine might have done. At long last, they both fell asleep.

The coals in the brazier burned themselves out. The room grew cold, and the young man woke with the shivers. The giant snored. The cold seemed not to bother him at all. The young man thought that rather than waking the giant, he would see if he could find some more charcoal himself. He slid open the screen to the next



room, which was not really a room at all, but a corridor like the one the woman had led him through. At the far end another screen glowed dimly.

**H**OW STRANGE THIS PLACE IS," THE YOUNG MAN SAID TO HIMSELF. "In my village, we build the rooms of a house next to one another." He walked down the corridor and opened the screen at the other end. The room he stepped into was very large, with wooden shelves lining the walls everywhere except for the place where he had just come in and a screen on the other side. Books and scrolls were stacked on the shelves, and they rose toward a ceiling so high that the young man couldn't see it in the darkness. The books might have gone up forever.

In the center of the room was a table where a bald man with a long, white beard sat reading by the light of a candle. The young man crossed the room, and stood before the table. The white-haired man did not look up. He rubbed his temples as he read.

"Are you the master?" the young man said.

The old man looked up with a start. "You're here!" he said. "No one has ever come this far!" He patted himself as if to see if he were dreaming. "The master? No, I'm not the master. I'm his librarian, and I hadn't expected you. I haven't read quite all of them yet."

"I'd like some charcoal. The brazier has gone out," the young man explained.

"Brazier? That's of no importance. You've come to the library seeking the secret of the maze. Let me see, now. Which riddle shall I ask you?" He carried the candle to one of the shelves and squinted as he held the flame close to the bindings. He groaned. "The ink fades every year. It gets harder and harder to read these."

"Perhaps the brazier doesn't matter to you," the young man said, "but I'm quite cold sleeping in the other room."

"Pay no attention to the cold," the librarian said. "If you're to see the master, it's the mind that matters. What a man wants is knowledge and a sharp wit."

What I want is fuel," the young man said. "Or a blanket."

**T**HE LIBRARIAN WAS ABOUT TO TAKE A SCROLL from the shelf, then stopped and looked at the young man. "From the provinces. Ho! I know the one. You'll never get it." He crossed the room and selected a book. The binding was tied closed, and the old man was some time plucking at the string with his fingernails. At last he loosened the knot and opened the book. He squinted at the page, rubbing his temples again. "How my head aches. If only the candle burned a little brighter."

"I don't mind riddles," the young man said, "but what I really want ..."

"Solve the riddle and you'll see the master," said the librarian, "and the master will give you your heart's desire. Now listen." He bent very close to the page until his nose almost touched it. "The marks are so very faint. Hardly there at all. 'I proceed until I am no more, but there I am behind me once again.'"

The young man thought a moment and said, "A wave."

"No!" the librarian said. "It's the Emperor."

"Are you sure?" the young man said. "Is that what's in the book?"

The librarian looked at the page again. "To tell the truth, I can't make it out, but I am sure I remember this one. It's the Emperor."

"But a wave is just as good an answer. Where I come from, it's a better answer because we see waves every day, but we've never seen the Emperor."

The librarian frowned. "I picked this one because of course you haven't seen the Emperor. It's supposed to be hard." He stroked his beard. "But I suppose you are right. Not all wit or learning is already in books. Some of it still needs thinking up and writing down. I could write in the character for 'wave,' and then that would be the right answer and I could tell you how to pass the maze." And that is what he did.

The young man opened the screen and went through the branching corridors according to the librarian's directions. The corridors branched and turned, turned and branched. The young man came at last to another screen. He opened it, and there in the center of a large room, a brazier burned with a yellow flame. Next to the brazier was a pile of charcoal. A great heap of treasure gleamed in the firelight. There were rings and swords, a robe suitable for an Emperor, coins and pearls, boxes of jewels. There were other, more common things as well: a lamp, a mirror, a silken kerchief, and a jar of wine.

The flame grew brighter, and a voice from within it spoke and said, "Take what you will."

The young man filled a sack with charcoal. Then he took up the lamp, the kerchief, and the wine. To the flame he said, "How do I find my way to the docks beside the fish market?"

The flame told him the way to take. Then the young man retraced his steps. He left the lamp with the librarian, who lit it and found that it burned very bright indeed. How it would relieve his aching head! In the captain's room, the young man rekindled the brazier and slept near it until morning. He made a gift of wine to the giant, who was as pleased as he was amazed. At the front door of the house, the young man met the woman and gave her the silken kerchief, saying, "Dry your tears. Not every story here is a sad one. I have seen the master, and I did not die in the attempt." Then he made to leave.

**B**UT IF YOU HAVE SEEN THE MASTER," THE WOMAN SAID, "then you have become a great lord and half the Empire is yours." She knelt. "If what you say is true, then I am to be your bride and Empress."

"I have never seen a woman more beautiful," said the young man, "but I am not a man of the Capital or any city. My life is on the sea. It is a hard life that would not suit you."

He left her. He followed the directions that the master of the house had given him. He recovered his little boat from beneath the dock, and he sailed home to his village. In time, he married a girl who had grown up nearby and they had children. In time, they grew old and had grandchildren. In time, they died.

Some say that the young man was a fool to turn down half the Empire.

Others say that if a mere fisherman had taken half the Empire, the other half would have gone to war against his rule and he would have come to ruin.

And a very few say that he had already possessed half the Empire before this story began, and that what he had refused was the *other* half. But the few who say this are strange. Very strange. ♣

# honeydark

**The balance of nature is  
simple, in both city and  
countryside: eat or be eaten.**

**B**y the time I left Constantinople and the House of Birds I'd had more than enough of politics, what with the intricacies and intrigues of the guilds, and the resentments that burned like slow-fire for years at the heart of the Court. The war had done nothing to help, for Constantinople and its scattered retinue of states had favored neither the Austrians nor the British, and consequently the city had found itself left on the sidelines when the war's end finally came in 1921. My own daughters spent their lives in plotting: against one another, and against myself. This was the world to which I had been accustomed ever since my birth into the House of Birds, and the life that I had lived unquestioned for so long, but on my 50th birthday I woke to the realization that something had changed. I was no longer the young man I had once been, steeped in the delight of schemes. *No more*, I said to myself, *I've had enough. I'm leaving*. I should have known they wouldn't let me go so easily.

I paid off my personal servants and left my family with a set of instructions regarding the whereabouts of my fortune that were cryptic enough to keep them bickering for the next few decades. I dropped a private word into a few select ears, telling them that I intended to go into seclusion at the monastery in Irekenia, a notoriously inaccessible branch of the Attic order. Then, my preparations for disappearance being complete, I set out, slipping away in the dead of night through the streets of Constantinople. The streets were empty. This close to the end of the war, the curfew was still imposed on the city, so I kept to the shadows. I caught the midnight ferry from Pera, disembarking at Parkouri just as the sun was coming up. From here, I began walking. A man on horseback or in a vehicle attracts attention; but someone on foot is clearly too poor to waste anyone's time.

**BY LIZ WILLIAMS**

**ILLUSTRATION BY MELISSA FERREIRA**



*Congratulating myself on my vanishing act,*

I made my way across Anatolia, sleeping in the stony fields and speaking to no one. Spring came early to the hill country and I never once regretted leaving the sordid warrens of the city behind me. There was a clear brightness to the air above the plain, and asphodel was coming into flower all along the road. For the first time in my life, I could look and think, and marvel at what I had left. I had walked away from everything: from my wealth and heritage, from the House of Birds, from my battling daughters. I wondered if they would try to follow me; whether they might send janissaries, those creations of metal and dead flesh, after me. Well, I would deal with that eventuality when it came, I thought. It all seemed so simple, there beneath the winds of the high wastes. I need never go back. I could stay here in these heights with the eagle and the raven for company, more sympathetic by far than the family I had abandoned.

After a few nights in the bleak countryside, and a sharp shower of rain, the romance of this new life inevitably faded. I awoke one morning in late April, and although the sky above me was washed with light and a lark was singing up near the sun, I was as cold as the stones on which I lay and my joints ached. It was time, I decided, to seek a more comfortable retreat from the world.

The next village I came to lay on the slopes of Mt. Phrygia, in a valley overlooked by the icy crags of the Anatolian Taurus. The village was nothing remarkable: an untidy huddle of whitewashed houses around a vine-fringed square. Up on the hillside the sound of goat bells rang startlingly clear in the still air. I wandered down toward the village and sat for a while beneath the trees. Years before, someone had planted an orchard here, and the old fruit trees stretched around me, pear and plum coming into blossom in the gentler weather. It was pleasant beneath the showers of sweetness, and I was more tired than I cared to admit. The sun was hot, the air somnolent and filled with the humming of bees. Before I knew it, I had fallen asleep with my cheek resting against the soft earth at the roots of the pear tree.

I woke with a start. Something was rustling in the dry grass. I rolled over, quick as a fox, and my hand crept down to the knife that had once hung at my side. But I hadn't been armed for years: the janissaries accompanied me whenever I left the House of Birds and I was still unused to walking unprotected. Cautiously, I raised my head. I could see nothing. I rose and walked warily down through the orchard. The cloudy flowers brushed against my face. I had reached the edges of the orchard now and could see my quarry: a girl, no more than 12 or 13, standing over a hive. Her face was uncovered by the usual apiarist's veil, and the bees swarmed up her arms and into her hair. I stood very still, watching. The sight made my skin crawl.

The girl was whispering to the bees, leaning down into the hive as she replaced the celled shelves of honey. Then she straightened and saw me. She spoke a word I did not hear and the bees poured down her arms and back into the haven of the hive.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to disturb you. I'm just a traveler."

She said nothing.

"Do you never get stung?" I asked, uneasy at the memory of the insects crawling over her skin.

She said, with a toss of her dark hair, "No. Why would they? I'm their keeper, after all." A stray bee whirred out of a blossom and settled on the hive.

"I'm wondering—do you know if there's somewhere in the village where I might stay for a few days?" I asked her.

The girl nodded. "You can stay with us."

My uncertainty must have shown in my face, for she added with childish candor, "People often do. My aunt takes people in. She's a widow, you see, and we need the money. My uncle's army pension doesn't go very far."

"I see. Well, that would seem to solve both our problems. Where do you live?"

"I'll show you," she said.

Her name, I discovered as we walked down to the village, was Melissa Sama. Her family had lived in this village of Eliskehir "forever," she told me. She was a serious child who took her role as beekeeper with a self-important pride. I told her that she had a pretty name, and in return for this compliment received a long, chilly stare which, I suppose, I deserved. Her aunt, Gulnara, was a handsome woman in her 40s; a little overblown, like a rose that had bloomed for too long. She greeted me cheerfully enough; I suppose I represented another few meals on the table. However much we city dwellers might romanticize the rustic simplicities, there is no denying that it's a hard life in these country districts, and often a bleak one.

Later that evening I walked back up to the orchard to watch the sun fall behind the mountains of the Taurus. The last of the light caught the icy upper slopes, turning the peaks as pink as the rosy *locum* that they sell in the Grand Bazaar, but in the valley the twilight cast the orchard into shadow. I sat down on a nearby stone and enjoyed the silence. I wouldn't have said that I welcomed company, but I found that I was pleased when the child appeared beside me. Her small face was grave.

"Have you come to watch the sunset?" I asked her.

"No, to see to the bees. You shouldn't be up here, it makes them restless."

"I'm sorry," I said, meekly.

Melissa replied, impatiently, "I can't stand here talking. I've got to see to my bees," and then she was gone. Intrigued, I rose and followed her up through the twilight orchard. The bees, perhaps sensing the presence of a stranger, stirred in the hives and I skirted the domes warily. Beneath the pear trees, it was dark and quiet. A shadow brushed past me and was gone: only a moth, sailing out in search of night flowers. I could see the pale blur of Melissa's skirt in the dusk, moving toward me through the trees. Then, she had taken me firmly by the arm and began guiding me quickly back.

"You're in a hurry," I said, amused, and she gave me a swift, uncertain glance. In the fading light, her eyes seemed huge and dark. When we emerged from the edge of the orchard, the sun was still touching the highest peak and then the light fell away.

"Isn't it a beautiful evening?" I said. Gently, I detached the girl's fingers from my arm. "I think I'll stay out here for a little while."

"No." Her face was tight-lipped and unhappy. "My aunt will worry. You have to come back with me."

*Old habits die hard, and there was still reason* enough to be cautious. I had no inclination to draw attention to myself. I acquiesced, and once we were back in the small, white house and I had lain down on the bed provided for me, I was thankful. I slid rapidly into an untroubled sleep and did not wake till morning.

I had intended to stay for no more than a few days, but it turned into a week, and more. I was without ambition or thought for the future, and I found that I could idle the days away very easily. Gulnara Sama showed no reluctance when I told her that I intended to extend my stay, and I paid her well enough, though not so well that she might have questioned it. I often strolled up to the orchard for an afternoon siesta, while Melissa tended the bees. The child was growing used to me: treating me with a kind of off-hand familiarity that I found refreshing after the sycophantic insincerity of my own daughters. Her tongue might be tart, but I sensed the beginning of a genuine affection.

Once, on a whim, I walked farther into the orchard to search for the inner hives, but there was nothing to be seen, only a mass of stones that suggested old fortifications. Gulnara asked me not to go up there at night, as it upset the bees: occasionally jackals came down from the heights and overturned the hives in seeking out the sweetness within. I respected both Gulnara's wishes and that of the bees, and stayed away. Instead, I took to frequenting the village

square at the end of my evening walk and soon made the acquaintance of the local doctor. He was a cultured man with a long, melancholy face and a penchant for the local raki. He had been educated in Constantinople and Vienna, and I suspected that his sojourn here in this remote hill settlement was not entirely his preferred choice. However, I too had secrets to protect and it would in any case have been unpardonably rude to pry into his past. Apart from these necessary reticences, we had much in common: a shared enthusiasm for politics and an interest in the natural sciences. Dr. Akharis also possessed a considerable degree of knowledge about the history of the region, as I was to discover during the course of one of our conversations.

let them dig up her pear trees, and who can blame her?" He sighed, and his dark eyes grew moist. "What a woman. A tigress, that one, when roused." We both contemplated this unlikely description of my landlady, and then the rain began again.

That rain was the last we saw of the cooler weather. The next day burned hot and that night the little house was like an oven. I lay naked and restless beneath a single sheet, and at last I got up and threw the window as wide as it would go. I leaned out into the night air, hoping for a breath of wind from the mountains. It was very still. Through the darkness I heard a voice, quickly falling into silence, and then I saw them. They were the women of the village, coming slowly in procession down from the orchard. Their white dresses trans-

*Against the sill it was black as coal*  
**and its wings whirred ominously.**

It had rained during the day and the doctor and I sat just inside the entrance to his house, watching the lamplight catch the drops that beaded the vine leaves. The air was freshened by the rain, pleasing after the sultry heaviness of the past few days. Akharis had reached that midpoint of inebriation: he was cheerful and expansive, but still lucid as he discoursed on the local religious practices.

"Of course, there's the new Mithraeum at Balchat, now. The old one's really only frequented by a few retired soldiers, and I suppose we'll lose those when the new railway comes, if it ever does. It's not like the city, my friend. Here, you have to plan your worship."

I laughed.

"It's true, we're spoiled in Constantinople. There's something to suit every predilection: Attic, Christian, Coptic ... it's such a crossroads."

"Your own family are ...?" the doctor paused, delicately, and poured out a further measure of raki.

"Oh, well, we've always favored conventional Attic practices...."

"You're in good company. The great houses principally follow the young god, so I'm told: the House of Lights, the House of Birds." He smiled. "Talking of which, they say old Petros Batrichan's gone into seclusion at Irekenia. There's a thing, eh?—a man like that, well up in politics. They say the family's in a panic; seems he took all his secrets with him and no one knows what he did with his money."

"So I've heard," I agreed, cautiously. I did not want any association to be drawn between myself and Petros Batrichan; as far as I was concerned, that man no longer existed.

I added, "Of course, the women in our family have always followed the usual rites; they go off to the Cybelic festivities every year and so forth."

"Oh, yes, it's the same here. There's a shrine up in the mountains, but they mostly attend temple in Balchat with their menfolk. But, you know, this wasn't always the backwater it is now. There used to be a temple just outside the village, dedicated to the Lady herself a good two thousand years ago. Nothing left now, of course, if it was even there."

"I might go up and have a look. Where's it supposed to have been?"

"Ah," Akharis said, smiling at me, "I believe you're already familiar with it. They say it's located where Gulnara Sama's orchard sits."

"Really? So all those great stones lying around are—" I paused, expectantly.

"Are the temple walls. But it's stony ground in these parts, and easy to imagine things. I wouldn't get too excited. An archaeological team came all the way from Munich before the war, but they didn't find much. Mind you, that might have been because Gulnara wouldn't

formed them into ghosts. One of them carried a light in a jar, and the twitching flame cast Melissa Sama's face into severe relief. I drew back from the window and as I did so, something moved across the sill. Looking down, I saw that it was a late, lost bee, perhaps a queen, for it was enormous. Against the sill it was black as coal and its wings whirred ominously. I stepped back just in time; it shot up from the sill, perilously close to my face. Then it was gone, eaten by the warm darkness.

The next morning was as hot and golden as the day before. The house was quiet. I crossed to the window, and my attention was caught by a dark smear on the sill. I looked more closely. At first I thought it was blood, but the consistency was wrong: a gelatinous crimson trail. I could make nothing of it. Fetching a cloth, I wiped the offending substance away and went in search of breakfast.

*I did not see Melissa or her aunt that day.*  
I took my usual stroll in the evening and found Akharis in his customary spot beneath the drowsy vines. The bottle of raki was only a third full, even though it was early in the evening. The doctor said, without looking at me, "Someone came to my surgery today."

"Oh?"

"A man in a linen suit. Much too good for these parts, but not out of place in Galatasaray or Pera. He had a janissary with him: all polished armor and preserved flesh." His mouth turned down in distaste. "You don't see many of those around here, not since the war."

"What did he want?" I asked, casually. My skin prickled with chilly anticipation.

"He was inquiring about strangers. Had I seen anyone new recently? He was particularly interested in a middle-aged man with, I quote, 'a saturnine clean-shaven countenance and smooth black hair.' Well, what could I tell him? I haven't seen anyone like that around here for a while." I thought of the face I had seen in the mirror that morning; sunburnt and bearded, and I smiled. "So I said no, there's been no one of that description hanging around here, and I shrugged. A little verisimilitude, you see," the doctor enunciated carefully. "So he nodded sagely, gave me a tip, and he and his infernal machine departed."

"A curious business." I said.

"Most odd." The doctor fixed me with an owl's eye. "I must say, I've greatly enjoyed your company these past 10 days or so. One rarely finds anyone of refinement, or indeed anything more than bovine intelligence, in this part of the world. I should be sorry to see you go."

*Continued on page 88*

THE

POND,

is a

**When a man does  
battle with the  
forces of nature he  
often forgets that,  
in the end, nature  
always wins.**

↓

he lawnmower was gone. Henry followed the parallel tracks of flattened grass, leading from the shed across the lawn to the pond. He left behind him the tracks of his own flat shuffle next to the mower's path in the grass.

For 40 years, Henry had tried to tame the back lawn. He had won his greatest victories in the years after the children left, and for a few brief summers the lawn had almost achieved his dream of smooth uniformity. After Jane's funeral, though, the days seemed shorter, and he had watched helplessly as nature retook his hard-won territory in a series of tiny skirmishes in which he felt hopelessly outnumbered. Now when he mowed he saw crabgrass under the willow, anthills erupting around the shed. In the corner by the patio sprouted a crop of wicked toadstools, red above and gill-like yellow beneath. Whether kicked over or allowed to die a natural death, these in death would inevitably turn to an acidic black goo that would dissolve the circle of grass where they stood.

The only part of the lawn where grass grew freely was the damp corner around the pond. There it grew stalky and thick, so thick that after a rain the ancient mower often needed to be flipped and its underbelly scraped free of green mulch. The grass tapered off again on the verge of the foot-wide border of slimy black mud that enclosed the pond itself.

The crosshatching on the mower's wheels was plainly visible where the tracks crossed the mud and disappeared into the dark water.

BY BRUCE GLASSCO • ILLUSTRATION BY LAURIE HARDEN





# T THERE WAS A SINGLE WEBBED FOOTPRINT IN

he pond had been lovely when they first moved in. Henry remembered his daughter Kimberly as a toddler, reaching out to touch the fat orange carp that Jane had managed to nurse through three summers, before a fungus wiped them out during a family vacation. They had come home and found the fish floating on their sides in the pond, covered with filmy hair, as if they had been trying to turn mammal and had perished in the attempt.

Lily pads once covered the surface, and Kimberly and Julian had caught frogs and put them on the pads and pretended they were Mr. Jeremy Fisher gone punting down the river. But the patch of lilies grew smaller each year. He remembered when the water became too dark for him to see the bottom, and when the surface had stopped giving him back his reflection on even the clearest of days.

Nothing larger than algae lived in the pond now. Green scum covered the surface, and the pond stank with its damp decay, along with all the darker smells of the life that feeds off death.

But the pond had never been more than 18 inches deep at its center. The central housing of the lawnmower was at least two feet high, not counting the tied-together handle. Henry walked around the pond to assure himself that there were no tracks coming out. He could understand kids breaking into his yard, stealing the mower, and pushing it into the pond. But if that was what had happened, then its rusting hulk should now be rising sadly above the surface of the water, like the wreck of the *Queen Elizabeth* in Hong Kong harbor.

There was something odd about the mower's tracks as they passed through the mud, and Henry bent down stiffly for a better look. Between the wheels of the mower were other, smaller tracks: footprints the size of Kimberly's first bronzed pair of shoes, long and thin, with a hole behind each one, almost as if a curved spike grew from the heel. And the toes were all wrong. There were four of them, pointed, with smudges in between as if there was something connecting them.

Henry shivered; autumn must be coming early, he thought. Perhaps he should fetch a jacket. He pushed himself to his feet; it took him two tries before he was successful. Instead of the jacket he got the garden hose from the shed and began laying it across the grass. The strange tracks were outside his experience, but there was nothing in them to contradict the obvious course of action. He couldn't get the rest of the lawn to the state he dreamed of, but he could at least eliminate one of his failures. The time had come for the pond to die, as other things had died, as other things would continue to die.

The pump he rented from the hardware store was simple to put together: a hose screwed in on each end, with a short cord to be attached to the long, orange extension cord from the shed. The thing looked vaguely menacing, the way the beast from 20,000 fathoms might have looked if five of its arms had been hacked off, and the remaining three were orange and two shades of green. Faye came out to watch him while he was unrolling one of the hoses toward the storm sewer in front of the house. When the children were teenagers she would rocket out of her dog door like a blonde blur, so fast her feet barely touched the ground. Now she bumped the door half open, cautiously, before finally summoning enough strength to push herself all the way through. There was a groove in the grass that marked her regular rounds, and she carefully surveyed her perimeter before settling into the grass near Henry and falling asleep. She didn't go near the pond.

Henry flipped the pump's on switch, and it hummed into life. He opened the gate and went out into the front to watch the dark water spurting into the depths of the sewer like blood from a punc-

tured artery. Then he went inside again to look at the catalogs he had picked up in the hardware store, luscious spreads of gleaming, tempting lawnmowers.

By evening the pond was nothing but a kidney-shaped patch of jet-black slime, shallower than he remembered because of the mulch from decades of fallen willow leaves. There was a corroded lump in the center, where the ornamental fountain had once aerated the koi carp. The stench of rot was overpowering. There was no sign of the lawnmower.

## W

*hen the movie came out in 1954, he had finally gathered the courage to ask Jane Caruthers out. After the fear of nerving himself to pick up the phone and dial the number, he had known that no movie could ever frighten him. All through the movie he felt her sitting beside him without daring to look, like an electric tingling on his skin.*

*In the old days there had been just one theater in town, a big one, not a mass of little theaterettes packed together like sowbugs in a dead log. When you walked in and saw the molded plaster, smelled the popcorn and the real butter poured over it, felt the thick red carpet beneath your shoes, you knew that you were really about to see something.*

*His kids had shown him the pathetic glasses they gave you these days, cheap cardboard things with slips of red and blue cellophane in the lenses, disposable toys you could take home or wad up and throw in the trash afterward. But back then they handed you real glasses, with thick lenses made of real red and blue glass inside tin frames. There was a box by the door that you put the glasses back into on the way out, so that kids the next night could pick them up and be terrified all over again when the planet exploded in the first scene, or when the creature knocked over the lamp, or when the scaly arm came thrusting out of the flat black water into the theater, plucking you from your seat and dragging you deliciously screaming into the depths of the black black lagoon.*

The next morning Henry awoke from a dream of distant barking to the sound of rain on the roof. After it stopped he went out and found that the pond had returned, with the same algae, the same flat, impenetrable surface reflecting as little of the sky as it had the day before. The mud around it was trampled as if from a battle, tattooed with the prints of canine paws and webbed feet the size of dollar bills.

Faye had disappeared.

## H

enry sat by the phone for almost an hour, staring at his daughter's number on the back of the phone book, imagining the conversations he might have.

"How could you lose a lawnmower, Dad? Well, you shouldn't have been mowing yourself anyway, we've been telling you that for years. We'll just hire one of the neighbor kids to come over and take care of it for you, all right?"

"We'll come right over and help you look for Faye, Dad. If she got out of the yard she can't have gone very far. But Dad, Faye is an awfully old dog. If something happened to her, well, maybe it was just her time.

"Fill in the pond? Well of course that's a good idea, we'll get



# THE MUD, JUST THE SIZE OF HENRY'S OWN FOOT,

someone to come out tomorrow. It's such a burden for you to have to look after that big old place, Dad. Have you given any more thought to what we said about selling and moving someplace smaller?

"A creature in the pond. Yes, Dad, I'm coming right over. Don't go anywhere, all right? Promise me you'll stay right where you are. We'll take you where you'll be perfectly safe."

At last he put the book down and went to the hardware store instead. As always, the bright tools and lawn furniture and bins of screws and bolts were a comforting stay against mortality. He compromised with his age by paying one of the young clerks to go home with him and carry the sacks of cement from the car to the shed. He thought he could still do the mixing and pouring on his own. He had laid the whole back patio himself—a precise and complex business, with strings and levels and wooden frames. It had been one of the proudest days in his life when he had finished; one of the saddest when it cracked down the middle during the rainy spring when Julian finished high school.

He would be less exacting this time. It would not be a pretty job—just the thought of the work involved exhausted him—but he felt like he had just enough energy left for the basics. Drain the pond, add the cement in layers, let each one dry before adding the next. Keep the mix drier than normal to soak up the mud. Leave nothing but a great round plug in the lawn, a canvas for chalk-wielding grandchildren. Even if it cracked, nothing would come out of the concrete but dust.

It was a job for tomorrow, not today; the shopping trip had drained him. He locked the doors and windows before going to bed, even dragging himself upstairs to check the children's rooms, though he had avoided the steps for years. He locked the door of his bedroom and lay awake with the bedside lamp on, staring at the quilted bedcover and the walls and the door and all the smooth surfaces of his life.

*The beauty of the creature was that he could be anywhere. Get in a canoe and you were in his world, his rules. The opaque waters of the black lagoon could hold anything—an inch below the surface and you were blind, you were helpless. So you stayed in the canoe and you watched for ripples, you watched for bubbles, and ripples and bubbles were everywhere so he was everywhere, rising to shatter the surface when your back was turned. The flat black water was charged with his presence, and it stretched as far as you could see, waiting to take form.*

**H**enry woke from a dream of black water as the window beside the bed exploded into a thousand fragments, cascading down like a jungle waterfall. A scaly arm above him groped, grasped, webbed talons clutching on air, on the curtains, on the lampshade. He watched the lamp tip over and smash on the floor, and then darkness flooded the room like a black river. He tried to scream but found that he had no breath in his lungs, so he screamed silently the way one does sometimes in dreams. He heard something fall, and then a rattle as something hit the window frame. He waited for the cold touch of talons on his face, but they never came. After a while, he heard a faint splash outside.

He had no idea how long he lay there, clutching the bedsheets with numb fingers. Finally he forced himself off the bed on the side away from the broken glass, and went to find a flashlight. Peering

fearfully out the window he saw no sign of anything on the lawn, but the pond was a blacker patch next to the black grass. There was a blank space on the bedside table where Jane's photo montage had stood: their wedding picture, their babies, their babies' weddings. All gone. In their place was a wet stone, shining in the flashlight's beam with all the rainbow colors of a diamond.

Henry made no attempt to go back to sleep that night. He turned on all the lights in the house and sat on the sofa, listening for the sound of distant water.

**T**he pond looked exactly the same in the morning as it always had: flat, calm, opaque. There was a single webbed footprint in the mud, just the size of Henry's own foot.

He briefly considered leaving, running away. Going where, though? To a place from one of those antiseptic brochures his children were always trying to get him to look at? No. Whatever this thing was that lurked beneath the surface, he would face it on his own turf, with whatever feeble tools he still had left. What did he have to fear for? His life? There were other things more precious.

He went to the hardware store to get new glass for the window and leaned it against the house next to the gaping frame. Then he leaned against the wall himself, trying to gather strength. Instead he found nothing but weakness, like a pool of muddy water slowly seeking its level. He was not afraid, but he realized that he was very, very tired. Too many tasks stretched before him: the window, the pump, the concrete. Buying a new mower, using it, and when he finished, the grass and the weeds would only grow again. You couldn't keep things smooth forever.

What had happened to those glasses, he wondered? When did the beautiful world that you dreamed of at night start losing its depth, its hard edges, its thrills that reached out from the screen for you like a scaly arm breaking the surface of a black lagoon? When did that world start turning into lawns and windows and pictures and still, empty ponds? And then even those were taken away from you, surface by surface, until nothing was left but a tiny rectangular patch of grass that anybody could manage, and a flat name written on a flat stone.

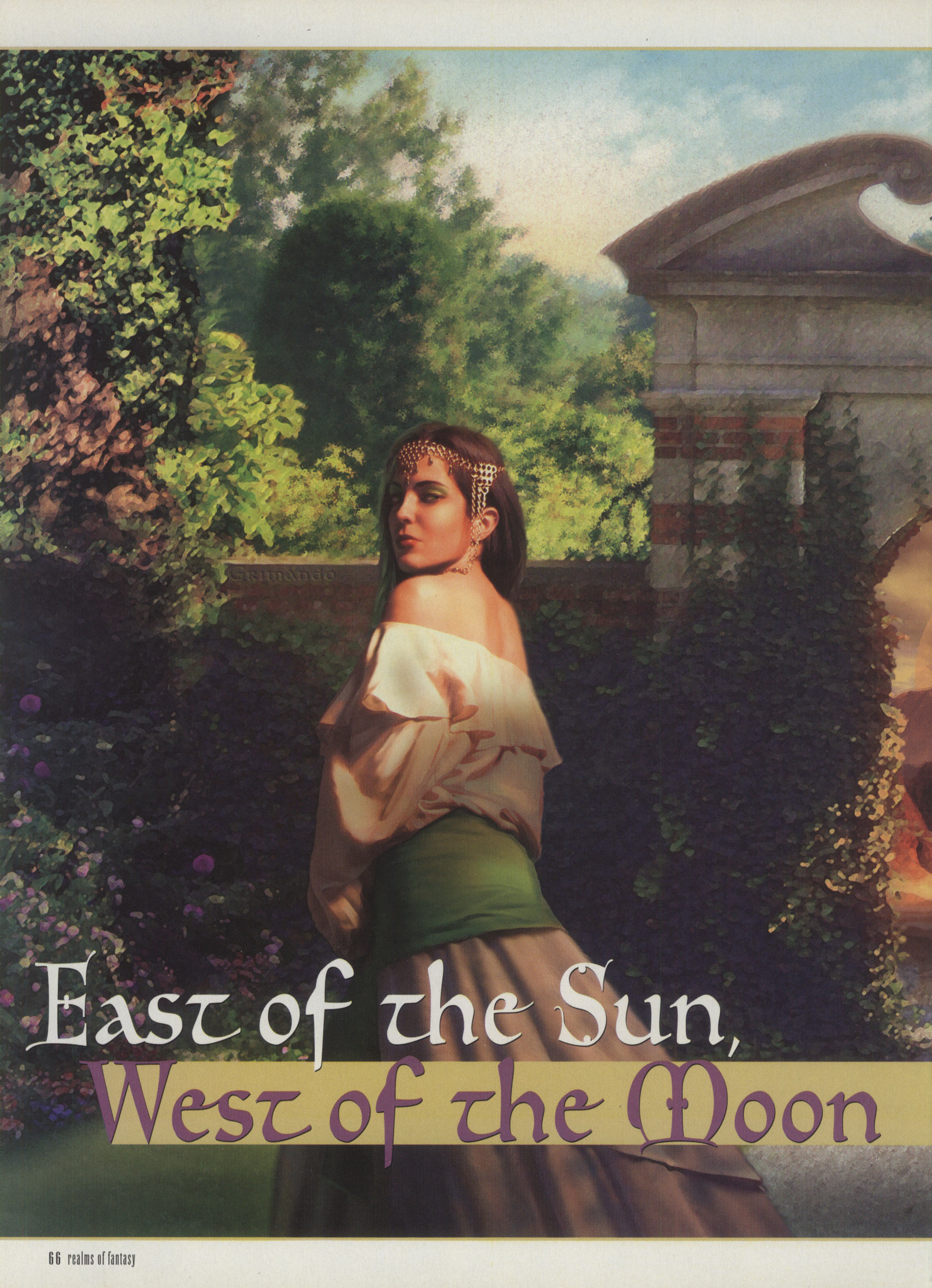
There had to be a better way.

Henry's wedding suit lay packed in mothballs in the attic, but the mothballs were nothing but gray stains now, and the moths had feasted for years. Still, the suit felt right to Henry somehow as he put it on, though it was too large now and the tails flapped against the backs of his knees. He combed what was left of his hair and entered the yard once again.

The first step was a shock, for even though it was midsummer the black water was icy cold. It poured into his shoe and sucked him down into the mud. He managed the second step, though, and the third, and by then his tails were floating in the water behind him.

Each step took a year, a decade, but when he reached the center of the pond there were no more steps to take. The bottom dropped from beneath him and the water stretched up and out and around in every direction, and he was free.

The years dissolved as he swam deep into the heart of the lagoon, where the matinee is only a dime and the hero always gets the girl, where no barriers stop you as your gills pulse and your fingerskin spreads, where you can swim outward in expanding circles forever. ♣



Erinando

East of the Sun,  
West of the Moon



**T**here was once a king who had three daughters. Now it happened that he must go to battle against his enemies, so he called his daughters to him and said to them:

“My dear children, it is with great sorrow that I leave you, for now that your mother is dead, you are all that I love in the world.

“While I am away my ministers will attend to the affairs of the kingdom. You may do whatever pleases you. My lands and all that is in them are yours—and my palace also, except for one room, the Room of Voices; do not go into that room or ill may befall you.”

The three princesses, released from nursemaids and tutors at last, revelled in their freedom. Refusing an escort, they saddled up long-tailed chakas and spent many days in the desert hunting sand-rats, racing their chakas, and singing under the stars.

They donned batwing-coats and wheelboots, and played wind-hockey inside the Dome of Winds, blown up and down the curved walls by the howling gusts from below the earth.

*A king, a kingdom, a lovely princess, and a terrifying beast. Have you read this tale before? I don't think so ...*

BY ELIZABETH COUNIHAN  
ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT GRIMANDO

Redmoon came and whitemoon and starlight, and messengers came to tell the sisters that their father was safe and had defeated the Oligarchs of the South. However, as he still had to engage the armies of the Twin Queens of the East, he bade them be good daughters and he would be with them as soon as duty would allow.

**T**hey called in snake charmers and bear tamers from the desert to amuse them. They heard musicians from the traveling tribes who played on pipes and zitars and sang plaintively of love and beauty. They summoned tumble-dancers from the Cataract at Brin, who imitated the jump-fish as he leaps the falls before mating. They went hunting with their father's stewards to the hills and rivers in the farthest reaches of the kingdom. Once they saw the blue flash of a halcyon as it dived for a fish, but it was too quick for their hawk; and once they heard the song of the silver quail, but did not set their brackets upon it because its song was sacred in that kingdom.

Again redmoon came and whitemoon and starlight.

The princesses became bored.

"Where," said the second born, Arbyair, "is the Room of Voices?"

"I have never heard of it before," said Dara, the youngest, "and it is the one place we may not go."

"I do not know either," said Princess Verun, the eldest and most daring, "but I have the key." She held up the chatelaine her father had given her, and showed among the keys of iron, brass, and silver a tiny disc of gold with a hole like a little mouth at its center.

For 20 days the princesses searched the palace from top to bottom. They did not question the stewards or servants for fear that the key would be taken from them by the King's ministers.

At last they came to the highest tower of the palace, where only lightning and carrion birds were ever seen. And, by the light of their candle, they saw a stairway winding upward, and they heard from above the murmur of voices talking low and secretly.

They went up the stairs and came to a door. There was no handle or lock and Verun could not push it open. But when Arbyair held up the candle they saw a tiny slit in the center. Dara, afraid, hung back, but Verun slipped the golden disc into the aperture and the door swung open.

By Arbyair's candle they perceived that the room was small and circular, and had no windows. It was empty. And yet still they heard voices and now saw a faint glow of light issuing from a table in the center of the room.

When they crept forward to look, they saw that the table was of carved rock and that sunk into it was a glowing crystal as big as a man's head. From it came the voices and in it they saw visions.

They saw their father talking with a bearded man robed as a chieftain, whose escort bore the banner of the Oligarchs of the South. And they heard their father's voice as if from far away. The words were in an unknown tongue but the eldest sister heard him pronounce the name "Verun."

Another man stepped forward, hook nosed and proud. He wore a headdress of orange and green feathers, and a slave behind him carried the emblem of the Twin Queens. Again they could not understand what their father said, but Arbyair heard her name spoken.

Then the crowd about the King parted like corn before the scythe and three grim figures strode toward him. They walked upright like men, but their limbs were thick and clumsy like those of great beasts, and they were scaled like chakas. Their heads, too, were scaled, but it seemed to the princesses that they had the eyes of insects. Each wore, on a chain around its neck, a badge in the shape of an animal, but being beasts, they wore no garments. The King welcomed them and spoke unknown words to them and they did not answer. But the princesses shuddered to the sound of their breathing, harsh as someone in the throes of a nightmare.

The leader of the three held out his paw to the King and the King

clasped it and said the name "Dara."

When the King returned home there was much rejoicing, with fireworks, feasting, and dancing, for he had won a great victory and had no more to fear from his enemies. After the feast he called his daughters to him, telling them that he had arranged rich marriages for them all.

To the eldest Princess he said, "My dear daughter, you are to marry the youngest and handsomest of the Oligarchs of the South. You will live in a golden palace on an island in the middle of a lake alive with colored fish. Your robes will be encrusted with sapphires and diamonds and you will be waited on by a hundred maids-of-honor."

Verun thanked her father, but she did not tell him that she had seen her suitor and was well pleased with him.

To the second Princess the King said, "My dear daughter, you are to marry the eldest son of Ziha, of the Twin Queens. You will live in a translucent palace of quartz set on a high mountain in the East, and you will fly there on the back of a great roc. You will wear the furs of the rarest beasts and your head will be adorned by the plumes of the roc itself. A hundred slaves will do your every bidding."

Arbyair thanked her father, but she did not tell him that she too had seen her Prince and was very well pleased with him.

Then the King called Dara to him and she came before him with cheeks as pale as white moonlight. Before he could speak she said, "Father, I know what manner of beast you have ordained for my bridegroom, and I do not care what riches I will receive. I beg you to release me from this unnatural union."

The King looked uncomfortable and two spots burned like red moonlight on his cheeks.

"Ah," he said, "I perceive that you have disobeyed me and entered the Room of Voices, and seen and heard that which I had forbidden. Nevertheless Dara, to you goes the greatest honor. For this Beast, and a very handsome and rich Beast he is, has ensured my victory by giving to me an invincible weapon by which my enemies were smitten. In return he has asked for the greatest jewel in my kingdom, and that is surely you, fairest of my daughters. Besides, he is far too wise to be a beast only. He must be a great prince under some form of temporary enchantment."

Dara hung her head in shame and swore to herself that she would die rather than lie with a beast, enchanted or otherwise.

After the weddings of Verun and Arbyair, which were as magnificent as could be expected from a king who had just ensured the future of his realm, the brides departed for their new homes.

Dara prepared herself for the coming of the Beasts.

They came unannounced, striding through the palace gates amid the fear and consternation of the King's subjects. They approached the King's seat and saluted, scaled fists raised to faceted eyes. From behind a screen, Dara waited in dawn-tinted bridal robes, fingering the vial of poison at her throat.

One of the three stepped forward, and in a voice like the sighing of wind in the chimney, asked that the King repay his debt. The King made a fair speech and Dara was bidden to appear. The three beasts looked upon her for a space. She held herself proudly but trembled inwardly. Which of the three hideous and identical beings was to be her husband, the author of her death?

The Beasts whispered among themselves like ghost-voices in a storm. Then the one who had spoken to the King, in a semblance of Dara's own tongue, repeated his request. And the King said again that his youngest daughter, Dara, was that which he had promised, the Jewel of His Kingdom.

The Beasts appeared angry.

Dara's fear turned to rage. Could it be that they dared reject her, a royal princess, and a renowned beauty, as she well knew?

She spoke haughtily: "For my father's honor and the honor of his kingdom I am given to one of you. Would you scorn me, a King's daughter, although you are but beasts and no better than the chaka I ride?"

The Beasts were dumbfounded. Their shoulders trembled with what she took to be fear. At last one made an incomprehensible gesture to his fellows, then held out a dark, scaled talon to the Princess. She grasped it, pride suppressing her nausea at its clammy coldness.

That night, to the mournful sound of reed pipes and muffled drums, Dara mounted her purple-clad chaka and, passing through ranks of weeping citizens, left her father's palace. The Beasts, scornful to ride their fellow creatures, walked beside her with slow and heavy steps.

After many hours of marching they reached a place in the desert far from human habitation, and there Dara saw a great tent, glinting silver in the light of whitemoon. And there was a shimmering of enchantment about it like the air on a hot day. The chaka snorted fearfully. The Beast who had chosen her helped her down from her steed and led her to the tent. He uttered a word and a doorway opened in its side.

When she had entered the tent of the Beasts, Dara gasped, for here was magic indeed. She found herself in a courtyard under a starry sky. The air was warm but cooled by a gentle breeze. Night warblers sang in the shadows and a fountain cascaded starlit droplets onto scented water lilies.

There was no sign of the Beasts, neither were there any attendants. As she stood wondering and alone, she saw a golden light. A doorway had opened silently at her approach, revealing a lighted alcove containing a sunken bath surrounded by mirrors. The door closed behind her.

As if in a dream, she removed her wedding garments and bathed in the scented water. Then her hair and body were dried by warm airs that wafted from nowhere, and crystal hands, issuing by magic from the walls, massaged her skin with unguents. On a marble bench she discovered tiny boxes, each of which sprang open at a touch to reveal a garment of silk so fine that Dara was certain it could have passed through the eye of a needle. She chose a caftan in the deep blue of the Lake of Brin, worn over loose trousers the color of the silver quail. Her wedding robes she discarded.

No sooner was her wardrobe complete than the door opened once more and revealed, not the courtyard, but a small chamber containing a table of pure crystal on which were laid dishes and goblets of jewel-colored glass. And there were two chairs. Trembling a little, Dara seated herself and was immediately calmed by the music of invisible harps and zitars.

Then the door opened and a figure entered.

It was a young man. Although his hair was as black as the wings

and she thought that his enchantment was broken. But when morning came she wept to see him once more in Beast form. He bowed his hideous head and touched her lightly with a massive paw, then took leave of her in the courtyard. A door opened at his command. Dara glimpsed a landscape of red rock under a black sky. The dark heads of other Beasts turned jewelled eyes toward him, and Dara shrank back in disgust. Then her husband was gone to join them, floating like a leaf on the wind. The gateway closed and would not open, although she battered the wall with her fists and screamed every magical word that she knew.

All day she wandered alone in that place. She discovered many rooms and gardens. Some were dimly visible, as if at the end of a long corridor, and these she could not reach however hard she tried. Others she could enter freely. When she was hungry she had only to sit at a table and food was brought to her. Sometimes she had only to formulate a desire in her mind, and she would hear music or watch ghostly dancers—even see the illusion of her homeland. But at night her husband came to her, a man once more.

The days and nights rolled by under a strangely lit sky with never a sight of whitemoon or redmoon nor even the sun itself. By night, the language of love became the beginning of a language of words and she learned that he was named "Zwon." But still every morning he became a Beast and she was left alone. And she began to plan how she might restore her husband's true shape.

There came a night when she made sure that he drank more than usual of the wine, so that he fell into a deep sleep. She commanded a faint light to appear in their room, and so found beside their bed the beast skin that he wore by day; and she took it outside into the courtyard, determined to destroy it.

At first she thought the task might be beyond her. The scaly, ill-smelling hide would not yield to her dagger. But she remembered the vial of poison that she had intended to use on herself, an inflammable distillation made from the resin of a certain tree. She carefully shook the contents onto the beast skin and, fetching one of the burning incense sticks that they used to perfume their bed chamber, set light to the hated thing.

It burned with a vile, acrid smoke that choked her, and yellow flames leaped to the sky. The stars winked out. She screamed as burning shards floated down on her. Her cries roused the man. He ran to her shouting, "No, No!" then, "Run!" He grabbed her hand, shouted a word of command, and hustled her through a doorway.

Snow fell all around her out of a gray sky. She was outside the tent. Its dark bulk was faintly discernible behind the swirling flakes. The

## Which of the three hideous and identical beings was to be her husband, the author of her death?

of a carrion bird and his skin the color of polished wood, she knew him for a true man as soon as he smiled at her. He uttered a command in the strange tongue of the Beasts, and instantly the magical hands appeared through the walls bringing food and wine: wonderful food such as she had never tasted and wine that lulled her senses.

They talked, and understanding nothing, laughed and then kissed.

When he led her to his bed he proved that he was indeed a man

naked man ran back toward it, leaving her shivering.

"Zwon! Zwon!" she screamed, but he had disappeared inside and its walls were impervious to her shouts and battering fists. Huddled in her flimsy robe she waited.

When he returned his appearance frightened her. He was swathed from head to toe in a garment of drab, gray silk. Even his hair was covered. He looked exhausted, his dark face gray and lined. He had brought her clothing similar to his and he wrapped it around her. As

he put her cold feet into heavy boots like those he wore, he cursed in the language of the Beasts, but in her tongue repeated over and over, "What have you done, Dara? What have you done?" and gradually she understood that she had not broken the spell, that he must leave her.

"Why? Why?" she implored, but when he tried to explain, their lack of words came between them. He gave her a bag and indicated

"Wait," the Mother said. "They will not want a woman with a child." "Nevertheless I will go," she answered.

The Mother stroked the baby's downy head and kissed the Princess, calling her "dear daughter." Dara embraced her and set off after the others.

One of the Beastmen was waiting for them halfway up the track. He spoke harshly but comprehensibly.

## She saw dimly a wall of crystal between her and the void where stars and sun floated like fish in a dark sea.

that it contained food and drink. Then he kissed her and turned toward his magical tent. She tried to come with him but he shook his head sadly.

As the doorway opened she felt a prickle of magic. Already he looked insubstantial against the glow that came from inside.

"How will I find you again?" she cried. He raised a hand in farewell. But his voice came back faint as if blown on the wind, and she thought his words were, "East of the sun and west of the moon."

The Princess perceived that she was on a barren plateau, the ground fissured and cracked on all sides as though dug by giants. The tent had disappeared. Crouching in the snow she covered her face with a fold of her garment and wept. When at last she arose she discerned a cluster of huts in the shelter of a valley far down the mountain. She began to walk. The magical garment she wore protected her from the bitter cold, but by nightfall she was hungry and exhausted and still had far to go. The bag Zwon had given her contained bread that filled her with only a few mouthfuls, and a magical drink that warmed itself when she opened the cup. And at the bottom of the bag she discovered a chain bearing the device that Zwon had worn around his neck—a graceful, white bird that floated on blue water.

That night she saw redmoon in a familiar sky and so by its light continued her journey down the mountainside, arriving at last at a house of women.

The women treated her with kindness. They knew nothing of her country or her father, but they spoke a language akin to hers and within a few tendays they understood each other well. Grateful for their courtesy, the Princess did not disdain the most menial work in order to repay them.

On hearing her history they were unsurprised. "We know of these 'Beasts,' as you call them," said the woman they called "Mother." "They come here often to wreak their sorcery on our mountain, tearing out its bowels. They are not beasts, however, but men, as any of these young women will tell you."

When Dara showed them her token they shook their heads; they did not know Zwon. But they assured her that the strangers would return one day, as they always did.

As winter closed in the Princess discovered that she was pregnant and in the spring she gave birth to a boy with black hair and slate-blue eyes. She named him Zwon.

One day she heard a sound like a thousand peals of thunder and saw fire on the mountainside. "It is the Beastmen," the girls said. They put on warm clothing to climb the mountain, but underneath wore their flimsiest finery.

"Will they not come down to you?" asked Dara. "No," they replied, "it is against their Law to appear as men among us."

"Then I will come with you," Dara said, and she put on the garments Zwon had given her and tucked her baby against her breast.

"Wait here. No further. Big bang! Much danger." The girls pouted, hands on hips. Dara hung back.

"Soon, soon," whispered the Beast eagerly. There was a loud explosion followed by a rumble of falling rock. The baby started crying. The Beast turned his insect-like head toward Dara but said nothing. He started up the track and the women followed.

Cataracts of boulders and the bones of trees fell into two great, new gashes in the rock. The plateau was still there and the dome-tent rested on it as if it had never gone away.

There was a time when Dara would have rushed toward it calling her lover's name, but now she covered her baby's head from the storm of dust and waited. At last two more of the strangers appeared, breathing harshly as always, still clutching in their talons the glowing rods that had blasted the mountain. The girls pirouetted before them and they seemed well pleased. The first Beast spoke to the one who appeared to be his leader, pointing to Dara and her child. This one approached her with a heavy tread and looked at her with his fearsome eyes, then demanded to know where she had got her clothing.

"My husband," she replied in the speech of the Beasts.

"But this is against our Law," he hissed.

Dara drew out the bird token. "Know you Zwon?" she asked, haltingly.

"You must not... We can be heard," he said, then apparently coming to a decision, beckoned to all the girls, including Dara. A word was spoken and there was the hum of magic as a shimmering doorway appeared. Dara was made to enter last. She bowed her head and held the baby close to her as she felt the tingle of enchantment on her skin.

When she looked up she was alone with little Zwon in a tiny room. There was no enchanted courtyard here and no sign of the women who had entered before her. No door was visible. She sat down on the only chair and suckled her baby. She did not wait long.

Part of the wall became translucent and a figure entered. He was no Beast but a true man and as fair as she was. He wore a necklace of fishes at his throat. He blanched when he saw the baby. "I see that someone has broken just about every law we have," he said, speaking Dara's language more fluently than any Beast she had met before.

"My husband is Zwon. Where can I find him?"

The man fingered her token and shook his head with obvious relief. "Swan, I do not know him. Not one of my men. The best thing for you, Miss ..."

"Dara, Most Royal Princess."

“... is to go back to your kingdom, or whence you came. I can arrange transport.”

“Go back to my father, like an unwanted gift? No. Where can I find my husband?”

“Miss ... er ... Most Royal Princess. Forget Swan. He is not truly your husband. It is against our Law to cohabit with natives.”

“And the girls who came with me?”

He looked shifty. “Well, boys will be boys. And as long as they come up here, we cannot contaminate your er ... circle of being,” he said, clearly translating a difficult concept.

“Mr. Fishes, if I were to return to my father—the King—I would make known to him what happens here, and he would doubtless inform your Authorities.” She was thinking on her feet, having no idea whose country she was in, nor what authority the Beastmen answered to.

The man shrugged helplessly. “Princess, truly I don’t know this man, Swan, and I don’t have access to the er ... appropriate fount of knowledge, here.”

Although suspecting that he lied, she said, “Then, show me this place of wisdom and I will ask there, leaving you to transgress your Law as you will.”

He held out a hand, lightly touching her fingers, and sighed. “Let it be as you desire, Princess.” Then he spoke into an amulet at his wrist.

As before there was no sensation of motion. She went through a doorway and arrived in another place.

For a moment she thought that she was alone in the space between the stars. She cried out. But then she saw dimly a wall of crystal between her and the void where stars and sun floated like fish in a dark sea.

A woman appeared before her. She was unsurprised now by such miracles. She was darker even than Zwon and had an air of authority. Her tone was threatening, but Dara pointed to her mouth and said, in the Beast Tongue, “Hungry.”

The woman snapped her fingers and the now familiar crystal hands rose up from the bench beside Dara bearing bread, cheese, and a jug of water. She ate and drank as the woman questioned her.

The questioning itself was a new wonder. The woman mouthed unknown words into an amulet held in her hand, but another voice, issuing from the amulet, asked questions in Dara’s own tongue.

She answered as well as she could but it was clear that her interrogator was not satisfied. Finally she said, “You do realize that this is a serious matter. It may be impossible to send you home.”

“Where is home? Where is this place?” asked the Princess

Suddenly the crystal chamber rotated.

“That is your world,” the woman said. A shining, blue disc swung into view. Two smaller discs, one brilliant white, the other pink, floated beside the big one like children protected by their mother. Dara, fighting vertigo, clutched her own baby.

The woman gestured toward the crystal walls about them. “We built this place in the void between the worlds of your sun so that we could explore them.”

**S**he pointed at the blue disc. “Our people have been mining your own world and its moons for years. You weren’t supposed to know about us. There are strict laws ... but we know that our men break them in some of the isolated mining areas. There are at least two hundred small kingdoms down there. We don’t know which one you come from unless you tell us, and if we send you back....”

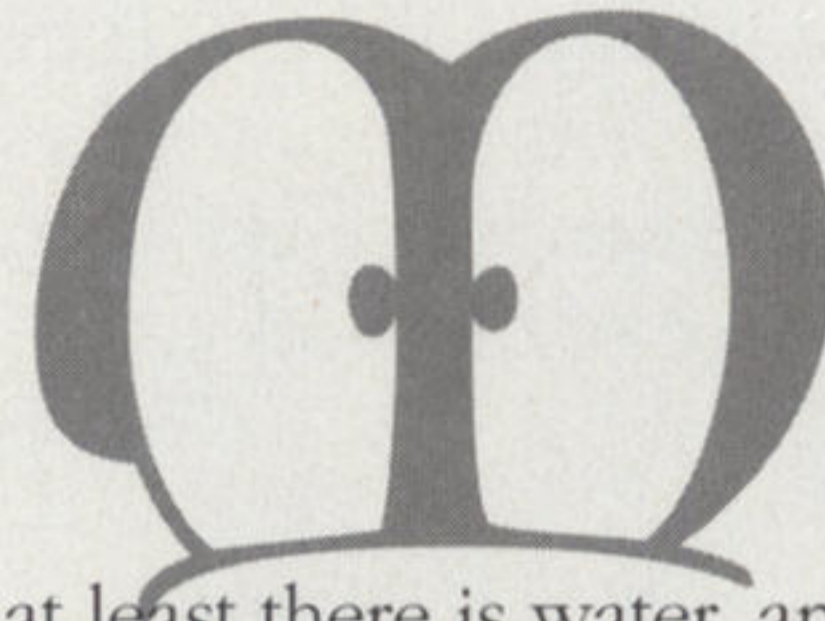
Dara took a deep breath. “I don’t want to go back. I want my husband, the father of my child.”

“That’s not possible. We don’t know who he is. Besides, the man is a criminal.”

“If I go back to my father, who sold me to your people, I will tell

the world about you, about the mining, about the weapon your men gave to my father to fight his enemies, everything I know. You should kill me and this little baby now.” She held the smiling baby out toward the woman. She looked horrified.

“Or, you can help me find my husband. His name is Zwon, or in your speech, Swan. This is his token. One of you told me that you have a fount of wisdom that knows all things.”



uch, much later Dara spoke to her sleeping baby. “That was not a good woman but she understands politics like one of the King’s ministers. And this is a bad place. The air is bad, and there is not enough food. But at least there is water, and I can give you everything that you need, little one.” The baby suckled contentedly.

The woman had consulted what she called data-base and discovered the whereabouts of Swan.

“You won’t like it, Princess,” she had said. “Silly bugger lost all his money; was just getting out of debt, when he trashed his biosuit. The lord knows how he did that, short of throwing it into a fire. So he had to give up visiting embargoed worlds.

“So he said ‘East of the sun, west of the moon,’ did he? In our tongue that means ‘beyond the farthest reaches of civilization.’ A good enough description of RDN3, so I hear. That’s the place he’s aiming for.” The woman had shrugged when Dara insisted that she send her there.

Dara could well believe that her journey was taking her to the back of nowhere. She understood that the distance she must now travel was too great for her to pass effortlessly through a doorway. She must go on a huge ship that would travel in a place that did not exist, and arrive so far from her world that even the sun would be reduced to a tiny pin-prick among the multitude in the heavens.

She also understood about smuggling and stowaways, such things were known of at home. In return for her silence she and the baby were packed into a freighter that was to call at RDN3.

She had never endured such hardship, floating alone with little Zwon in a tiny space. There was light, but she turned it off if she heard movement outside. The compressed nutrient was unpalatable, and she longed for the natural fruits of her own land. The waste degrader she had been given did not suck all the impurities from the air, and the stench became noxious. Rats and large insects gnawed at her feet. She kept Zwon close to her, fearful that he would be bitten. He became thin and fretful.

She had no way of measuring time.

It was the child’s crying that finally gave her away. There had been a sudden feeling of pressure in her body and she realized that she and Zwon were stuck to one surface of the container under a pile of debris. She heard loud thumps and scraping noises from outside. Zwon became inconsolable.

There was a sudden bright light, a rush of cold air, and the sound of rough voices. Rough hands dragged her out into the open.

The Princess was questioned many times, but she said no words of her own tongue lest her captors would use their magical amulets to identify her origin. In the Language of the Beasts she asked continually for Swan and pointed at the device on her neck chain, but she was ignored. Although she was given no news of him she learned from her captors that she was on the world known as Arden and this gave her hope, for “Ardee-en” was the place where she had been told she might find him.

At length she and her child were taken as prisoners through a land of forests. They traveled inside a vehicle that used neither wheels nor draft animal but rode on the wind.

They traversed a landscape that was sometimes a brilliant green under a searing white sun; then clouds would gather at the summits of the mighty trees and descend with great cracks of thunder and

avalanches of rain.

After some days Dara was confined in a prison for women that was set in the middle of a place known as the Drowning Forest, surrounded by trees that brushed the sky. At first she was very weak, almost unable to walk from long confinement in weightless conditions. The baby was ill too, but she refused to let him be taken from her, and gradually he recovered.

Most of her fellow prisoners were insane or addicted to spirits or other toxins. Several were accompanied by young children. They lived in wooden huts built on high stilts to lift them above the frequent inundations. The food was dreary, based on a rice-like crop that could withstand the floods, and it was part of the work of the inmates to grow and prepare it.

**A**t first Dara was puzzled that the prisoners did not attempt to overpower the all-female guards. Then she saw that the batons they carried were, in fact, yet another manifestation of the power of the Beasts, for when aimed at a rebellious prisoner, they could cause a temporary paralysis. The Beast-word for them was "stunner." She also learned that she would not be ill-treated provided that she obeyed the guards and permitted certain fumbblings from some of them.

When she was not tending the crops or preparing food, Dara prowled around the perimeter fence, little Zwon strapped to her back. As she peered between the logs and wires of the stockade her thoughts turned constantly to the forest—a forest that made those in her father's lands seem like playgrounds for children. Surely in this place one could hide from one's enemies forever!

Time passed.

Zwon could sit up and he started eating from her plate. Dara was impatient to escape but she had no idea where to go to seek her husband.

Then one day she was called before the Governor, the only man she had seen in the compound. He was thick-lipped and fat and smelled of liquor, but his hands were small and feminine. They fluttered in his lap. Dara noticed that his right little finger was missing.

Once more she asked for news of Swan.

The Governor said, "You know he isn't legally your husband, my dear, and we can't all go making claims on citizens or there would be no end to it. Be patient. Serve out your time here. You are young and fertile. One day you will be assigned to one of the new settlements...."

She leaned forward accusingly. "You know Swan, do you not? You know where he is."

"I hear there is a fellow of that name living across the rift, but ..."

"Get Swan now, please. I am wife with baby."

He rubbed the scar on his hand and smiled at her pityingly. "My dear, we really don't have the staff or facilities for instigating a search ..."

"You have data-base? You find Swan, I give you ..." She took a deep breath. "What so ever you wish."

For a moment he stared at her with cold insolence, rubbing his hands. Then he laughed and picked up her right hand, taking the little finger into his mouth, licking it.

On a dark, overcast night Dara gathered up her sleeping baby in his blanket, crept past the other women, and left the shelter of their wooden cabin. She reached the perimeter fence. Teeming rain almost obscured the fence lights. She ran for the little gate used exclusively by the staff. It swung open. The Governor pulled her through quickly, away from the lights and into the shelter of the nearby trees.

They hurried between the vast boles that for so long had completely encircled her world. The rain battered the leaf canopy like a hundred side drums. Dara could hear rivulets running down the channels in the trunks and forming water spouts that jutted from the

bark, soaking her frequently. All the time she kept the child held to her breast, protected from the downpour.

They came to a track, now almost a river. She saw the dark shape of one of the floating vehicles that had been her first mode of transport on Arden. The man shouted a word above the noise and a door slid open, revealing a dully lit interior. He pushed her inside onto the front bench. She felt the vehicle rise up; its headlights probed first the slanting rain, then the rushing flood at their feet. They glided forward. She could hear, but not see, the fountains of water that sprayed out on each side as the vehicle ploughed its way through the stream.

"This is good," the man muttered, "no trace of us, eh my dear?"

Zwon, after whimpering a little, had dropped back to sleep.

"How far will you take me?" Dara asked. He turned toward her and she smelled the spirit on his breath and a whiff of some other drug.

"As far as you want, and farther." Dara clenched her fists and waited. Her wounded hand throbbed.

He knew the road well, and in this land of downpours had no fear of the conditions. At last he stopped somewhere in the midst of the forest.

"This should do," he said. In a flash of lightning she saw his livid teeth, grinning at her. He tugged off his rain cloak and threw it behind the bench. Dara smiled back, and as he turned toward her, she reached forward and snatched the stunner from his belt and fired it instantly. He yelled and tried to grab her, but his arms were already numb. Zwon began to wail.

Dara grabbed the rain cloak out from behind the bench and carefully draped it about herself and the baby.

The man's head lolled. "You are very fooliss," he managed. "You c'nnot dwive."

"I will find my husband. Already have I fulfilled my bargain with you!" She gestured toward his right hand, resting on the seat like a spider. It had five fingers.

"You will die in fowess," he gasped, as he lost control of his speech.

She fired again and he lapsed into unconsciousness. Quickly she searched him and found a flask of spirit and his torch. There was no food. Then she fastened around her waist the device that he had promised her when he took her finger. Lastly she repeated the command word for the door and, as soon as it opened, held Zwon in one arm and the stunner in her good hand, and dropped down into the mud.

She wanted to get as far away as possible before the heavy rain stopped. If only these people rode chakas or any animal that she could have turned to her use, but she had no idea of how one guided a float car. She would have to rely on her feet and her wits.

Running among the trees, she did not stop until her breath would let her go no farther. She wrapped the cloak around herself and the wailing child and crouched, panting, to await the dawn.

Although she had appeared defenseless to the Governor, Dara was now nearer to familiar territory than she had been since she first crossed the threshold of Swan's tent. She and her sisters had roamed the wild places of her father's kingdom since earliest childhood, and had been instructed in the arts of woodcraft by skillful hunters. Now, with her baby to protect, she was as elusive and patient as a wild cat, leaving no trail.

The rain had ceased by morning and drained quickly into the matted forest floor. She suckled the child, then strapped him firmly to her chest and started walking, her feet sinking into the springy undergrowth at each step. With the stunner in her hand, she listened for rustlings in the undergrowth that might indicate game. For many hours she pushed her way through the feathery curtains of lichen that hung from the giant boughs.

She went hungry all day, but in the evening small, rat-like animals crept out of the shadows. She stunned two and then killed them quickly, as she had been taught. Even in this unfamiliar forest, with its monstrous trees, she was able to find the means of starting a fire



and sheltering it in a pit. *I hope there is no one here that knows the art of tracking*, she thought.

Even with all the skill she could summon, after days of wandering under drenching storms and nights spent in sleepless vigil beside her son, Dara began to despair. Game was scarce, and the stunner was a very short range weapon, unsuitable for bringing down birds or the fast-moving deer she sometimes glimpsed. Deeper among the trees, especially at night, she would hear the coughing grunts of

how to aim it, his wandering hands as he fastened the flimsy material that was to protect her against impact. *Courage, Most Royal Princess*, she thought. *Were you not the most skilful in archery of the King's daughters?*

She watched the tiny spark of fire lock on to the branch supporting the tree-top hut.

Then she touched a lever. There was a violent jolt at her waist as the line sped across the gap. Dara cradled her baby. A moment later

## The sky had cleared suddenly as if a maidservant had opened the curtains to reveal the day.

larger beasts. Zwon was wailing continuously from hunger and she feared that she would be too weak to defend him from a predatory attack. But always she headed toward the setting sun, for in that direction, so she had heard, lay the rift that the Governor had spoken of.

On the evening of the fifth day a violent storm descended, blotting out the sun. Thunder roared incessantly, and Dara could not pacify her terrified baby. Her feet sank into the undergrowth as the water level rose. She remembered the tales she had heard at the prison camp, how the water could rise roof-high in a few minutes; when the water subsided animal corpses would be found, their eyes nibbled by fish. The Drowning Forest—it was well named! She fingered the Beast-machine at her waist. Had the time come to use it?

A lightning flash seared her vision and the accompanying clap of thunder brought her to her knees in the water, hands clasping her ears. There was an explosion of fire directly in her path and a flaming tree fell sideways with a groan like a dying man, then disappeared into the ground. She felt the heat of its passing.

As her vision cleared she could see a landscape dimly lit by the sulphurous sky. The fallen tree was a blazing arc, dwindling as it wheeled downward into a huge chasm at her feet. Far away a dark line of trees was outlined against the livid clouds. The rift! She cowered at its edge, clutching little Zwon. Fearing that she might faint, Dara turned away and sat down in the water that flowed all around her.

After a while she realized that the rain had stopped and she felt a warmth on her back. She turned once more to face the rift.

The sky had cleared suddenly as if a maidservant had opened the curtains to reveal the day. The sun blazed red-gold. Dara rubbed her ears but was still aware of a constant roaring sound. She peered into the gulf and saw a mighty waterfall that tumbled from her side of the rift, only to be lost in a sparkling rainbow far below. Mist rose in plumes from the trees on the far side to join the wispy clouds that brushed their summits. And perched there she perceived a hut built like a bees' nest in the treetops. The sun was setting behind it so that it glowed in a halo of light. She turned to look backward and saw the crescent of a moon rising slowly above the trees to the east.

She kissed the baby now asleep at her breast and whispered to him, "Surely, little Zwon, that is the house of your father, for is it not east of the sun and west of the moon?"

But she saw no bridge across the chasm.

She fumbled at her waist and drew out the device that had been part of the payment for her mutilation, the device used by the woodsmen of Arden to escape upward into the treetops should the flood rise dangerously. Would it reach so far? Dara checked the straps that held Zwon to her chest.

She remembered the Governor's sneering face as he showed her

they were catapulted upward with the speed of an arrow. The wind stung her face. For a moment the rift gaped below her—rocks and a foaming river. Then she was flung against the branch. Her vision contracted to a dark tunnel.

A woman's voice spoke through the fog. "What should we do with her, neighbor? She looks like an alien. Do they eat as we do?"

"They are no different from us. Keep her warm. Give her food—and the infant too. Here, let me have it," a man's voice said.

A baby cried. Dara opened her eyes. An arm propped her up and a cup was held to her lips. She looked into the eyes of an old woman, the only truly old person she had seen in these strange lands. Dara drank greedily, then sat up abruptly.

"Where is my baby?"

A man came toward her, Zwon in his arms. He was a dark-faced man with graying hair. Dara held out her arms and the baby chuckled.

"Zwon, my beloved child," she cried out in relief, forgetting her resolve never to speak in her native tongue.

"But that is my name," said the man. She saw his pupils dilate; he looked as if he had been struck by a thunderbolt. "I am Swan. And you look like Dara, that was once my wife."

"No indeed," she said as if dreaming, "Swan is a young man. See, his son that you hold in your arms, is not yet a year old." The baby laughed and lunged toward her.

"It was 15 years ago," he murmured. "The suits that we wore to protect your world from contamination ... they were supposed to be almost indestructible. I had to push you out into the air, Dara, the fire was raging so. I had no money to buy another. While you traveled here with the speed of lightning, time slowed for you. But I came by degrees, and labored on many worlds before I arrived here."

Bewildered, Dara, looking into her child's slate-blue eyes, saw an identical pair gazing at her from the man's lined face. Then she saw the chain about his neck and the bird device. Slowly she drew out the emblem that she had carried for so long.

**I**n a distant place and in a lost time an old man lay dying. His two remaining daughters waited at his bedside. Their husbands eyed each other, calculating how his kingdom should be divided after his death. The King blessed his daughters and said farewell, then turned away. "Dara," he murmured.

And on the world called Arden, the Princess and her lover fled from the place where her enemies might find her and dwelled with their child in another forest, in peace and happiness, for she was to her husband a gem of great price, the jewel of her father's kingdom. ♣

# the Wizard

# Omar



By Karen Haber

He makes it look so easy. But then, wizards often do that when they're creating magic, and Omar Rayyan creates a special sort of magic with watercolor in which giant butterflies alight upon the heads of viziers and entrepreneurial mice trade berries for buttons.

His watercolors sparkle with light and color, with remarkable details and textures that reveal a mastery of this temperamental medium. A Spectrum Award recipient and Chesley Award nominee, Rayyan is known for his illustration work for children's and young adult books.

Like most good wizards, Rayyan can multitask with the best of them. During a Worldcon panel on art materials and techniques, he never stopped painting even as he patiently answered questions. At the end of the panel he held up his pad to reveal a nifty little green and yellow monster with a gaping mouth. (It should be noted that no one asked him about his inspiration. Wizards don't like to be asked.)

And, again, like most good wizards, Rayyan possesses an intriguing personality: by turns revealing and concealing, humorous and pensive, playful and serious.

Folklore artist Omar Rayyan  
makes narrative moments come  
alive with his mysterious and  
whimsical illustrations.



RAY

YAN





## "The looser you hold the reins the

**O**f necessity his is a narrative art. As an illustrator he must literally make narrative moments come alive for the reader. But even in personal works like *The Berry Market*, which won a Silver Award from Spectrum 7, Rayyan hooks the viewer with all sorts of details, clues, and textures that invite further looking and speculation: Is that mouse asking too many buttons for his berries? Is his customer's fan a butterfly wing or is it an elaborate scabbard tucked in his belt? Why is that fairy keeping guard above the berry bush? And whose

elaborate, lacily detailed citadel can be glimpsed in the distance?

Despite the obvious fantastic elements in his work he doesn't consider himself a fantasy artist but, rather, a folklore artist, with a touch of surrealist and symbolist thrown in.

"I enjoy a surrealist's perspective. I actually prefer it to the title 'fantasy' artist. There's something about 'magic realism' and 'surrealism' that goes for a substantive look at things. I like the terms, the approach.

"I don't like doing contemporary illustration so I end up doing a lot of folklore. I push

for—and get—a lot of animal stories where you can have anthropomorphic characters, which is a lot of fun. For example, chickens riding bicycles—I think that was a Yugoslavian fairy tale—and the most recent one I did involved a little bear who accidentally ate his father's pie and had to bake another one without having all the right ingredients. So you get bears messing around in the kitchen.

"One of my loves is wildlife and wildlife painting, although I don't like the straight-laced scientific end of it, which gets a little boring. I'd rather put a little life to it and



*PREVIOUS SPREAD: Left: In Pear Meditations I Rayyan expresses both mystery and whimsy. The intricate pattern of the tiles adds texture and Eastern ambience. Right: Bufo the frog is painted in accurate detail, but his expression and body language are purely human.*

*LEFT: Rayyan's sense of humor is on view in Leda and Her Merganser Hood. The viewer is left to answer the question, "Why a duck?"*

*CENTER: The trees are full of tiny creatures and plant life in The Troll King.*

*ABOVE: In Frog Courtesan of Venice, the background is completely Italian, while the courtesan wears a Japanese headdress, robe, and sandals.*

easier it is to guide the horse."



explore animal personalities and animal anatomy and textures and furs. It's much more enjoyable."

Rayyan's ability to imbue animals with anthropomorphic sensibility without straying from physiological accuracy into mawkish cuteness is one of his notable artistic strengths. His whimsical sense of humor may lead him to place a Merganser on the head of a Renaissance beauty, but that duck will be anatomically correct, you betcha. The artist isn't interested in giving easy answers. He leaves you to figure out "why a duck?" Per-

haps it's a sign of respect for the viewer. He leaves you the invitation: Come join him in his magical dance of the imagination.

"There's a whole new movement in contemporary art back to figurative painting that's using figures as allegories for various emotions and whatnot," Rayyan says. "And now things that look like fantasy are actually great places to talk about heavy, serious, real stuff in a safe mythological setting. A symbolic language."

Rayyan's artistic choreography can take him—and us—into some intriguing and

beautiful places. In *Pear Meditations I* we see a small bearded, robed figure sitting cross-legged in a tiled enclosure, so engaged by his meditation upon a lopsided pear that he seems oblivious to the large—pterodactyl-size—butterfly that has landed on his turban. There's whimsy here and mystery, and the artist's fearless use of white space to balance the color below. Rayyan's love of intricate pattern is also on display, a legacy of his early work in pen and ink, and, perhaps, his birthright. He was born in Amman, Jordan, and has a passion for Eastern art.



Underlying all of my work are Persian miniatures and Japanese ukiyo-e prints. I'm drawn to the strong use of two-dimensional design within those schools, to a kind of aesthetic other than Western. The East has such a different way of looking at composition and design as style, putting all the other stuff in as flourishes on top.

"To me the Eastern integration of illustration with text is one of the most successful: Their approach was one in which illustration has free range and the text goes in a little box, so that the page is alive with drawing and the text is contained. This is completely opposite to the West. And, it must be said, Arabic script is a wonderful dancing animal."

Why watercolor?

"I started out in pen-and-ink *with* watercolor, then dropped the pen-and-ink. There are so many joys in using the medium, some of them physical joys. It's nonsmelly, non-messy. The looser you hold the reins the easier it is to guide the horse. You're riding these little drops of water with pigment in them, and the more you respect where the pigment wants to go, if you're flexible enough in what you're actually trying to do, you end up getting what you want in the end. It's a wonderful Zen experience.

"Essentially I draw with a brush. And I actually do a lot of layering or "glazing." I mix my water with a little bit of gum arabic which, I suppose, technically turns the water into more of a medium which allows for a little bit more control. You develop a certain instinct for how much water is in your brush, and what that amount of water is going to do to your underlayers. You have very distinct lim-

*"Essentially I draw with a brush."*





*OPPOSITE TOP: There are new things to discover on each viewing of *The Berry Market*, a personal work that won a Silver Award from Spectrum 7.*

*OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Rayyan's love of wildlife and touches of the fantastic grace Mint Julep.*

*LEFT: You can feel the snail pulling at his leash in the charming Walkies. The disproportionate sizes of the three figures make the painting joyful without being too cute.*

*BELOW: Rayyan's sense of the surreal took control in *Being Gardner Dozois*.*

## "I enjoy a surrealist's perspective."

its but the play is there if you know where to look for it."

Ask him about influences on his work and he'll laugh. "My favorite artist depends on what year you talk to me. I like Dulac and Rackham, of course. I don't really have a favorite watercolorist. The closest I come is, maybe, Sargent but I prefer his oils to his watercolors. Currently I'm looking at a lot of Sargent, Velasquez, and the Northern Renaissance painters. The Flemish painters. Ten years ago I had no interest in them. And now they're becoming a lot more important to me. Their sense of style and their sense of light and their use of realism has a particular flavor."

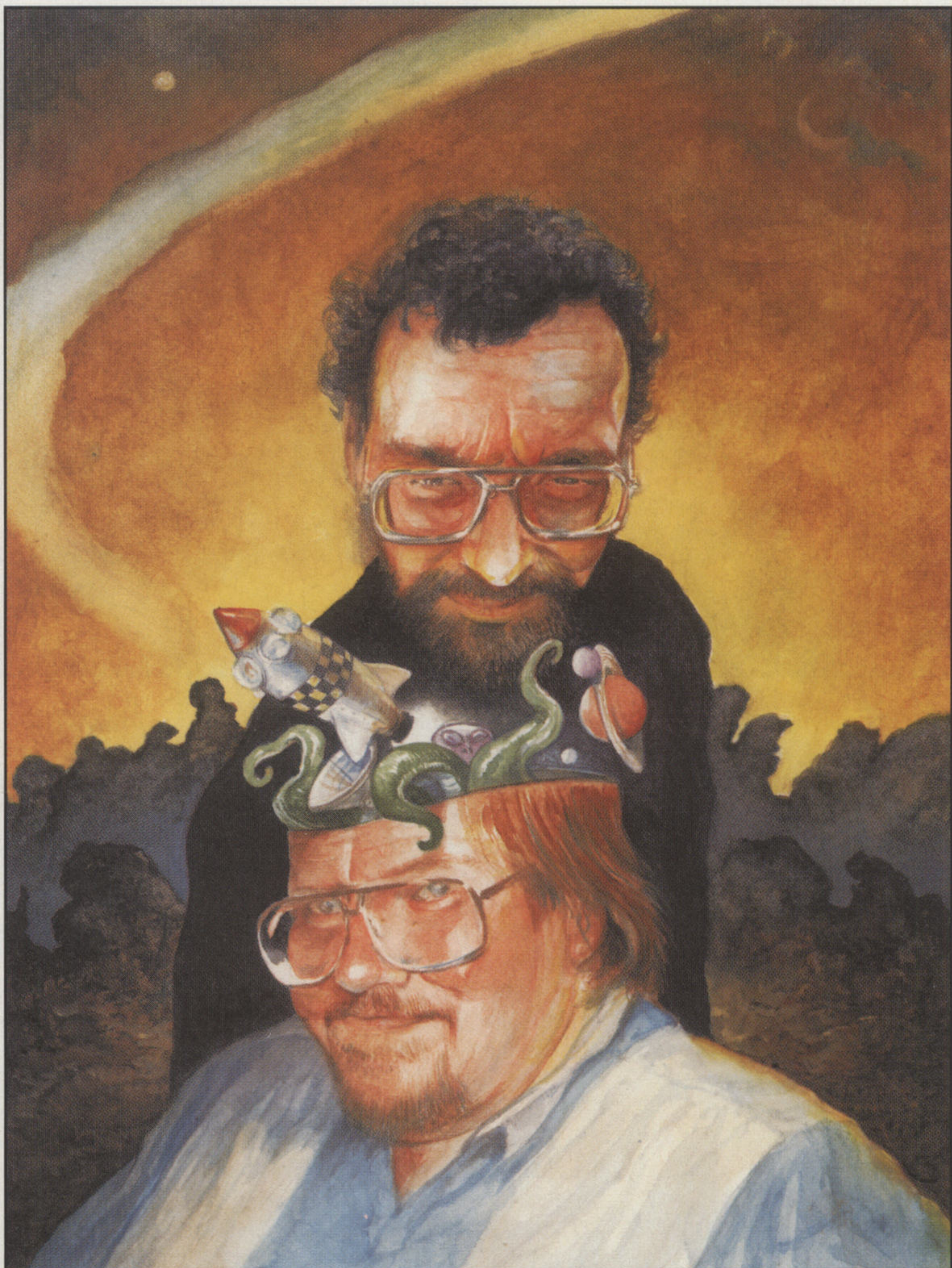
A very important influence on his work is his wife and fellow artist, Sheila Rayyan. The two met as students at the Rhode Island School of Design, and each cites the other as their most important critic or editor.

"You can lose objectivity very quickly, staring at the damn thing for so long, and we both know each others' strengths," he says. "Sheila knows what I'm capable of doing and generally what I'm actually trying to do and so she's the best judge, even better than me, as to whether the piece is there or not. I rarely have to ditch the whole piece: If there's a problem I just look for other solutions. It doesn't happen that often."

The Rayyans have done mural work together and have discussed potential future collaborations. "We work very differently stylistically and technically, so to collaborate directly would require just the right project."

The next step for Omar seems obvious although it may be a few years down the road: writing and illustrating his own stories. "If I'm going to really put my identity out

*Continued on page 88*



## Dungeon Siege offers cool new solutions to wealth management.

**D***ungeon Siege*, the new dungeon crawl-style role-playing game from Microsoft will simply spoil players for other computer games because it has no levels. This is not to say that there aren't distinct areas where the action of the game takes place; there are. Towns, dungeons, castles, forests, and mountains—all the familiar settings for sword and sorcery adventure—are represented, but none of them is divided from any other by a "loading level" screen. The characters' surroundings load continuously as the game plays, so there is never a delay between leaving the town for the forest or for descending from the top level of the dungeon to the next level. It is simply the coolest feature to be added to a videogame since the quick-load key.

The second coolest feature of *DS* is that the characters can buy donkeys to haul all the treasure they collect. This is such a good solution to such a perennial problem that it is amazing no game has previously implemented it. In

modern computer RPGs, particularly at the lower difficulty levels, characters accumulate mountains of treasure and weapons and magic items as they hack and slash their way through armies of monsters, but there are very few places where these portables can be converted into cash. Cash is handy because most games, and *DS* in particular, let char-



Little Keep on the *Borderlands* takes fantasy roleplaying back to the dungeon.

acters carry an unlimited amount of it. Not only does *DS* let players add a donkey to the party to haul things, but one of the first spells that magic users find in the game is a transform spell that changes loot into gold. Even if the spell doesn't create as much gold as the characters would get at a store, most of the things it is used for would otherwise be left behind and never make it to a store. A little gold is better than none.

The third best feature of *DS* is the artificial intelligence that runs the characters for the player, particularly the donkey. *DS* is a real-time game with no way to set automatic pauses in the action. It is possible to micromanage the characters by frequent use of the pause key, but there is little need. Once their weapons and spells have been selected and they are pointed at the enemy, the characters do a fine job of fighting for themselves. They do an even better job if players download one of the user-created mod packs that increase the characters' autonomy so that they will drink potions as they need to and flee when they're being overwhelmed.

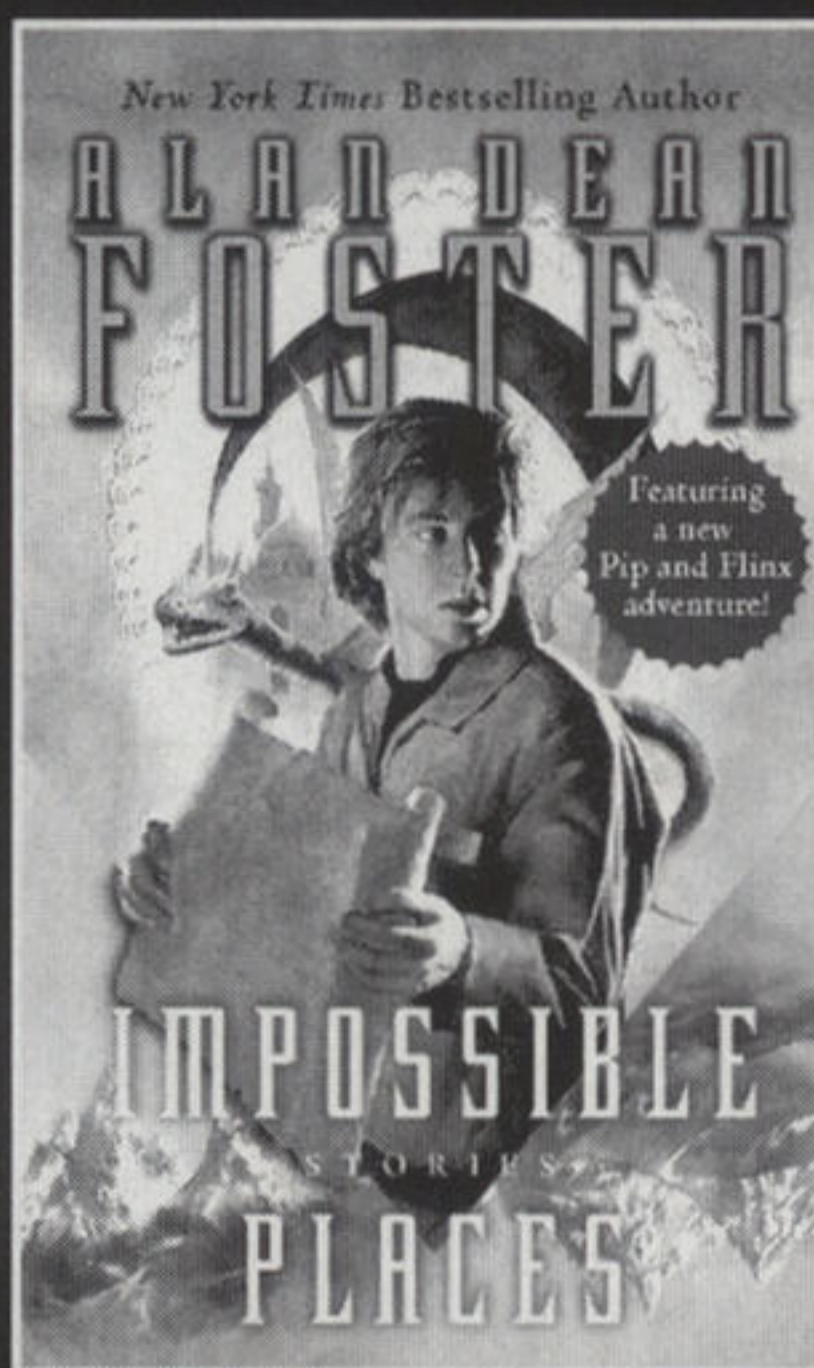
There are only two criticisms to make of *DS*. One is that despite the fact that players can control up to eight characters in a party,





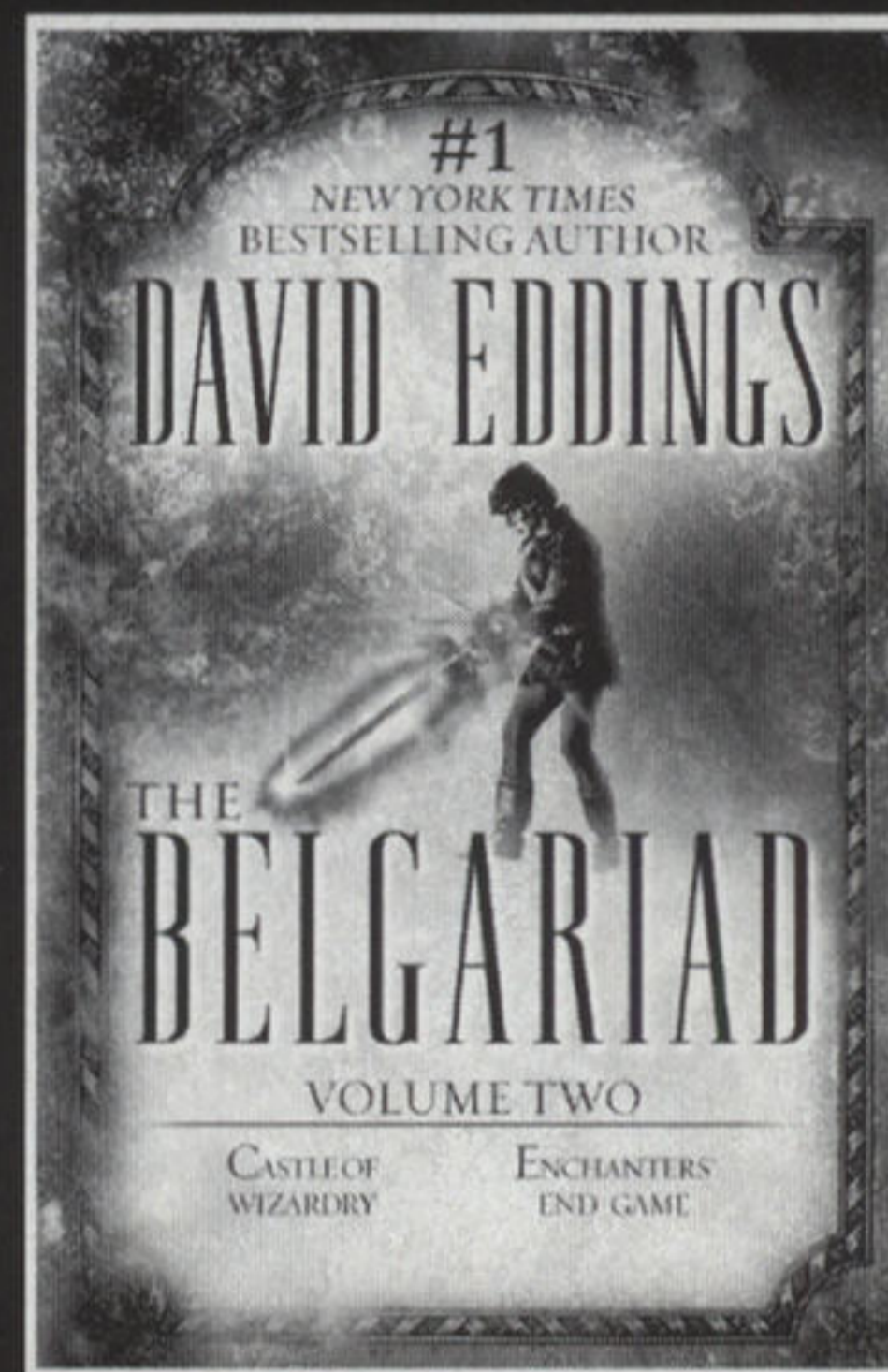
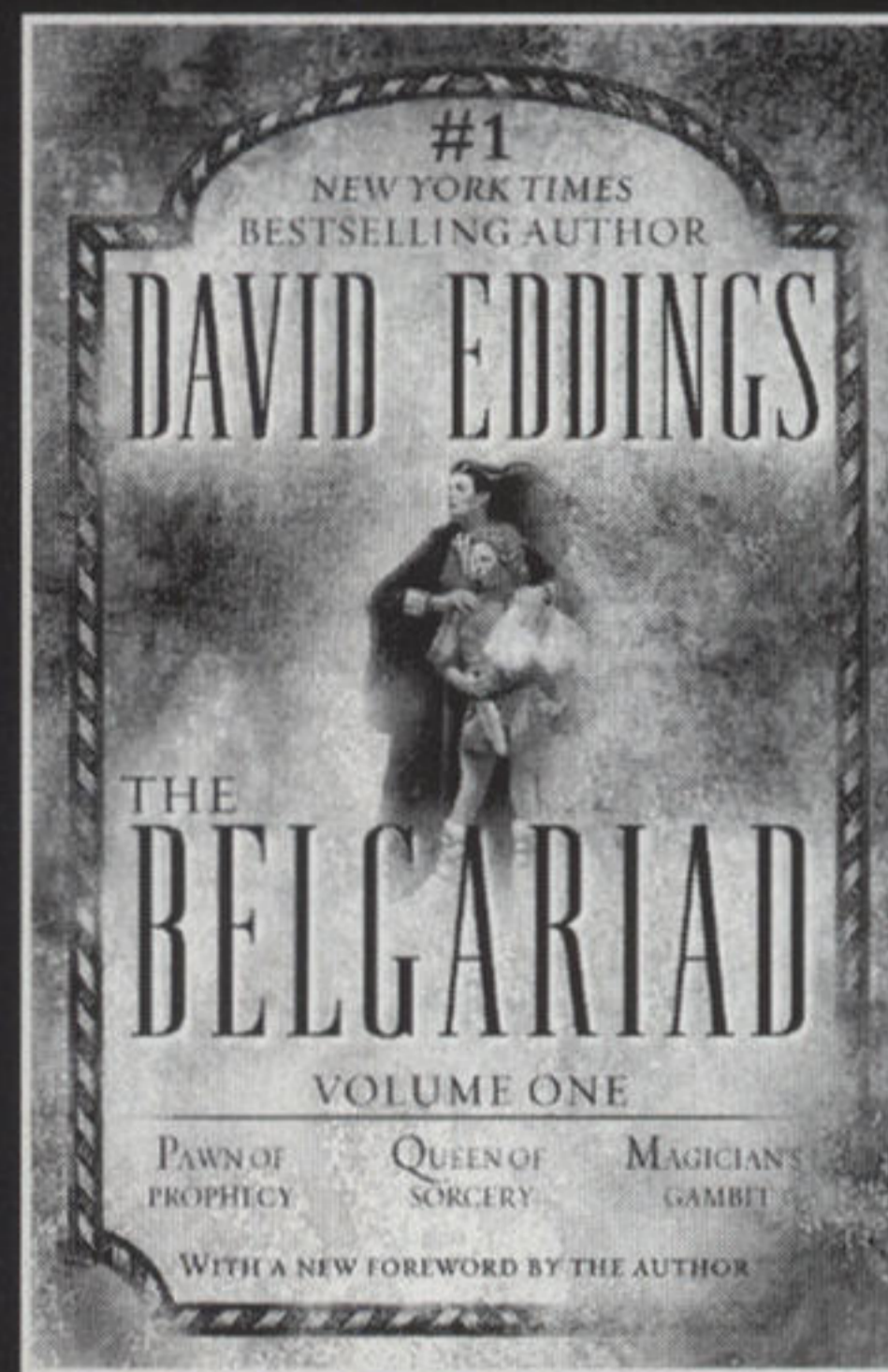


Where the exceptional rules.



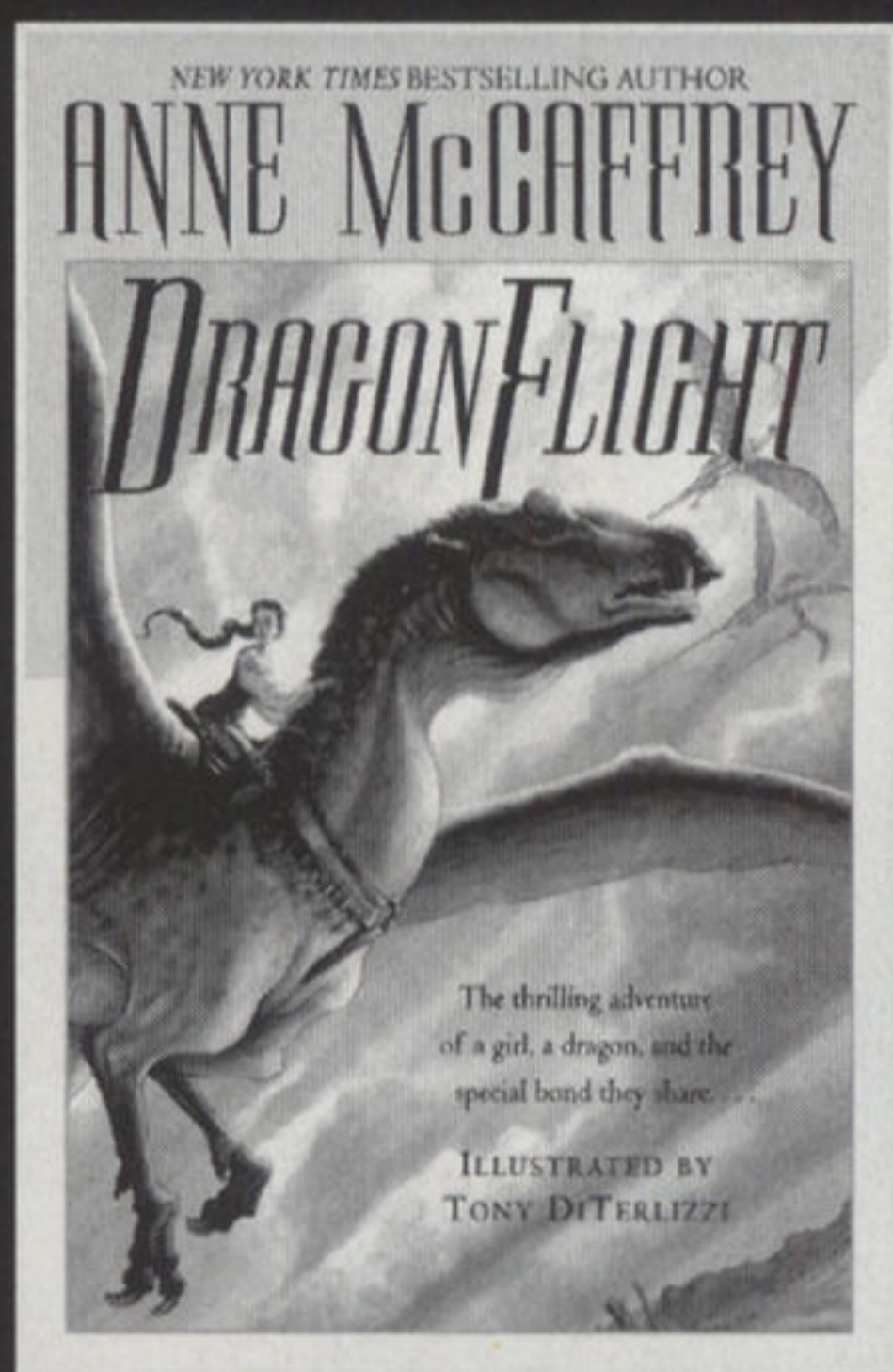
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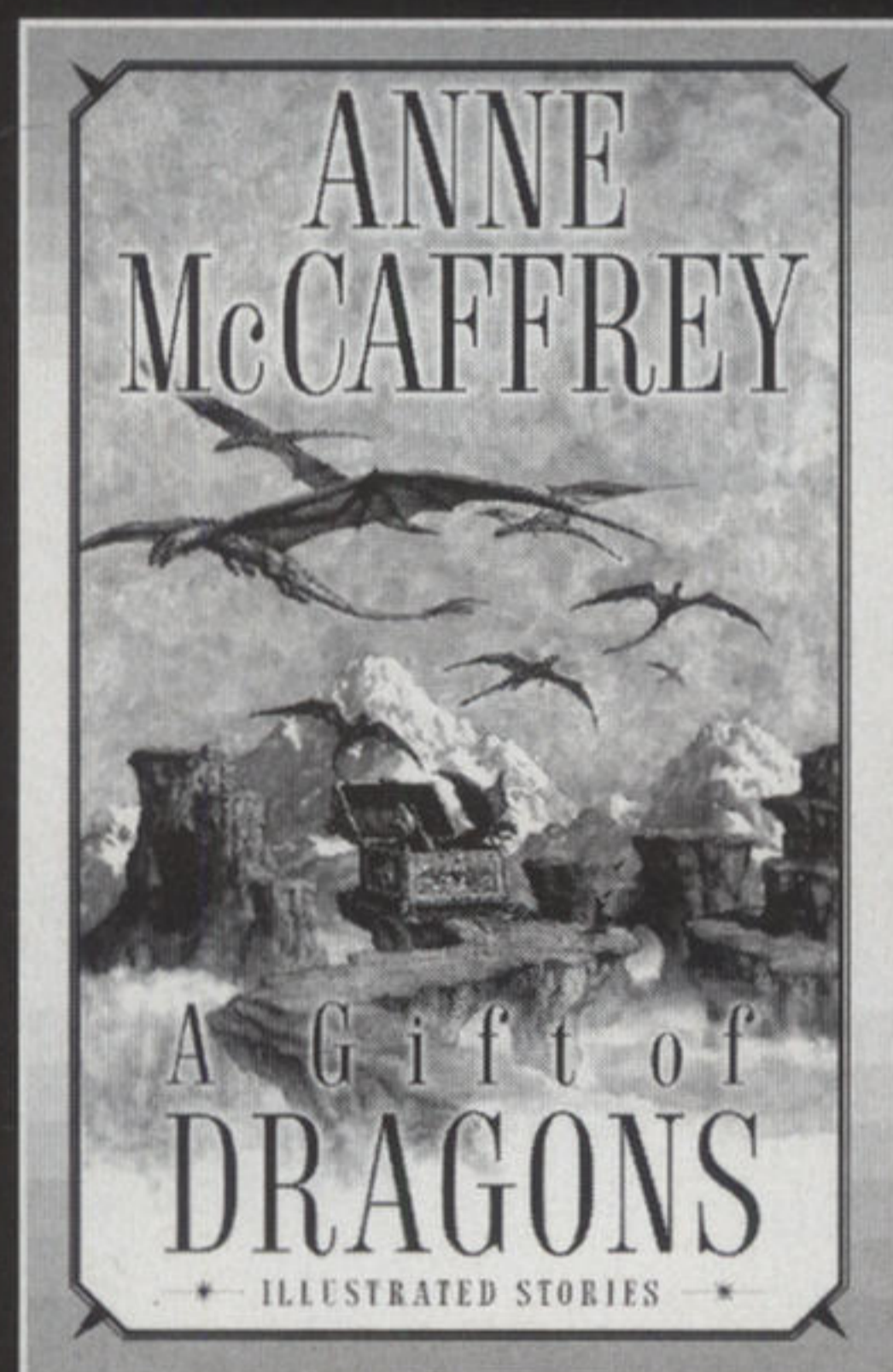
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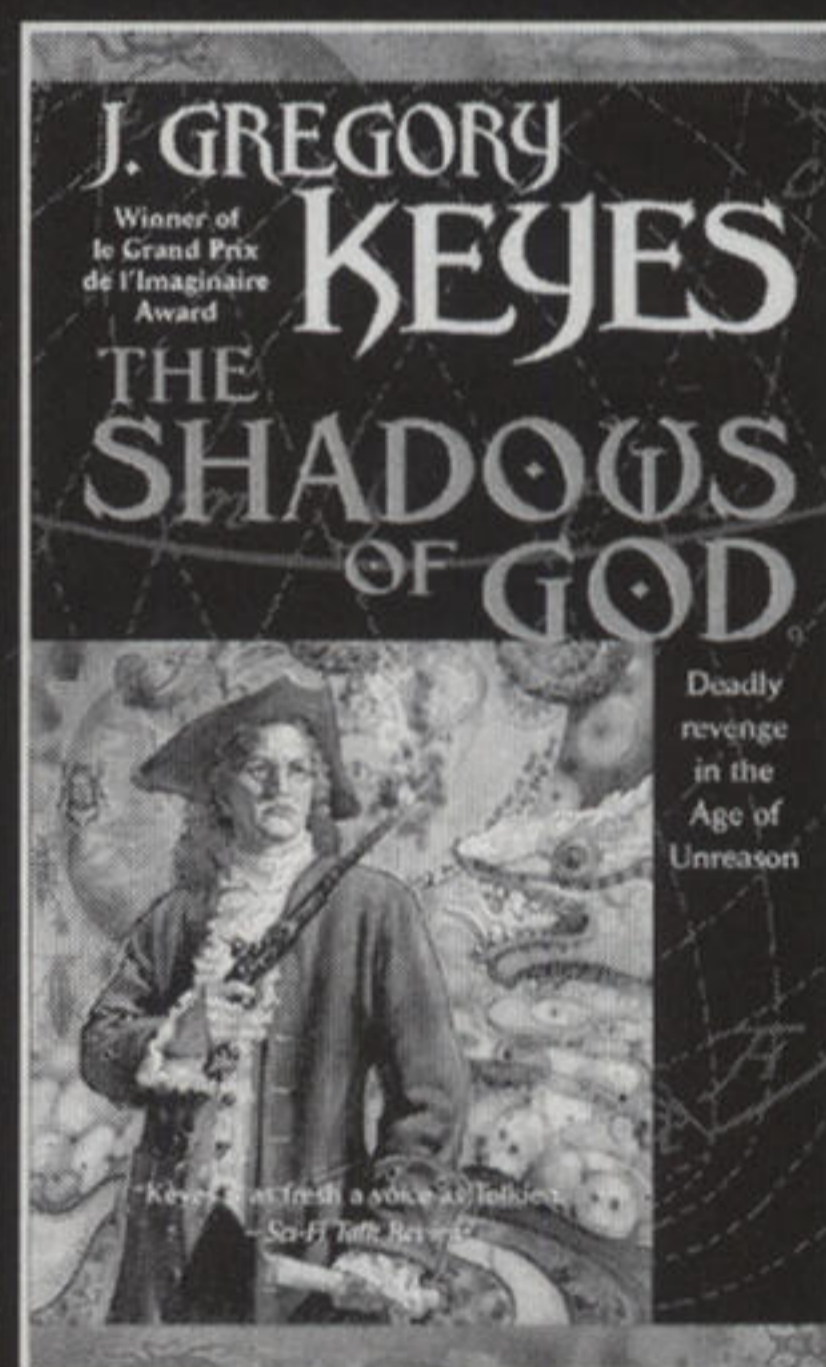
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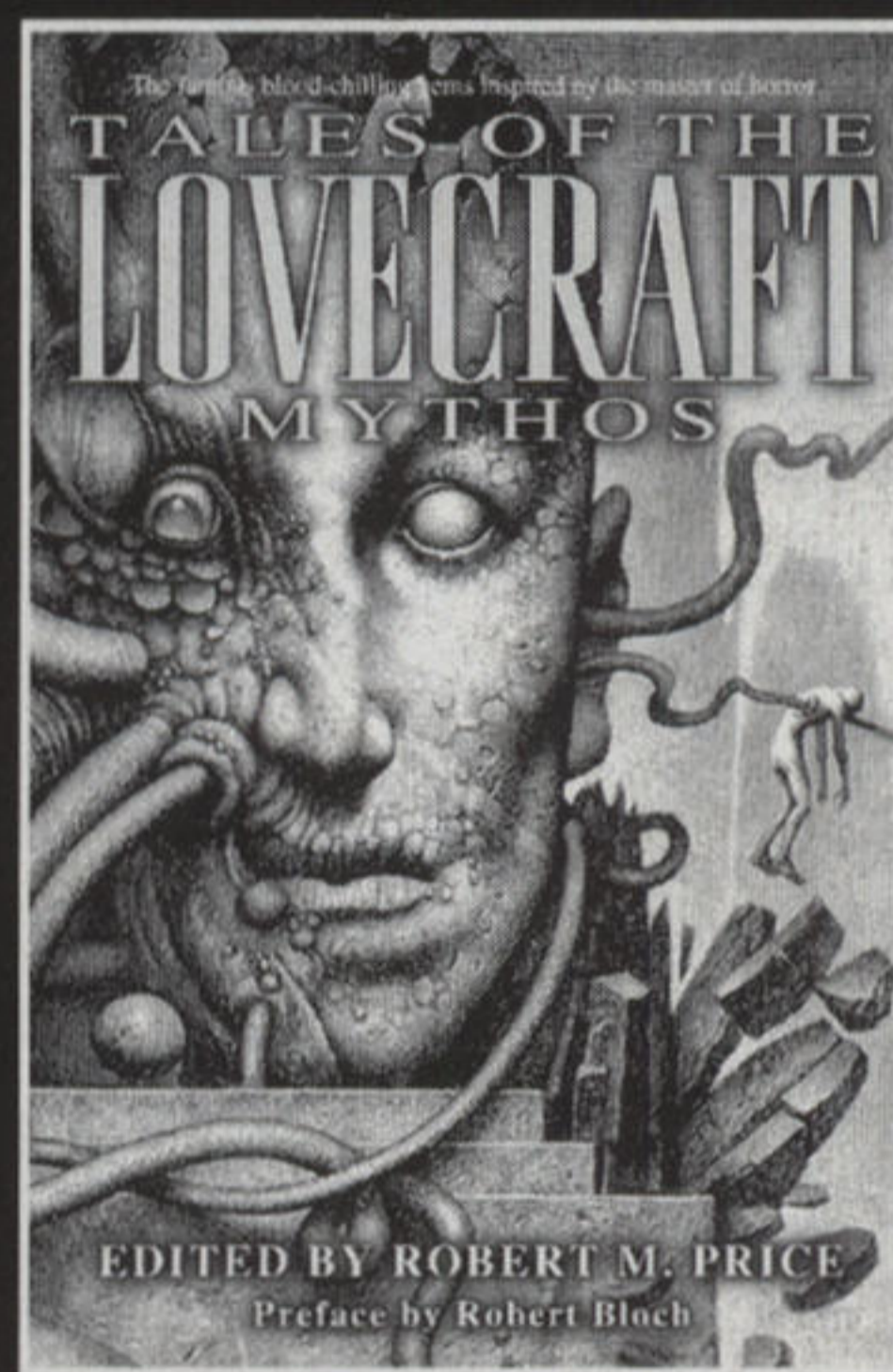
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private yacht all the way to a First Age heavy warship. With the exception of the First Age ships, the examples are of generic ships with it being left to the Game Master to customize them as needed.

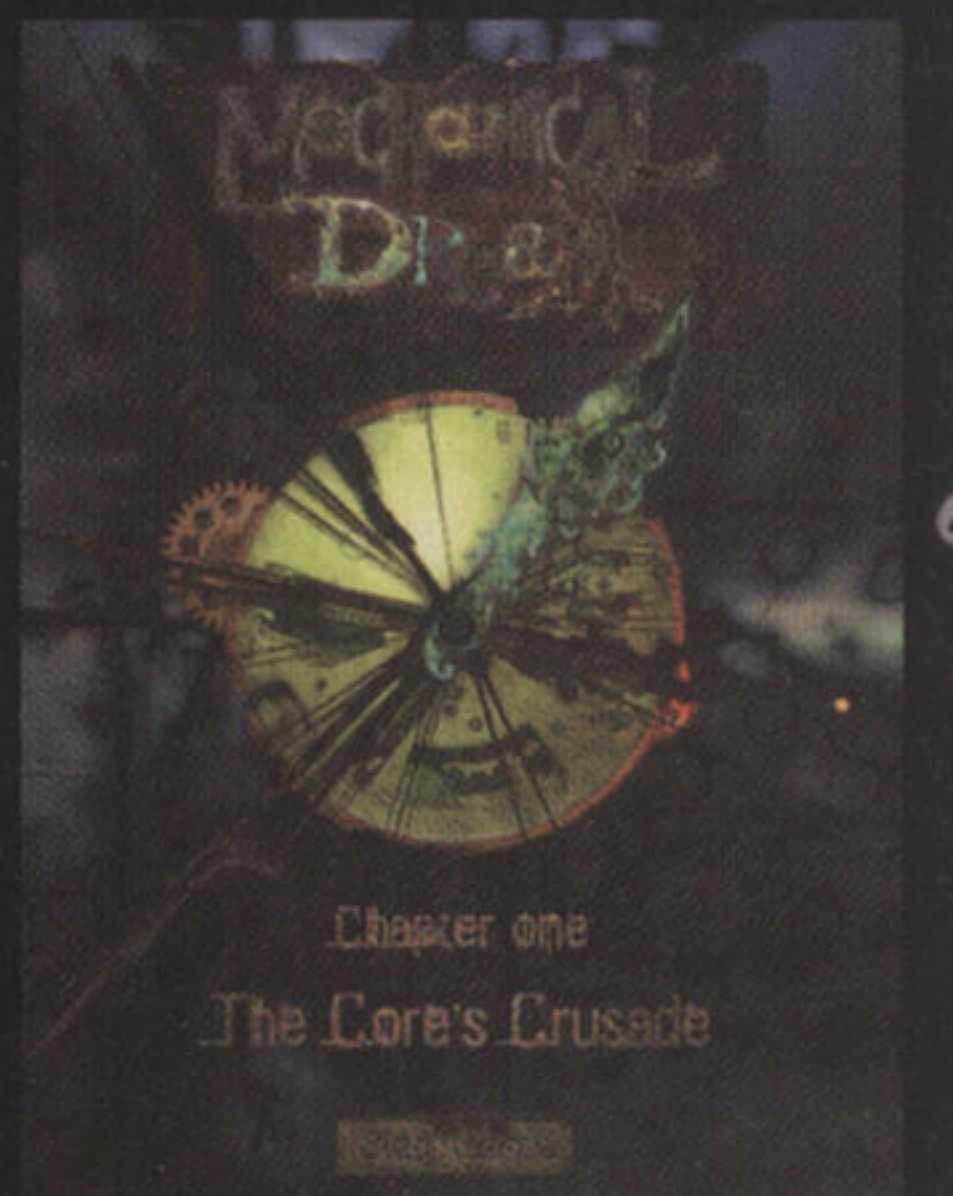
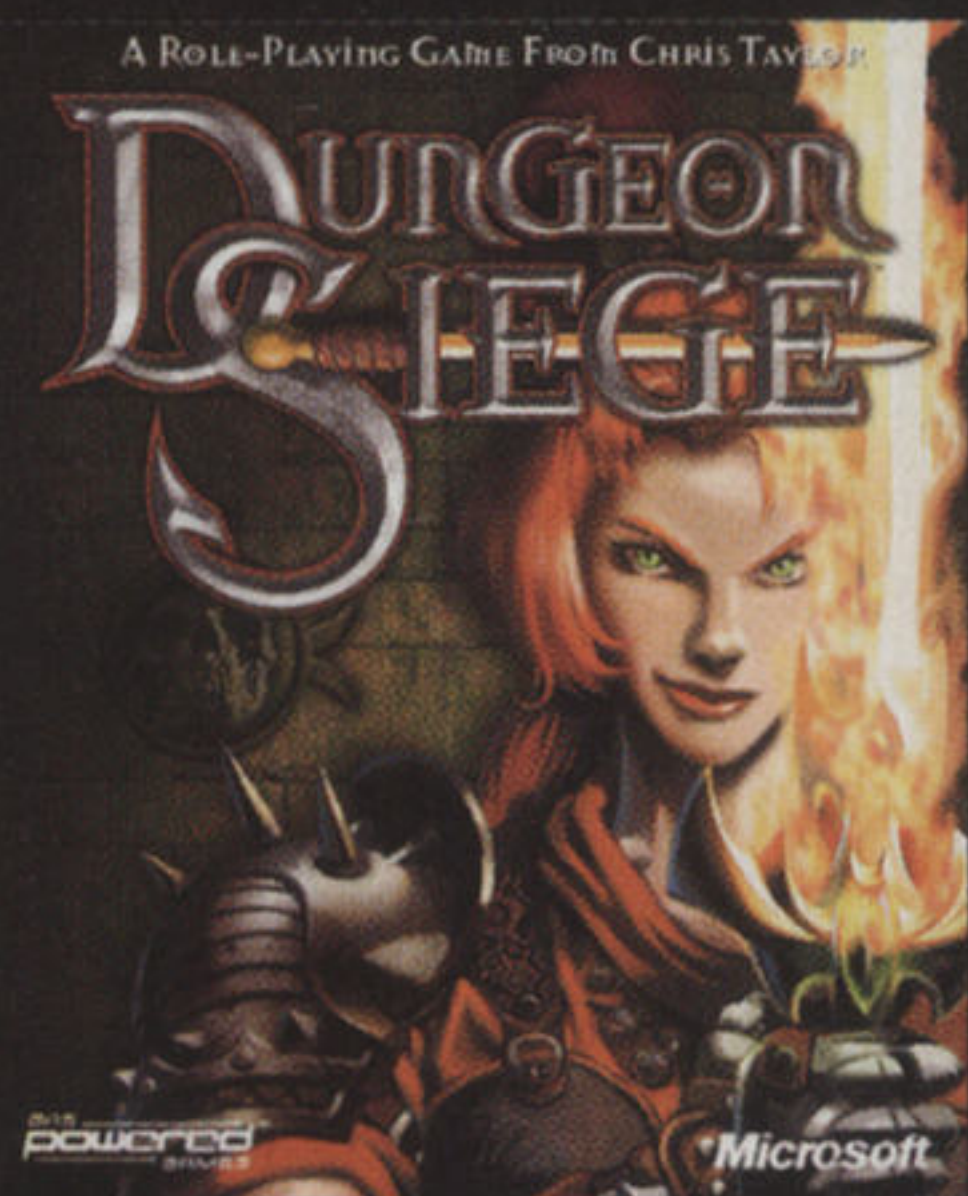
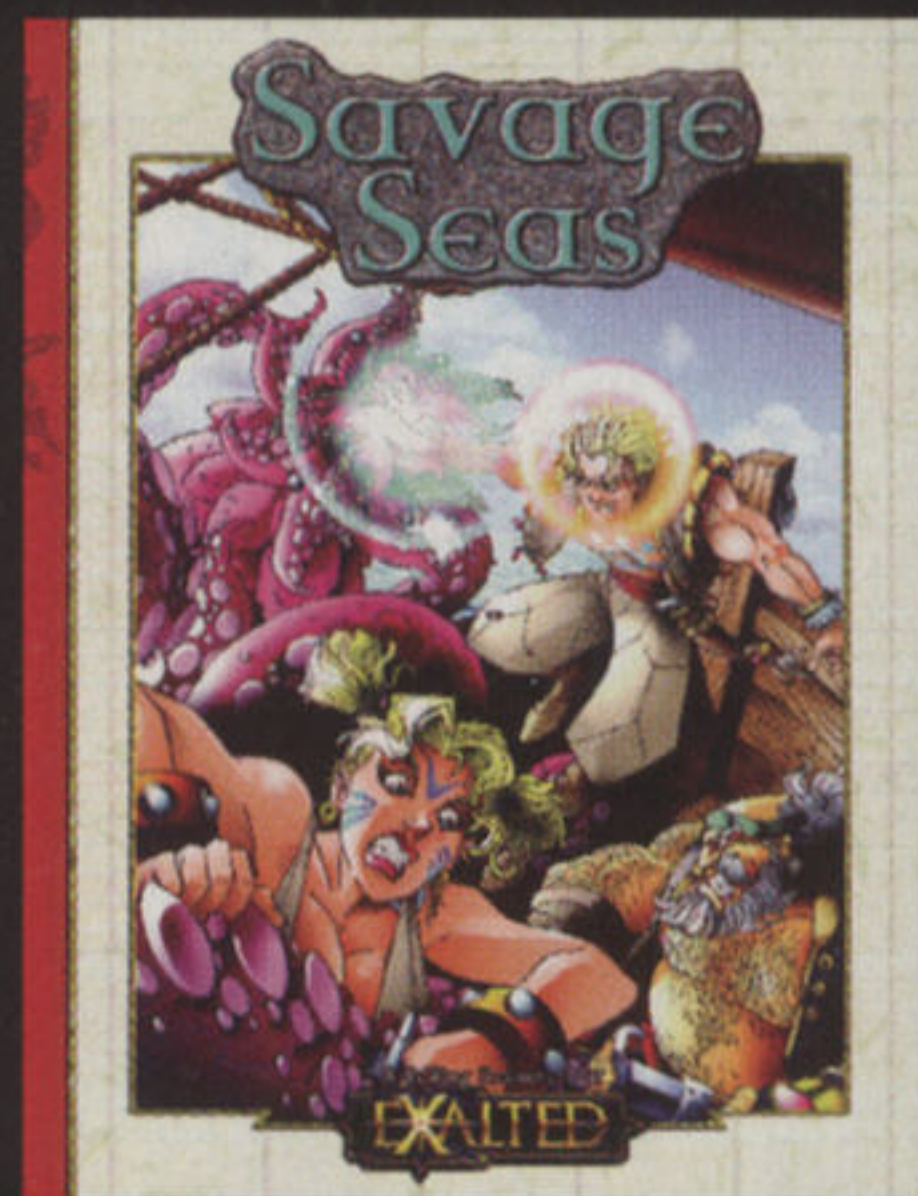
Customize as needed is the pattern of the book, even in the chapter on the clans and pirates and sailors who dominate the ocean. A few paragraphs about each are given and the GM is left to outfit and provide statistics for any characters from those groups that may be introduced to a campaign. This not an unreasonable task to give a GM, but for a world as large and as foreign as the *Exalted* one, the more specifics GMs are given, the easier it is for them to improvise from the generalities.

The best part of the book is the list of artifacts in the back. As in the descriptions of the First Age ships, write-ups of these dangerous toys give the readers a sense of how different the *Exalted* world is from ours, and how the magic inherent in it makes day-to-day life there a different thing from the modern day.

Making GMs and players feel comfortable playing in an alien world is also the challenge set by *Mechanical Dream*, a new paper-and-dice RPG from Steam Logic. It is a much greater challenge for *MD*, though. The world of *Exalted* might as well be modern-day Cleveland compared to Kainas, the place where *MD* is set.

Kainas is round, but it is flat. Its sun is blue and square, and swings through the sky as if at the end of a pendulum. Kainas is enclosed by a black wall that stands 40 miles high, and everyone in the world depends on a fruit, Orpee, mined from underground to live. There are 10 races open to player characters, and none of them is human. The technology seems to be about Renaissance level, but

Orpee provides Eflow, which acts as mana to power all sorts of



those characters have no actual personality once they are under the player's control. They don't talk or interact. They all fight and walk and run in the same manner, regardless of their race or profession. This comes as a surprise since nearly all the characters, when first encountered, have a back story and a little animated movie to give players a feel for who they are and what they can do. Sadly, once they join the party, the fact that they drink or that they are overconfident or that they have a Scottish accent, etc., never comes up again.

The other knock is the multiplayer game. While up to eight players can play *DS* cooperatively, they can't save the progress they've made in the game. They can save the loot they've collected and the experience and skills that they've earned, but all the dungeons and forests are just as full of monsters the next time they log on as they were the first time. It is still possible to have fun in the multiplayer game, but not as much as could be had if the world were persistent.

Turning to paper-and-dice role-playing games, the latest supplement to White Wolf's *Exalted* campaign is *Savage Seas*, which bills itself as a setting source book for the game. The setting it covers is ocean and river travel.

It is divided into five chapters: an introduction; a chapter about the lives of sailors and the economics of sailing; a chapter on the actual ships themselves; a chapter on the trade and traders who ply the sea; and, finally, a chapter on the creatures, gods, charms, and artifacts associated with the sea in the *Exalted* world.

Given how the politics of the *Exalted* world are dominated by a city's position relative to the sea, and given the preponderance of trade that occurs on it, *SS* is a supplement that *Exalted* Game Masters can use. Unfortunately, despite the breadth of its subject, the book is only 128 pages. This gives it space to talk broadly about the generalities of the sea, but not to flesh out the specifics. For instance, there are 12 ship types that are presented with full statistics, one example of each class from a small



Illustration by Yann Leroux



magical effect. This is to say nothing of the night which is ruled by the Dream, or of The Core who rules the day, or of the huge mechanical cities in which everyone has to dwell or be devoured by the monsters that live between them.

Not the usual fantasy background.

The *MD* rule book is 368 hardbound pages, 32 of them on glossy paper and in full color. It is printed with the setting chapters upside-down behind the rules chapters (or visa versa, depending on which you read first) so both covers are "front" ones. It is full of good art, which it needs because everything in it about this world is brand new to readers. Players are going to need all the help they can get to put themselves into this game.

None of the game mechanics in *MD* will be opaque to any player who has role-played before. That said, this is not a game for the faint of heart. It is one thing for a player to put him- or herself in the role of an elf in a sylvan wonderland questing for treasure. It is another to try to play one of the solitary Zin, a long-lived race that apparently has no mouth and that can (in times of stress) transform into a 50-foot, taloned monster, as it quests about a crowded mechanical city while trying to perfect its inner being. It is not that one character is better or worse; it is simply that playing a Zin is harder. And for all the background information in the rule book, there are no chapters on how to introduce this world to the players, or how to run adventures in it once the introduction is made.

A much easier thing to run, at least in terms of familiarity, is *Little Keep on the Borderlands*, an "Introductory Module for Characters Level 1-4" for Kenzer and Company's satirical *HackMaster* RPG. Easier because *HackMaster* is set in the same pseudo-Tolkien Middle Ages as *Dungeons & Dragons*. All the *HackMaster* products go so far in parodying the *D&D* books on which they are based that they fall back into being actual playable games. And so it is with *LKotB*, which at 144 pages of very small type provides a true mini-campaign with enough monsters for six to eight characters to rise from first to fourth level during the course of it.

The module is produced with the same detail and ease-of-use features as Kenzer's serious modules. It contains lots of pictures to help set the stage, and not all of them are of player characters being hacked to pieces. It

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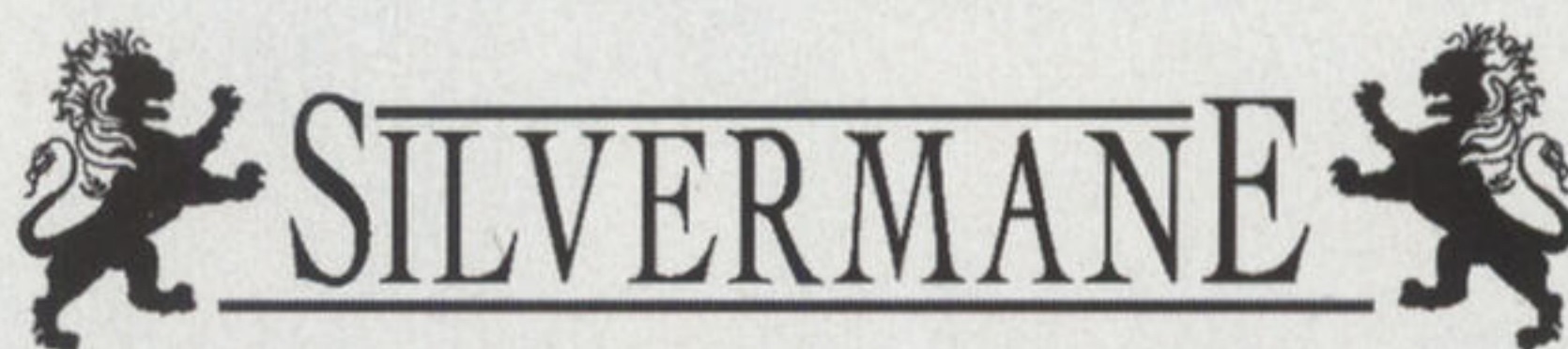
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contains appendices full of statistics and rules for the nonplayer characters and monsters and treasure—seven such appendices in fact, plus maps and an index. The satire goes beyond the numerous monsters and deadly traps to include admonitions to the Game Master not to go soft and fudge things in the players' favor. "Remain fair and impartial," even if it means the party dies.

Of a more serious nature is *Mightier than the Sword*, a source book containing two adventures for AEG's *7th Sea* RPG. It contains no appendices, few pictures, and only one map. On a words-per-page basis, it isn't nearly the value that *LKotB* is, and while the second adventure is intended to be light-hearted, the book as a whole isn't nearly as funny as *LKotB* is. *MttS* is, however, more playable and just as suited to its rules set.

In the first adventure, the characters find themselves at a masquerade ball held in honor of a musical prodigy. When she disappears, it is up to the characters to unlock the mystery and rescue her from a fate that threatens the entire city. The second adventure is a treasure hunt. The heroes are one of several groups racing to find the head of a statue made of solid gold. The catch is that the head is over nine feet tall. Intended to be a romp in the spirit of the great Hollywood treasure-chase movies, the second scenario is scalable to be either the work of an evening or of several extended sessions.

A good mixture of things for players to do and specific information for adding to an

existing campaign is contained in *Seven Cities*, a supplement for the D20 System from Atlas Games' *Penumbra* line. The supplement contains maps and write-ups of seven different cities sized from a thorp to a village to a large city. There are also general rules and guidelines for players creating and managing their own cities.



The arrangement of *SC* is like a Chinese box. The description of each of the smaller cities fits inside the description of the larger ones. Thus, the write-up of the hamlet uses some of the places and people from the thorp. The village write-up uses some of the people and places from both the thorp and the hamlet. And so on up the ladder so that the write-up of the large city uses people and places from all six of the previous cities. This arrangement allows the book to be detailed despite having only 144 pages, but it does mean more work for the Game Master who wants to use more than one of the cities from

the book. Characters have to be steered away from duplicate dwellings, or else the details of the double-dipped locations have to be changed. ♣



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# action figures

Continued from page 45

disguise and a secret identity and shit. So maybe he does have girls and, you know."

Frank finally speaks. "Yeah, maybe he's me. Maybe I'm his 'secret identity' and all I have to do is push you off this beam and down you go, and I have the choice of flying down and saving your sorry ass or letting you grease the sidewalk."

"Hey, relax, man. I'm just sayin' is all." Tony thinks about what it would be like to have a secret life. To be one thing to some people and something completely different to other people. That would be sweet, you bet. If you did it for the right reasons. Tony recalls the years when his daughter was just a baby, and the reasons why her mom wanted to divorce him.

For what feels like a long time they watch the city from their superior vantage point. Below them, for miles in all directions, a great city gets ready for the evening and the Independence Day weekend. From up here city noises blend and roar like sounds inside a giant seashell.

Suddenly Tony points due south. "Look!" Frank follows his point and sees the flying man heading this way, flying a path as straight as an I-beam and higher than a diddly 55 stories. "Up in the sky," Tony sing-songs. "It's a bird! It's a goddamn plane!" He laughs.

"He could have it all," Frank says. "What kind of a man is it who could have everything—he could take what he wants, be President of the United States; hell, he could be king of the whole fucking planet and no one could do a damn thing about it. What kind of a man lets that go to waste? He could have every *thing* and every *body* he ever *wanted*. And what does he do? Saves goddamn old ladies and makes asses out of the rest of us, makes us look weak and, and—" His voice trails off. He looks away from the sky, begins packing up his gear for his trip home.

Tony shrugs. "Like you say, he's a fuckin' alien, so who knows why? But, I dunno, maybe that's what it's all about, bein' a hero." He stops. Gauges his words with effort. "It's not what you *can* do, it's what you *don't* do, y'know, even when you can. Maybe that's what it really means. Y'know?"

Frank ignores him.

Tony smirks and says in a deep voice, "The waters run deep when you stir 'em."

Frank scowls. "The waters, asshole, are full of shit."

They both laugh as the flying figure passes directly over the apartment building a quarter-mile to the west.

**N**ICOLE HAS THE CAMERA AIMED AT HERSELF. She is on the bed and naked. All the lights are on so the camera can see everything, including the fading bruises around her right eye and the blacker bruises on her arms and thighs.

She speaks to the camera, addressing Frank by name. She rambles from thought to thought without a plan for what she's going to say. She talks about what first attracted her to him: his good looks and maturity. His revealing vulnerability in the bank, which made her want to comfort him. She's a giving person, everyone says so. His explosive animal energy during their sex that first evening, aggressive and forceful and so masculine as if he had something to prove. Three months after they began the affair, during the only rendezvous where they got really drunk together, he told her to never mention his "failure" in the bank. So she mentions it now. She wants it to hurt. Why not? It's not as if he's *happily* married, so this past Wednesday, when she brought up her need for a real commitment from him, he shouldn't have gotten so angry. He said cruel things to her, things meant only to hurt. Although she had long ago grown used to little tortures, she ended up in tears and agreed with him that it was all her fault. He called her a pity junkie. He accused her of manipulating him like she did other men. He was right. She always did that.

She tells him that she feels so sorry for his wife. What's her name? Patty, he had said. She tells him that Patty has the first tape they made three weeks ago. And a letter telling her everything. Nicole says she doesn't want to cause any more unnecessary pain, but sending the tape and the letter, that was necessary. Patty needs to know what kind of a man she's married to. Nicole hears her voice getting slurred and blurry.

Five years ago, living with a boyfriend in Michigan, on a day when something brought back the black, shattering depression for the first time in almost a year, she swallowed what was left in a bottle of sleeping pills. The boyfriend came home from work to find her semiconscious on the floor. He rushed her to the nearest hospital, where they pumped her stomach and made her fill out a lot of forms. She refused to see a counselor. Days later, talking about the incident had led to a quarrel: He said she obviously hadn't meant to kill herself or else she would have taken a larger dose. This enraged her and her tantrum was so loud the neighbors called the police. They broke up that week. Ever since, she has had to prove that she can follow through with anything she puts her mind to.

This, now, is no exception. Twenty minutes ago she popped the plastic lid off another bottle of pills. A half-empty glass of water is on the nightstand, leaving a ring on her father's expensive wood furniture. She pours the other half of the bottle's contents into the glass and wraps her fingers tight around it.

The phone on the nightstand rings. Slowly she turns her head to look at it. It's probably a wrong number or a telemarketer or someone from work wondering why she didn't go in today. Maybe she should answer it just so the last voice she hears won't be her own. Or not. She has to follow through, to show her

father and Frank and all the others that she doesn't need them anymore.

The answering machine is unplugged so the ringing goes on and on and on. She wishes it would just stop. Then, as if someone had read her thoughts, it does. She looks beyond the phone and out the window. The sky is darker now, but she can see a familiar flying shape high above the skyline. Flying a straight path from south to north, the perfect man is looking for victims more deserving of his attention. Just like at the bank, he's not looking for her at all. Within a minute he approaches this part of the city, a graceful missile. He passes directly over her building and is out of sight. So much for goddamn heroes. She raises her glass toward the ceiling. *Thanks for everything*. She laughs a little and is too tired to wipe her mouth though she'd really like to and the video camera catches it all and the goddamn phone rings again ...

**P**ATRICIA STROPAUGH HAS HER LUGGAGE PACKED. On the TV is a note she has written to Frank, along with the taped-together letter that arrived this morning. She can imagine how hard it must have been to write that letter. The videotape that came with it is in her purse, which is in her hand. Her note mentions the name and number of her lawyer.

In a magazine, maybe it was *Time*, she had read about an experiment involving two groups of mice. The mice were under scientific observation, both groups in identical conditions and trained to perform an identical task. The task was that somewhere in their cage there was a lever they must press or nudge or move in some way. The first group of mice got an electrical shock whenever they moved the lever. Every time. The second group got the same thing, only every once in a while, whether at regular or irregular intervals, they got a piece of cheese or a treat of some sort.

The first group, the one that got electrocuted every time, eventually stopped performing the task. That group learned to stay away. The second group always went back. They just kept going back. Until they died.

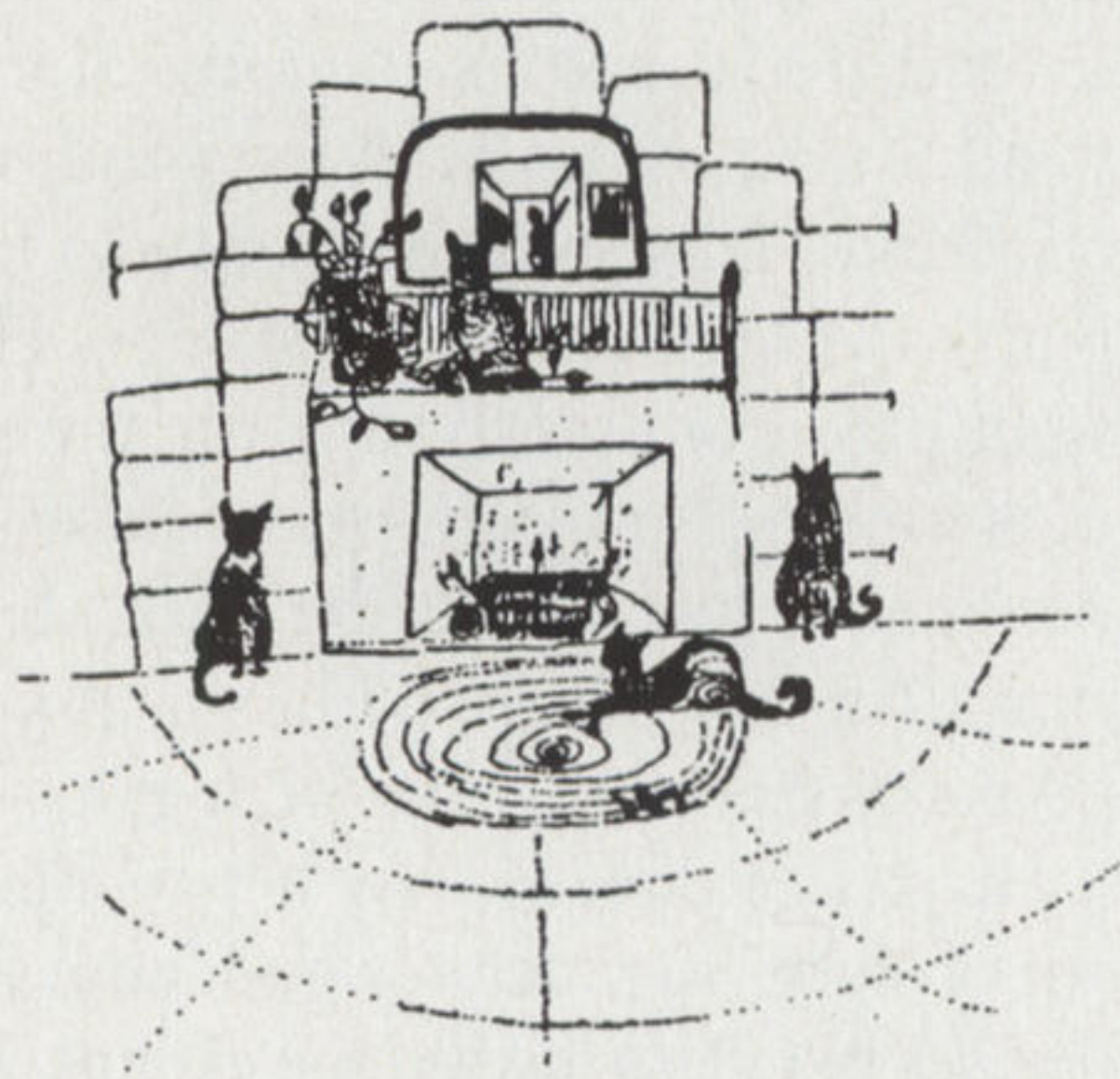
Nothing in the article said whether or not a mouse from the first group ever tried to help a mouse from the second group. Probably didn't. They were, after all, only mice.

In the taped-up letter is a phone number that Patricia dialed just moments ago. She let the ringing go on and on and on before giving up. She should just get the hell out and forget about that girl—that slut, that bitch—in the letter, on the videotape. Instead, something pushes her to dial the number a second time. She walks to the balcony carrying the phone. Above the construction site and other high-rises midtown, a tiny moving speck is silhouetted against the early evening sky. This time the phone on the other end picks up ...

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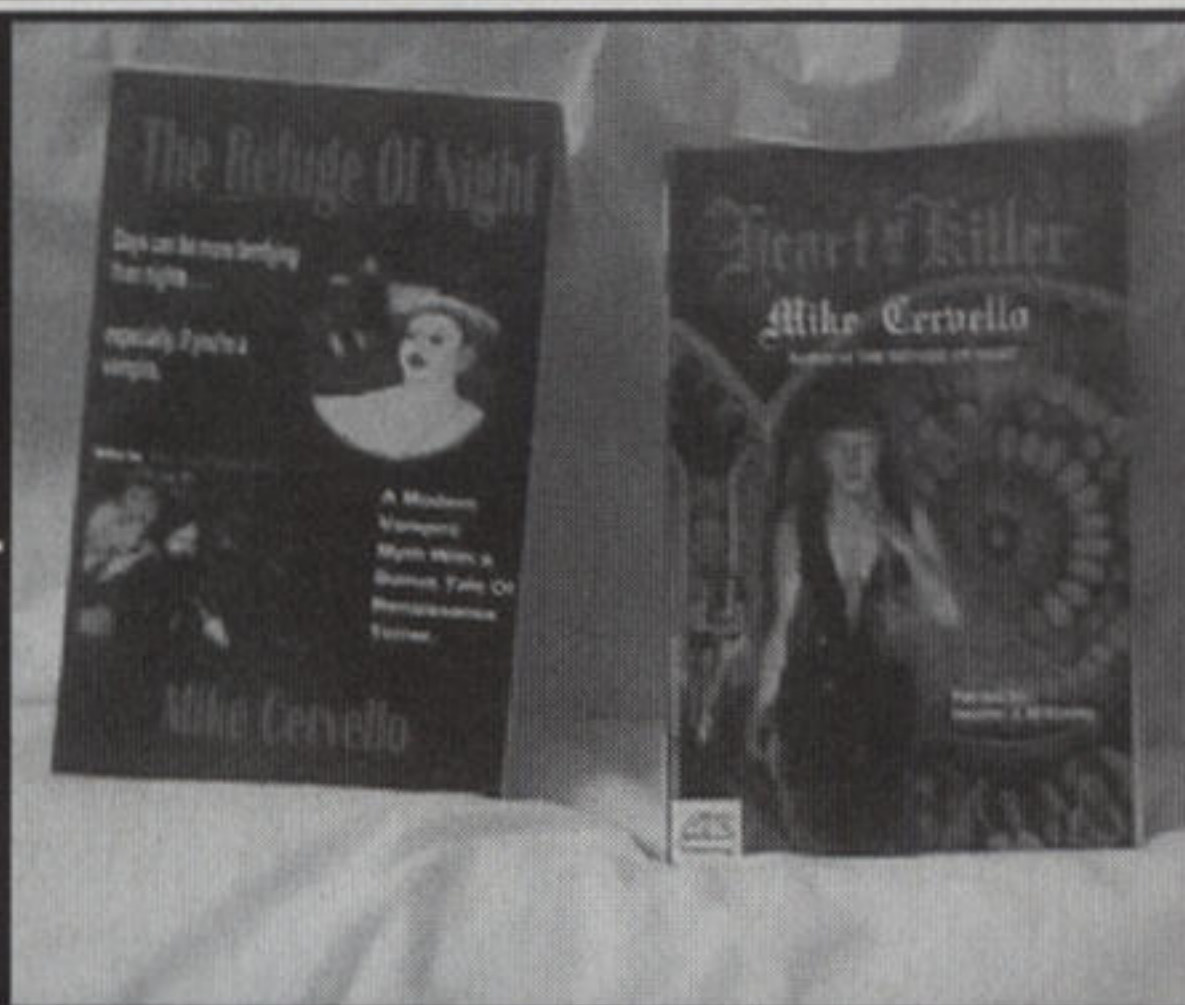
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## witch's garden

Continued from page 53

And I, too, lost a friend. Gerda, the made-children who stay behind—they are sold into slavery. The girl you saw at the laboratory—she *was* your friend. She had been fragged—they used their magic to see that she would behave herself, and they sold her. Kai just had it done sooner, since they were afraid he'd cause trouble."

"Sooner or later, the Snow Queen comes for all the made-children," Gerda said.

"Yes," I said.

"I had realized that, too," Gerda said. "I still want to find Kai."

"There's nothing you can do for him," I said. "Must you find him today?"

Gerda looked away from me, toward the station. "Yes."

**W**e slipped into the station with a shipment of supplies and hid in the storage warehouse. To either side of us, storage shelves stretched from the cold slab floor to the cavernous ceiling, disappearing into dusk near the top. "Now what?" I whispered.

"I guess we look for Kai," Gerda whispered. She looked around at the shadowy warehouse, unsure where to even begin.

"Use the claw," I said. "Its magic will help you find anyone who is close to your heart."

Gerda took the claw in her hand and said, "Kai, Kai, Kai." The claw moved slightly in her palm and pointed. Looking carefully to be certain that no one could turn suddenly and see us, we hurried through the narrow corridor between the shelves until we found a solid wall, and then a door in the wall. Through the door, and we were out in a hallway.

"Kai, Kai, Kai," Gerda whispered. The claw pointed—but the corridor ran straight, and the claw pointed at an angle. "This way," Gerda said after a moment, and we continued on.

I shivered; my years as a made-child in the station were flooding back. We heard footsteps, and flattened ourselves uselessly into one of the doorways, but the footsteps faded away.

"He's behind this door," Gerda said suddenly.

The door was not locked. We felt a blast of cold air as we stepped inside, colder than the winter air outside; Gerda closed the door quietly behind us.

We were in another warehouse, but it was a warehouse for storing frozen things. Frost coated the walls; a patch of it melted under my breath as we hesitated by the door. I tucked my hands under my second-best cloak and shivered. Gerda, beside me, hardly seemed to feel the cold.

At the far end of the room, a brown-haired boy was stacking boxes on a pallet. Gerda sucked in her breath.

"That's Kai?" I whispered. She nodded tightly. "Well, let's go talk to him, then."

The boy didn't look at us as we approached. "Kai," Gerda said softly. He stopped what he was doing and looked up. "Kai, do you remember me?"

Kai's eyes were strange and foggy. In his temple, I could see a flicker, like light catching in a bright jewel.

"He's a frag," Gerda said. "There were frags who did the cleaning and the cooking. Even some who cared for the made-children. I never realized ..."

Of course not.

"Come with me," she ordered Kai, but his masters had not told him to obey her, so he simply stood where he was. He didn't cry out or alert anyone to our presence; that wasn't one of his orders, either. He was just there to load and unload boxes. Through the mists of the forgetfulness tea, I thought back to my own childhood—to the training classes I took as an 11-year-old, a 12-year-old. Frags could learn nothing new. Kai, fragged early, could not do any of the more technical work that would have made him valuable to the scientists.

Gerda took Kai's hand; he allowed her to hold it, pausing in his work for a moment, puzzled but cooperative. "Oh, Kai," she whispered. She turned to me, fiercely, for a moment. "Can you help him? Can your magic help him?"

"I know of no magic that can restore a soul, once it's been taken," I said. "And I've never heard of a frag becoming whole again."

Kai had started to turn away, to return to his work, and Gerda caught him in her arms. "I won't leave you like this," she said. With one hand, she caught the tag, snug against Kai's throat, and wrapped her fist around it. "Be free, Kai," she said, and yanked it loose. There was a soft pop, like popcorn, and a burned smell, and Kai dropped where he stood.

"Now we can go," Gerda said.

**G**erda didn't speak again until we were back in my valley. The air had grown crisp in my absence, and the current crop of oranges and lemons would be lost—but the trees would survive. And the roses, I thought.

After inspecting the garden, I made tea for both of us, to give us strength of heart and body. Gerda drank a little of the tea, but mostly she just clasped the cup, warming her hands.

"Can I stay here with you?" Gerda asked.

"Of course," I said. "You are my daughter, and I love you."

Gerda drank the rest of her tea. "I'll go back someday," Gerda said. "To free the made-children."

"Yes," I said.

"Teach me your magic, mother," Gerda said, and I reached out across the table to clasp her hand. ♣

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# honeydark

Continued from page 61

"So would I," I told him. We finished the raki in silence and I made my way home. I took a circuitous path back through the village, walking quickly and quietly. It proved a wise course of action.

They were standing outside Gulnara Sama's back door. There were three of them: two janissaries and the languid man in the linen suit described to me by Akharis. I knew him, of course. His name was Emet Galaray, and he was the lover of my eldest daughter Suli. It was also said that at that time he controlled half the hired assassins in Constantinople. I experienced a moment of pure and bitter regret, for the life I had lived and the kind of man I had been. If I had taken pains to be a gentler father, if I had not imbued my children with my own cynicism and taste for politics, I might have found this new peace years ago. I thought, suddenly, that I should like to do better with the child Melissa. Well, there was little I could do about that now. I stepped into the shadows beneath the lemon tree and waited. I heard Gulnara Sama's bewildered voice say, "No, no, we have a guest staying here, but I really don't think—" and then the child's clear tones.

"He's been to the village, but he's not there now. I'll show you where he is."

I thought of my own daughters, who would betray me at a word, and a shiver of unaccustomed pain ran through me. The janissaries rustled and murmured. I could see their jaws moving beneath the helmeted heads: the razor edges of engineered bone. Galaray, motioning to them, followed Melissa toward the gate. I slipped from underneath the shelter of the tree and bolted for the orchard. I ran past the singing hives and in among the pear trees. Not far behind me, I heard the sound of metal footsteps. With an agility born of desperation, I caught an overhanging bough and swung myself up into the pear tree in a shower of blossom. Melissa's voice said, close and accusatory, "He's been staying with us for *weeks*. I don't like him. There's something funny about him." I kept as still as I could.

"There," the child hissed. They were below me now. I could see the top of Galaray's head and the shiny helms of the janissaries. Melissa was standing with her hands resting on top of a hive. Galaray glanced around.

"Where is he? I don't see him."

"He's here. I *told* you," Melissa said impatiently, and lifted the lid. I looked straight down into the hive. The celled cavities were a clear, translucent crimson, and they glowed as though lit by some inner lamp. Honey, as black as blood, dripped from the edges of the lid. Inside the hive, something crawled. The child spoke a word. She looked up into the pear tree and her eyes met mine, but a cloud of bees was rising between us. Then Galaray

was running and Melissa, quickly as a cat, was up the tree. She flung her arms around me and I held her tightly; I thought, for her own protection. Only in the moments that followed did I realize that she was protecting me. The bees made no sound. The swarm lifted up, whirled down. Galaray fell with only a little cry. The janissaries whirred in frantic confusion. Their limbs jerked and slowed, and the cracks between their plated armor began to seep fluid, slow and dark and thick. With a hypnotic repulsion, I watched them until they lay still.

"Melissa—" I whispered.

"Be quiet! Don't you know anything?"

"But the bees—"

"Wait!"

To my shame, I found that I was shaking in the girl's grip. The orchard was gone. Through the branches of the pear tree I gazed out across a great plain, sweet with night flowers. In the distance was a river. The bodies of Galaray and the janissaries lay unmoving in the long grass, but as I watched, I saw Galaray jerkily arise and begin to walk down toward the river shore. The janissaries did not follow. The bees hummed around them for a little while and then arched up through the shadowy air. I looked up through the bony branches, and over the top of the mountains I saw the horn of the new moon rising. The silent coil of bees arched up and poured back into the hive.

"There. They'll be happy now they've fed," Melissa said, sliding down to the ground. Reluctantly, I followed her. She was standing over the womb of the hive; reaching in, she gouged out a curl of honeycomb. With a half-conscious provocativeness, she sucked her fingers clean.

"It's not for you," she told me, slyly.

"Put the lid back on that thing, for the gods' sake," I snapped. Silently, she laughed, and taking my hand she walked with me through the orchard and out under the sanctuary of the moon.

No one else has come from Constantinople to look for me. Occasionally, Dr. Akharis tells me fragments of news from the city: that my daughter Suli has been forced by the city Judiciary to marry the son of an Austrian family, and that the House of Birds no longer exists. The city seems to belong entirely to another life, and I feel safe here, among the trees of the orchard and the beehives. But then again, I have little choice. I have seen too much to be allowed to leave. My time in politics has taught me that every life has its price, as does every worship, and the bees require payment, now and again, to keep their honey sweet. Melissa has told me that it may not be for many years, but when the time is right, then all I will have to do is to accompany the women, the priestesses of the bee, up into the inner orchard. It is a more honorable end than the assassin's knife, and I suppose I should be grateful, for the mercy shown to me by the Lady of the hive. ♣

# omar the wizard

Continued from page 79

there the only way to do it is to have my own project. I'd like to write my own stories, to work off my own world.

"Obviously you return to themes and issues. After a few years you can step back, look at the whole group of them, and say, 'Hey, there's something happening here. These actually tie together.' So you follow that thread and that becomes a way to slip into making books.

"After 10 years of painting I'm finally beginning to get a sense of what that kind of world might be, which will enable me to explore some more interesting concepts within that world. So in the next couple of years I hope something's going to start happening."

Rayyan is aware of the creative stretch required in taking on his own projects. "When you're illustrating, you're working on a painting in which you're just glancing at a magical moment in a story. But when you're writing the story as well, you've got to find a way to spread the magic out over 32 or 64 pages. It becomes a different kind of challenge, probably similar to the difference between writing a short story and a novel.

"One of the things that science fiction and fantasy conventions have provided me with is a deadline to produce personal work, my own experiments, generally with subject matter more than medium, although I'm able to experiment with medium a bit too. It's given me a sense of a world I could start exploring that might become one single book."

Until he's ready to embark on his own work, he continues to paint spot illustrations and magazine story illustrations. He's currently at work on *The Unicorn Secret*, a four-book YA series for Simon & Schuster.

"I'm doing the cover and interiors and it's dang fun! Usually, watercolorists don't get to do covers because the medium is considered too delicate, so I'm really pleased about doing the covers. This medium kind of fits the subject. One of the things that I like when I'm doing illustration is to customize the image to the sensibility of the story."

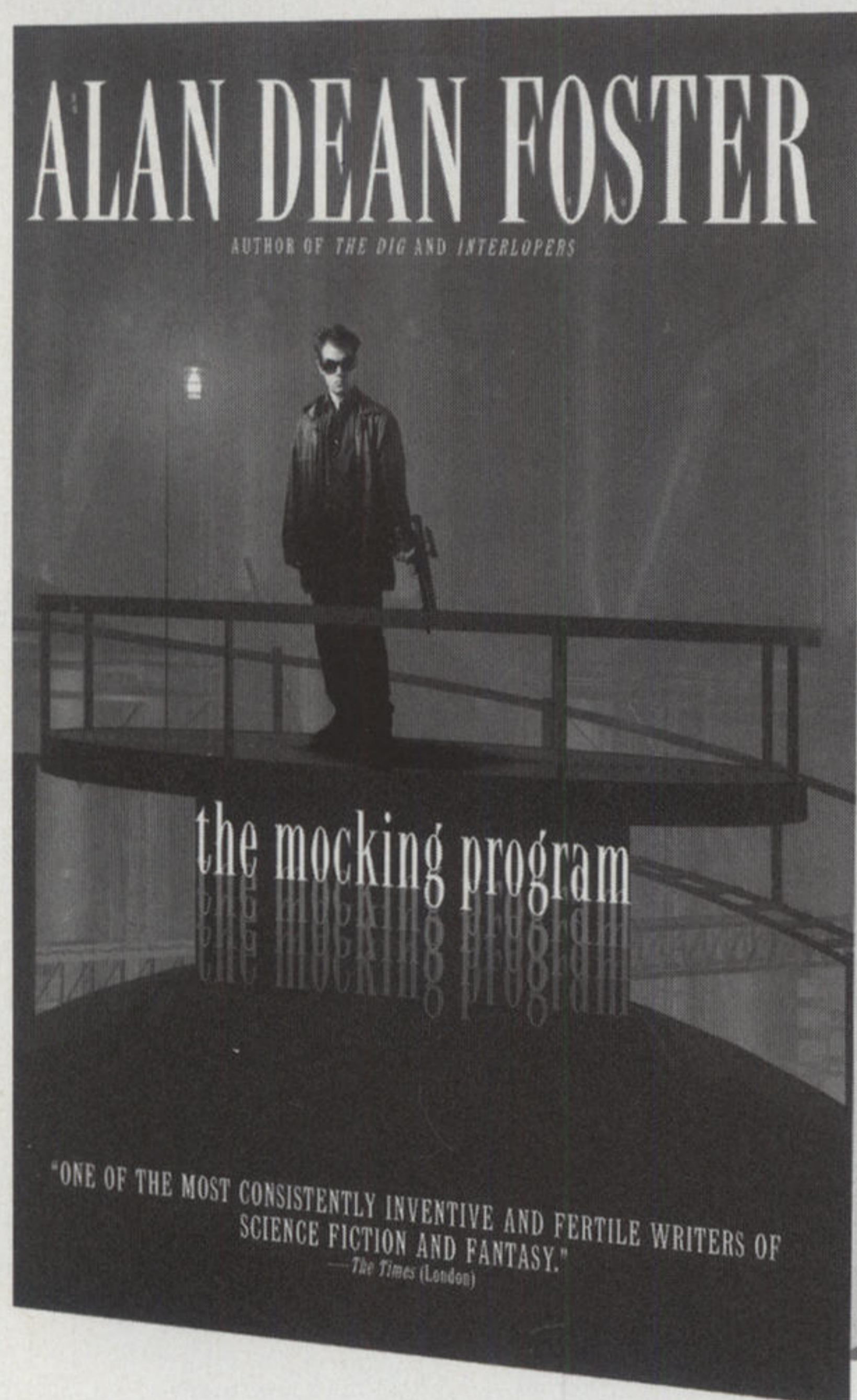
Perhaps it's his deep respect for and understanding of the medium that give his watercolors a special quality. The clarity of the color, the surprising richness of the textures. They reproduce well, and "in person," these paintings glow like gems. Rayyan knows when to suggest and when to be specific. Part of what gives his work such strength is his mastery of linework—it's the underlying structure, the armature for his paintings. Part of it is his joy in color, pattern, and subject.

Or, perhaps, it's all simply magic. ♣

To see more of Omar Rayyan's work, check out his Web site: [www.studiorayyan.com](http://www.studiorayyan.com)



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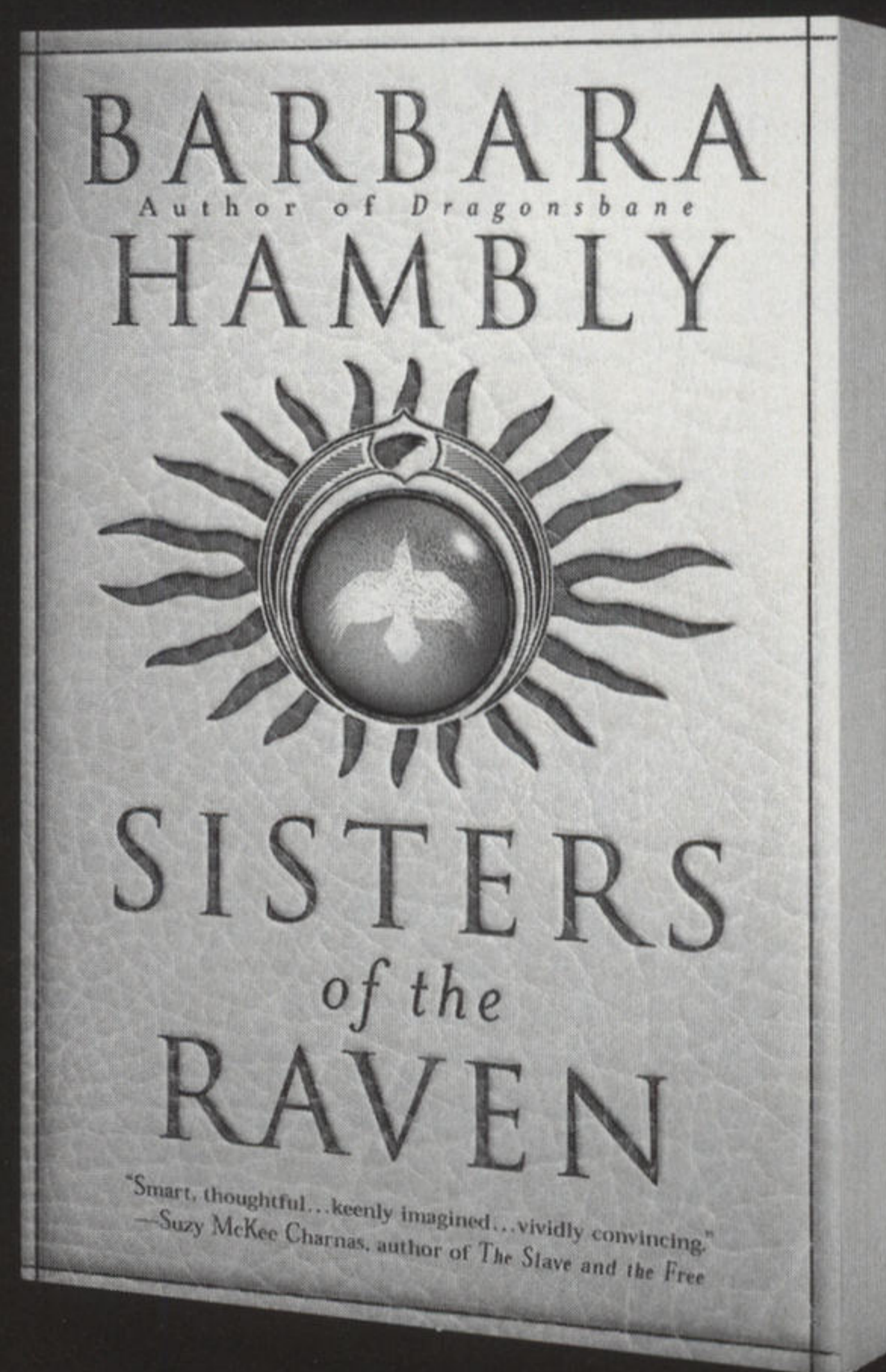
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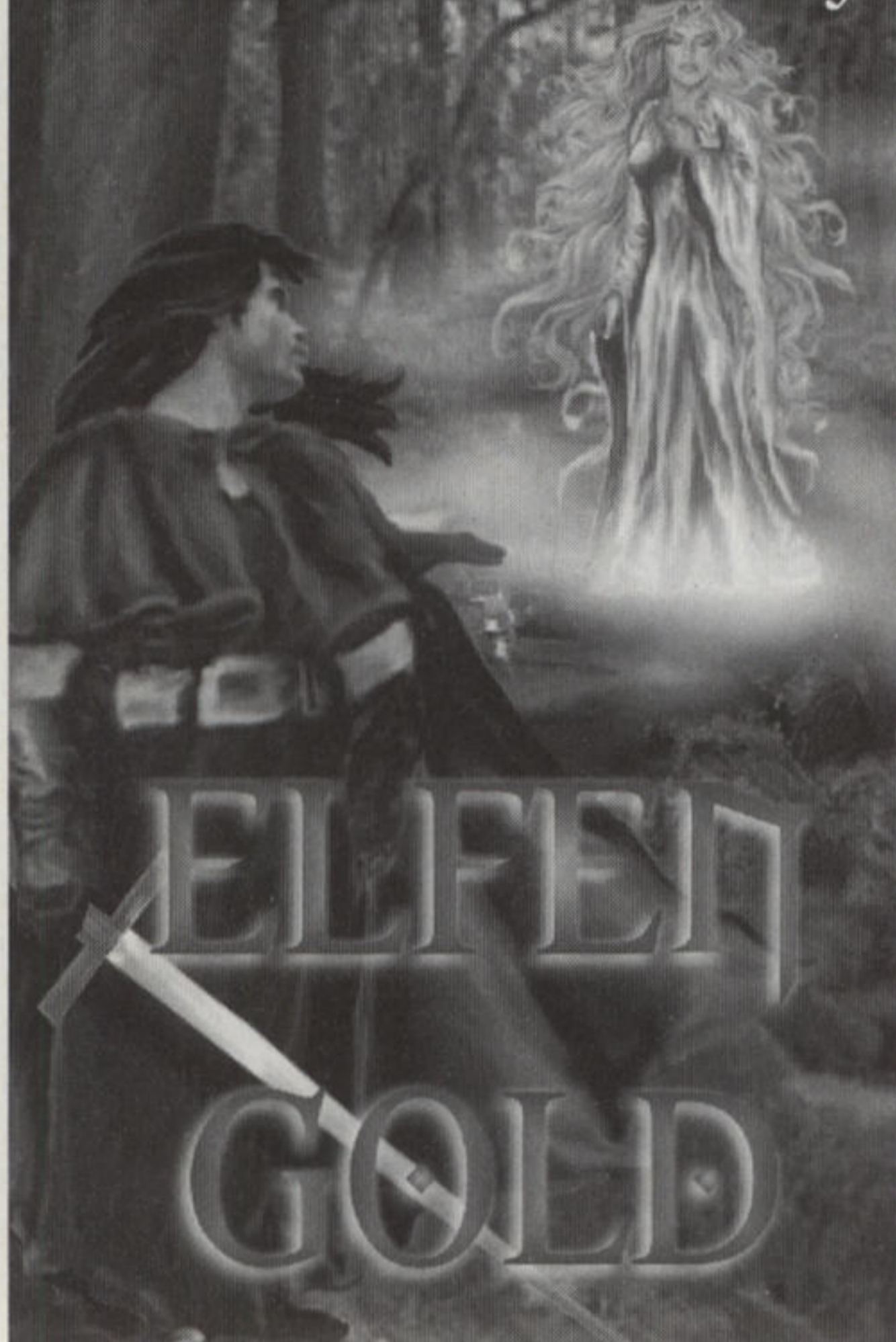
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**MARK BOURNE's** fiction has appeared in *Asimov's*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and various anthologies, including *Full Spectrum 5*, *Sherlock Holmes in Orbit*, and the *Chicks in Chainmail* series. His novella, “What Dreams Are Made On,” will appear in the fourth edition of *Literature and Ourselves: A Thematic Introduction for Readers and Writers*, a popular college textbook for Introduction to Literature courses. Within the 1,500-page collection, “Dreams” will be part of a section that also includes contributions from three of Mark’s literary heroes: Ray Bradbury, Mark Twain, and Woody Allen. An e-book collection of his previously published short fiction, *Mars Dust & Magic Shows*, is available from Scorpius Digital Publishing. Mark lives in Portland, Oregon. His Web site is [www.sff.net/people/MBourne](http://www.sff.net/people/MBourne).

**WEB BRYANT** was one of the founders of USA TODAY, and is currently a senior illustrator there. His freelance work appears in numerous publications, and his paintings can be seen at Row House Gallery in Suburban Cincinnati, or online at [www.rowhouse.com](http://www.rowhouse.com).

**ELIZABETH COUNIHAN** comes from Brighton in England. She qualified as a medical doctor but stopped work a couple of years ago to concentrate on writing. She edits the British fantasy magazine *Scheherazade* and has had stories published in *Interzone*, *Odyssey*, and *The Mammoth Book of Comic Fantasy II*. She is currently writing a science fiction novel for children.

**MELISSA FERREIRA** shares studio space in Providence, Rhode Island, with her husband Jon Foster, and their frisky cats and spirited dogs. Her insistent creative urges direct her to create paintings for kids’ picture books and magazines, conceptual development and character design for kids’ entertainment, and 3-D pieces for exhibition.

This is the sixth story that **BRUCE GLASSCO** has had published in *Realms of Fantasy* within the last four years. He has also had stories published in Datlow/Windling anthologies, and in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, Twelfth Annual Collection. He is a graduate of Clarion '95, and lives in Virginia on a narrow strip of land between two large bodies of water.

**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*.

**NAOMI KRITZER** lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Her work has appeared in *Realms of Fantasy* several times before; one of her stories, “The Golem,” was reprinted in *Year's Best Fantasy*, edited by David Hartwell. Her first novel, *Fires of the Faithful*, will be published in October 2002. You can visit her Web site at [www.naomikritzer.com](http://www.naomikritzer.com).

**RESA NELSON** is a freelance writer and a Clarion '85 graduate. Her fiction has been published in *Science Fiction Age*, *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, and several anthologies. She acted as screenwriter and/or producer for three independent short films made in the Boston area, which gave her experience ranging from running a casting call to acting as a body double. Resa is currently writing a novel based on “The Dragonslayer's Sword,” a short story first published in the premiere issue of *Science Fiction Age*.

**BRUCE HOLLAND ROGERS**, a two-time Nebula Award winner, lives in Eugene, Oregon. He is the author of *Word Work: Surviving and Thriving as a Writer*, and some of his short fiction can be found at [www.shortshortshort.com](http://www.shortshortshort.com).

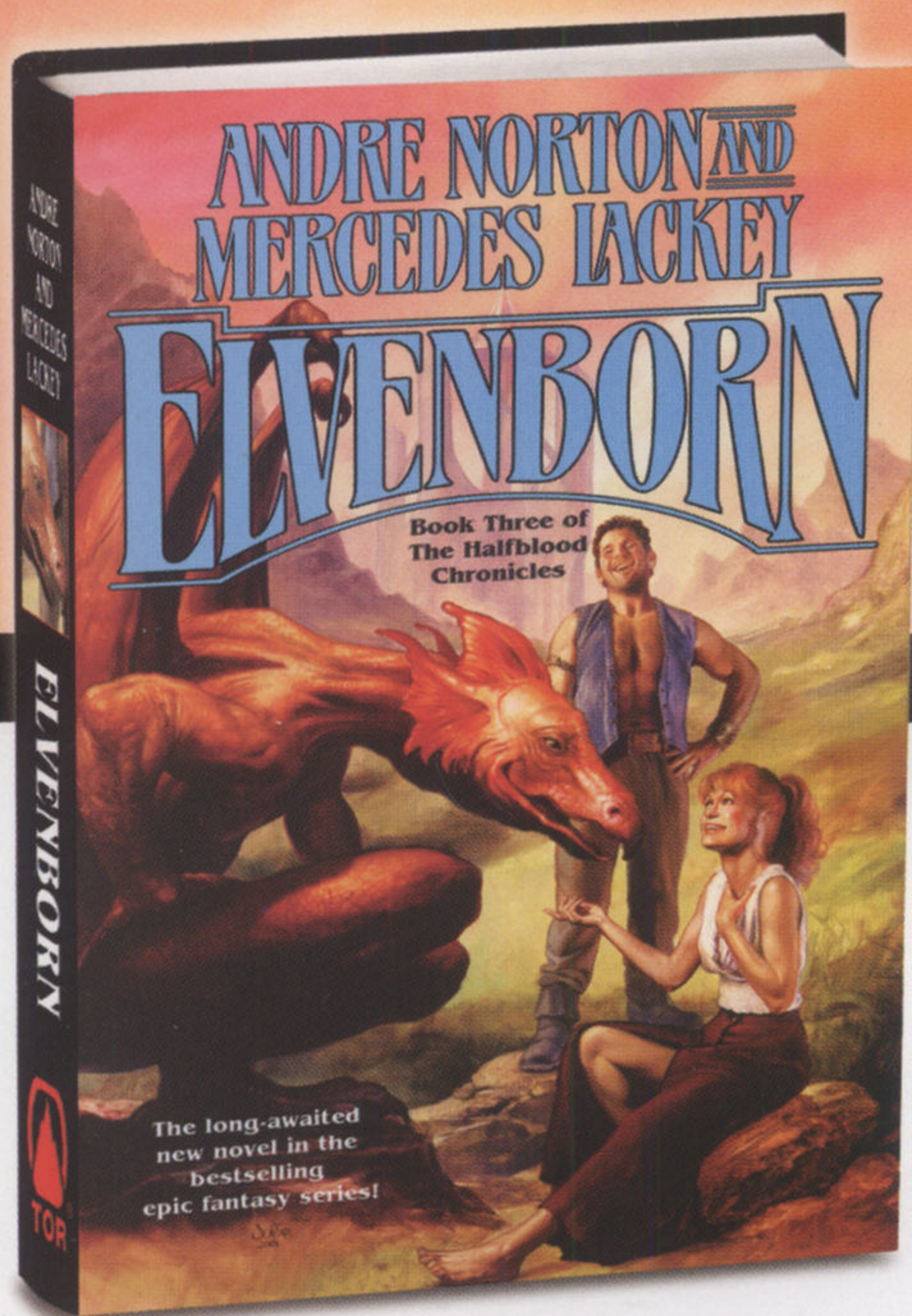
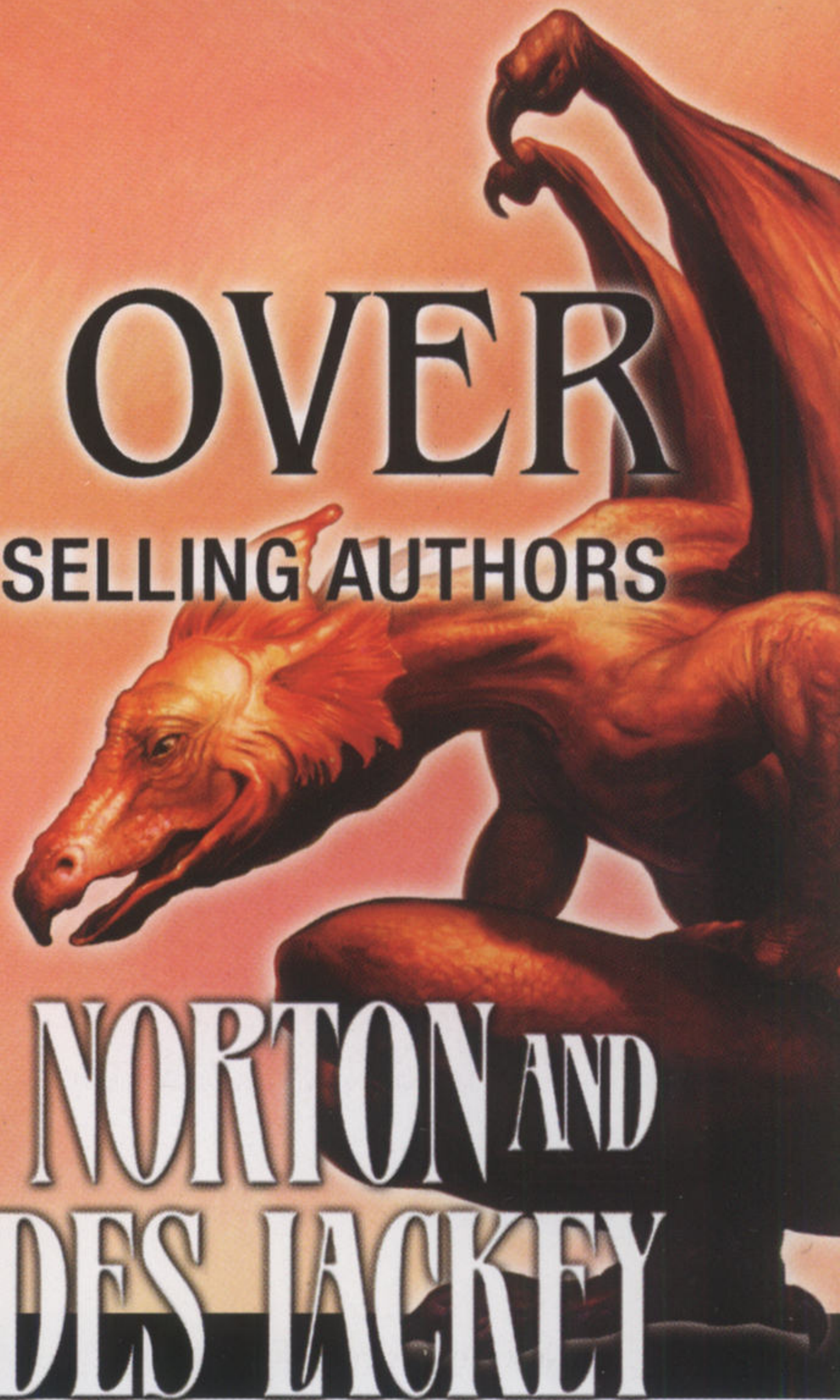
**MAHENDRA SINGH** was born in 1961 to a German mother and an Indian father. As a youth, he traveled extensively with his parents and was exposed to many cultures. His exotic culture is reflected in the humorous, erotic, and sometimes bizarre nature of his pen, ink, and conte pencil renderings.

**LIZ WILLIAMS** is the daughter of a conjuror 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 was 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.

**TERRI WINDLING** is editor of the Tor Books *Fairy Tales* series, and co-editor with Ellen Datlow of the six-volume *Snow White, Blood Red* anthology series of adult fairy tale fiction, among other works. She has won six World Fantasy Awards, and the Mythopoetic Award for her novel *The Wood Wife*. The full, unedited version of her article on Bluebeard, as well as previous Folkroots columns, can be found on The Endicott Studio for Mythic Arts Web site: [www.endicott-studio.com](http://www.endicott-studio.com).

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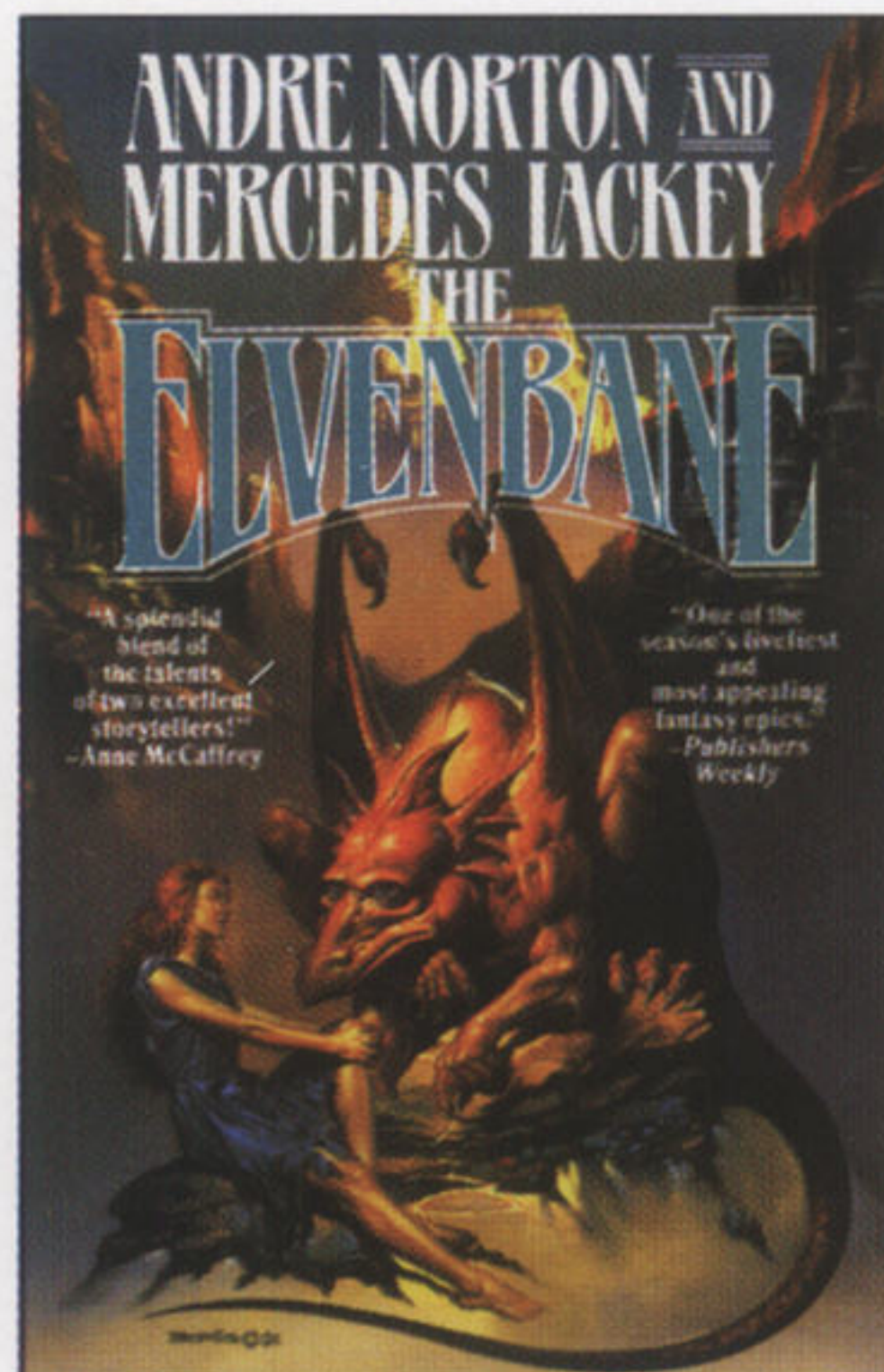
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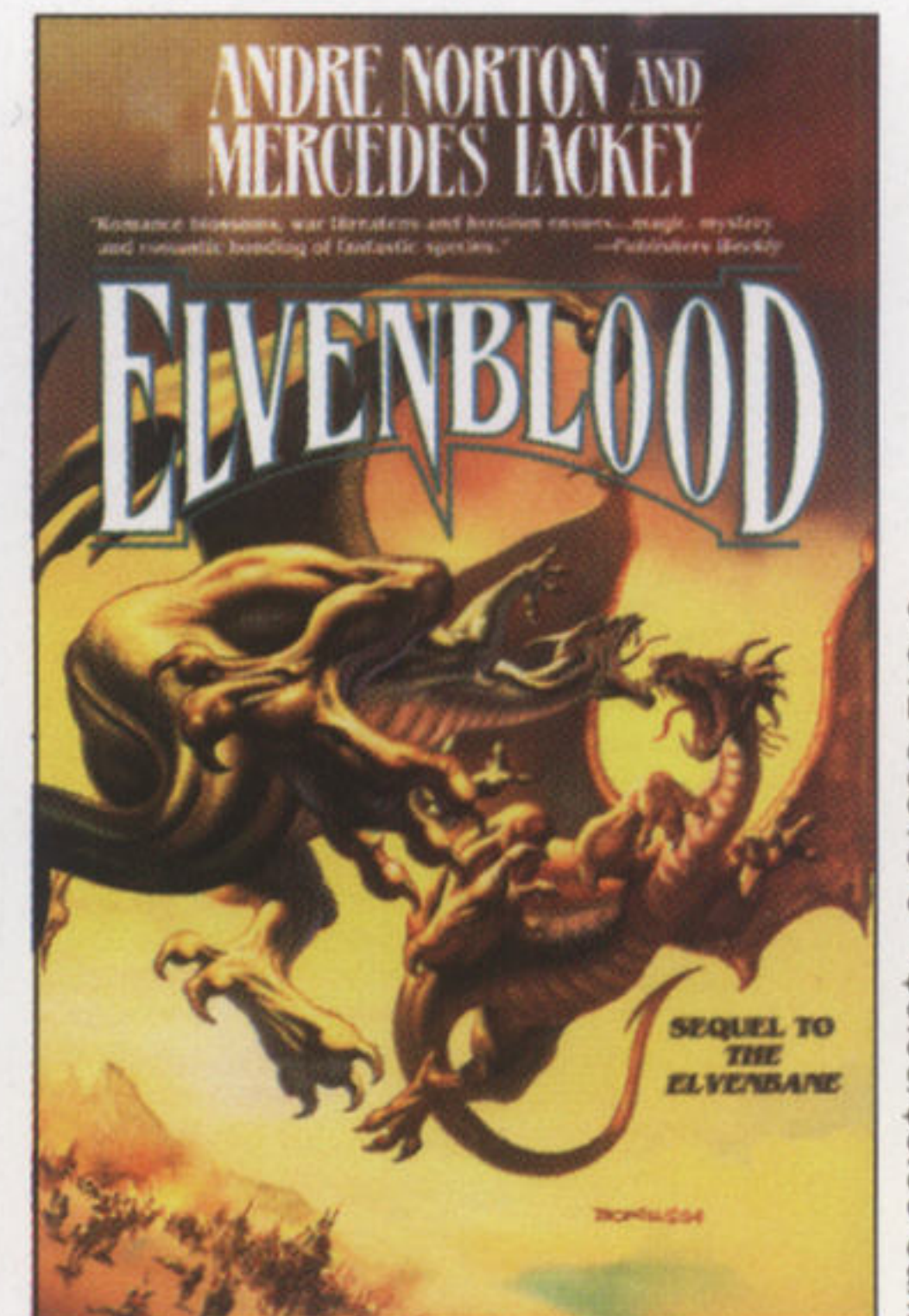
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