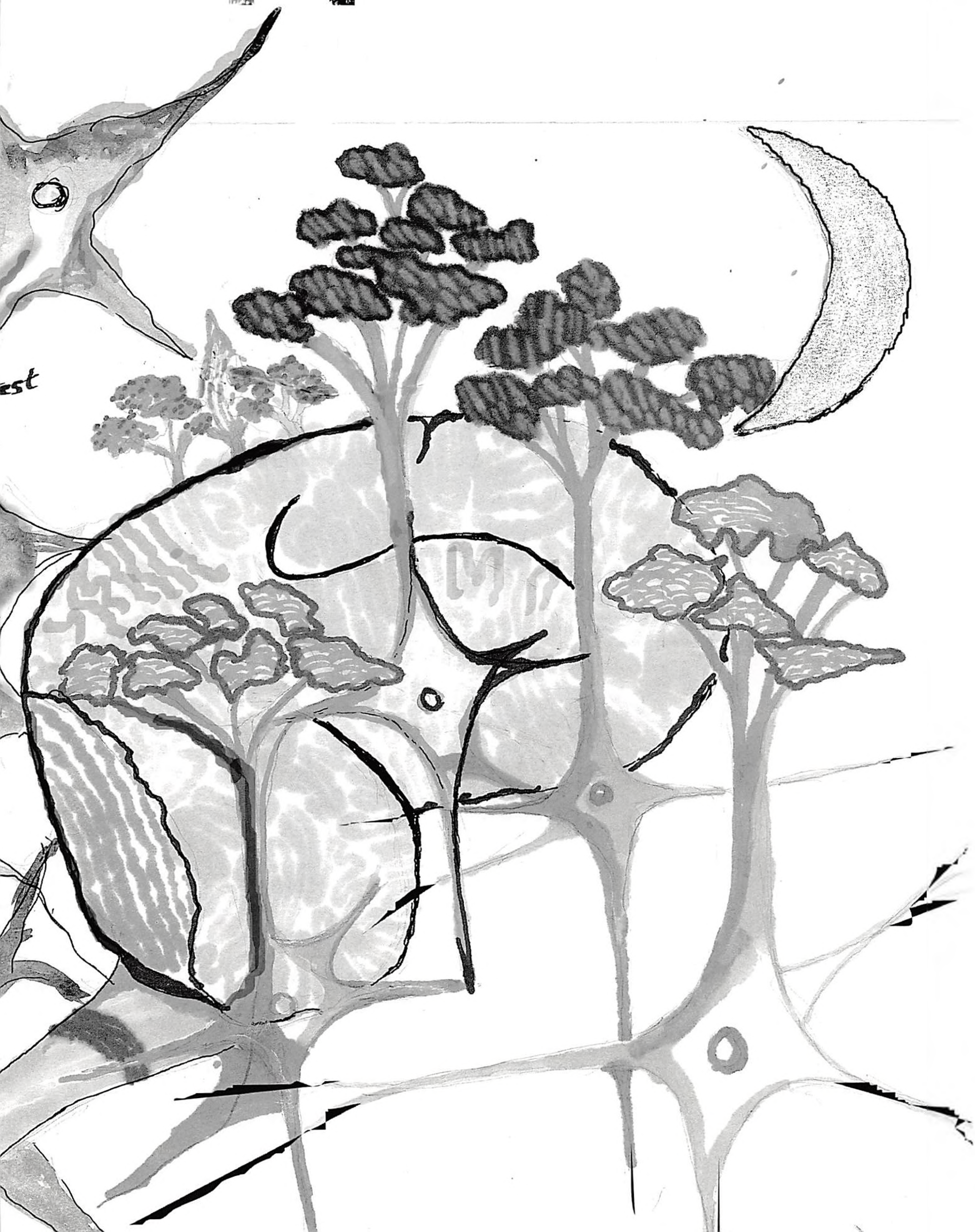
# READERCON 23



# Readercon 23 Souvenir Book

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Peter Straub and Caitlín R. Kiernan in 2001, demonstrating their destiny as future Readercon Guests of Honor, and also the clear superiority of black finery.
Photo by Susan Straub.

# Maker Straub, a Milwaukee Tough: His Story

## John Clute

[The main section (after centered line) is a revision of John Clute's original essay first published in *Supernatural Fiction Writers: Contemporary Fantasy and Horror*, vol. II, 2nd ed., Charles Scribner's Sons (2003), edited by Richard Bleiler.]

He is an inch, perhaps two, over six feet, powerfully built, and he advances straight at you with a slight stoop of the shoulders, head forward, and a fixed-from-under stare which makes you think of a charging bull: until the eyes crinkle and he says *John* in the soft slightly breathy high-baritone voice of a man who does not need to shout to gain attention. *Peter* says John, for imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and walks after him into the lowest level of the Straub Manhattan home, the point where the bookshelves start their climb story after story heavenwards bearing like salvers their precious cargo up, until the fifth floor is reached, where Peter works with John Ashbery and Henry James shelving the dark walls: penates. But far below, the books that have just arrived sit in columns at the bottom of the house, waiting to be opened, to be found not wanting. Each day, it seems, new volumes arrive: poetry, journals, fantastika, even *nonfiction*. Down here there is a low sound of jazz—perhaps Lester Young, music Peter knows deeply—and sunlight through back windows, from the small but perfectly formed Manhattan garden. Susan Straub comes into the room swiftly from her enterprises. The color of sunlight through windows. There is a smell of coffee. It is a writer's life to die for.

We do all know, however, that nothing is free. Certainly nothing I've ever said about the work of Peter Straub—a revised version of a longish piece from 2002 makes up the bulk of this homage (see below)—can have ever given anyone the impression that I thought his twenty-five or so books came easy. But it's more than that. I think Peter in his gait when greeting and in his life overall and in his work is a living exemplum of equipoise: that like an equilibrist, or a shark, or a dancer, he needs to move forward in order to stay afloat: that each new book has dragged the words it dances in upwards out of the rag and bone shop. His books can read easy, and maybe some of them even came easy: but in my heart, when I start a new Straub novel, I expect to feel in my bones as I read some fingerprint of struggle, some impatience wrestled into the high mensuration of the inevitable, some rightness wrought and earned. If I feel that sense of victorious struggle more poignantly in Straub's work than in almost any other author I can think of (except perhaps Joseph Conrad), I may do so because I sense—without any warrant of any secret knowledge of his inner story—that in Peter Straub's case the foul rag and bone shop of the heart is strobe-lit. That his tales are carvings wrested from Pandemonium.

But here he is now, walking down the corridor like a man, like any other guy who's grown up to be a man, just another Lord Jim who never jumped ship. Easy to say, I guess. But how many of us guys ever did grow up to be men?

---

Every book by Peter Straub is an open book: you can see the teeth. Even his recent and most difficult solo novel, *Mr. X*, is positively littered with clues to its inner meaning, Ariadne's Threads that lead inward to the darker chambers of the tale and the teller: where it begins to bite. It is only necessary to read the book, and it will open for you: or so it seems. Certainly the big genial voice in which Straub's novels are told, a narrative voice instantly recognizable under its various disguises, seems to be saying to readers that they are right to feel secure, even in the valley of the shadow to come: because that voice has the horrors well

in hand, it is an open voice, sure. As none of his earlier tales are as problematical in the telling as *Mr. X*, it should therefore be relatively easy to go back to the beginning days in the career of Peter Straub and to enter his many novels and stories, these houses without doors, and to gain the pleasures they certainly promised from the get-go: most of them, after all, have been bestsellers.

This ease is, however, an illusion. The bonhomie is a trap. Every book by Peter Straub may be an open book, but that is to give room for the teeth. Straub does not write stories to be told around a fire; he is not postprandial. Littered with clues his texts may be, but those clues are elusive, embedded in texts argumentatively dark in their rendering of the nature of the world, self-conscious, gnarly, thrusting, insistent.

We are left with a paradox, or at any rate with something of a phenomenon. Out of a difficult and bleak understanding of the world, out of literary tastes (from John Ashbery to William Faulkner) that most of his readers would find rarefied, and out of an ardor to tell the truth about hard things, Peter Straub has engineered an astonishingly successful public career. His books have sold millions of copies. They are among the best sellers of our time. In the end, the explanation may boil down to the simple fact that Straub is a storyteller of great ingenuity, a writer who obeys story with all his heart and mind, who delivers what he promises, and maybe that this is rare enough to keep his readers faithful, no matter how hard the road. But the fact remains that his underlying instincts about the world, which suffuse every paragraph he writes, are complex and bleak: for the world he gives us is a world fallen from a sky which is godless, and can never be made whole again. This does not seem to be natural bestseller country.

We return to story. From the first paragraph of his first novel, we feel ourselves to be in the hands of a writer who pays intense attention to the telling of the tale, an attention which in many storytellers seems almost instinctual, something that cannot really be taught; but the long growing success of Straub's career has almost certainly depended, from its inception, not only on instinct but on brutal hard work. Like his friend and collaborator, Stephen King, though far more single-mindedly—with indeed an intensity of application not seen, perhaps, since Charles Dickens carved his great late novels out of the raw exuberant turf of his early work—Straub has taken each book he has published as a stepping-stone to the next, an example to learn from and to go beyond. Though it may be argued that everything he writes is a variation on a single underlying theme (the hunger of the fractured to be whole), no one book much resembles any other, and his later work, which builds so consequentially upon the earlier, has grown steadily in richness and resource. His oeuvre is a series of climbs towards a goal that may not be reached for years.

Peter Francis Straub was born 2 March 1943 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a city he transforms into an almost sentient, deeply ominous, entrapping organism in "A Short Guide to the City" (*Houses Without Doors*), where clearly intended echoes of many writers—Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, and Franz Kafka come immediately to mind—irradiate the seeming openness of the prose. From his early years he was an avid reader. At the age of seven he was struck by an automobile and almost killed; the consequences of the accident—many broken bones, operations, a near-death experience, a year away from school while confined to a wheelchair, emotional traumas whose most evident signal was a severe stutter, from which he does not now normally suffer—can perhaps be too glibly read into his fiction. But it may be safe to suggest that, at some level not necessary or seemly to analyze, the continual interplay in Straub's work between brokenness and the ravening desire to be whole reflects his life.

He then went on scholarship to Milwaukee Country Day School, which appears thinly disguised in *Shadowland*; took a degree in English at the University of Wisconsin; married Susan Bitker in 1966 (they remain married); taught from 1966 to 1969 at Country Day; moved to Ireland, where they lived from 1969 to 1972; failed to complete his thesis on D. H. Lawrence—a thesis which closely resembles the thesis that bulky, balked Miles Teagarden fails to complete in *If You Could See Me Now*—and wrote simultaneously his first novel, the unfairly deprecated *Marriages*, which was published in England in 1973. From that point he has done nothing in his professional life but write. They returned to the United States in 1979 and live in Manhattan.

We will not linger at the absolute beginning. Straub's first incarnation as a published writer was as the author of two volumes of poetry, which assemble competent work—some of it respectably first published in magazines like *Poetry*—but (compared to his prose) work which seems shruggingly unavowed: it does not seem hugely to care to exist. Straub's poetry, and his never-completed thesis on Lawrence, are markers of first attempts at a career he signaled his dis-ease with from the start, a career he abruptly terminated well before it took off.

Except for one bravura sequence, *Marriages* (1973) is not a tale of the supernatural, though the book as a whole does adumbrate much of Straub's future work, both in the concerns it articulates, and in the peculiar intensity of its depiction of personalities undergoing fracture. The shadow of Henry James, whose own fracture as a man and writer is persuasively described in Joan Aiken's *The Haunting of Lamb House* (1991), can be felt throughout the text, in the repeated image of a Golden Bowl riven by cracks, from *The Golden Bowl* (1904); an image which surfaces time and again through the novels to come. Even more pertinent to this first tale is Straub's modeling of Owen, the protagonist of *Marriages*, on Lambert Strether, the protagonist of *The Ambassadors* (1903). Both men are Americans the nature of whose work is left disdainfully vague; both come as deadly innocents (after the fashion of Americans) to Europe; the souls of both are burned by a vertiginous confluence of culture and passion, though Owen's experiences of raw being and deep sex are direct while Strether's are anything but; and both fail—as they must—to gain for themselves the first-order being-in-the-world Owen craves so brutally.

So hungry for wholeness is Owen that his famine seems almost to burn through his skin, which is "a hard carapace like a walnut"; all the same, he fails to make his life cohere—the novel is told in sections whose fragmentation is a kind of body English of its protagonist's—any more than he can truly understand "the woman" he falls desperately in love with. At the climax of the tale, she blindsides Owen by sleeping casually with someone else, though she returns immediately; but Owen reacts with destructive rage at this cracking of the Golden Bowl, a rage he directs outwards to the world and inwards through his roiled guts: again and again in Straub's work, protagonists respond similarly to the bondage of their lives, through literal spasms of vomit, as though to purge themselves of the terrible physical immanence of a world which will not let go, will not allow them any triumph of mere being.

At this point in *Marriages*, Owen catches a glimpse of and attempts to follow a man of his acquaintance who eludes him in the back streets of a small French city, in scenes strongly reminiscent of Nicolas Roeg's film *Don't Look Now* (1973); some instantiation of the man, who has in fact died in an American prison, leads him deeper and deeper into the surreal, folded-over topology of the underside of the city, a region of night and revel we meet frequently in later novels, Hampstead in *Floating Dragon* and Hatchtown in *Mr. X* being perhaps the most vivid examples. But the coils of the city, like the coils of his gut, are coils of bondage. By the end of the novel, Owen is locked back inside the carapace of his marriage and his life—*Marriages* differs from its successors not only in its lack of a past which haunts the present like a bad twin; it also, in the end, leaves its protagonist where he began, neither dead or in recovery.

*Under Venus*, written next but not published until its inclusion in the omnibus *Wild Animals* (1984), reverses the move of *Marriages*: its protagonist returns to the States after long exile in Europe, becomes deeply embroiled in a complex family and civic dispute whose roots lie deep in the past, tries fumblingly to sort things out. Superficially more competent than its predecessor, it retreats from *Marriages*'s blunt obsessive focus on one man's cracking of the Golden Bowl of his daylight life. It lacks the unremittingness that marks every other Straub fiction.

*Julia*, which does not lack unremittingness, is Straub's first tale to integrate supernatural motifs and events into a vision of the world at large, a structure of telling designed to wring the uttermost storyable meaning out of lives so torn that they cannot be understood—or told—mimetically. Julia has just left her older, domineering husband after a family tragedy. For the first half of the novel we see through her eyes almost exclusively, and our instinctive identification with her gradually darkens into a sense (not entirely accurate) that she is in fact almost totally unreliable as a point of view: that her perceptions of herself, of

her friends and intimates and of her granite-hard husband Magnus, and of the hauntings that begin to torment her, have been generated out of some profound hysterical displacement.

It is only in the second part of the novel, when the single-viewpoint begins to fracture into disconcerting shards of objective story, that we learn the truth: that her abhorrence of Magnus, because he had cut their young daughter's throat in an attempt to save her from choking, is misplaced, as it had been Julia herself who had cut her daughter's throat. But once her central traumatic delusion is unpacked, we find ourselves forced to begin to believe what Julia is in fact experiencing: the ravenous ghost of an earlier, murdered child of Magnus's is haunting Julia in the guise of her own daughter, longing somehow to re-embody herself. *Julia* ends in the death of its protagonist and in gestures of cruelty and self-aggrandizement all around, and is perhaps Straub's grimmest tale. Unlike later protagonists, Julia finds herself, in the end, with no story to ride. She is swallowed.

These first three novels, which contain some unmistakable (though parodic) self-portraits, are Straub's most naked texts. They are not yet garbed in the intricacies of telling, in the dance of allusions between raw surface story and the literary models that serve as incipits and old haunts for the novels to come; they are not yet exemplars—organons—compendiums that illustrate the many ways one may use the nature and manifested artifice of story itself to itself tell Story. Nor are they able to conceal Straub's deep obsessive interest (as a writer) in what might be called the thingness of the absence of Good; in his four "professional" novels, this sense or intuition of the procreative entangledness of absence is (as it were) obscured through simplification: the knottedness of the hunger for being—*for being told*—is opaqued into "simple" evil, profoundly unfathomable perhaps, but also somewhat lacking in novelistic interest. In their essence, the supernatural entities who threaten the surface of the world in *If You Could See Me Now*, *Ghost Story*, *Shadowland*, and *Floating Dragon* are, as a result, quite astonishingly similar. Their absence of Good evacuates them; their ravenousness defines them utterly, blanking out intricacies of story in the blare. No yin tinctures the yang.

The advances that these four novels represent are, on the other hand, various and commanding. Each of them is a work of virtuoso applied craft; and as a whole they can stand as a working encyclopedia of the contemporary novel of supernatural horror in America. It is in these novels, which remain his central achievement as an author attempting to shape his chosen genre, that Straub begins to show more than occasional interest in the particular mode of telling story that overridingly shapes his work from this point on: the use of irony as a structuring device to maintain control over the gap between the telling of a tale (which may be conducted by a narrator hidden or manifest, or a story within a story, or a frame or a book within a book) and the events themselves. Straub's already familiar narrative voice now becomes instantly identifiable as a voice-in-control, one whose ironical edge, or gradient from above, over the told generates both a sense of security in the reader, and an almost palpable momentum. This genial, ominous, lapel-grabbing irony marks Straub off from almost all his American colleagues, except perhaps Gore Vidal whose use of this tool in his fiction is uneasy.

The first of the professional novels, *If You Could See Me Now*, is perhaps the simplest of the lot. The story is told in the first person by its protagonist Miles Teagarden—yet another burly, bewildered, fractured big man hungry for sense and fullness and prone to swift ecstasies of anger—in the form of an actual narrative that he writes into journal form, and in which he takes time off during the events recounted in order to continue composing. Everything that happens in the novel, therefore, *has already happened*; the irony here is temporal, not a matter of incline from teller to told. We learn that Miles's life has gone off the rails, that his marriage has ended bitterly, that his thesis on Lawrence will either be written very soon, or else he will lose his teaching job, that he is entering mid-life on fumes. He remains obsessed by the death, apparently by drowning, of his teenage love, Alison, twenty years earlier. Just before her death, they had sworn an oath to reunite twenty years later, even if they were dead. Half madly, it is to fulfill this oath that Miles has returned home to semi-rural Wisconsin.

Unfortunately his arrival coincides with a rash of savage killings, and the compulsive oddness of his behavior (caged admissions of which stain the edgy stuffiness of his prose) makes him an obvious though fairly clearly innocent suspect. A portrait of the roiled and venomous life of the small town of Arden begins to unfold, as the lives there begin to fracture, and the long summer gradually darkens and corrodes under the purely malign influence of Alison's ghost, a revenant which bears vestiges of the human girl like widow's weeds coating the abomination of something felt in the dark that hungers. "Most of the odors I catch hook the nerves," Miles notes early; later sightings of Alison are *trompe l'oeil*: she is simultaneously an image of the dead human, and a thing made of exudations of nature: dead leaves, stones, thorns, bark, and leaves. The title is perhaps obscure: but it seems to evoke the deep horror—most succinctly presented in W. W. Jacobs's "The Monkey's Paw" (1902)—at the thought of what in truth a returning ghost might actually look like. A marriage of hungers—Miles for the whole life taken from him by Alison's death; the revenant's savage scrabble upwards towards beingness—is perhaps hinted at, but ultimately declined. Miles escapes, husks the bondage of his vomitous choked psyche, lights westward out of the territory.

Escape is less easy for the congested souls who populate *Ghost Story*, which is Straub's most professional novel, the one (along with its companion, *Floating Dragon*) whose effect on the reader is most impersonal. It was also his most commercially successful solo work. The telling of the story, which is intricate, unpacks through various voices and devices into a haunting, extremely compelling artifact of suspense. The literary incipit in this case is Arthur Machen's famous early contortion of the Club Story, "The Great God Pan" (1894), which details the consequences to a group of idle gentlemen of a scientist's ruthless attempt, by operating on the brain of a young girl he has slept with and feels he owns, to open her perceptions to the true world beyond the rind of the customary, the world whose ancient liminal annunciator is the Great God Pan. The girl goes mad, nine months later gives birth to a girl child, and dies. A quarter of a century later, the gentlemanly interlocutors reconstruct the savage career of this child of Pan, who lures men through sexual excess into fatal confrontations with Reality when the rind of the world is peeled. Two members of the league of gentlemen then force her to commit suicide. They go scot free.

In *Ghost Story*, Straub deliberately does nothing to complexify the convention that a woman too nakedly primordial—a woman who manifests the sexual abandon of Pan Within—may be thought of as irredeemably Other. Long before the story proper begins, the envious shapeshifter entity who incorporates this principle has taken temporary human shape, and has sexually enthralled a group of young men destined to be dominant figures over the next decades in the small city of Milburn, New York, somewhere east of Binghamton, a backwater region adjacent to (but detached from) more vital parts of America. Almost accidentally, one of the young men, driven to a Straubian excess of anger, kills her. Realizing their careers will be destroyed unless they conceal the deed, the five youths put the corpse in a car which they sink in the nearby lake. But the seeming corpse shape-changes gloatingly, and escapes the trap.

Decades later, her/its vengeance begins. The slow unfolding of the pattern of deaths is superbly apportioned through a narrative texture whose almost reportorial calm tellingly contrasts with the savage dismantling of the lives of Milburn it records. For within the rind of the world of *Ghost Story*—once it peels free and becomes a threshold to the reality within—is chaos and old night: revel. The five men, now reduced to four, continue to hold regular meetings of what they call the Chowder Society, during which they tell Club Stories as Milburn turns into an arena for Walpurgisnacht. The most effective of these tales, told fittingly enough by a character named Sears James, is a parody-with-love of Henry James's seminal Club Story, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), though it varies the implications of that famous tale significantly. What Sears James describes is an unmistakable invasion of the supernatural, which he has experienced; he is not (in contrast to Henry James's original heroine) arguably the source of an evil which can only wreak havoc if it is imagined into being. By extension, the members of the Chowder Society are understood to be relatively innocent victims of a similarly malign incursion.

So the remaining cast—and the readers—of *Ghost Story* are "free" to engage in the succeeding pyrotechnics without conscience. In the end the Pan/lamia shape-changer is reduced to a wasp and destroyed,

in a final scene of remarkable power, and the novel closes with a glossy click. But the skillfulness of *Ghost Story*—which helped it gain bestseller status, and inspired the makers of the film into creating the simplistic *Ghost Story* (1982)—should not disguise the polished pertinence of the tale to Straub's ongoing concerns and modalities: the sense that the present rides the past like a rind upon the real; that our fallen world, which is all we inherit, is by that very token ravened after by incomplete beings, creatures (human or not) who are best understood in stories that encompass the supernatural; that, in short, to be is to be hungered after.

In contrast—almost certainly deliberate—Straub's next novel, the ungainly but vibrant *Shadowland,* is anything but polished. It is a Godgame novel [an entry on Godgame as an sf device can be found in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* at http://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/godgame], the most complex and demanding Godgame yet published in the field of the fantastic. The term comes from John Fowles's *The Magus* (1966), whose working title was "The Godgame," a text Straub discusses at length in his introduction to the 1995 reprint of *Shadowland.* The term describes a tale of initiation whose rituals are created and managed by a magus figure who, with or without consent, forces his young "victim" to undergo complex ordeals designed to test his or her readiness to matriculate into a fuller world. Godgame tales tend to be set on islands, like Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (first performed circa 1610–1611), or, like *Shadowland* whose main action takes place in rural Vermont, in forests; their protagonists usually find themselves transacting labyrinths embedded into edifices—neither labyrinth nor edifice need literally exist, though usually they do—and must expect to be tempted (and tortured) sexually.

The novel begins with a frame set years after the events it describes, as an unnamed narrator, who is hard to distinguish from Straub himself, encounters an old school friend, Dan Flanagan, now a stage magician of great skill. Slowly he draws from the not-unwilling Flanagan the nest of stories within stories that makes up the story of Flanagan's experiences twenty years earlier, in a great house called Shadowland owned by a great retired magician named Coleman Collins, who is the uncle of Del Nightingale, a school friend of both Flanagan and the narrator.

The tale reveals itself through almost palpable folds of narrative, stories and dreams palimpsested over dreams and stories, some of them fairy tales, so that *Shadowland* (itself shaped as a story that frames stories) seems set in a world literally made up of story. In this intricate fashion, Flanagan reconstructs the events of one fatal story-crafted summer. After a tortured year at the appalling private school they all attend, and after a series of events which make it clear in retrospect that the physical school is a kind of scrim (or cover story) hiding a deeper, even more corrupting pocket world, Dan and Del go to Shadowland to spend the summer with Collins, the retired magician. Both boys hope he will teach them his trade.

But Collins is also a magus, protean, mocking, unstable, ultimately vicious, the "King of the Cats"; and Shadowland is both the "real" school and a labyrinth the boys must master before one of them is chosen to be his successor. It soon becomes clear, however, that Collins is in fact unwilling to play the game, that the Godgame of Shadowland is a cheat, that he wishes to trap the boys into eternal bondage, that he wishes to be himself immortal. At this point the story has become so complex and multi-layered—the young woman who serves as the boys' sexual tempter is, for instance, Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid, and she walks on knives—that there seems no "professional" exit for Straub, no way to keep the tale on the rails. So the simplification of Collins into a figure of unalloyed malice can be understood as a necessary clarification of the narrative. And, in the end, this purely malevolent Collins is defeated; and Flanagan graduates into the story of his own real life, the story of the years between the events at Shadowland and his telling of the tale to the Straub-like narrator: but this story he does not tell, because (we guess) his life has been a success.

Indeed, the destabilizing shakiness of the edifice of stories that comprises *Shadowland* seems quite possibly to be a central point the novel is intended to convey. It is a tale intoxicated by story, but also subversive of story. The faltering staccato of tales that start the book off—like the uncompletable stories

that make up Gene Wolfe's even more disquieting *Peace* (1975)—seems to constitute a warning to the reader not to trust any of them. And the story under all the stories, the story-shaped world that Coleman unfolds like Satan tempting Jesus, imposes itself upon the boys through illusion and lie, through stagecraft gone sour. *Shadowland* is ultimately not about initiation, but about betrayal: Collins's betrayal of other human beings, his betrayal of magic, of art, of story itself.

The next novel, which is the last of the "professional" tales of the supernatural, can stand as a direct contradiction of the subversive questionings of *Shadowland. Floating Dragon* is a kind of upscaling of *Ghost Story*, a comprehensive unpacking, through a congeries of neatly dovetailing stories, of the range of effects available in the contemporary novel of horror. Like both *If You Could See Me Now* and *Shadowland*, the novel presents itself as a text written by one of its cast (its controlling irony is again temporal); in this case, the narrator is neither the incriminated protagonist of his own tale, nor a ghost Straub, but the elderly Graham Williams, once blacklisted by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and now a successful novelist, who lives in Hampstead, a Connecticut exurb of New York. (His similarity to Ricky Hawthorne, the lovable elderly protagonist of *Ghost Story*, is clearly intended.) Hampstead lies under a double curse: a principle of unslakable evil has for centuries periodically inhabited a Hampstead resident, who then becomes a serial killer and causes other havoc, including earthquakes; and a chemical experiment has gone wrong, letting loose into the air a toxic, transformative poison. These two curses interact calamitously over the course of a very bad summer.

In his afterword to the 1995 reprinting of *Shadowland*, Thomas Tessier describes *Floating Dragon* as "the largest sustained *jeu d'esprit* ever written," which—though he perhaps unfairly skips over Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers* (1933–1943)—points directly to the kinds of pleasure this exuberant text offers. Synopsis is impossible in any brief compass. Over the course of the bad summer, Williams assembles through observation and interviews a third-person narrative too full to synopsize: murders, rapes, landslides, a floating dragon, a brand-new disease of unparalleled loathsomeness, telepathy, the reconstitution of a young man as a childe with burning sword, joyous plays with other texts, most movingly L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900)—many of these events repeating themselves, under various guises. Moreover, it becomes necessary for Williams to search through Hampstead's history over 300 years, and to recount—in ample detail—the evidence he gathers to confirm that the spirit of unslakable evil has been repeating itself unslakably.

Despite the horrors that fill it, *Floating Dragon* is not, in the end, a very serious book, though some of the individual strands of story which weave together would, if extracted from the merry-go-round, continue to show a growing mastery in the depiction of character. Patsy McCloud, an unwilling psychic in an appalling marriage, strikes a more plangent note throughout—and indeed a detachable part of her backstory was calved off by Straub, well before publication, and transformed into *The General's Wife*, a novella set in London, where she becomes profoundly entangled in a deeply compelling troilism involving her, an ancient general, and a kind of ghost/golem replicant of the general as a young man. But this story is, in the end, inexplicable; it does seem to have been properly removed from *Floating Dragon*, whose comic structure requires ultimate explanations—or at least a setting to rest—of the events Williams has been shaping into story.

There are two collaborations with Stephen King, *The Talisman* and its sequel, *Black House*. The first can be seen as a diversion for Straub, as its quest structure, its clearcut storyline, its habit of residing far too long in individual episodes, and its secondary world setting all signal King's dominant role in the product. *Black House*—except for a final descent into an otherworld linked clearly to King's long Gunslinger/Childe sequence—seems, on the other hand, marked throughout by Straub's methods and concerns. The third-person-plural narrative voice is, to begin with, Straubian: big, genial, sweeping, ironical, and engaging in play with some earlier model, in this case the superb, very similar voice Charles Dickens developed to narrate *Bleak House* (1853), a text variously evoked throughout *Black House*. (That the first edition of each

text is 625 pages long may be coincidental.) The story itself can also be understood in terms of Straub's abiding concerns: a few decades after its close, the valiant Tom Sawyer-like protagonist of *The Talisman* has turned himself—by developing amnesia that severs him from the central moments of his life—into another Straubian study in fracture. He only re-immerses himself in his real story when it becomes inescapably clear that the serial murders afflicting the small Midwestern town he has retreated to are connected to that real story, at which point he uncovers the sword that is his inner self, translates himself and his motorcycle-gang samurai crew back into the otherworld Territories of *The Talisman*, and destroys the foe. He is then killed as far as the mundane world is concerned (a third volume may someday recomplicate this terminus). The energy of telling is huge. In its way, *Black House* is as joyous as *Floating Dragon*.

After *The Talisman* Straub turned away from supernatural fiction, and although a reading of *Koko* and *Mystery* and *The Throat* and *The Hellfire Club* are necessary for any complete understanding of his long self-explorative career, that reading does not belong here. During this decade or so, Straub restricted his non-mimetic work to occasional short stories, and a short novel, *Mrs. God*, which he wrote, after an intensive reading of his stories, as an homage to Robert Aickman. A mediocre academic named Standish gains permission to spend the summer at Esswood House, a stately home in England, which stores valuable twentieth-century manuscript archives, including the papers of Standish's grandfather's first wife, Isobel. Standish has left his own wife behind, the anguish of the abortion he once forced upon her by no means resolved by her current pregnancy. The setting, therefore, is pure Aickman: a protagonist who is incapable of sorting the discords and thrusts and appalling glitches of his early life into a kind of entente cordiale, and who finds himself caught in a tangle of fragmented unreadable scenes and narratives which fleetingly seem to replicate his own fragmentation as a man. Nothing in the end makes sense, though everything is tellingly horrific; so Standish literally burns his life to ash, scalding himself into a state so close to genuine infancy that he and the aborted child whom he has fabricated out of the stench of his own bad faith seem pretty well identical.

*Houses Without Doors* assembles stories of the 1980s, some of them supernatural, including "A Short Guide to the City" and a short version of *Mrs. God* (this version, which Straub prefers, was reprinted as a standalone volume in 2010). "The Buffalo Hunter," also published here for the first time, can be read as analogous to *Mrs. God*, for its protagonist, significantly named Bunting, has also failed to make sense of his fracturing self as the middle years approach. Standish lights out for a Territory which is a pathless shatter of mirrors; Bunting turns inward, hunkering infant-like in his New York apartment, where he finds himself actually entering the worlds of the Westerns he reads for escape. Fatally, however, he comes across Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1873–1877) and, while inside Anna's tortured story, is run over by the train which kills her.

*Magic Terror* assembles more recent work. Each story, even the non-supernatural tales, powerfully explicates the central concerns which have possessed Straub throughout his career. Two are of particular interest. "Hunger, an Introduction" (1995), the story of a failed con-man and cheat, told posthumously in the first person, in an Edgar Allan Poe voice, constitutes Straub's most intensely comprehensive vision of the ravenousness of the absence of Good or Being; the last scene, where the ghost sucks minutiae of live substance through watching a child watch television, is both excruciating and surreally hilarious. "Mr. Clubb and Mr. Cuff" (1998) is a take on Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1856), though Mr. Cuff himself presumably homages Sergeant Cuff in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868). The narrator, chief partner of a firm of accountants which specializes in criminal clients, finds that his young wife has been unfaithful, and asks his assistant to help him hire some thugs to punish her. Right on schedule (though we learn later they had never in fact been approached) the seemingly comic Mr. Clubb and Mr. Cuff arrive, and through their vaudeville parody of a Mr. Interlocutor routine extract from the narrator the information they require; at the same time, they begin to transform his offices into a scene of uncontrollable revel. They then perform their duties with the wife and her lover—torturing both of them to death—and then balance the books with the narrator, torturing him as well, all the while addressing

each other with a camp formality that makes them seem—theatrically and inescapably—twin Lords of Misrule. His torture complete, his business ruined, his wife a corpse in the ground, the narrator returns to the fundamentalist constraints of his upstate home town, where he can be said to flourish as a clockwork man reconstrued from fractures might flourish: "Ceremonious vestments," he tells us, "assure that my patchwork scars remain unseen."

The central narrative secret of *Mr. X* seems no secret if the reader knows before opening the book that its narrator is black, for there are dozens of clues throughout that make it clear that he is not white; and at least two extended sequences—one when a small boy with perfect pitch imitates a Southern black accent with a striking accuracy that Straub renders phonetically—only make sense if this is understood. At the same time, these hints and sequences are laid down inconspicuously, as part of the flow of a tale of quite remarkable complexity, so that early reviewers' failure to notice Ned Dunstan's color was probably inevitable. Straub himself has said (personal communication) that:

> The main thing [readers] missed was some of the humor and the suggestion that black Americans are like the doppelgängers of white Americans—feared, avoided, and necessary to the picture as a whole. If you *did* get it mid-way through the book, then you would enjoy the salutary shock of recognizing that you had all along been taking these black people as simply people, without reference to their race.

The cultural implications of this game of invisibility are in themselves sufficiently telling to justify Straub's strategy here; but as *Mr. X* is itself a novel *about* invisible doppelgängers who are denied but who are "necessary to the picture as a whole," then the strategy seems doubly clever.

Ned Dunstan has been shadowed all his life by his invisible quasi-ghost twin brother Robert, while at the same time he has been tracked and haunted by his father, the eponymous Mr. X, the demented illegitimate offspring of the demented philoprogenitive Howard Dunstan, a black man who lives in the large family house out of town, and of Ellie Hatch, who is white. If miscegenation were itself not difficult enough to field for the two families, Ned's parents are also unduly consanguineous, as his mother, Star Dunstan, is Mr. X's niece. Since the nineteenth century, the Dunstans and the Hatches have shared an uneasy, shifting hegemony over the southern Illinois city of Edgerton (probably Cairo in real life), which only intensifies the sense that, under Straub's rendering of the family/civic arabesques riddling Edgerton, there lies an auctorial play with William Faulkner, whose greatest novels revolve around incestuous miscegenating families. That Howard Dunstan's house finally burns down with him in it, which is what happens to the demented philoprogenitive Thomas Sutpen and his house in *Absalom, Absalom* (1936), proves, however, to be coincidental, as Straub was not familiar with that Faulkner novel.

Ned returns to Edgerton when he senses that his mother has also returned there to die. He arrives in time to say farewell to her, and to gain some clue as to his father's identity; and his subsequent search through the present and past of Edgerton, which arouses his hiding father into murderous activity, supplies the central spine around which the numerous threads of *Mr. X* are woven. Mr. X believes himself to be a scion of the Elder Gods out of the Cthulhu Mythos of H. P. Lovecraft, whom he reads literally; this belief, along with certain supernatural powers shared by all the Dunstans, make him a dangerous Dad to touch base with, and the surface action of the plot deals more than competently with various expectable scenes and encounters. At its heart, though, *Mr. X* burns through the virtuoso devices which make reading the text a series of lessons in reading Peter Straub. *Mr. X* is in itself a joy to read, without glosses. And it is funny. If in the end, it goes further—uncovering itself as a meditation on perception, genre, race, the past, Americanness, family, sex, friendship, loyalty, betrayal—that fractal unpacking of the world, and what we say to the world in order to tell the World, is what Peter Straub has learned how to give us. It was perhaps Peter Straub's best novel to that point. We were fortunate to be able to hope for more, and to have had our hopes fulfilled. ⚘

Peter Straub signing *A Dark Matter*; February 2010.
Photo by Ellen Datlow.

# Thirteen Ways of Looking at Peter Straub (with apologies to Wallace Stevens)

F. Brett Cox

I

Walking to the cabana
Straub carries his words
A folder of nightmare.

II

Freud vs. Marx
Straub stakes his claim:
Freud, yes.

III

It is the red bow tie
That is important.
It is not the red bow tie
That is important.
Straub gives nothing away.

IV

A blind detective
Walks into a bar:
Straub!

V

Gary Wolfe has written
Insightfully of Straub
And deserves his own poem.

VI

A star walks into a lobby
And regards Straub.
Both understand.

VII

Side by side with John Crowley
Their erudition stuns us
We want to be erudite
Straub continues.

VIII

Rock vs. jazz:
Straub stakes his claim
But will be denied nothing.

IX

Stephen King has collaborated
Successfully with Straub
And undoubtedly has
His own poem.

X

A mile from Shirley Jackson's house
Blackbirds line a stone fence.
Straub would approve.

XI

Straub turns fear into art.
So do many of us.
Just not as well.

XII

Straub reads a story
About a town in Florida
And the laughter does not stop.
Straub continues.

XIII

The blackbirds on the stone fence
Are gone.
Straub opens his nightmare folder
And begins.

Peter Straub with Gary Wolfe, "graveside chat"; June 2011.
Photo by Ellen Datlow.

# Peter Straub, Unaccountable

## John Crowley

Not too long ago, Peter Straub and I, and my wife and daughters, were in a cab going up FDR Drive from the Wall Street area, where my wife had found a cheap hotel. Of course we were soon passing by, or under as it always seems, the Brooklyn Bridge, and Peter and I began reciting: *How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest / The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,* and *Over the chained bay waters Liberty,* and *O harp and altar, of the fury fused, / How could mere toil align thy choiring strings?* The "Proem," of course, to Hart Crane's *The Bridge.* I don't know many people who would (a) be able to recite that, and (b) be unashamed and even delighted to do so. It encapsulates my reasons for loving the man.

Peter is probably the best-read person I have ever known. Harold Bloom may beat him, but there is reason to think that Bloom has not read every book he regards familiarly, and I believe that Peter has read what he claims to have read, which covers an immense ground: popular fiction, including of course fantasy, horror, and SF but also crime and anything else that looks interesting; poetry, including some stern modernists I have not attempted; modern fiction of every stripe, pre-modern, modern, Magic Realist, realist, post-modern, post-post-modern, neorealist, minimalist, maximalist, neomodernist. His breakfast table is piled so deep in new arrivals that there is hardly room for coffee.

While he is far better read than me, he is so generous in his views, so open to diversity (though not tolerant of pretension or crap), and so free of any kind of critical cant that talking about books with him is a pleasure reminiscent sometimes of the delight you found as a youth on coming across someone whose modes of understanding were in alignment with your own though not identical; it makes one (me) feel a little of the boundless enthusiasm felt then, for the riches of books and the excitement of talking insightfully or at least passionately about them. I'm afraid that a working life producing them does not always conduce to a rapturous engagement with books in the later years. Sitting at Peter's breakfast table has a pang of *temps perdu* to go along with the shame of not having read a tenth of what he has, even upon his high recommendation.

I first met Peter at a now-famed World Fantasy Convention held in a fairy tower high above Berkeley, California. We had the same agent, in whose company we met. (Stephen King was with that agent too, and had come to the Con; it was long ago.) I had little occasion to speak to him, and I think he was likely unaware of my books at the time. He was dressed as he always was then and still often is, in a three-piece navy-blue suit, wingtip Oxfords, and a subdued tie. His somewhat owlish glasses and large and even then combing-challenged head completed the picture. The only actual exchange I can remember having with him was to remark that I had heard (I had) that he was an accountant. He looked puzzled for a moment and said, "No, it's just that people think I *look* like an accountant." This was sufficiently embarrassing that I avoided him thereafter.

It isn't, of course, any sort of insult to suppose that someone is or has been an accountant, even if the someone is also a writer. But Peter Straub is not one. It is not only from the books he has written that we can know that he is not, and has not ever been, an accountant; accounts are not what he keeps, in any sense, and balance sheets are inapplicable to his thought. It has been a grief to him how few of his own books I have been able to read—I have a horror of horror that only my friendship for him induces me to even try to overcome—whereas he has read, and even in some instances partly reread, much work of mine, and has always been able to say things both generous and smart about it. In spite of all this he has always been glad to see me. How can that be accounted for?

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# Tribute to Peter Straub

## Michael Dirda

Others will speak about Peter's genius as a storyteller, his on-going exploration of the inner geography of horror, dark fantasy, and psychological suspense, and his influence on all these fields. But I'd like to underscore two other aspects of this year's Readercon Guest of Honor: his innate courtesy and his wide-ranging taste as a man of letters.

Is there a kinder, more generous figure in our field than Peter Straub? A major artist in his own right, Peter is nonetheless always eager to discover—and celebrate—a new writer or honor an admired master. Is Neil Gaiman throwing a 50th-birthday party in New Orleans? Peter is there. Is Gene Wolfe being inducted into the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame? Peter is there—in tuxedoed splendor. Talk to Elizabeth Hand about Peter and the first verb she uses to describe her feelings for him is "love." She speaks for many.

I first met Peter, telephonically, sometime in the 1980s. As an editor at *The Washington Post Book World*, I had asked Frank Herbert to review *The Talisman*, the first collaboration between Peter and Stephen King. We ran the review on the top of the front page, pairing it with a piece by Doug Winter about an omnibus edition of Peter's early novels. I remember that I had a tight space for the headline and came up with "The Sorcerer's Apprenticeship"—not that *Julia, If You Could See Me Now*, and *Under Venus* were apprentice work.

Not long after, I convinced Peter to review some new horror title. In the course of our conversation I discovered that this writer's true passion was for jazz. So a month or two later I asked him to discuss a couple of new jazz books for *The Post*. And he did it, needless to say, very well.

I think we met for the first time, in the flesh (to use a Clive Barker phrase), at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, perhaps a decade ago. This was the year when the great Joan Aiken was ICFA's guest of honor and China Miéville struck me as looking a lot like the genie of Aladdin's lamp. There, beside the pool in the Florida sunshine or late at night at the bar, Peter and David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer and John Clute and Alice Turner and Fiona Kelleghan and Tim Sullivan and the much-missed Robert Holdstock and I sipped tall drinks and gossiped about books, publishing, literary politics, and our favorite science fiction and fantasy. It is a truth universally acknowledged that in sf one finds the best company and the mightiest drinking companions in the world.

I once stayed with Peter at his townhouse in New York. There were books on every level, signed artwork by Gahan Wilson, a magnificent audio system, and jazz CDs carefully organized into heavy archival binders. Peter started his career as a poet and so we were soon talking about poetry, especially John Ashbery. Nonetheless, I was astonished to realize that Peter actually bought—that is, paid hard cash for—the work of new, relatively unknown poets. And then, even more astonishingly, he actually read their work. I also discovered that he loved the comic Dortmunder novels of Donald E. Westlake and the fiction of the underappreciated Donald Harington, the creator of Stay More, Arkansas, and a writer of Nabokovian brilliance. To cap everything, one evening during my visit Peter toddled off to The Century, the famous New York arts club where he could hobnob with biographer Robert Caro, novelist Louis Auchincloss, and other pillars of the literary establishment.

Above all, Peter Straub loves people and he loves literature. Over the course of his career, he's written poetry and award-winning essays, published the groundbreaking *Ghost Story*, edited major anthologies for the Library of America, and periodically brought out those masterly stories and novels through which he explores the darkness in the American psyche, especially in the aftermath of Vietnam. For decades now, Readercon's 2012 Guest of Honor has been reading widely and working hard, repeatedly challenging himself as an artist, and always staying vitally involved with the literature of our time. Of course, Peter has had a bit of luck too—especially in marrying the wonderful Susan. But that's another story.

Susan and Peter Straub; May 2007.
Photo by Ellen Datlow.

# Smoking with Peter

## Craig Shaw Gardner

Sometimes, a cigar is more than a cigar—

What can I say about Peter Straub? I mean, besides the fact that he's one of the most important voices in horror fiction today, who wrote a pair of novels—*Ghost Story* and *Shadowland*—that pretty much defined the best that horror had to offer during the boom years of the 1980s. And he's continued to write thoughtful, and scary, books ever since.

Peter's the kind of guy you can talk to. Don't get me wrong; horror fiction writers are just about the nicest folks you'll ever meet. (By and large, I think they let all the dark stuff out on paper.) But, for whatever reason, an awful lot of these nice guys disappear to Maine or Georgia or wherever, never to be seen again. Peter actually seems to like going to conventions, and appearing on panels and sharing his opinions with others. He has been a big supporter of the Horror Writers of America, and has attended Readercons and that other convention to the South (Necon, the fabled Rhode Island convention that—when the stars are properly aligned—takes place the weekend *after* Readercon). I've heard him speak on dozens of panels and the like, where he manages to actually make complex literary ideas understandable. And he delivers it all with a great sense of humor. Basically, Peter's one heck of a nice guy.

How do I put this all in perspective? For the last three decades, I have wandered around the world of sf, fantasy, and horror. Now, the best moments at sf cons always seem to take place at some party or the SFWA suite. I learn the most interesting things at fantasy cons when I'm going out to dinner. But at horror events, the best stuff always happens in the bar.

So it happened, lo these many years ago, when you could still smoke in bars. And many of us HWA types were sitting around the bar at the Warwick Hotel in New York City (a neat old place where we'd take over the penthouse where Cary Grant used to stay when he was in town). And the conversation wandered, somehow, into whether any of us indulged in the then-current craze of cigar-smoking. None of us had, except for Peter—who then proceeded to take out cigars from his own personal stash, and give them to everyone at the table, so that we could all experience smoking those things first-hand. And, let me tell you, they were really good cigars. And we learned how to snip off the ends, how to actually keep them lit, how to fully appreciate the smoke, and all that stuff. (And for me, who has never smoked a cigarette in his life, this was indeed a new experience.) So we spent the evening drinking and smoking, which, as anyone can tell you, is far better than just drinking, and a grand time was had by all.

Thus were the officers of HWA, men and women alike, led further down the pathway of sin. And it was all thanks to Peter. How can a guy be any nicer?

# A Dark Matter of Trust

## Rick Wilber

Peter Straub is consistently brilliant. He's so steadily excellent, in fact, that he's completely won my readerly trust. This thought occurs to me as I stand at my bookshelves and sift through my favorites of his novels and marvel again at how well and how often he makes major contributions to not only the horror field but to literature, and, hell, life, in general.

I've read everything he's published that I could get my greedy hands on, or nearly so (all right, all right, I haven't read the very early poems, and I haven't read *Marriages*), but from about *Ghost Story* forward I've

been happy to call myself a fan, and I've done that because I not only enjoy, but admire, his continuing excellence. He was very, very good early on and has simply moved forward into fully realized excellence from there.

For me, there's never a Straub story or novel that doesn't impress. I won't name names, but that's something I can say for exactly three writers, and I've been reading a novel or two a week since I was in fourth grade and I am now much farther along my personal timeline than I care to admit. I hesitate to calculate the number of total novels read.

A couple of years ago I happened to read Stephen King's *Under the Dome* and Peter's *A Dark Matter* back to back and then had some fun posting on a blog a little compare and contrast with the two books.

King's *Under the Dome* is a top-notch thriller, I noted, and a fast read despite its nearly 1100 pages. The opening chapter sets a frenetic pace as that large, inexplicable, clear dome appears over a small Maine town and mayhem follows, complete with car, truck and airplane crashes and a few lucky and talented people who dodge the carnage and begin to realize what's happened.

As the story progresses we meet and like the good guys and meet and dislike the bad guys, especially one despicable father and son pair. Will good prevail over evil? Will anyone survive as the air runs out and evil seems to be triumphant? Will we ever find out how in heck that dome appeared out of nowhere? Does it matter if we do? All of these questions are answered as we keep (rapidly) turning the pages.

King's writing is excellent and fully under control, and I think *Under the Dome* is one of his better books, though it's unfortunate that some essential elements of the story also appear in the Simpsons movie, where they are rather more hilarious than horrific.

But Peter's *A Dark Matter*. Ah, now that's another kettle of Wisconsin perch. It isn't just good, I noted; it is, despite its relative brevity, a transcendently thick, rich, thoughtful exploration of life, love, and the loss of innocence. As often happens in Straub's stories, a childhood experience has cast very long shadows on the lives of a number of people and much later in their lives they finally search for an understanding of the horror of that day.

The novel is one-third the length of the King, but took me much longer to read. Peter's prose is so rife with imagery and meaning that I found myself getting slower and more careful in the reading process as the story progressed. In many sections I read it the way I read poetry: thoughtfully, wondrously, enviously (I'd give a lot to be able to handle the language like this).

The story is told by novelist Lee Harwell, who was only tangentially involved in the dark moment from the shared past of his friends and his now-blind wife (who, no surprise, "sees" the story better than anyone else in the novel). The novelist-as-narrator gives Peter free rein once again to utilize a voice that hints at fabulous (in the imaginative sense of the word) depths.

I said in the blog post that I always think of this kind of writing as the iceberg principle at work, with seven-eighths of the import of the work waiting to be found below the waterline. Read it slowly and savor the really outstanding use of the language as the story emerges in all its emotional complexity.

I closed my comments by noting that I've read just about everything that's out there by Straub and admired it all. But *A Dark Matter* was, to my mind, something very, very special and a truly outstanding book written by a first-class talent in absolute control of his work.

I should add that in addition to his writerly talents, Peter is a first-class social talent, too, imbued with a sparkling, even gregarious personality. I often have college-student writers in tow when I see Peter at one conference or another and he always goes out of his way to be patiently informative and supportive and downright chatty with them. I don't know that I've ever properly thanked him for that, so that's an omission I'll remedy at Readercon.

I've discovered, in scribbling all this down, another omission. I haven't read the current novel, *Mrs. God*, yet. Happily, the digital age makes that easy to fix so—wait a few seconds—there, I've just Kindled it and I'll read it on the plane on the way to Readercon. I'll have very high expectations, as it were, as I read it at 34,000 feet over the Carolinas. The only problem, of course, will be figuring out a way to get him to sign it once I work my way to Burlington. I'm stumped in that regard, but Peter will figure something out. I trust him.

# What You Will Bring Forth Will Save You: An Appreciation of Peter Straub

John Langan

Towards the end of *Shadowland* (1980), Peter Straub's fifth published novel, Tom Flanagan, the narrative's "underrated" hero, is shown a book by the villain, Coleman Collins. "A watered-down version" of this volume, "known as *The Gospel of Thomas*," was discovered in the Nag Hammadi library; Collins calls it a "weak document" that "does not reveal our secrets." The secrets in question are those of magic, of a society of magicians whose history extends back at least two millennia, probably longer, and of which Collins is current head. In addition to such maxims as "As Above, So Below," Collins shares a quotation from the book that is also in the better-known Gnostic gospel: "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you." By this point, there is a great deal else going on in the novel, so we might pass over these words without bothering to consider their full import; I want to suggest, though, that they form a kind of lens through which we can view Peter Straub's accomplishment. Indeed, his work has been defined by a constant concern with bringing forth that which is inside, from the level of narrative design to that of narrative action.

Since it's not my intention to offer a book-length exploration of Straub's fiction (Bill Sheehan has written a nice one in his *At the Foot of the Story Tree* [2000]), I'll confine myself to a trio of what seem to me the most obvious manifestations of this concern. The first is Straub's second published novel, *Julia* (1975). Straub wrote the book after having published one novel, *Marriages* (1973), and having completed but failed to find a publisher for a second, *Under Venus* (1984). At this point, he had authored several volumes of Ashbery-inflected poetry, *My Life in Pictures* (1971), *Ishmael* (1972), and *Open Air* (1972), and these exerted some sway over his fiction. As Straub told Douglas Winter, his aim was "to write something very akin to prose poetry." Plot was "anachronistic and unmodern"; what mattered was "style and the way that different textures in a novel clashed and interacted."

After *Marriages*, though, his interest began to shift in the direction of "more traditional narrative," in part because it struck him that he would be able "to spread my wings a little further" and achieve "deeper satisfactions" as a writer. *Under Venus* was his initial foray into this new territory; when it went unpublished, he decided to journey even further down the road of traditional narrative, and try writing a ghost story. He had an idea for one, he told Winter, "and the idea scared me." There was an "enormous advantage" to working in what Straub was "very conscious" of as "an unregarded form," namely, that "it meant that I could try whatever I wanted and nobody important would notice." At the same time, while Straub wanted to write a novel "that would have readers," he intended it to "satisfy the demands I placed upon myself" as an artist. He had recognized that the "merit" in a ghost story, as in any kind of fiction, "is brought by the individual writer and is not inherent in the genre itself." Therefore, he "wanted to bring whatever literary acumen and intelligence I could muster to a very attractive and quirky form."

The success of *Julia*, which included a film adaptation starring Mia Farrow and Keir Dullea, vindicated the shift in Straub's aesthetic. At the risk of trespassing on Straub's biography, it's my belief that this move's roots stretch back to his early childhood, when the combination of his precocious development as a reader (he had taught himself to read in kindergarten), his inclination toward what Bill Sheehan has called "fiction of an exotic and adventurous nature," and his own, nascent storytelling abilities made him "in demand around campfires and in backyards on summer evenings." His relation to narrative would be dramatically intensified as a result of the near-fatal accident he suffered at age seven, when he was hit by a car. His injuries were extensive, and led to several operations, long hours in a wheelchair, and a year out

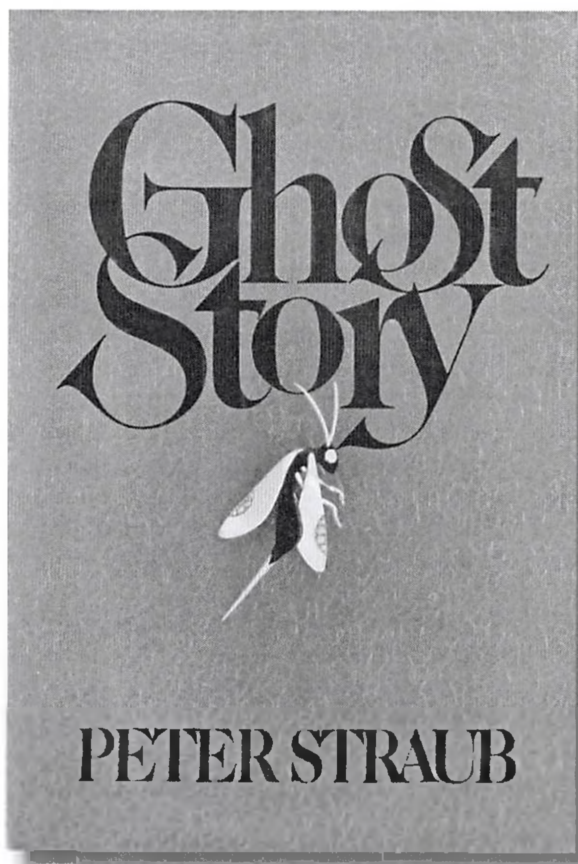
of school. He passed this time reading ferociously, and when at last he returned to school, his powers of narrative were undiminished; indeed, as he told Douglas Winter, "whenever I saw a chink of daylight—the tiniest possibility to justify it—instead of actually writing the theme I was supposed to do, I would write a kind of wild invention around it." He wrote plays for the other neighborhood children to stage: "moralistic, with a lot of violence."



So when the adult Peter Straub decided to pursue more traditional narrative designs, he was bringing a significant element of his childhood forth into the context of his mature creative ambitions. In retrospect, it makes perfect sense that Straub should have met the challenges posed by writing the novel by drawing on his longstanding experience of and proficiency with narrative. The books that followed *Julia*, which continued and deepened his engagement with story, bear out his choice.

II

The second instance of Straub heeding *The Gospel of Thomas*'s injunction also has its origin in his childhood. With *Ghost Story* (1979), his fourth published novel, Straub had dramatically raised the stakes for himself as a writer. Both *Julia* and *If You Could See Me Now* (1977) had been fast-moving, tightly focused narratives centered on a single character's conflict with the supernatural. *Ghost Story* spread itself among a number of protagonists; it also presented its supernatural elements in greater variety and scope than before. It's possible to trace the novel's expansiveness to the informal survey Straub and fellow writer Thomas Tessier had been doing of the history of supernatural horror fiction, "talking," as he told Bill Sheehan, "about writers like Lovecraft, Richard Matheson, and Robert Bloch." That reading, however, was not Straub's first exposure to the depth and breadth of the horror field. At around the age of eleven, he had discovered the Modern Library anthology *Great Tales of Terror and the Supernatural* (1944), a compendium of stories ranging from Poe's "The Black Cat" to Henry James's "Sir Edmund Orme," from Wilkie Collins's "A Terribly Strange Bed" to Walter de la Mare's "Out of the Deep." Straub told Winter, "As a child, I always carried a book with me, just as I always do as an adult. That book I carried with me for a long, long time"; it seems obvious that he had continued to carry *Great Tales of Terror and the Supernatural* within himself long after the physical volume in his possession had been replaced by another. Thus, the writers he and Tessier were surveying constituted a kind of refresher course, a return to and expansion of his first encounter with the horror field. The consequence of his recognition of the richness of supernatural horror was *Ghost Story* and the two novels that followed it, *Shadowland* and *Floating Dragon* (1983). Together, the books form a kind of thematic trilogy, one in which the overarching narrative contains and is complemented by a number of local stories. This yields a kind of synergy in which the whole exceeds the sum of its parts.



III

Much as Straub's renewed engagement with narrative in *Julia* paved the way for him to explore one of its major neighborhoods in *Ghost Story*, so that exploration, in turn, led him to the spaces underneath that neighborhood, to the caverns atop whose ceilings its twisting structures had been constructed. The result was *Koko* (1988), the third instance in which Straub brought forth that which was within—specifically, trauma. The ways in which the world wounds us, especially when we are children, lie at the heart of this novel and the two that followed it, *Mystery* (1990) and *The Throat* (1993), the other volumes in Straub's "Blue Rose" trilogy. I've already mentioned the childhood accident that almost claimed his life and plunged him more deeply into the world of narrative; with these novels, that event moves to center stage. Initially, *Koko* appears to be a thriller about a crazed veteran of the Vietnam War who is murdering his former squadmates. In its concern with a figure from the past wreaking violence upon a group of old friends, the book seems to share the structure of *Ghost Story*. By *Koko*'s end, however, we have moved into new territory. We've learned that the reason for the killer's behavior lies well beyond his military experience, in the abuse of his childhood; indeed, that abuse actually fits him for the obscenity of war. And unlike *Ghost Story*, where the solution to the threat lies in defeating it, matching violence to violence, the solution to *Koko* lies in acknowledging the killer's original trauma, giving voice to the travesty of his childhood. In the "Blue Rose" novels, the monstrous must be given its due, allowed its place in the larger scheme of things; in these books, the saving power of bringing forth what is within becomes a vital part of the narrative action.

Again, in retrospect, it's not a great surprise that Straub's ongoing engagement with the creative strategies and subjects of his childhood should have delivered him to the catastrophe that had almost ended it. No doubt, too, what Sheehan called Straub's "decade-long experience with psychoanalysis" played a role in his decision to explore the implications of early trauma; after all, what is psychoanalysis but a prolonged effort by the analyst to help the patient to bring forth what is within, to tell the stories of his/her life in order to save him/herself? What is remarkable is what he did with his experience of trauma. In the "Blue Rose" novels, Straub achieves a balance in the portrayal of his antagonists between the menace they represent and the pain that shapes and drives them. It would be easy enough for him either to reduce these characters to one-dimensional killing machines, or to sentimentalize them into hapless victims; instead, like the creature in Stephen Crane's famous poem, they force their own, bitter hearts into their mouths and chew, drawing sustenance from the acrid meat of their wounding.

IV

Peter Straub's fiction since the "Blue Rose" books has not stood still; among the most restless of writers, he's continued to challenge himself as an artist. Later novels such as *lost boy lost girl* (2003) and *In the Night Room* (2004) explore the slippery knot of loss and desire that lies at the heart of artistic creation. Though he's received lifetime achievement awards from the Horror Writers Association, International Horror Guild Awards, and World Fantasy Awards, Straub has shown no inclination to rest on his laurels. Speaking to Winter, Straub said, "I value virtuosity." The books that he has written—that he has continued to write—exemplify such virtuosity. What Straub has brought forth from himself over the last four decades has saved him, and we are the beneficiaries of his salvation. ⚘

# Smithie

## Nick Mamatas

"Hey Olivia," I said to my wife. "Remember that time you tried to read Peter Straub?" Back when we were dating, I'd pressed a mass-market paperback of *lost boy lost girl* into her hands. She read it faithfully for several nights, then stopped.

"Sure," she said. "It was interesting. He set a good scene—with a fairly sad family drama and lots of really clear visual images." And, she added, "his characters felt real and their motivations were credible." Olivia has a degree in English from Smith; such things are important to her. But she didn't make it more than halfway through the book.

"I stopped reading mainly, I think, because I didn't particularly want to know the awful things he was about to lay down," she said when I asked her. That's how she remembered it now, a few years later. At the time she stopped, she made terrible faces, stuck out her tongue, and waved the book around like it had a dead thing in its pages. *lost boy lost girl* features a torture bed—a rack of sorts—lovingly made and installed in a now-abandoned home, where a girl was repeatedly tortured. That idea, of an assemblage of wood and steel that isn't even depicted in its days of use in the book, was enough.

I reminded Olivia, and she said of the secret torture bed, "I still don't want to know, and I don't get why people do want to know about it."

Well, I'll tell you. When Peter Straub writes about a torture bed, what you'll end up knowing about it is important. It's not the typical adventure-porn—girl tortured, middle-class man breaks in to stop the madness—there's violence and struggle, and after a commercially determined ratio of grue to one-sentence paragraphs is met, a satisfying ending. Straub knows that the idea of the bed itself is sufficient, for both his characters and his readers, and then he pushes on in directions beyond the norms of the often (aesthetically, politically) reactionary horror genre.

*lost boy lost girl* was followed by *In the Night Room*, in which the events of *lost boy lost girl* are critiqued, reconceptualized, and remixed by a combination of metafiction and the dark fantastic. In one especially gripping scene, a fictional boy detective realizes that he is fictional and that the traditional eerie mystery in which he is involved will not ever be solved. But the boy detective's author is also fictional. There's Tim Underhill, the author of and character in *lost boy lost girl*, who encounters a woman named Willy, the author of *In the Night Room*. He also encounters the murderer from Straub's *lost boy lost girl*, who is upset over the portrayal of his daughter in Underhill's version of the book. PS: Willy is also imaginary, to both Underhill and to us. Naturally, Underhill—a Straub surrogate and a character in Underhill's own previous book—is as well.

Four layers of metafiction, and not in some obscure avant-garde publication or work in translation, but in a book you could buy in a grocery store with a sawbuck and get change. The evil torture bed of *lost boy lost girl* is frightening in its implications, but when Straub explores those implications, he does it like nobody else, pushing to the very edge of reality and beyond. And that, Olivia, is why we read him.

# Throat

## China Miéville

"The Throat" is, of course, the greatest book title in the history of English. Literary judgments are subjective, yes, except when they're not. "The Throat" is the greatest book title in the history of English because it does nothing to its own words, and because instead it lets the word(s) do everything.

To quote Nick Mamatas quoting something someone else said on Twitter, "In the horror story, the horrific bit is the truth of the world, and everything else is a lie." Plenty of written horror is an irruption of the pathological into reality: the greatest, though, is a revelation that pathology is the reality.

Thus, the horror of words: not what you can do with them, but what they do. What they are.

How can it be possible, how can it possibly be possible, for one definite article and one simple noun, *sans* even an adjective to nudge the reader the desired way, to embed terror? And not even a noun for some baleful enormity, not even the signifier of a self-evidently horrible horror, but the name of a quotidian bit of flesh, thousands of which we are all surrounded by every day. Things we clear every time we prepare to speak. Things on top of which, indeed, sit the very heads with which we read that very word that sends cold right through us. Cold that fills our throats.

The title is the telos of literary horror. Only the most masterful writer could use it. If any of the rest of us called a book "The Throat" it would just mean the little bit under your chin, you know, that thing, the neck thing you swallow with, whatever.

But we didn't write it. Straub wrote it.

Peter Straub is to words what the fabled sculptors are to jade—an artist whose job is to gently and exquisitely hone away just a tiny weight of excess, a little distracting accretion, to bring out the contours waiting, to unveil the shapes that hide right there in the matter of the world, there, right there in plain sight.

Not carp, though, nor lotus, in his case. Horrors.

How can it be possible for such a simple word to do something so terrifying? Like this, is how:

*The Throat.*

That was me quoting Straub: that's why it got you. That word-dust you feel scattering is the tiny, faint remnants that Peter Straub has brushed from the word, the faint furring of common usage, the merciful verdigris of habit that has effaced the edges of that absolutely everyday and absolutely utter horror. Straub brushes the language clean, stands back and tilts his head to check and nods in satisfaction, and god help us we can see the words we thought we knew, that we could have bloody sworn we'd been using all this time without them feeling like this, without this badness in the heart, in the world. In the throat.

Throat is not, it turns out, a simple word. But the horror of that is that no word is, because neither is the world they speak. None of it is simple. It is Straubian.

# A Book Worth My Job

## Elizabeth Hand



I vividly recall my first encounter with Peter Straub's gorgeously unsettling, virtuoso work: a cold sunny morning in April 1979. I was working at Fox & Sutherland's bookstore in Mount Kisco, New York. My duties included managing the children's book section and helping out in the stockroom, where each day I avidly tore open the new shipment from Baker and Taylor, the distributor whose cartons were the closest I ever came to peering into a genuine treasure chest.

That morning, the hoard included multiple copies of a novel that was already being touted as one of the year's biggest books. Despite my brief tenure at the shop, I'd already learned to be suspicious of the publishing sales force—I'd been responsible for ordering too many kids' books that still hadn't sold. But I was immediately seduced by the book's cover art, a deceptively simple, elegant image of a gold-and-diamond brooch in the shape of a wasp; and by the novel's title, equally concise: *Ghost Story*.

I snagged the book and a stack of other titles, hurried from the minuscule stockroom back into the shop, and began to read *Ghost Story*. There were no customers—April was a slow month—but Herman Fox, the store's octogenarian co-founder, was in the store that day. Employees were forbidden from sitting down except in the breakroom, so I wandered around the stacks, shelving books at a snail's pace as I grew increasingly captivated and disturbed by the account of Alma Mobley's revenge upon the Milburn Chowder Society. Mr. Fox confronted me more than once when he caught me leaning against the shelves, but by that point I was too immersed in the novel to care: at last, I had encountered a book worth losing my job for.

I didn't get fired, but I did finish the book before I left the shop at 5PM. I put it back on the shelf, making a mental note to buy it when I got my paycheck on Friday. But by Friday, all the copies were gone. The book became Peter Straub's first bestseller, and I became a lifelong fan.

Fortunately for me—for all of us—Peter is marvelously prolific, especially considering that he's a writer's writer's writer. So there were a lot more tales where that one came from. Many of them are great ghost stories; just as many are great ghost stories in which the ghost never appears, to crib Straub's now-famous line from *Ghost Story*. My favorite may be "Pork Pie Hat," about jazz and the persistent horror of racism.

"Most people will tell you that growing up means you stop believing in Halloween things—I'm telling you the reverse. You start to grow up when you understand that the stuff that scares you is part of the air you breathe."

Peter Straub's work is now part of the air I've been breathing for over thirty-three years. And one of the great joys of my life has been getting to know Peter and his wife Susan as friends whose kindness, generosity, and warmth brings to mind a lost Golden Age of literature, when writers of supernatural elegance and wit and grace would welcome others to share their world. In the case of Peter Straub, that Golden Age is right now, and we're all incredibly blessed to be part of it.

# Peter Straub

## Kit Reed

I was drawn to Peter Straub's work long before I ever met him. The man's a stylist, which means I hear the prose as I'm reading, and this isn't a theatrical rendition. Style is metabolic. The cadences, the word choices, the rhythm all serve the work, his dark imagination and mine.

OK, I'll stop blathering. We're friends for many reasons, not the least of which is that Peter did me a tremendous favor some five years ago and I like to think it is I, Kit Reed, who returned the favor.

Readercon was the only con I'd ever been to until Peter talked Joe and me into going to International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, something I couldn't do back in the day, when Brian Aldiss first brought it up. We had small kids and had to visit my ailing mother in St. Pete on spring break, no way could we drive across Florida in the early days of ICFA, but now ... David Hartwell and Gary Wolfe lent a hand and, *voilà*.

In return, I kvelled to Peter and Susan about Readercon ... small compared to the monster cons in distant places, convivial, smart people, lots of fun, close to home, how could they refuse? Now, I'm sure Gary and Liz and John and all were working on this long before I brought it up, but I like to think that it was I, me personally, who got the Straubs here that year and hey, look, now Peter Straub is your Readercon Guest of Honor! I couldn't be more pleased.

# The Peter Straub Book Club

## James Morrow

If the hero of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* had been acquitted by the court-martial and gone on to raise a family, I believe he would have become a father very much like my own. In my perceptions, at least, the late Bill Morrow was a Billy Budd figure—not in the troubling sense of a man burdened with childlike innocence, but in the wholly positive sense of a person who incarnated a quintessential goodness.

Like Billy Budd, my father was a taciturn man, and not especially articulate, characteristics that compromised our ability to talk to one another. Compounding the problem, I now realize, was the primitive quality of my own conversation skills as an adolescent and young man. And yet Dad and I were always seeking ways to connect. Over the years, we managed to sustain a halting discourse driven largely by Hollywood movies, Norman Lear sitcoms, and the Philadelphia Eagles. (I know this sounds pathetic, but recall the gender under consideration here.) But eventually, I am happy to report, we discovered a far more reliable and resonant way to communicate—by sharing our reactions to the novels of Peter Straub.

Bill Morrow was not a bookish person. He never went to college, and his dreary vocation had him filling orders, year in and year out, for an upholstery-supplies wholesaler. And yet Dad had always found solace in fiction, his affections running from James Michener epics to the occasional John Updike novel to Clifton Fadiman's *The World of the Short Story*. (I'm staring at my inherited copy even as I write this.) In particular, he cultivated a taste in high-end horror: a means, perhaps, of negotiating with his dark side—though I'm half-persuaded that, against the odds, he didn't have one. When I was in high school, he and I read *Dracula* in tandem, reveling not only in its melodramatic effects but also in the ineffable sense of primal evil with which Stoker suffused the text. We also attempted *The Turn of the Screw*, a novella that

largely baffled us, though we decided that the fault lay within our own limitations as readers. And then one glorious day in 1979, the gods of American letters smiled on us, dropping in our laps a hardcover wonder entitled *Ghost Story*—and the two-member Peter Straub Book Club was born.

Of the many glittering stones that constitute the mosaic of *Ghost Story*, Dad responded most strongly to the Chowder Society. He was enraptured by the idea of four elderly men sitting around swapping horror yarns by way of sublimating an unspeakable secret—not because he had an unspeakable secret (as far as I know) but simply because he wished that he belonged to such a club. And we both stood in awe of Straub's astonishing talent for blending Gothic chills with the caliber of ambiguity that inspirits the best literary fiction. At long last, *The Turn of the Screw* made sense to us.

As the decade turned, Mr. Straub provided Dad and me with two more marvelous—and eminently discussable—reading adventures: *Shadowland* and *Floating Dragon*, each boasting, in its own distinctive way, the sorts of intricate pleasures we'd encountered in *Ghost Story*. We especially loved puzzling out the chilling folktale that Coleman Collins relates to the two apprentice magicians in *Shadowland*, the elusive parable that ends "Then I am the King of the Cats!" We were equally engaged by the baroque splendors of *Floating Dragon*, which got us quoting to each other a line from Brian de Palma's *Scarface*, released the same year as *Floating Dragon*: "Nothing exceeds like excess."

In the mid-1980s, Dad suffered a severely detached retina that was never properly treated. Following on that ordeal, his zest for reading waned, and the Peter Straub Book Club faded into memory. While it lasted, however, this organization supplied its intergenerational participants with many golden moments.

Thinking back on that interval in my life, I'm reminded of Henry Miller's observation that, because you never know exactly who your audience is, writing fiction is "like shooting fish with a slingshot in the dark." It goes without saying that *Ghost Story*, *Shadowland*, *Floating Dragon*—and all the Straub books that came before and after—have occasioned vital conversations among countless readers: fans felicitously pricked by the hallucinogen-tipped darts of this author's unbounded imagination. Ah, but how many of those readers get to express their gratitude in a Readercon souvenir book? Very few. Thank you, Peter Straub. For my beloved father and myself, you found the mark.

# Peter Straub Appreciation

## Gary K. Wolfe

Sometime in the mid-1990s, after I had already been reviewing science fiction in *Locus* magazine for a few years, the famously crusty and opinionated godfather of that magazine, Charles N. Brown, who often gave me unsolicited tips intended to improve my reviews and probably my taste as well, told me I should be reading Peter Straub. The conversation went something like this:

"I've already read Peter Straub," I said. "I even bought *Ghost Story* way back when I was briefly a member of the Book-of-the-Month Club, and it was a main selection."

"Ah, but you haven't read *enough* Peter Straub," Charles insisted.

"How do you know that? I've read—well, several novels. *Shadowland, Floating Dragon, Koko*—"

"*The Throat*?" asked Charles. "*Mystery*? *The Hellfire Club*?"

Well, no, I had to admit that at that point I hadn't read all those novels. But I also had to confess I didn't know what Charles was getting at. At the time, *Locus* already had a talented reviewer of horror fiction in Ed Bryant, so he surely wasn't trying to recruit me to review horror fiction, a field in which I would never pretend any particular expertise.

"No, no, no," he persisted. That's not it at all. You *have* to read *The Throat*!"

"All right, fine," I said. "I'll read *The Throat*. But if I'm not going to be reviewing this stuff, at least tell me why it's so important for me to read Straub."

"Because," said Charles, "he knows how to write."

* * *

As it turned out, I did eventually begin reviewing Peter's work, but not for a while. A couple of years after this conversation, Peter was guest of honor at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, in Florida. By then I'd read *The Throat* (starting out dutifully, and ending in a mad, delightful rush), and was anxious to meet the writer who, I had by then decided, was not only the most complex novelist working in modern horror fiction, but probably the most broadly literate as well. Within a day or so, he and his wife Susan had formed an almost instant bond of friendship with my wife and me, a friendship which even in retrospect seems startling in its suddenness. It turned out to be the sort of lifelong camaraderie you seldom develop in adulthood, and it remains one of my most treasured and consistently rewarding friendships. So I'm biased. But most of what follows is, I hope, equally useful for those who haven't even had the pleasure of meeting him.

It was during that same weekend in Florida that I began to discover some hints of the cultural and profoundly humanistic substrata that lends Peter's fiction that marvelous polytonality. I still wouldn't count myself an authority on horror fiction, but I'd gone through enough youthful enthusiasms to have at least a passing familiarity with its canon, from Machen to Lovecraft to King. But increasingly, it seemed to me, too much horror fiction was about *other* horror fiction, less interested in seeking the sources of its power than exploiting its easier effects. (Much the same could be said of a good deal of science fiction, but that's another matter.) But Straub's fiction has long been in dialogue not only with his genre, but with a fascinating assortment of lifelong passions that ranges from Raymond Chandler and Henry James and Melville to John Ashbery and Fernando Pessoa to Lester Young and Paul Desmond. He can write about jazz as movingly as anyone I've read (see "Pork Pie Hat" or parts of *Mr. X*), but he can also make you think of very unpleasant things to do with *dental floss* (see "Mr. Clubb and Mr. Cuff"—and how did he know that dental floss would be scarier in *italics*?). When he takes you into the recesses of a disturbed mind, or into a shadowy movie theater where a child is in danger, he won't give you the option of looking away (see "The Juniper Tree"), but at other times he will sit you down in a diner to have some nice cherry pie while you're aware of terrifying unseen things happening just down the street (see "A Special Place"). When he writes of horror, he writes not from effects, but from first principles, from the kind of preternatural clarity that can come from extremity. Yet, when he does choose to go for the effects, he has the technical skill to bring them off as well as the best writers the field has ever seen.

A few years ago Peter edited a special issue of the literary journal *Conjunctions*, and not long after that an anthology titled *Poe's Children: The New Horror*, and not long after *that* his already classic two-volume Library of America anthology *American Fantastic Tales*, which received a World Fantasy Award in 2010, the same year Peter received the Life Achievement Award. To some degree, all these anthologies had similar purposes—to reclaim horror and fantasy from their long exile in the servants' quarters of modern literature, and to reclaim for literary fiction its ancient birthright in the fantastic. By now it's reasonable to assert that he has done as much to bridge that gap as any living writer, but he'd been doing it in his own fiction for decades before he became a public champion of intriguing newer writers from Kelly Link to Graham Joyce to Brian Evenson to—well, the list could go on and on. Peter seems to read a lot.

He doesn't actually write a lot, although by most reasonable standards seventeen novels in just under forty years, plus story collections, novellas, and nonfiction, is pretty impressive. What I actually mean by that is that he doesn't write quite *enough* for readers who, once they discover him, churn through the backlist fairly quickly and start waiting for the next box of surprises. Because if there's one thing Straub readers learn not to expect, it's anything like what they saw the last time out. *Ghost Story* didn't quite prepare you for the literary fantasy overtones of *Shadowland*, which in turn didn't prepare you for the py-

rotechnics of *Floating Dragon.* The epic-scaled collaborations with Stephen King, *The Talisman* and *Black House*, would hardly lead you to expect the layered metafictional experiments of the *lost boy lost girl/In the Night Room* duology or the almost visionary passages toward the end of *A Dark Matter.* And I'm pretty certain that the next novel is going to be something entirely different again, and I'm far from alone in my impatience in getting my hands on it.

One doesn't really read Straub these days simply to get frightened or thrilled; his imagination can be both antic and magisterial, both horrifying and transcendentally beautiful, sometimes all within a few pages. The degree to which he can be really funny at times seems to surprise even him; a few years ago his reading of "Lapland or Film Noir" at ICFA had most of the audience nearly in convulsions. I don't think any of us expected to have that reaction going in, but it illustrates my point about what you *can* expect from Peter's work, which is, well, to have your expectations subverted—expectations about form, about convention, about language, about genre. Like Charles told me years ago, for reasons that I now understand well: he knows how to write. ✣

# World Fantasy Convention

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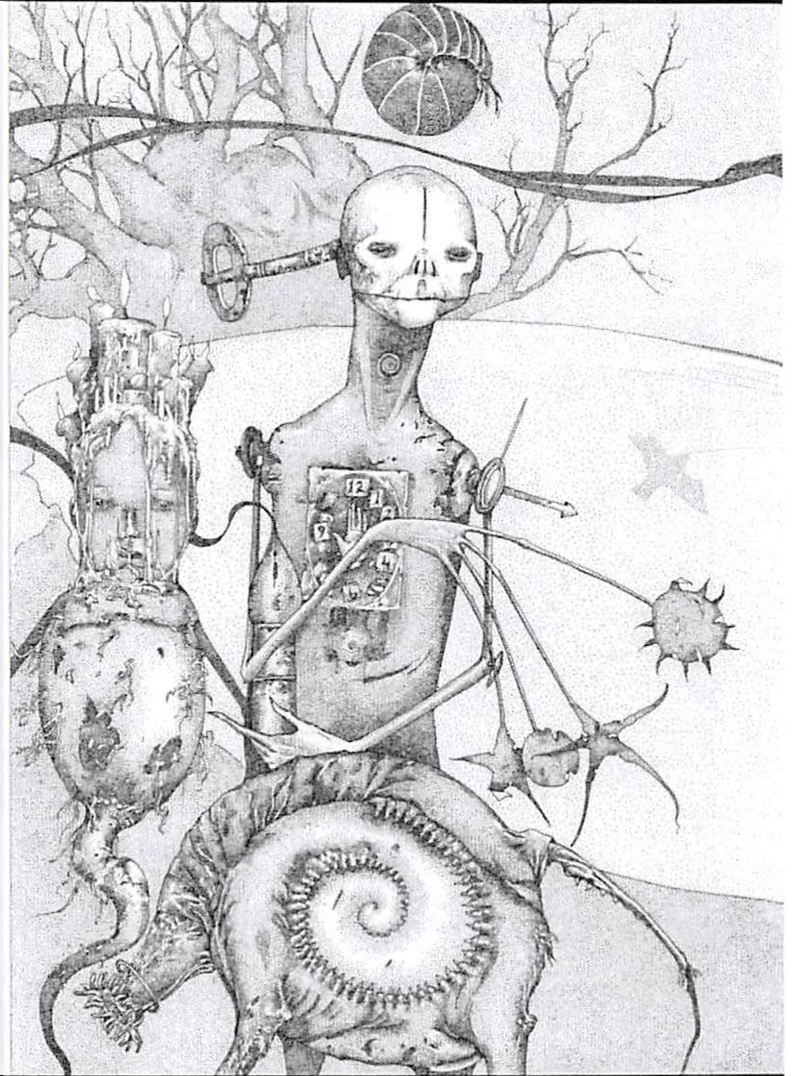

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# Excerpt from The Smell of Fire (forthcoming novel from Doubleday in 2014)

Peter Straub



Eccentric Masterpiece in Milwaukee Show Has Local Connection
by Sheldon Outerthwaite
from *Minneapolis Tribune,* August 14, 1958

"Scenes of Country Life," the show recently mounted in Milwaukee's lakeside war memorial cum art museum, is for the most part no more imaginative than its group title. It need not draw any but the most devoted of our gallery-goers, who will in any case already have seen in other museums better paintings by most of the artists gathered here. The Turners from museums in Sante Fe, Columbus, Savannah, Ft. Worth, and Tallahassee are among this great painter's least inspired, and the three Constables on loan from the Santa Barbara Museum of the Visual Arts seem too comfortable by half. However, a splendid Thomas Girton, "Yorkshire Abbey," on loan from the Seattle Art Museum, and John Linnell's "The Woodcutter's Cottage" from Williams College are mainstays of the English landscape tradition and would well reward a visit from residents of our fair city.

However, the most interesting and exciting painting in the show is almost completely unknown, as is its creator. The Honorable Hugo Ayling is one of those Richard Dadd-like figures in English art whose personal problems overwhelm recognition of their art. He was the fourth son of a landowning Baron, Thomas Aquitane Ayling, who squandered most of his inheritance on gambling, horses, and mistresses. The title and property passed to his eldest son, William, who eventually succeeded in rescuing the estate from bankruptcy. One brother went into the army, one converted to Catholicism and became a Jesuit, and another was involved in a shady scheme involving railroad stock and fled to Australia. After a conventional education at Repton (later to claim Christopher Isherwood as an old boy), Hugo enrolled at the Royal Academy but was asked to leave in his second year for "unhealthy Decadence." No one knows precisely what kind of behavior the RA found grounds for expulsion, but Ayling's brief later career as a professional painter may give us an idea. (I confess to having a dog of my own in this hunt: my Master's thesis was on the English Decadent Tradition.)

Ayling seems to have taken rooms near St. Paul's Cathedral and eked out a living in two ways: friends he had made while still an arts student and a few family contacts arranged for Ayling to paint an unknown number of portraits. Three of these survive in private hands. (Hermann Goering was known to have acquired an Ayling portrait, but it disappeared immediately after the war.) The National Gallery has never exhibited its single Ayling, a group portrait called "The Adepts."

The second way the young Ayling earned his shillings and florins was to make himself useful to older, more established painters who hired talented juniors to paint in backgrounds, skies, or details of clothing. In return the assistants earned small stipends and were given lessons by their masters. Ayling had revealed himself as a excellent technician while still at the RA, and this ability made him welcome in the studios of several major Victorian artists. We know, for example, that both John William Waterhouse and Lord Leighton took him on, and it is almost certain that he performed similar tasks for Sir Frederick Watts and Albert Moore. Watts probably dismissed him within six months. After a year, Moore did the same. However, Ayling's most meaningful association was with William Powell Frith.

## Ayling's Master

As "The Gathered Clan," the painting now on display in Milwaukee, makes clear, Ayling was drawn to Frith's big, summarizing canvases depicting a range of English citizens at their recreations. "Derby Day," the most widely known of these, bespeaks a Dickensian interest in the representation of a vast slice of Victorian experience. Ayling could have made such paintings without Frith's tutelage, but he must have felt that the other man could help him to match his talents to his ambitions more efficiently. It was therefore to Frith he turned when no longer welcome in Leighton and Waterhouse's studios.

Three of Frith's genial books of reminiscences were published in his lifetime. A fair copy of a brief, little-known, and unpublished fourth volume, written in a feminine hand, resides in the Widener Library, where it may be examined by scholars like myself. It has been speculated that this fourth volume was dictated from his deathbed to one of his many daughters. Much of an eight-thousand-word chapter near the end of the book concerns Hugo Ayling, who fascinated, then disturbed, and in the end repelled his Master.

Until his late twenties, Ayling was a tall, fair-haired young man of considerable beauty and great personal charm. Although young Ayling seems always to have had unusual and rarefied interests, he appeared to have had no bad habits and to have been devoted to his work. Whatever variety of "Decadence" had exiled him from the RA took some time to make itself known. Frith took pleasure in the young man's presence in the studio, and noted with amusement the effect he had upon his daughters, who apparently quarreled over which of them he preferred. (A year later, Frith noticed that his daughters appeared to have grown shy, perhaps even fearful around their former darling, and later still cursed himself for blaming this change in mood on the children.) At the beginning of their relationship, Ayling reported daily to his studio and worked to the painter's own long hours. After a few months he asked for, and was granted, his evenings free to do portraiture and some occasional "metaphysical investigation" with friends. He already had Saturdays and Sundays free, and on Fridays occasionally brought with him to the studio a Gladstone bag packed for the weekend—from the haste of his departures, Firth assumed there was a train to catch. For the first year, but for the occasional misstep and missed hours to be expected from any young person, all went smoothly.

## Signs of Trouble

Ayling began to lose weight. He became careless in his dress. Discolorations appeared under his eyes, which seemed to darken and recede. Twice as they were changing into painting smocks for the day's work, Frith saw bloodstains on Ayling's shirt. The younger man assured him that he'd had minor mishaps. Sometimes he appeared simply to be *dirty*, as if he had neither bathed nor changed clothes for a couple of days. Once Frith heard him whispering to himself in what sounded like a foreign language. Frith might have let him go, like artists before him, had it not been that his work on the paintings left him to complete became more and more extraordinary, more expressive, as if profound thoughts and feelings had been transmitted directly down the brush and onto the canvas. Whatever this young man was going through, he had become a greater painter than William Powell Frith.

Too generous a man to resent his assistant's mastery, Frith offered to help him find portrait commissions and, after he had completed a show's worth of new paintings, have his work seen by the right people. Ayling refused, insisting that he was satisfied with present conditions.

The young man's deterioration became more conspicuous. Burn marks now and then appeared on his clothing, and one morning his hair and eyebrows were singed. He lost so much weight he looked gaunt. Some days he had both a red-rimmed aspect and a faintly greenish cast to his skin. His hands trembled until the moment he picked up a brush.

One night in the library of the Reform Club Frith overheard his assistant's name surface in a conversation between two young members engaged in a game of whist. Questioned, they revealed themselves to be sons of country squires less ruinous than Aquitane Ayling. One of them had gone to school with Ayling at Repton, and the other knew him socially. Ayling's problem, they informed Frith, seemed centered at a country house called Blane, in Surrey, three hours from Charing Cross station. It was, apparently, to Charing Cross and Blane that Ayling had rushed with his Gladstone bag early on so many Friday evenings.



### The Blane Connection

The family at Blane, the Haywards, drew an interesting and varied company to their house parties: the authors Arthur Conan Doyle and Henry James had sojourned at Blane, although not at the same time; a prime minister, a Chancellor of the Exchequer, and several shadow ministers had enjoyed the hospitality of the Haywards, as had various generals and bishops; but the guests that the young gentlemen saw as the root of the problem at Blane had another sort of distinction than authors and politicians. The Haywards, at least some of the Haywards, were in love with the idea of the arcane and occult, with secret knowledge, mystic correspondences, and obscure grimoires: also, and more perilously, with witchery and sorcery and perhaps (here the young gentlemen seemed hesitant to tread) diabolism. Now (they averred), that really may be a bit alarmist. No one, at least as far as they knew, had ever heard anyone talking about Satan. It was a question of *atmosphere*: sometimes a damned unhealthy atmosphere, it seemed. "Opening of the veils, that sort of thing," said one of the young men. "A certain type of person is tremendously eager to catch a glimpse of what's on the other side, what's *beyond*. All well and good, what? Yet suppose a few of these lads are hoping to glimpse something perfectly horrible … eh? *Hoping*, d'you see?"

It was not that they had any proof of Ayling's involvement in anything so provocative, yet they knew at Blane he had been in intense, sequestered conversations with William Wynne Westcott, Dr. Anna Bonus Kingsford, MacGregor Mathers, and Mathers's wife, Mina Bergson. The central figures in English occult thought in England, they were the subjects of his first large Frith-like canvases, "The Adepts," and eagerly welcomed by the Haywards. Other, more eccentric guests had also visited Blane, among them a snarling, crook-backed Yorkshire man named Arnold Gather, a stunning but impassive woman named or perhaps simply called Aurora Shell, and a person known only as Lord Wren, who despite his title had a Cockney accent and wore patched, ill-fitting clothes of homespun. Depending on the light, Wren could appear to be either a boy of sixteen or seventeen or a withered ancient in his eighties. Mina Bergson's unpublished *Secret Diary* mentions her appalled flight from what she had taken to be Wren's "Black Wedding," held in the "Master's Undercrypt" at Blane. This event is taken to be more of a symbolic than a literal nature.

"The Gathered Clan" depicts the Haywards and their household staff arrayed before Blane. Far more than a sumptuous family portrait, though it certainly is that, the painting hums with mystery. The figures seem to be grouped casually, but as the composition becomes clear its subtle imbalances create uneasiness in the viewer. Five figures placed far to the left, a single woman and four men, one of whom has turned his back on the scene and appears to be slipping away, create a structural asymmetry appropriate to the rumor, mentioned by Frith, that these are the occultists and mages so welcome at Blane.

Perhaps it is they who are responsible for the charged, eerie beauty of Ayling's brushwork. His mastery here of tints and textures and shading may never have been surpassed. The English sun, as melancholy as grief, exposes these people with the pitiless ripeness of the late-period Rembrandt. Every detail of their faces, their postures, and their garb, even the muted, glowing façade of Blane, seems charged with a mysterious sadness on the verge of speech.

### Death of a Painter, Theft of a Painting

It was to be Ayling's only triumph, and it cost him dearly. Though Frith permitted him to work on the painting in his studio, the older man's steadying influence could not keep him from a mental breakdown later that year and placement in Broadmoor, then a newly-finished mental hospital in the north of England. Richard Dadd, a fellow patient, shunned him as "unclean," referring apparently to both Ayling's physical and spiritual condition. Hugo Ayling was thirty-five when he entered Broadmoor, sixty-two when he died there, and although he began many paintings during those years, he never completed a one.

"The Gathering of the Clan" hung in the orangerie at Blane from 1888 to 1908, when it began the odd, itinerant after-life that brought it to Milwaukee.

In May of that year, Haxton Hayward, who appears as a boy in the canvas's lower right corner and in 1908 was in his early thirties, absconded with the painting and half the family jewelry and took it all with him on a passenger liner to New York. The family could easily have alerted the police and used the telegraph system to have him apprehended on the docks in New York, but chose not to do so. Haxton Hayward had a wicked reputation, and his family may well have considered some bracelets and necklaces, plus the curious painting from the orangerie, a reasonable exchange for his absence.

Haxton moved to Boston, married, squandered the fortune he got for the stolen jewelry, divorced, and moved first to Chicago, then to various small towns in mid- and western Wisconsin. He took menial employment, married again and had children who became clerks, woodworkers, post office employees. Haxton Hayward died in the nineteen-twenties, the victim of an unsolved murder. His children and grandchildren grew up into the working-class lives that seemed their inheritance from him. Several of them moved to Milwaukee.

### Surprising Minneapolis Connection

Haxton's son Hale, a bartender in Milwaukee who inherited the painting because none of his siblings wanted it, stored it under a tarp in his basement. On Hale Hayward's death, his son Tillman, now a residential property owner in Columbus, Ohio, acquired it, again because neither of his two siblings considered this portrait of a conventional-looking family, their eccentric guests, and their pseudo-Gothic brick manor house, to be worth owning. Tillman hung the painting in his den and avows utter indifference to art of any form. "My sister's the one with the art collection," he says. "She lives in the twin cities, probably you've heard of her."

I had heard of her, all right. So have you. Tillman Hayward's sister is none other than Mrs. Harry Mountjoy, Margo (originally Margaret). And as readers of this paper know, the Mountjoy art collection, which is focused on the Post-Impressionists, the Nabis, and the Abstract Expressionists, is not only the finest private collection of modern art in our state, but one of the finest in the nation as well. Mrs. Mountjoy grew up with Hugo Ayling's masterpiece, and who is to say that it did not inspire her love of art? Now and then, surely, Hale Hayward's daughter pulled away the tarp to gaze upon the only painting in her house. Its customary place now is in the den of an apartment-house landlord who barely looks at it.

I, Sheldon Outerthwaite, have a shamelessly presumptuous suggestion to make to Margo Mountjoy, whose gracious hospitality I have many times enjoyed. I humbly suggest to this great patroness of the arts that she rescue "The Gathered Clan" from her brother's house and bring it to this proud city for donation to The Walker Art Center. It would not be at home in the Mountjoy collection, but the Walker, a world-class arts institution, would place it perfectly and permit the citizens of our great city to confront and communicate with one of the art world's most enigmatic and ravishing works. If you ask me, and I know you haven't, Hugo Ayling's tortured vision belongs in Minneapolis, and the beauteous Mrs. Hayward has the power to bring it here. As our much-loved "In My Corner" columnist, Cedric Adams, likes to say, wouldn't that be a humdinger, now? ♣

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TWO WORLDS
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# Caitlín R. Kiernan: Prose-Poet of the Lost

S. T. Joshi

In my estimation, the one writer who has, over the past twenty years, risen to canonical status in weird fiction is Caitlín R. Kiernan. Born in Ireland in 1964, she came to the United States as a child, settling in Alabama. She studied paleontology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and at the University of Colorado, and she has written a number of scientific papers on the subject. After working with Neil Gaiman on the comic book series *The Dreaming* (1996–2001), she began writing novels and tales in earnest. She dislikes being labeled a "horror writer," and her work is *weird* in the fullest and richest sense of the term, fusing the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and supernatural horror and also drawing upon the heritage of cosmic weird fiction, notably Lovecraft, Machen, and Blackwood.

In many ways her best work remains in the short story, even though (like Ramsey Campbell) she is obliged to write novels to bring in revenue. It is telling that her short-story collections—from *Tales of Pain and Wonder* (2000; revised edition 2008) to *The Ammonite Violin* (2010)—are published by small presses (chiefly Subterranean Press), while her nine novels are published by Penguin (under the Roc imprint). It is one more indication of the pervasive and ingrained prejudice of commercial publishers against short-story collections.

There are two distinguishing features of Kiernan's work. The first is a prose style of wondrous luminosity. When you come upon the prose of Caitlín R. Kiernan, all you can do is gasp in amazement. I pick a passage almost at random from *The Ammonite Violin*:

> "And then," she says, as though she still imagines that I've somehow never heard this story before, "the demons tried to carry the looking glass all the way up to Heaven, that they might even mock the angels." *But it shattered*, I cut in, trying to sound sober, and she smiles a vitreous sort of smile for me. I catch a glimpse of her uneven bluish teeth, set like mismatched pegs of lazulite into gums the colour of a stormy autumn sky. (63)

Purely on the level of prose, Kiernan already ranks with the most distinctive stylists of our field—Edgar Allan Poe, H. P. Lovecraft, Lord Dunsany, Thomas Ligotti. With Ligotti's regrettable retreat into fictional silence, hers is now the most recognizable voice in weird fiction. No one is ever likely to mistake a sentence by Kiernan for a sentence by any other writer.

The other distinguishing feature of Kiernan's work, both on the level of technique and on the levels of theme, imagery, and motif, is its inextricable fusion of science and artistry. She has mastered what might be called geological horror. Consider "To This Water" (1996). This story tells the tale of the Johnstown Flood of 1889, suggesting that it may have been supernaturally caused by the rape of a young girl. This fusion of the cosmic and the personal is also a keynote of Kiernan's work. It features an intense focus on the shifting and at times contradictory emotions of her characters, and their ability or inability to deal with domestic, social, and sexual—particularly sexual—traumas. Her stories are littered with the refuse of our society—the aimless teenagers, the abused whores, the vicious but vulnerable drug dealers whose flittings at the fringes of middle-class life we so fervently strive to ignore.

Kiernan's tales do, however, at times fail to cohere as narratives and can descend into mere vignettes or prose-poems that appear to have little focus or direction. There is never a wasted word; the prose is always throbbing with vitality and pathos; but too often the stories don't seem to go anywhere, and end arbitrarily and inconclusively. Among the full-fledged narratives, "To This Water" and, preeminently, "In the Water Works (Birmingham, Alabama 1888)" (2000) stand head and shoulders above the rest. The latter is a masterwork of subtle cosmicism, telling of what may lie in a water-filled pit as the water lines

of Birmingham are being built. There are the dimmest echoes of Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space," but the loving character descriptions—both of the grizzled workmen and of the young professor, Henry S. Matthews, investigating the site—as well as the gradual accretion of horrific details are pure Kiernan.

Kiernan's gift for language can gloss over a number of elements that, in a weaker writer, might be seen as flaws. It is, for example, surprising how many of the stories in *The Ammonite Violin* deal with venerable tropes that have dominated weird fiction for centuries. "In the Dreamtime of Lady Resurrection" is, as its title suggests, about the resurrection of the dead—but it is told in the first person, by a woman so resurrected, and so Kiernan is able to portray with heart-rending pathos the shifting emotions of the woman as she undergoes the experience. Perhaps, indeed, she did not wish to be resurrected at all? The line "I cross one way for you, and I return as another's experiment, the vessel of another's inquisition" (194) would certainly indicate so.

A number of stories rather quaintly treat the mermaid theme, but even this hoary topos is rendered distinctive by novelty of approach. How does a mermaid, having been skinned and therefore become approximately human, seek to buy back her own skin from a curio dealer? You can find out in "For One Who Has Lost Herself." "Metamorphosis B" is told from the point of view of a woman who professes to be the daughter of a mermaid and the sea captain who raped her. "Madonna Littoralis," insofar as I can make sense of the plot, is about lesbian sex with a mermaid. Sexual desire, indeed, looms large in this book, and its performance and ramifications—chiefly lesbian or gay, but occasionally heterosexual, as a kind of novel diversion—are rendered as achingly beautiful by the alchemy of Kiernan's prose. This fusion of sex and the supernatural can also revivify otherwise-stale themes, as in "Orpheus at Mount Pangaeum" and "Ode to Edvard Munch," both of which feature heterosexual sex with a female vampire.

Kiernan's acclaimed first novel, *Silk* (1998), features her customary cast of twentysomethings—drifters, struggling rock musicians, and so forth. The focus of the narrative is Spyder Baxter, who runs a shop called Weird Trappings. After some of her friends conduct a ritual involving peyote in the basement of her house, the legs of some immense spider appear to poke out of the trapdoor leading to the basement. One by one, these friends die hideously—one of them has his throat slit by spiderwebs. Eventually we learn that, when she was a child, Spyder was locked in the basement with her crazed father, who had collected hundreds of black widow spiders; they bit him and he died, but they did not bite Spyder. Are they in fact protecting her by killing her friends? Perhaps not: at the end of the novel she is found wrapped in an immense cocoon.

Several characters from *Silk* return in *Threshold* (2001), but the focus here is on Chance Matthews, who has moved back into her family home in Birmingham, Alabama, after the death of her grandparents. In a sense the novel is an expansion of "In the Water Works," for we are here dealing with the possibility that an immense monster is dwelling under a mountain near the city—one that, apparently, her grandfather had found when the water-works tunnel was dug in 1888. Still more of these characters appear in *Low Red Moon* (2003) and *Murder of Angels* (2004).

One of Kiernan's most challenging novels is *Daughter of Hounds* (2007), which appears to use Lovecraft's concept of ghouls—cited in "Pickman's Model" and *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*—as a springboard. Around this time Kiernan moved to Providence, Rhode Island, so her absorption of the Lovecraft influence was perhaps natural. But *Daughter of Hounds* is a curiously mixed bag: in tone it wavers from dreamlike fantasy to hard-boiled crime, and its overall thrust—in which a young woman named Soldier discovers that she is a changeling raised by ghouls—remains unclear.

Far and away the most impressive of Kiernan's novels is *The Red Tree* (2009). It concerns a writer named Sarah Crowe (already dead by suicide as the novel opens) who has written a book (really a series of diary entries written over a roughly two-month period) entitled *The Red Tree*. Within this text, Sarah transcribes portions of a fragmentary treatise written by a professor named Charles L. Harvey entitled ... *The Red Tree*. Clearly, this is a novel about layers.

Harvey's incomplete typescript reveals his obsession with the red oak (*Quercus rubra*) at the farmhouse where Sarah herself is now staying as a renter. Harvey committed suicide by hanging himself from the red tree. What kind of sinister power does that tree have? In the course of the narrative we learn that its evil effects stretch back centuries, perhaps millennia. This part of the narrative, evoking a centuries-old evil lurking in the wilderness, is a plot that Lovecraft could, and should, have written.

Those seeking a neat resolution to the overall scenario—either to the supernatural manifestation that is the red tree or to the lives and fates of the protagonists—are likely to be disappointed. *The Red Tree* is supremely rewarding not merely for its moments of terror, but for its ineffably sensitive display of the complexity of human emotions. It is a kind of "Heart of Darkness" for our time—an exploration of both the sinister darkness of the foreboding rural landscape and of the inscrutable darkness of the human heart.

Caitlín R. Kiernan is in the prime of her career, and it will be fascinating to see in what new directions she leads herself and her readers. She has already produced a corpus of work as impressive as that of any weird writer now writing, and she is one of the very few writers in this field who one can confidently say will be read by future generations. ⚜

Drawing of Caitlín R. Kiernan made at Readercon 20 (July 2009) by Chris Howard, SaltwaterWitch.com

[This interview first appeared in the online magazine/blog Bookslut.com in November 2004; reprinted by permission of Geoffrey H. Goodwin and Bookslut managing editor Charles Blackstone.]



# Geoffrey H. Goodwin Interviews Caitlín R. Kiernan

Caitlín R. Kiernan's *Murder of Angels* is earning great reviews. Entertainment Weekly just gave it an A–, praising the book as a "brutally realistic portrayal of addiction and mental illness." *Murder of Angels* is a harrowing novel of love and transcendence that takes place in two worlds: one somewhat like our own and the other a world of mystery traditions and fantastic landscapes.

Since selling her first short story eleven years ago, Kiernan has had six novels published, with her fiction earning acclaim on all fronts. Her first novel *Silk* (1998) won the International Horror Guild's award for First Novel and Barnes and Noble's Maiden Voyage award. *Silk* was followed by *Threshold*, *Low Red Moon*, and the release of her long-delayed first novel *The Five of Cups*.

Along with the novels, Kiernan wrote for DC Vertigo's *The Dreaming* from 1997 to the series conclusion in 2001 and her short fiction has been collected in *Tales of Pain and Wonder*, *From Weird and Distant Shores*, and *Wrong Things* (written with Poppy Z. Brite). Upcoming projects include a short-story collection called *To Charles Fort, With Love*, and the soon-to-be-released dark science fiction novella *The Dry Salvages*.

A vertebrate paleontologist, Caitlín R. Kiernan uses that training to render the worlds, deep time, and vast cosmos of her work with scientific precision. The clarity, intelligence, and insistent pull of her words and characters have been praised by Peter Straub, Charles de Lint, Poppy Z. Brite, and many others, with Neil Gaiman calling her "the poet and bard of the wasted and the lost." Her website is caitlinrkiernan.com.

[GHG]: You've been talking about a sort-of-sequel to *Silk* for at least four years. Was *Murder of Angels* a tough book to write?

[CRK]: Yes, it was an extraordinarily tough book to write. I've never written a book that was easy to write, and I doubt I ever shall. *Silk* took me more than three years, though it wasn't particularly difficult. But then *Threshold* was a nightmare, and I was sick, physically ill, most of the time I was writing it. Then I started *Murder of Angels* in the summer of 2000, got two chapters in, and it just completely stalled out on me. I fought with it until the following spring, when I finally gave up. I shelved it, and in 2002, in only about eight months, I did *Low Red Moon*. That's the closest I've come to doing an "easy" novel. It wasn't easy. It was difficult as hell, but it just kept coming, and suddenly it was done. And I think it fooled me into thinking I could do that again, write a novel in only eight months. So I signed a two-book deal with Penguin, for *Low Red Moon* and *Murder of Angels*. In September 2002, I pulled *Murder* down off the shelf, dusted it off, read through the hundred or so pages I'd done, tossed out a chapter I couldn't use, and figured I'd have it finished by the end of June, at the latest. Wrong.

Right from the start, I was back into all the old problems I'd had with the book: writing a sequel that simultaneously was and wasn't a sequel, that could stand on its own but connect with the people who'd liked *Silk*; allowing the book to go into more fantastic territory, which I'd always planned for it to do; working through a lot of very, very personal problems that I try to deal with in the book. The last was the worst problem. *Murder* was more than a year of intense self-analysis, I think. Me as Niki. Me as Daria. Me as Spyder. Having to be these three women, all broken bits of me, and face them every day. I was not a nice person to be around. The summer of 2003 was a very dark time around here. I almost gave up on the book more than once that summer. I threatened to burn the print-outs and erase all the files on my hard drive. I fucking hated that goddamn book. It was like having to spend every day sitting in front of a

mirror, vivisecting my own brain. And all the time I'm thinking, no one's going to get this book. They're going to hate it. It's too weird. It's going to get awful reviews. I didn't finish it until December 2003. It took just a little longer to write than *Silk*, which I guess is appropriate.

[GHG]: How do you think *Murder of Angels* compares to your other novels?

[CRK]: I can't really answer that question. I still think that *Low Red Moon* is my best book so far; at least it's my favorite. But lots of people disagree with me, and some of them are a bit brighter than me. I'd say *Murder of Angels* is probably my most ambitious book so far, and it's some of my most honest writing, and it might serve to give readers a fair idea of where I'm headed as a writer.

[GHG]: For the unaware, as Caitlín, could you please describe Nar'eth.

[CRK]: Let's see. Nar'eth is the person I sometimes wish that I were. Or she's the person I really am inside. She's a rogue Nebari bounty hunter and arms smuggler, outwardly amoral, inwardly anything but. She's a full-fledged alter-ego that started out as a costume, a costume that came about because I fell in love with the TV series *Farscape* and then let a friend dare me I wouldn't do something as unprofessional as show up in full Nebari make-up at an SF convention where I was a guest. But now she's become this whole other thing. I think there are people who know who Nar'eth is, but have no idea who Caitlín R. Kiernan is, which is actually kind of cool. She's a practice in pop-culture shamanism. She's a way of stepping almost entirely out of myself and letting go for a day or so. It's not easy, which is probably a good thing. I spend four hours in a make-up chair, wear uncomfortable black contact lenses that severely impair my vision, ten-pound leg shields, a steel-boned leather corset that restricts my breathing. The airbrushed make-up is completely sweat-proof and has to be removed with isopropyl alcohol. When the whole process is done, there's no exposed skin anywhere on me, and it's hot as hell in there. But, regardless of all this, here's this new being looking back at me, and it's one of the few things I do these days that I could describe as fun. I think there might be more than a handful of my peers who see me doing this and look at me even more askance than they did before, but they can get over it. Or not. Whatever. Anyone who wants to know more about Nar'eth should visit Nebari.net. [*Site is now defunct. —Eds.*]

[GHG]: Despite this fun streak (and your ritual of Friday Night Kid Night which involves B-movies, videogames, and comfort food), your work embodies a fierce responsibility to the reader and characters who often face difficult personal transformations. How did you acquire such perseverance and passion? Have you always been an intense and disciplined person or was there a turning point where the life you were living and, in effect, your writing became more serious?

[CRK]: I wasn't such a dire child. That didn't begin until high school, when I started having serious issues with things like faith, popularity, and gender identity. That was where things began to slip, I suspect. But I've always been very passionate, something of a perfectionist, and I think all the years I spent working as a paleontologist, especially the time doing fossil excavation in the field and preparation in the lab, helped nurture that. Doing such precise, difficult, demanding work. If you're preparing a seventy-million-year-old bone and screw up, that's it. That thing survived for fucking eons and can be destroyed by a second's carelessness.

It never even occurred to me not to approach writing with the same intensity and focus. There's very little I don't approach with intensity. I mean, if it's worth noticing at all, it's probably worth taking seriously. I'm sick of watching dispassionate people who may as well be zombies, shuffling indifferently from Point A to Point B, consuming crap and producing crap. I think my writing is a fairly accurate reflection of who I am, what I've lived through, who I want to be. I've survived things that I shouldn't have, that no one should have to survive: divorces, a lover's suicide, discrimination so pernicious and inescapable that it entirely altered the course of my life, gender dysphoria and gender reassignment, an alcoholic stepfather, physical and psychological abuse, drug addiction, life in the South, and eight years of college. But, un-

derstand, I'm emphatically not saying, "Oh, please pity me for my difficulties and misfortune. I've been victimized." Not in my fiction or in real life. Instead, I'm saying, "This is what I've seen out there. This is what I've experienced. This is how bad it can get, and as a writer it is my responsibility to try and relate these experiences." I don't know. No, I was not always so disciplined or serious, intense or passionate, but now I am. It's what has come of being alive, which, I should point out, wasn't my idea in the first place, so it's how I approach writing.

[GHG]: Allen Ginsberg believed that, while touching himself and reading "Ah Sunflower" in 1948, the actual William Blake came and spoke to him. If the world is indeed that complex, and H. P. Lovecraft chose to visit you, what would you say to him?

[CRK]: That I was very sorry that he had to live the last part of his life in such absolute, terrible poverty and that he was not truly appreciated until long after his death. Twice now, I've gone to Providence and visited the places where he lived and worked, visited his grave, and there's always such a sense of sadness to these trips. And yet, I read the letters he was writing at the time, towards the end, and Lovecraft seems to have had an ability to carry himself with dignity in the face of very demeaning circumstances and to see silver linings where I'd have only seen doom and futility. So, I would also say to him how much I admire that ability in him and how much I have envied it. But I suspect the best I can do is to continue to draw attention to his influence on my own work and to continue to insist that anyone who wants to seriously approach reading or writing dark fantasy must read Lovecraft repeatedly. Occasionally, I will also leave something on his headstone, usually a small plastic frog.

[GHG]: *Memento mori*, or at least what Franz Kafka broached when he said, "The meaning of life is that it stops," is present throughout your work. How does this help to tell your stories?

[CRK]: I don't know that it helps me tell my stories. Instead, I'd say it's one of the reasons that I'm telling stories. We seem to be at a point in history where society, at least Western society, is more intent on ignoring the reality of death than ever before. We wage wars, but never see the bodies. Our government doesn't want us to see the bodies. Everyone knows that death is always right here with us, sure as our shadows, but most people seem to exist in a perpetual state of denial. It's as though they believe that it'll never happen to them if only they ignore it hard enough, or maybe they think that acknowledging it as a part of day-to-day existence will somehow devalue their lives. Don't get me wrong. Death scares the piss out of me, which is probably another reason it figures so prominently in what I write. But I've been staring it in the face since I was a kid. Few things terrify me so much as the end of consciousness, which is what I fear that death may be. But I don't know how to stop thinking about death, any more than I know how to stop thinking about life. So, I look for the beauty and the wonder and the horror in it and then try to celebrate those things, which seems a whole lot healthier than cowering in fear or pretending that I'll live forever.

[GHG]: How are the branching outcomes, actions done and not done and their effects on worldlines, integral to *Murder of Angels*?

[CRK]: This has been a recurring theme throughout my work, probably from the very start. History is this amazingly strange thing. And the more physicists learn about space and time, the stranger history becomes. I'm obsessed with "the road not taken," as Frost said. Change just one little thing, and it all comes out differently. History is so unfathomably complex that we can hardly begin to grasp the importance of our least significant actions upon the whole. Nothing anyone ever does is negligible. In the case of *Silk* and *Murder of Angels*, I'm always asking myself questions like, what if Niki hadn't dealt so poorly with the news that Danny Boudreaux was a transsexual? What if she'd never gone to Birmingham? What if her car hadn't broken down there? What if Daria had never picked up her boyfriend's bass? What if Spyder's father hadn't been a lunatic? What if Scarborough Pentecost hadn't died in Spyder's house [in *Low Red*

*Moon*]? What would have happened in that other world, if that other world actually exists? What if Niki had been better at committing suicide? What if Daria had never become a successful musician? Reshuffle the cards and you'll deal a different hand. The multiverse contains an infinite number of recombinations. And it's this fact that underlies much of *Murder of Angels*. From the beginning, I refused to allow myself to know how the book would end. That would be determined by each and every decision I made through the proxy of the characters, another act of shamanism. It all could have gone another way. In other world-lines, I'm sure it did. There are universes where I wrote books wherein Niki fought the Dragon or where the Dragon reached our world or where Niki and Daria never became lovers, books wherein Spyder never went insane. But here, now, this is what happened. I never cease to find that fascinating, that the end result is never inevitable.

[GHG]: In a previous interview, you said that you think people can consciously lead themselves to moments of awe and that reality may be, at best, an illusion—even implying that chaos theory and quantum physics are scarier than the things you dream up. Is your work an intentional attempt to challenge and explore comfortable assumptions of reality?

[CRK]: Oh, I think it's absolutely true that chaos theory and quantum physics are scarier, and weirder, things than anything I could ever dream up. This is the fact that lies at the root of all good dark fiction, that fiction that often gets labeled Lovecraftian because Lovecraft kept pointing this out. We are brilliant, fleeting dust specks adrift in an incomprehensible and probably indifferent matrix of subatomic particles and atoms and organisms and planets and solar systems and galaxies and universes and timelines. But yes, I would say that a lot of what I'm doing is trying to get people to at least question their perceptions of "reality." I'm not so ambitious as to think I can lead anyone to expand his or her consciousness, and consciousness is the fundamental unit of individual reality. But I can at least try to instill a little doubt.

I'm annoyed at how many people read *Murder of Angels* and quickly draw conclusions about the relationship between Spyder's insanity and the existence of the world of the Dragon and the red witches. Did Spyder create it from her own psychocosm? Was it there all along and somehow she became conscious of it as a child? Is this really somehow the result of Niki's schizophrenia? Was Spyder right about the Nephilim, even without knowing it? These are all perfectly good questions that the book may be asking, but if you allow yourself to settle on one then I'm afraid you've missed the point. People hate uncertainty. They want to know "what happened." But for me it's always the questions, and the act of asking the questions, of figuring out how to formulate the questions, that's really interesting. Truth, if such a thing actually exists, strikes me as a dead end. That all sounds very arrogant, I know, but it's meant just the opposite. All I'm saying is that I don't know anything.

[GHG]: On August 3rd of this year (at http://livejournal.com/users/greygirlbeast) you discussed why your novels, chapbooks, and collections have been dedicated to Elizabeth Tillman Aldridge. Her suicide was obviously a great personal loss and something you waited nine years to discuss publicly. What has it been like to unearth this secret and how does this tie in to her influence on your work?

[CRK]: I've never talked about this in an interview before. I hadn't planned on ever talking about it publicly, not beyond the dedications in my books. Then, a day or two before this most recent anniversary of her death, I decided I'd talk about it in the blog. And I didn't let myself talk myself out of doing it. Her death in 1995, just as I was beginning to be recognized as an author, changed everything about my life. Everything. When I found out what had happened, that she was gone, that was one of my first thoughts—Everything is changed forever. Whatever was going to happen, her decision made this happen, instead. Sometimes that has made me very angry. And yes, I wish she were here. But I won't condemn her for making the choice she made. I know it's all far too complicated to allow myself to think like that.

As for my work, I think it's fairly evident that she's one of the things I've been writing about over and over for years. Her death determined the ending of *Silk*, and she's the reason I needed to create

Salmagundi Desvernine, and the reason that Jimmy DeSade became such a bastard, and the reason *Low Red Moon* is such an unrelentingly harsh novel. I think *Low Red Moon* was an attempt to deal with her death, once and for all and be done with it. I'd heard a line from Poe's song "Haunted"—"Time to gather up the splinters, Build a casket for my tears"—and it was always at the heart of that book. And I did work through a lot of my grief in *Low Red Moon*, but it's not a casket. I know now that there's never going to be a casket. *Murder of Angels* is, in part, my acknowledgment that memory, not forgetting, is the way I'll deal with Elizabeth's death. There. That's the hardest question I've ever had to answer in an interview. You better print every word.



[GHG]: Having written six novels, forty-eight comic scripts, at least sixty short stories—even singing for a goth band at one point—what would you say to someone who is just discovering your work?

[CRK]: Well, it's probably not what you're expecting. I'd say that. And I'd say please, please, please give it a chance, work with me. I don't write books or stories that are meant to be passively consumed. And if you keep coming back, I'd say thank you.

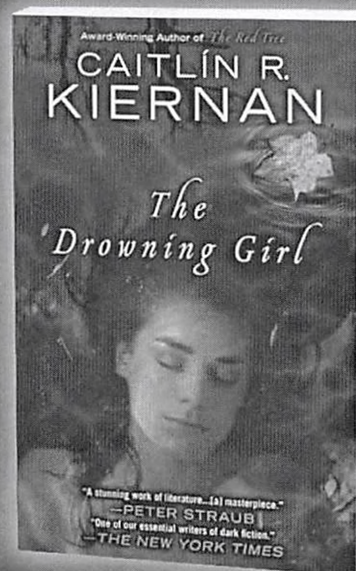
[GHG]: Finally, all else being equal, how would Nar'eth see Caitlín?

[CRK]: I think Nar'eth would find Caitlín utterly perplexing, frustrating, occasionally infuriating. She wouldn't ever have the patience for Caitlín. Nar'eth acts, and Caitlín dithers. Nar'eth would think I waste too damn much time on foolishness and propriety. She'd be furious at the amount of crap I take off people, and she'd definitely be of the opinion that I ought to write less and get out more often. That's how Nar'eth would see Caitlín, I think.


CONGRATULATIONS TO AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR AND GUEST OF HONOR

CAITLÍN R. KIERNAN

*Don't miss her brand-new chilling dark fantasy*




"[Kiernan has] a gift for language that borders on the scary."
—NEIL GAIMAN

caitlinrkiernan.com

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# Afterword: A Certain Inexplicability

Ramsey Campbell

The best enigmas are more imaginatively stimulating than any solution could be. "It was just a color out of space." We never know the nature of the invasion of "The Willows," nor can we be sure what Blackwood's Wendigo—accept no substitutes—does to its victims except to carry them through terror towards awe. Practically any of the supernatural tales of Robert Aickman or Walter de la Mare refuse to offer us the comfort of explication. That great film of unease, *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad*, is so enigmatic that it can be claimed for dark fantasy or, as Brian Aldiss does, for science fiction. *The Blair Witch Project*, the most Lovecraftian of all films, achieves its sense of supernatural dread purely through hints and glimpses and allusions. The utter horror of passages in various David Lynch films—*Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive,* and pretty well the whole of *Eraserhead*—is intensified by the lack of explanation. I take all these to be examples of the art of disquiet at the top of its form, and the height is also occupied by the tales of Caitlín Kiernan. In less than a decade she has earned a thoroughly deserved reputation as one of the most accomplished contemporary writers in the field, and very possibly the most lyrical.

Trailing after such a feast of achievement with this afterword, I can only risk making observations that our readers have already enjoyed for themselves or that Caitlín has articulated more elegantly than I may manage. In her introduction, "Looking for Innsmouth," I'm especially unnerved by her and Kathryn's encounter on the beach, not just in itself but because of its resemblance to the image that forms the climax of "The Night Ocean," Lovecraft's final collaboration and subtlest tale: "a man or something like a man, which came towards the land from a dark ocean." Is it possible for one's influences to become manifest in some form that approaches the physical? Fort might have wondered too.

"Valentia" embodies many of its author's strengths, not least her recurrent elegiac feeling for paleontology and her veneration of the eons. Occasionally her prose contains the faintest echo of a predecessor—doesn't the first sight of Ireland here invoke the ghost of Joyce?—but it could never be called derivative. It quickly displays a favorite device of hers, the sentence that falls away to reveal it isn't one, having said all that it needs to say. In this book entire stories fall away to strand the reader with an experience that needs no explanation.

"Spindleshanks (New Orleans, 1956)" is another of several pieces here that touch on Lovecraft in precisely the allusive way he might have most appreciated. Its lack of resolution leaves its supernatural encounter to haunt us. "So Runs the World Away" treats Lovecraftian ghouls and other creatures with some of the affectionate humanization that Ray Bradbury brought to the variously monstrous Elliott family, but Caitlín's psychological observations are all her own, not to mention the inspired touches of horror—"how or why to breathe"—and cadenzas of language. Has a creature that wasn't a ghost, despite the title of Peter Straub's novel, crept in here too? Adrian's name seems ominous.

"Standing Water" pretends to be just an excellent traditional horror story, with the gradual build-up the genre requires, but where the climax should be there's a pothole into the unknown, which is all the more effective. "La Mer des Rêves" isn't merely the shortest story in the book; its breathtaking terseness transforms the material into delirious poetry. It's a prose poem with considerably more plot than is usual for the form.

"The Road of Pins" extends a choice of enigmas to its protagonist and us. "Onion" saddles each of its characters with one. The sensuality of the glimpse of another place suggests one kind of compensation—the heightening of perception. The banality of those who meet to share their experiences of the inexplicable, much as alcoholics or any other addicts might, turns out not to be the point; the last page is, and it's a bleak yet visionary one. It sums up a central theme of the book, and perhaps it's as much a reassurance to the author as to anyone: after all, to dream a piece like "Apokatastasis" onto the page requires even more than the usual amount of trust in one's imaginative instincts that any good writer needs. I see that it also needed a protracted series of ghastly personal experiences as at least a background to its composition. I reflect that I wrote one of my better novels during the worst year of my life. In both cases I'd say that the story was worth it now that the disasters are past, but I can only speak for myself.

"La Peau Verte" was one of the tales that made my task of writing the introduction to an aborted absinthe anthology worth the time. Despite the nature of the commission and the state in which it was written, it is by no means just or even mainly an absinthe tale. Indeed, the poetic precision with which Caitlín describes the Mari Mayans high is, like the entire story, a triumph of artistic control. The remarkable compactness of the tale incorporates enough material for a novella if not a novel with no sense of strain or disproportion. It's even better the second time around, believe me, but I think that can be said of all her work.

"The Dead and the Moonstruck" reacquaints us with the Children of the Cuckoo, and with Caitlín's apparently effortless ability to combine naturalistic observation of character, however inhuman, with delicately macabre humor or, just as deftly, with great poignancy. Like all her Lovecraftian fiction, it's remote from the slavish imitation too many fans of Lovecraft clamor for; it's a substantial contribution to his tradition—indeed, I think it and "So Runs the World Away" might very well have invented a new Lovecraftian form. It's certainly at least as magical as the old gent's gentler fantasies. Until I read Caitlín's afterword it hadn't occurred to me that the story had been aimed at young adults. It's worthy of them and of the rest of us too.

And so we come to the chronicles of the Dandridge clan, three tales that recede into the past, teasing us with hints of more of an explanation than we need. Who else but their author would have the audacity to concoct a potion of Lewis Carroll, Lovecraft, and Greek myth? As much to the point, she has the panache to make it spellbinding. In "A Redress for Andromeda" both character and text undergo transformation, while "Nor the Demons Down Under the Sea" presents us with a classic haunted house only to render it more monstrous. "Andromeda Among the Stones" manifests a wonderfully vivid specter and revives the notion of the attic dweller in a strikingly personal way. The author's oceanic lyricism may seem inimical to Lovecraft's view of the sea, but just as Lovecraft built on the traditions of his field to create something of his own, so does Caitlín Kiernan incorporate his achievement to highly individual ends.

The trilogy of stories forms a splendid coda to a splendid volume. Caitlín Kiernan is one of the true visionaries and finest stylists in our field, and not just in contemporary terms. I'm delighted to be part of this book, even if my thoughts have fallen short of expressing all my enthusiasm. Let me finish by exhorting the reader to make sure of having all Caitlín's other books. If you've read them, they're better read again. They enrich the imagination and the literature of the dark at its most gorgeous and disturbing.

# First Person, Singular

Gemma Files

I've been asked to say something about Caitlín R. Kiernan, which is a somewhat terrifying prospect, considering how much I respect her as both an artist and a person. Her work I consider foundational, part of the three-sided cornerstone of influences that I routinely cite as having started me along my own current path: Kathe Koja, Poppy Z. Brite, Caitlín. She is a poet of the weird, the odd, the numinous, the contramundane—that whole ill spectrum of creative endeavor that illuminates sidelong, by contrast, far more through darkness rather than through light.

But what I want to talk about here is the inspiration I still gain from watching her at a remove, seeing her work through her creative process in at least semi-public—the daily dose of Kiernan glimpsed through the keyhole of her blog, greygirlbeast.livejournal.com.

The single best thing anyone ever said about my work was written by Kiernan, in the introduction to my first collection of short fiction, *Kissing Carrion*: "Boldly, brazenly, Gemma Files pushes her hands deep into the red and seeping unconscious places and finds the bits of treasure worth pulling back into the light. ... [she] seems to understand the weight and consequence, the inherent *severity*, of her fictive transgressions. And so her stories do not disintegrate, do not dissolve into accidental comedies of the grotesque. They do not degrade her characters.... Horrible things befall them, time and again, but never merely for our amusement."

It was—and is, still—the quote I put at the very top of my list, whenever I need to do self-promotion. But far beyond being simply flattering, it was incredibly helpful; it showed me not only what my writing was, provided a philosophical template that I struggle every time I write to not violate, but what it *could* be. The best-case scenario.

It was shortly after that introduction that I began reading her blog regularly, and clearly recall at least one entry—maybe more—in which she remarked that she would never write anything in the first person, because it was fundamentally dishonest, fundamentally unreliable. Over a series of years, however, I saw her first begin to poke at the edges of that belief, then lift it back like a scab, letting what was underneath breathe free. Eventually, I watched her embrace the unreliability of first-person narrative and its potential to tell two or more stories at once—a story run both inside and outside the lines, commenting on itself—first in the novella *The Dry Salvages*, then in various short stories, then in her stunning novels *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl: A Memoir*. In other words, I saw her flourish, producing some of her best work, *because* she continued throughout to move in a slow, painful, utterly honest way towards first deciding to take that risk, then taking it, then dealing with the consequences.

One of the other things I've seen her do is fold selected pieces first premiered in her *Sirenia Digest* newsletter—a showcase of short erotic fiction she produces monthly—into her novels, and I think that's amazing: It shows how, when an idea or a theme possesses you, everything becomes "about" it, to one degree or another. You start seeing sticky threads trailing back to things you never thought were part of the same narrative, and then you realize that hey, they actually were. That they were predictions or shadows of the larger, unifying story to come. It's very ... Pythian, I think; writer as oracle, muse-possessed. A divinity at work, if only a small, perverse one.

So when I watch her doing all this, excoriating her way from page one to page last, it makes me want to do the same. To risk myself. To scare myself. To dig so deep it hurts, bleeds and scars, so that what I come up with will be specific in that way which reads as fictional yet absolutely true, and therefore worthy of investment. It's a coring, humane sort of exhibition, the individual straining to understand themselves so well that everyone else will see something of themselves in what comes out. And it doesn't matter if that

recognition is a dark, unpleasant thing—indeed, it's probably better that way. The revulsion that comes from facing a reflection that does anything but flatter, an almost Cronenbergian push-pull.

It makes me want to figure out what scares me most and lower myself into it like an acid bath, just so I can see what's left behind when the alchemical process lifts my crust away in a scum of dead assumptions. And for that I will always thank Caitlín R. Kiernan, *revere* her, even more so than for the gift of her writing, which remains a constant spur and joy in my life—while simultaneously apologizing, as ever, for not commenting more on her entries. Because I know she really does like that.



## Tribute to Caitlín R. Kiernan

### Michael Cisco

Sometimes things just drop into your lap, and in this case, my point of departure I only found last night reading a story called "Someone Else's Theme" by Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky.

"... what mystical *something* distinguishes a creator of culture from its consumers?" the narrator asks his interlocutor, a down-at-heel street philosopher who barters aphorisms for hot lunch. The philosopher answers him sadly: "Honesty. Only honesty."

All too often missed by casual critics is the honesty that raises genre fiction above the level of merely distracting entertainment. Or rather, a writer's desire to tell the truth about his or her own experiences, inner and outer, resists a counterforce much more powerful and much less personal than shame, and which wants to make all culture into offensively inoffensive, salable pap.

It's her honesty that I most value in Caitlín's writing, more than her great skill or her copious inventiveness. Her work is emotionally real. What she writes about happens.

There is a fear of being alone and different among people who are unpredictably liable to turn on you, not simply in anger, but in complete rejection of you as a person—and this is not a paranoid fantasy, it has happened to you before, it happens all the time. And there is a fear of what will happen if the forced retreat from others will send you into insanity or, if not death, then into an isolation that is like enough to death. There is also wish-fulfillment, or yearning, commingled with the fear, as if that isolation to which you have been turned might turn towards you, and become the tribe or the home country or companion that humanity refuses you. Fear of taking an irretrievable step in the direction of that other.

Horror has always meant something more than the fear of physical injury or suffering; it isn't fear, it's an intense desire to reject a possibility that confirms or surpasses your worst expectations. In Caitlín's work, I find less the pointed or specific kind of fear, and something that is at once more general, taking the entirety of existence into account, and yet not therefore impersonal. Anguish and loss are aspects of the experience of horror, whether you lose someone you love or a more innocent and bearable idea of the world. Poignant loss is the common element in these experiences. Caitlín can show you that loss as few can. It's a unique gift.

# The Mosasaurs Are Trashing the Con Suite

Geoffrey H. Goodwin

Frell. I guess I'm here to sing the song of a nightmarist. How do I celebrate Cait even though deep time proves that none of this means a thing? I guess it's like how she still brushes away dirt and unearths stories. If she can keep at it even though we're all old socks stuffed with sawdust, maybe I can too. Maybe I can even make sense instead of referencing a bio about a previous incarnation of Caitlín that was up on a previous incarnation of Caitlín's site.

What goes here, half-remembered secrets whispered at the witching hour? Even if I've learned most of Caitlín's secrets, you have too. They're all in her blog somewhere. Even the things she doesn't want you to know that you know. Some might be tucked underneath deeper truths—but they're there. Almost all of her secrets. The last handful of mysteries? Those are in her books and *Sirenia Digest*. If you're only reading her blog, you're doing it wrong. Caitlín R. Kiernan wouldn't be a Readercon Guest of Honor if all she ever did was write a primo blog.

So all of this is a smokescreen for how I've got nothing. What would you want to hear anyway? Ghosts, angels, and a Dog's Bridge? How Caitlín R. Kiernan chases lightning bugs and talks to wolf spiders? Diverse threads coming together before we all get snipped by fate?

Like Phil Dick's empire, the mosasaurs never ended. Caitlín will tell you there was mosasaur material near where she grew up and that started lots of everything, but the truth might be stranger. The truth might be that everything's temporary and happening at the same time. We're in the quarry and in the sky and teetering everywhere between. Deep time reminds us that we'll all wash away, or crunch big, or dance to the grinding halt of heat death. Are we clear that nothing matters? Good. On a long enough timeline, the survival rate of every universe drops to zero.

So, a few milliseconds ago, in 1992, Caitlín started writing fiction. Says she chose writing because there was nothing else *left* to choose. Makes it crystal clear that writing often strikes her as a bad call. Yet despite her intimate familiarity with the zero-sum game of breathing, Caitlín, damned near every day—through eleven novels and hundreds of short stories—shows us gorgeous and sexy nightmares. She sells those "strange nightmares and reveries" hoping she and Kathryn don't wind up in the street, and get to have teeth, and get to feed kitty cats. I guess if it all works out they'll have a farm and some chickens. They certainly deserve it.

Nothing amounts to anything, survival rate of zero, yet she keeps typing. Probably typing right now. You could say she's trying to push herself, and everybody else, outside of some comfort zone—but let's be real. When nothing matters because we're specks in a restless and relentless universe, you can lie to yourself and play pretend—but there's no comfort zone. Ever.

For all I really know, despite any intimations or whispers, maybe she's trying to punish herself:

Writing is "absolutely the hardest, most maddening thing."

"Most times, I hate it. I just can't seem to stop."

Mytho-artistic rituals and a perpetual state of creating sound like enough to frizzle-fry anyone's mind. Is that what we're honoring? Probably not. When nothing's rational, then nothing's irrational. The mosasaurs are trashing the con suite.

So why are we here? Seriously. Why are any of us here?

*The Drowning Girl*. Imp. Eva fucking Canning. Abalyn. *The Red Tree*. Sarah Crowe, Constance Hopkins. They're here and this might take a while. Deacon, Spyder, Chance, and Sadie are here. Emmie and Soldier. Niki and Daria. We're celebrating these people ... in all their broken, scarred, and endless guises. The mosasaurs have never ended because we've still got to hear the *Death's Little Sister* songs and Narcissa Snow's name is still etched on a Providence tombstone. Wait a while, a second, or maybe a mil-

lennium because it's all concurrent, and Joey LaFaye might appear out of nowhere riding Young Master Goblin.

Dancy, the alabaster girl with a sword, "an avatar for some dark splinter" of Caitlín, got her own comic. Siobáhn Quinn and Aloysius from *Blood Oranges* are hiding over in the corner. *Sirenia Digest* just passed issue #79 and is doing obscene things to a tarted-up Rottweiler in the greenhouse next to the hotel.

I bet that once we die, the words die too—but let's forget that for a long weekend. Let's honor Caitlín for writing some of the best words. Twenty years of writing some of the best words is worth a riotous party. We'll probably have headaches tomorrow. We'll probably have headaches for all of next year. Eventually we'll be in caskets or in cinders. Probably both. All at the same time. *Par-tay.* ♣



**[Original publication online in Sirenia Digest #69, September 2011.
Author's note: "Caitlín R. Kiernan is the siren that sings you to shipwreck."]**

# Drowning Like You Mean It

Sonya Taaffe

On the cold sill of the Atlantic
there is still time to forget,
to shrug back the sea's indifference
like a postcard in the lighthousekeeper's store
and settle for being innocent.
A tourist can skip the waves with a silver dollar,
a blue-eyed boat dreaming of Carthage or Syracuse
that carries no one under the sun,
a poète maudit wavering on the rim of the Seine
in an anise-flare of futile revelation,
a siren rocking the deep sea-swell of bones.
You sank once like Ophelia, with skirts full of riverweed,
rose with a broken language of flowers in your hair.
Leave the stones from your pocket, this time,
the sea-glass, the spyglass, the sugar for Poseidon's team.
All you need is the shingle, the sandy waves swirling,
the open-eyed breath and knowing no going back.

♣

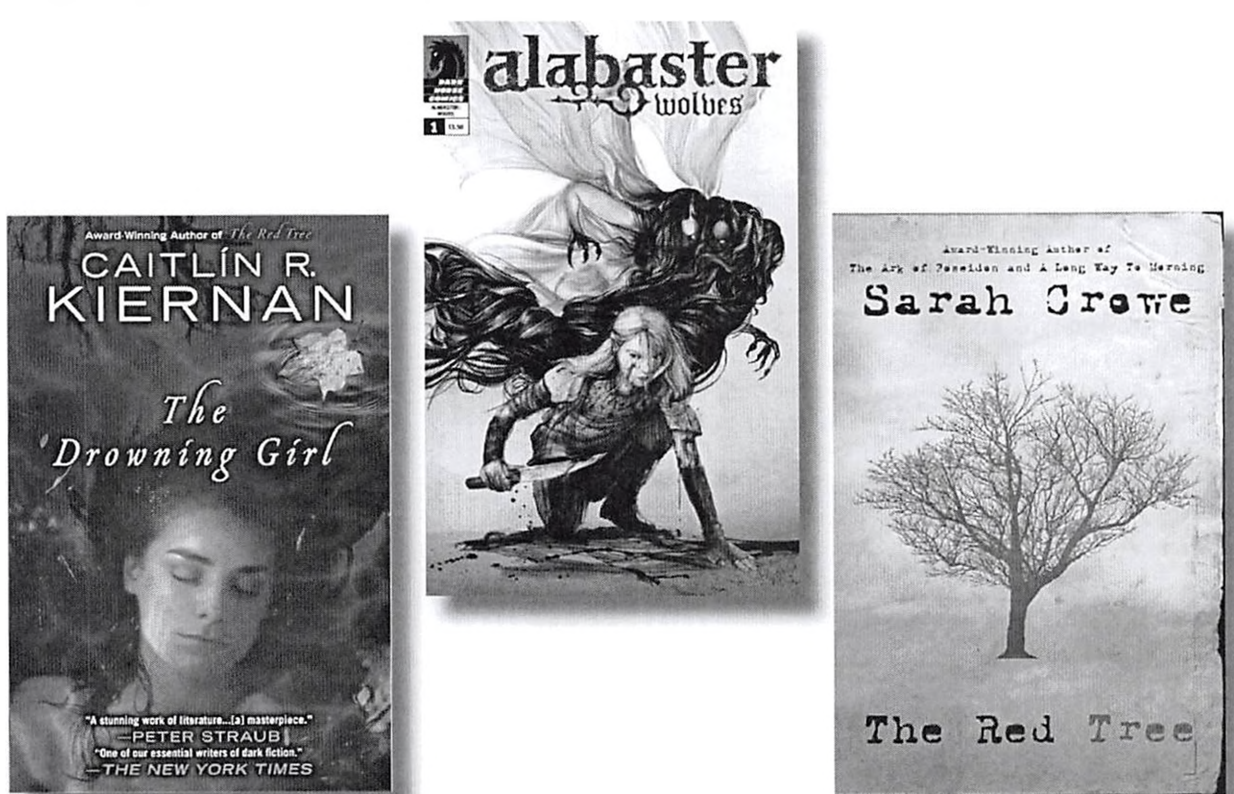
# Caitlín R. Kiernan: an Appreciation

## Elizabeth Hand

Based solely on her last two novels, *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl*, Caitlín R. Kiernan's work demands a place besides Shirley Jackson's on that great Bookshelf in the Sky. Once you factor in Kiernan's earlier books, it becomes crystal clear that she deserves an extensive shelf of her own. Since the appearance of her first novel, *Silk*, in 1998, Kiernan has become one of the most important writers in the contemporary literature of the fantastic. Enormously gifted and utterly fearless, she is seemingly incapable of repeating herself: her tales range from the dark fantasy of *Daughter of Hounds*, to the Vanceian off-planet terrors of "The Dry Salvages," to *Silk*'s incantatory Southern Gothic horror. Her evocation of place is equally remarkable and far-ranging: the American South; 1990s Manhattan; far-future off-world colonies. With *Daughter of Hounds*, *The Red Tree*, and *The Drowning Girl*, she staked her claim to Rhode Island, vying with H. P. Lovecraft as one of the state's iconic fantasists.

Kiernan's prose style, at once lush and fiercely controlled, unfailingly evokes the sublime, the sense of mingled wonder and terror that is the hallmark of the original gothic impulse. Her gorgeous, deeply unsettling tales reward frequent rereading: their impact doesn't depend so much on the frisson of unease or fear they engender, as on a deeply disturbing, almost subcutaneous sense of recognition, a glimpse of another, stranger, even more beautiful and often threatening world; the *true* world immanent within our own. It's a recognition not just of the dangers inherent in that sacred space, but of the fact that it may be our true home. In a 2000 interview, Kiernan noted: "As I see our mass culture sinking deeper and deeper into consumerism and cynicism, artless decadence and apathy, and probably a dozen other soul- and society-destroying evils I could tick off, I see goth as another sort of sanctuary."

Caitlín Kiernan is a literary treasure, her novels and stories a refuge that many of us have long been searching for. For those of you who have yet to encounter her work, welcome home. ✢



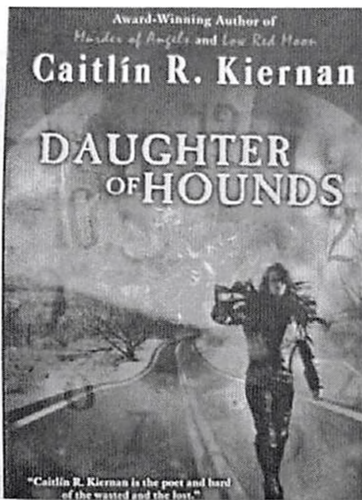
# Tribute to Caitlín R. Kiernan

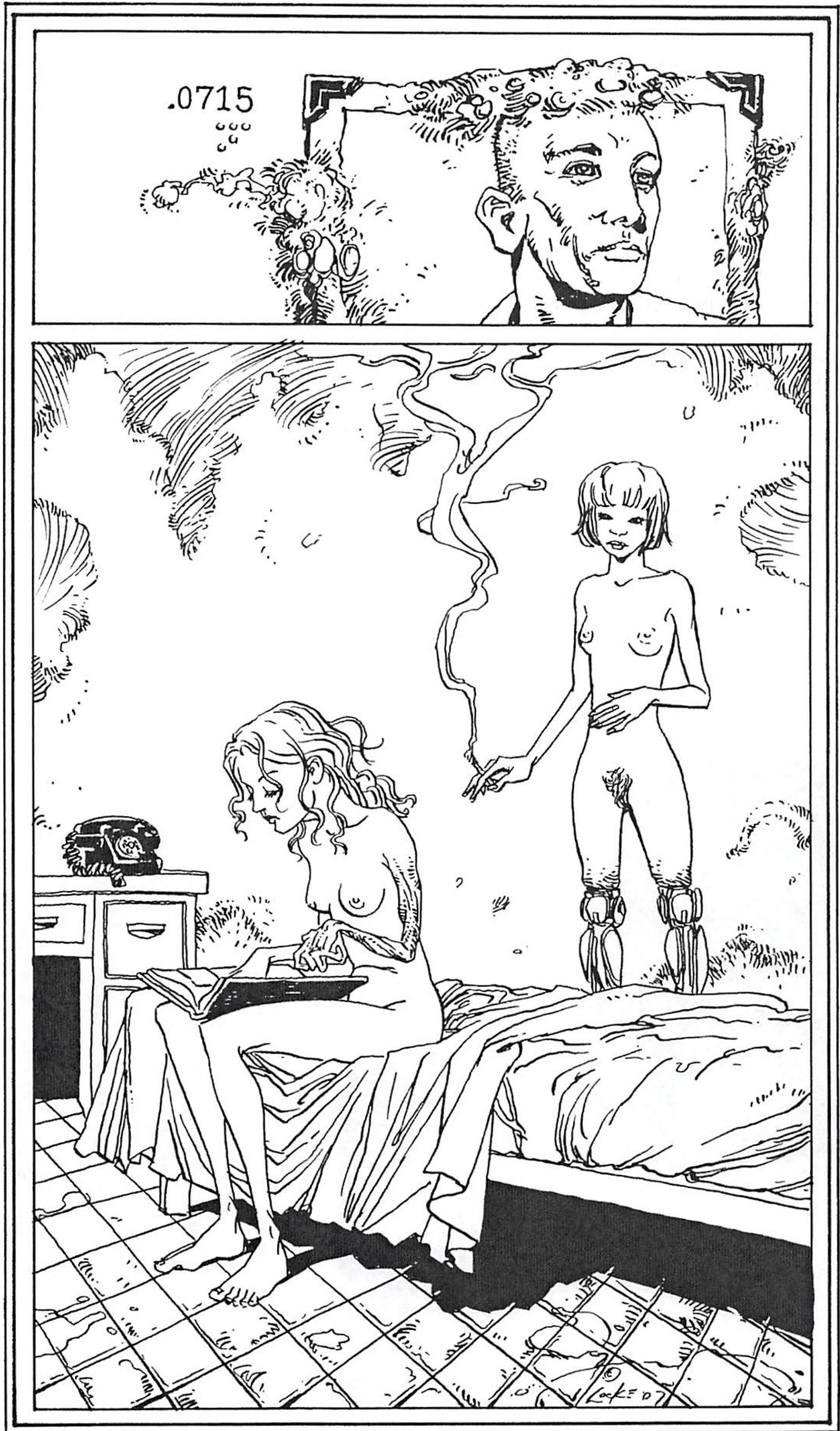
## Jeff VanderMeer



Perhaps fittingly given Caitlín R. Kiernan's background in paleontology and other sciences, it is her evolution as a writer that I find truly remarkable. When she started publishing her work, you could see the influence of Lovecraft and the Southern Gothic in stories that were weird, startling, and beautifully written. If she had continued in that mode, Kiernan would have had a great career. But the truth is, Kiernan has never quite settled down into one place, one viewpoint. As a result, her work has grown wider, deeper, and richer over time, with the early work complementing her later work but not overshadowing it. She is a great inspiration to me because I feel that she continues to dig deep into her subconscious and to be fearless in what she writes about, and how she writes about it. The work is uncompromising, and it forces the reader to come to the author rather than the other way around, even though Kiernan's fiction is highly entertaining in addition to its other qualities. She also has this remarkable ability to see the world through other than human eyes, by which I mean that even though she can write about creatures and entities that are truly frightening, that are a threat to her human characters, they also have their own integrity. They exist beyond the limits of the human gaze, too. If we begin to understand a world beyond the human world in her work, it is because of this quality.

I'm really glad that Readercon is honoring Kiernan because in honoring her, the convention is acknowledging the importance of unique literary voices, ones that may not always be comforting or comfortable to readers, but that are always honest and true. So thank you, Caitlín, for being one of my literary heroes.






Previously unpublished illustration by Vince Locke, originally intended to accompany this story in A Is for Alien.

[Written in 2007; first print publication in *A Is for Alien*, 2009, Subterranean Press.]



# In View of Nothing

Caitlín R. Kiernan

*Oh, pity us here, we angels of lead.*
*We're dead, we're sick, hanging by thread ...*
David Bowie ("Get Real," 1995)

### 02. The Bed

My breasts ache.

I have enough trouble just remembering the name of this city, and I have yet to be convinced that the name remains the same from one day to the next, one night to the next night. Or that the city itself remains the same. These are the very sorts of details that will be my undoing someday, someday quite soon, if I am anything less than mindful. Today, I believe that I have awakened in Sakyo-ku, in the Kyoto Prefecture, but lying here staring up at the bright banks of fluorescent lights on the ceiling, I might be anywhere. I might well be in Boston or Johannesburg or Sydney, and maybe I've never even been to Japan. Maybe I have lived my entire life without setting foot in Kyoto.

From where I lie, almost everything seems merely various shades of unwelcome conjecture. Almost everything. I think about getting up and going to the window, because from there I might confirm or deny my Kyoto hypothesis. I might spy the Kamo River, flowing down from its source on Mount Sajikigatake, or the withered cherry trees that did not blossom last year and perhaps will not blossom this spring, either. I might see the silver-grey ribbon of the Kamo, running between the neon-scarlet flicker of torii gates at the Kamigamo and Shimogamo shrines. Maybe that window looks eastward, towards the not-so-distant ocean, and I would see Mount Daimonji. Or I might see only the steel and glass wall of a neighboring skyscraper.

I lie where I am and do not go to the window, and I stare up at the low plaster ceiling, the ugly water stains spread out there like bruises or melanoma or concentric geographical features on an ice moon of Saturn or Jupiter or Neptune. This whole goddamn building is rotten; I recall that much clearly enough. The ceiling of my room—if it *is* my room—has more leaks than I can count, and it's not even on the top floor. The rain is loud against the window, but the dripping ceiling seems to my ears much louder, as each drop grows finally too heavy and falls to the ceramic tiles. I hear a distinct *plink* for each and every drop that drips down from the motel ceiling, and that *plink* does not quite seem to match what I recall about the sound of water dripping against tile.

The paler-than-oyster sheets are damp, too. As are the mattress and box springs underneath. Why there are not mushrooms, I can't say. There is mold, mold or mildew if there's some difference between the two, because I can smell it, and I can see it.

I lie here on my back and stare up at the leaky ceiling, listening to the rain, letting these vague thoughts ricochet through my incontinent skull. My mind leaks, too, I suspect, and in much the same way that this ceiling leaks. My thoughts and memories have stained the moldering sheets, discrete units of me drifting away in a slow flood of cerebrospinal fluid, my ears for sluice gates—or my eyes—*Liquor*

*cerebrospinalis* draining out a few precious milliliters per day or hour, leaving only vast echoes in emptied subarachnoid cavities.

She looks at me over her left shoulder, her skin as white as snow that never falls, her hair whiter still, her eyes like broken sapphire shards, and she frowns, knitting her white eyebrows. She is talking into the antique black rotary telephone, but looking at me, disapproving of these meandering, senseless thoughts when I have yet to answer her questions to anyone's satisfaction. I turn away—the exact wrong thing to do, and yet I do it, anyway. I wish she would put some clothes on. Her robe is hanging on a hook not far away. I would get it for her, if she would only ask. She lights a cigarette, and that's good, because now the air wrapped all about the bed smells less like the mold and poisonous rainwater.

"We do the best we can," she tells the telephone, whoever's listening on the other end of the line, "given what we have to work with."

Having turned away, I lie on my left side, my face pressing into those damp sheets, shivering and wondering how long now since I have been genuinely warm. Wondering, too, if this season is spring or winter or autumn. I am fairly certain it is not summer. She laughs, but I don't shut my eyes. I imagine that the folds and creases of the sheets are ridges and valleys, and I am the slain giant of some creation myth. My cerebrospinal fluid will form lakes and rivers and seas, and trees will sprout, and grass and ferns and lichen, and all that vegetation shall be imbued with my lost or merely forfeited memories. The birds will rise up from fancies that have bled from me.

My breasts ache.

Maybe that has some role to play in this cosmogony, the aching, swollen breasts of the fallen giantess whose mind became the wide white-grey world.

"I need more time, that's all," the naked snow-coloured woman tells the black Bakelite handset. "There were so many more layers than we'd anticipated."

With an index finger I trace the course of one of the V-shaped sheet valleys. It gradually widens towards the foot of the bed, towards my *own* feet, and I decide that I shall arbitrarily call that direction *south*, as I arbitrarily think this motel might exist somewhere in Kyoto. Where it ends, there is a broad alluvial fan, this silk-cotton blend splaying out into flat deltas where an unseen river at last deposits its burden of mnemonic silt and clay and sand—only the finest particles make it all the way over the far away edge of the bed to the white-tile sea spread out below. Never meaning to, I have made a *flat* white-grey world. Beyond the delta are low hills, smooth ridges in the shadow of my knees. Call it an eclipse, that gloom; *any* shadow in this stark room is Divine.

These thoughts are leading me nowhere, and I think now that they must exist only to erect a defence, this complete absence of direction. She has pried and stabbed and pricked that fragile innermost stratum of the meningeal envelope, the precious pia mater, and so triggered inside me these meandering responses. She thought to find only pliable grey matter waiting underneath, and maybe the answers to her questions—tap in, cross ref, download—but, no, here's this damned firewall, instead. But I did not put it there. I am holding nothing back by choice. I know she won't believe that, though it is the truth.

"Maybe another twelve hours," she tells the handset.

I must be a barren, pitiless goddess, to have placed all those fluorescent tubes for a sun and nothing else. They shed no warmth from out that otherwise starless ivory firmament. Heaven drips to make a filthy sea, and she rings off and places the handset back into its Bakelite cradle. It is all a cradle, I think, this room in this motel in this city I cannot name with any certainty. Perhaps I never even left Manhattan or Atlanta or San Francisco.

"I'm losing patience," she says and sighs impatiently. "More importantly, they're losing patience with me."

And I apologise again, though I am not actually certain this statement warrants an apology. I turn my head and watch as she leans back against her pillow, lifting the stumps of her legs onto the bed. She

once told me how she lost them, and it was not so very long ago when she told me, but I can no longer remember that, either.

She smokes her cigarette, and her blue eyes seem fixed on something beyond the walls of the motel room.

"Maybe I should look at the book again," I suggest.

"Maybe," she agrees. "Or maybe I should put a bullet in your skull and say it was an accident."

"Or that I was trying to escape."

She nods and takes another drag off her cigarette. "If you are a goddess," she asks, "what the fuck does that make me?"

But I have no response for that. No response whatsoever. The smoke from her lips and nostrils hangs above our damp bed like the first clouds spreading out above my flat creation of sheets and fallen giants. Her skin is milk, and my breasts ache.

I close my eyes, and possibly I smell cherry blossoms behind her smoke and the stink of mildew, and I try hard to recollect when I first walked the avenues of Kyoto's Good Luck Meadow—Yoshiwara—the green houses and courtesans, boy whores and tea-shop girls, kabuki and paper dragons.

"You have never left this room," she tells me, and I have no compelling reason to believe her or to suspect that she's lying.

"We could shut off the lights," I say. "It could be dark for a little while."

"There isn't time now," she replies and stubs out her cigarette on the wall beside the bed, then drops the butt to the floor, and I think I hear a very faint hiss when it hits the damp tiles. She's left an ashen smudge on the wall near the plastic headboard, and that, I think, must be how evil enters the world.

### 04. The Book (I)

This is the very first time that she will show me the scrapbook. I *call* it a scrapbook, because I don't know what else to call it. Her robotic knees whir and click softly as she leans forward and snaps open the leather attaché case. She takes the scrapbook out and sets it on the counter beside the rust-streaked sink. This is an hour or so after the first time we made love, and I'm still in bed, watching her and thinking how much more beautiful she is without the ungainly chromium-plated prosthetics. The skin around the external fix posts and neural ports is pink and inflamed, and I wonder if she even bothers to keep them clean. I wonder how much it must hurt, being hauled about by those contraptions. She closes the lid of the briefcase, her every move deliberate, somehow calculated without seeming stiff, and the ankle joints purr like a tick-tock cat as she turns towards me. She is still naked, and I marvel again at the pallid thatch of her pubic hair. She retrieves the scrapbook from the sink.

"You look at the photographs," she says, "and tell me what you see there. This is what matters now, your impressions. We know the rest already."

"I need a hot shower," I tell her, but she shakes her head, and the robotic legs whir and move her towards the bed on broad tridactyl feet.

"Later," she says. "Later, you can have a hot shower, after we're done here."

And so I take the scrapbook from her when she offers it to me—a thick sheaf of yellowed pages held between two sturdy brown pieces of cardstock, and the whole thing bound together with a length of brown string. The strings have been laced through perforations in the pages and through small silver grommets set into the cardstock covers, and each end of the string is finished with black aiglets to keep it from fraying. The string has been tied into a sloppy sort of reef knot. There is nothing printed or written on the cover.

"Open it," she says, and her prosthetics whine and hiss pneumatic laments as she sits down on the bed near me. The box springs creak.

"What am I supposed to see?" I ask her.

"You are not *supposed* to see anything."

I open the scrapbook, and inside each page displays four black and white photographs, held in place by black metal photo corners. And at once I see, as it is plainly obvious, that all the photographs in the book are of the same man. Page after page after page, the same man, though not always the same photograph. They look like mug shots. The man is Caucasian, maybe forty-five years old, maybe fifty. His eyes are dark, and always he is staring directly into the camera lens. There are deep creases in his forehead, and his skin is mottled, large-pored, pockmarked. His lips are very thin, and his nose large and hooked. There are bags beneath his eyes.

"Who is he?" I ask.

"That's not your problem," she replies. "Just look at the pictures and tell me what you see."

I turn another page, and another, and another after that, and on every one that haggard face glares back up at me. "They're all the same."

"They are not," she says.

"I mean, they're all of the same man. Who is he?"

"I said that's not your problem. And surely you must know I haven't brought you here to tell me what I can see for myself."

So, I want to ask *why* she has brought me here, only I cannot recall *being* brought here. I am not certain I can recall anything before this white dripping room. It seems in this moment to be all I have ever known. I turn more pages, some so brittle they flake at my touch. But there is nothing to see here but the man with the shaved head and the hooked nose.

"Take your time," she says and lights another cigarette. "Just don't take too much of it."

"If this is about the syringes—"

"This isn't about the syringes. But we'll come to that later, trust me. And that Taiwanese chap, too, the lieutenant. What's his name?"

"The war isn't going well, is it?" I ask her, and now I look up from the scrapbook lying open in my lap and watch the darkness filling the doorway to our room. Our room or her room or my room, I cannot say which. That darkness seems as sticky and solid as hot asphalt.

"That depends whose side you're on," she says and smiles and flicks ash onto the floor.

It occurs to me for the first time that someone might be watching from that darkness, getting everything on tape, making notes, waiting and biding their time. I think I might well go mad if I stare too long into that impenetrable black. I look back down at the book, trying to see whatever it is she wants me to see on those pages, whatever it is she needs to know.

### 03. The Dream

The night after I lost the girl who lost the syringe—if any of that did in fact occur—I awoke in the white room on the not-quite-oyster sheets, gasping and squinting at those bare fluorescent tubes. My mouth so dry, my chest hurting, and the dream already beginning to fade. There was a pencil and a legal pad on the table beside the bed, and I wrote this much down:

This must have been near the end of it all, just before I finally woke. Being on the street of an Asian city, maybe Tokyo, I don't know. Night. Flickering neon and cosplay girls and noodle shops. The commingled smells of car exhaust and cooking and garbage. And I'm late for an appointment in a building I can see, an immaculate tower of shimmering steel. I can't read any of the street signs, because they're all Japanese or Mandarin or whatever. I'm lost. Men mutter as they pass me. The cosplay girls laugh and point. There's an immense animatronic Ganesh-like thing directing traffic (and I suppose this is foreshadowing). I finally find someone who doesn't speak English but she speaks German, and she shows me where to cross the street to reach the steel tower.

There might have been a lobby and an elevator ride, or I may only be filling in a jump cut. But then I was in the examination room of what seemed to be something very like a dentist's office. Only there wasn't that dentist-office smell. There was some other smell that only added to my unease and disorientation. I was asked to have a seat, please, in this thing that wasn't quite a dentist's chair. There was a woman with a British accent asking me questions, checking off items on a form of some sort.

She kept asking questions about my memory, and if I was comfortable. And then the woman with the British accent placed her thumb beneath my jaw, and I began to feel cold and feverish. She said something like, *We'll be as gentle as we can.* That's when I saw that she was holding my jaw in her hands. And I could see my tongue and teeth and gums and lower lip and everything else. The sensation of cold grew more intense, and she told me to please remain calm, that it would all be over soon. Then she pressed something like a dental drill to my forehead, and there was a horrible whine and a burring sort of pain. She set the drill aside and plugged a jack into the roof of my mouth, something attached to an assortment of coaxial cables, and there was a suffocating blackness that seemed to rush up all around me.

I stare for a few moments at what I've written, then return the pencil and the pad to the table. My mouth tastes like onions and curry and aluminum foil, a metallic tang like a freshly filled molar, and I lie back down and shut my eyes tightly, wondering if the throbbing in my chest is the beginning of a heart attack or only indigestion. I'm sick to my stomach and dizzy, and I know that lying down and closing my eyes is the worst thing I could do for either. But I cannot bear the white glare of those bulbs. I will vomit, or it will pass without my having vomited, but I won't look up into that cold light. I do not know where I am or how I got here. I cannot recall ever having seen this dingy room before. No, not dingy—squalid. The sound of dripping water is very loud, a leaky ceiling, so at least maybe the damp sheets do not mean that I've pissed myself in my sleep. I lie very still, listening to the dripping water and to my pounding heart and to a restless sound that might be automobiles on the street outside.

### 05. The White Woman

She leans close, and her lips brush the lobe of my right ear, her tepid breath on my cheek, breath that smells of tobacco and more faintly of Indian cooking (cardamom, tamarind, fenugreek, cloves). She whispers, and her voice is *so* soft, so soft that she might in this moment have become someone else entirely.

"Nothing to be desired anymore," she whispers. "*Nichts gewünscht zu werden.*"

I don't argue. In this place and time, these are somehow words of kindness, words of absolution, and within them seems to rest the vague hope of release. Her body is warm against mine, her flat belly pressed against mine which is not so flat as it once was, her strong thighs laid against my thighs and her small breasts against my breasts. Together, we have formed an improbable binary opposition, lovers drawn from a deck of cards, my skin so pink and raw and hers so chalky and fine.

"*Gelassen gehen Sie,*" she whispers, and I open my eyes and gaze up into hers, those dazzling, broken blue gems. Her beauty is unearthly, and I might almost believe her an exile from another galaxy, a fallen angel, the calculated product of biotech and genetic alchemy. She lifts herself, rising up on those muscular arms, my hips seized firmly and held fast between the stumps of her transfemoral amputations. There was an accident when she was only a child, but that's all I can now recall. *This is how a mouse must feel,* I think, *in the claws of a cat, or a mouse lost in a laboratory maze.* She smiles, and that expression could mean so many different things.

She leans down again and kisses me, her tongue sliding easily between my teeth.

The room is filled with music, which I am almost certain wasn't there only a moment before. The scratchy, brittle tones of a phonograph recording, something to listen to besides the goddamn rain and the leaking ceiling and the creaking bed springs. And then she enters me, and it comes as no surprise that

the robotic legs are not the full extent of her prosthetics. She slips her left arm beneath me, pulling me towards her, and I arch my back, finding her rhythm and the more predictable rhythm of the mechanical cock working its way deeper inside me.

In all the universe, there might be nothing but this room. In all the world, there might only be the two of us.

She kisses me again, but this time it is not a gentle act. This time, there is force and a violence only half-repressed, and I think of cats again. I do not want to think of cats, but I do. She will suck my breath, will draw my soul from me through my nostrils and lips to get at whatever it is she needs to know. How many souls would a woman like her have swallowed in her lifetime? She must be filled with ghosts, a gypsum alabaster bottle stoppered with two blue stones—lapis lazuli or chalcedony—cleverly shaped to resemble the eyes of a woman and not a cat and not an alabaster bottle filled with devoured souls.

Our lips part, and if she has taken my soul, it's nothing I ever needed anyway.

My mouth wanders across the smooth expanse above and between her breasts, and then I find her right nipple, and my tongue traces a mandala three times about her areola. Perhaps I have sorceries all my own.

"No, you don't," she says and thrusts her hips hard against mine.

And maybe I remember something then, so maybe this room is not all there is in all the world. Maybe I recall a train rushing along through long darknesses and brief puddles of mercury-vapour light, barreling forward, floating on old maglev tracks, and all around me are the cement walls of a narrow tunnel carved out deep below a city whose name I *cannot* recollect. But cities might not have names—I presently have no evidence that they do—and so perhaps this is not forgetfulness or amnesia, exactly. I turn my head and look out the window as the train races past a ruined and deserted station. I'm gripping a semi-automatic the way some women would hold onto a rosary or a string of tasbih beads. My forefinger slips through the familiar ring of the trigger guard ....

"You still with me, sister?" the albino woman asks, and I nod as the memory of the train and the gun dissolves and is forgotten once again. I am sweating now, even in this cold, dank room on these sodden not-quite-oyster sheets, I am sweating. I could not say if it is from fear or exertion or from something else entirely.

And she comes then, her head bending back so far I think her neck will snap, the taut V of her clavicles below her delicate throat, and if only I had the teeth to do the job. She comes with a shudder and a gasp and a sudden rush of profanity in some odd, staccato language that I do not speak, have never even heard before, but still I know that those words are profane. I see that she is sweating, too, brilliant drops standing out like nectar on her too-white skin, and I lick away a salty trickle from her chest. So there's another way that she is in me now. Her body shudders again, and she releases me, withdrawing and rolling away to lie on her back. She is breathing heavily and grinning, and it is a perfectly merciless sort of grin, choked with triumph and bitter guile. I envy her that grin and the callous heart in back of it. Then my eyes go to that space between her legs, that fine white thatch of hair, and for a moment I only imagine the instrument of my seduction was *not* a prosthesis. For a moment, I watch the writhing, opalescent thing, still glistening and slick with me. Its body bristles with an assortment of fleshy spines, and I cannot help but ponder what venoms or exotic nanorobotic or nubot serums they might contain.

"Only a fleeting trick of the light, my love," she says, still grinning that brutal grin of hers. And I blink, and now there is only a dildo there between her legs, four or five inches of beige silicone molded into an erect phallus. I close my eyes again, and listen to the music and the rain tapping against the window.

### 01. The Train

The girl is sitting across the aisle and only three rows in front of me, and there's almost no one else riding the tube this late, just a very old man reading a paperback novel. But he's seated far away, many rows

ahead of us, and only has eyes for his book, which he holds bent double in trembling, liver-spotted hands. The girl is wearing a raincoat made of lavender vinyl, the collar turned up high, so it's hard for me to get a good look at her face. Her hair is long and black and oily, and her hands are hidden inside snug leather gloves that match her raincoat. She's younger than I expected, maybe somewhere in her early twenties, maybe younger still, and a few years ago that might have made what I have to do next a lot harder. But running wet dispatch for the Greeks, you get numb to this sort of shit quick or you get into some other line of work. It doesn't matter how old she is, or that she might still have a mother and a father somewhere who love her, sisters or brothers, or that skimming parcels is the only thing keeping her from a life of whoring or selling herself off bit by bit to the carrion apes. These are most emphatically not my troubles. And soon, they will no longer be hers, either.

I glance back down the aisle towards the geezer, but he's still lost in the pages of his paperback.

The girl in the lavender coat is carrying, concealed somewhere on her person, seven 3/10ths cc syringes, and if I'm real goddamn fortunate, I'll never find out what's in them. It is not my job to know. It is my job to retrieve the package with as little fuss and fanfare and bloodshed as possible and then get it back across the border to the spooks in Alexandroupoli.

She wipes at her nose and then stares out the window at the tube walls hidden in the darkness.

I take a deep breath and glance back towards the old man. He hasn't moved a muscle, unless it's been to flip a page or two.

*Mister,* I think, *you just stay absolutely goddamn still, and maybe you'll get to find out how it ends.*

Then I check my gun again, to be double fucking sure the safety's off. With any sort of half-assed luck, I won't need the M9 tonight, but you live by better safe than sorry—if you live at all. The girl wipes her nose a second time and sniffles. Then she leans forward, resting her forehead against the back of the seat in front of her.

There's no time left to worry about whether or not the surveillance wasps are still running, taking it all in from their not-so-secret nooks and crannies, taking it all down. Another six minutes and we'll be pulling into the next terminal, and I have no intention of chasing this bitch in her lavender mack all over Ankara.

I stand and move quickly down the aisle towards her, flexing my left wrist to extend the niobium barb implanted beneath my skin. The neurotoxin will stop her heart before she even feels the prick, or so they tell me. Point is, she won't make a sound. It'll look like a heart attack, if anyone bothers with an autopsy, which I suspect they won't. I've been up against the Turks enough times now to know they only recruit the sort no one's ever going to miss anyway.

But then she turns and looks directly at me, and I've never seen eyes so blue. Or I've never seen eyes that *shade* of blue. Eyes that are both so terribly empty and so filled to bursting, and I know that something's gone very, very goddamn wrong. I know someone somewhere's lied to me, and this isn't just some kid plucked from the slums to mule pilfered load. She sits there, staring up at me, and I reach for the 9mm, shit-sure that's exactly the wrong thing to do, knowing that I've panicked even if I can't quite fathom *why* I've panicked. I'm close enough to get her with the barb, though now there might be a struggle, and then I'd have to deal with the old bookworm up front. I've hesitated, allowed myself to be distracted, and there's no way it's not gonna go down messy.

She smiles, a voracious, carnivorous smile.

"Nothing to be desired anymore," she says, and I feel the muscles in my hand and wrist relax, feel the barb retracting. I feel the gun slip from my slack fingers and hear it clatter to the floor.

"Go back to your seat," she tells me, but I've fallen so far into those eyes—those eyes that lead straight down through endless electric blue chasms, and I almost don't understand what she means. She leans over and picks my gun up off the floor of the maglev and hands it back to me.

"Go back to your seat," she says again, and I do. I turn and go back to my seat, returning the M9 to its shoulder holster, and sit staring at my hands or staring out the train window for what seems hours and hours and hours ....

### 06. Marlene Dietrich

I sit alone at the foot of the bed, "south" of that sprawling river delta and the low damp-sheet hills beyond, all rearranged now by the geological upheaval of my movements. I sit there smoking and shivering and watching the dirty rainwater dripping onto the white tiles covering the floor of the room. The phonograph is playing "I May Never Go Home Anymore," and I know all the words, though I cannot remember ever having heard the song before.

"I have always loved her voice," the albino woman says from her place at the window, behind me and to my left.

"It's Marlene Dietrich, isn't it?" I ask, wishing I could say if I have always been afflicted with this patchwork memory. Perhaps this is merely the *nature* of memory, and that's something else I've forgotten.

"That wasn't her birth name," the white woman replies. "But it wasn't a stage name, either. Her parents named her Marie Magdalene—"

"Just like Jesus' whore," I say, interrupting. She ignores me.

"I read somewhere that Dietrich changed it, when she was still a teenager in Schöneberg. 'Marlene' is a contraction of 'Marie' and 'Magdalene.' Did you know that? I always thought that was quite clever of her."

I shrug and take a long drag on my cigarette, then glance at the scrapbook lying open on the bed next to me. The black-and-white photographs are all numbered, beginning with .0001, though I'm not at all sure they were the last time I went through it. The voice of the long dead actress fills the room, making it seem somehow warmer.

*Don't ever think about tomorrow.*

*For tomorrow may never come.*

"You should have another good look at the book," the albino woman suggests.

"I don't know what you expect me to see there. I don't understand what it is you want me to *tell* you. I've never *seen* that man before. I don't *remember* ever having seen that man before."

"Of course you don't. But you need to realise, we're running out of time. *You're* running out of time, love."

*Time is nothing as long as I'm living it up this way.*

*I may never go home anymore.*

I turn my head and watch her watching whatever lies on the other side of the windowpane. I still have not had the nerve to look for myself. Some part of me does not want to know, and some part of me still suspects there may be no more to the world than this room. If I look out that window, I might see nothing at all, because nothing may be all there is to see. When I fashioned the flat, rectangular world of the bed, and then this white room which must be the vault of the heavens which surrounds it, perhaps I stopped at the room's four walls. Plaster painted the same white as the floor tiles and the ceiling and the light shining down from those bare fluorescent stars. Beyond that, there is no more, the edges of my universe, the practical boundaries of my cosmic bubble.

"She really did a number on your skull," the albino says. "I don't know how they expect me to get anything, between the goddamn firewall and what she did."

"What *did* she do?" I ask, not really wanting to know that either, but it doesn't matter, because the albino woman does not answer me. She's still naked, as am I. I still do not know her name. "Are we in Kyoto?" I ask.

"Why the hell would they bother slinging a wog sniper all the way the fuck to Japan?" she wants to know, and I have no answer for that. I seem to have no answers at all.

*I've got kisses and kisses galore,*

*That have never been tasted before.*

"Just be a good little girl and look at the book again," she says to me. "Maybe this time you'll see something that you've missed."

I breathe a grey cloud of smoke out through my nostrils, then pick the scrapbook up off the bed. The covers are very slightly damp from lying there on the damp sheets. I don't suppose it matters. I turn the pages and smoke my cigarette. The same careworn, hollow-eyed, middle-aged face looking back at me as before, staring back at whomever took all these pictures. I turn another page, coming to page number nine, the four photos designated .0033 through .0036, and none of it means any more to me than it did the last time.

"I think that I may remember a good deal about Kyoto," I say. "But I don't remember anything at all about Greece. And I don't *look* Greek, do I?"

"You don't look Japanese, either."

One last puff, then I drop the butt of my cigarette to the wet tiles, and it sizzles there for half a moment. I run my fingers slowly over the four glossy photographs on the page, as if touching them might make some sort of difference. And, as it happens, I do see a scar on the man's chin I hadn't noticed before. I examine some of the other pages, and the scar is there on every single one of them.

"If I don't find it, whatever it is you want me to find in here—"

"—there are going to be a lot of disappointed people, sunshine, and you'll be the first."

"Can I have another cigarette?" I ask her.

"Just look at the damned book," she replies, so that's what I do. It's open to page fifteen, .0057–.0060. I try focusing on what the man's wearing instead of his face, but all I can see is the collar of a light-coloured T-shirt, and it's the same in every photograph. My eyes are so tired, and I shut them for a moment. I can almost imagine that the flat illumination from the fluorescent bulbs is draining me somehow, diminishing me, both body and soul. But then I remember that the white woman took my soul when she fucked me, so never mind. I sit there with my eyes shut, listening to the dripping water and listening to Marlene Dietrich and wishing I could at least remember if I've ever had a name.

*If you treat me right, this might be the night.*

*I may never go home, I may never go home.*

*I may never go home anymore.*

*I may never go home anymore.*

## 08. The Fire Escape

When I found the umbrella leaning in one corner of the room and opened the window and climbed out onto the fire escape, she didn't try to stop me. She did not even say a word. And there is a world beyond the white room, after all. But it isn't Kyoto. It is no city that I have seen or even dreamt of before. It must *be* a city, because I cannot imagine what else it might possibly be. I'm sitting with the window and the redbrick wall of the motel on my right, my naked ass against the icy steel grating, and the falling rain is very loud on the clear polyvinyl canopy of the umbrella. I think I might never have been this cold in all my life, and I don't know why I didn't take her robe, as well. If I have clothes of my own, they are not anywhere to be found in the room.

I peer through the rain-streaked umbrella and try to find words that would do justice to the intricate, towering structures rising up all around me and the motel (that it is a motel, I will readily admit, is only a working assumption). But I know I don't possess that sort of vocabulary. Maybe the peculiar staccato language the albino woman spoke when she came, maybe it contains nouns and verbs equal to these things I see.

They are both magnificent and terrible, these edifices that might be buildings and railways, smokestacks and turbines, streets and chimneys and great glass atriums. They are awful. That word might come the closest, in all its connotations. I will not say they are beautiful, for there is something *loathsome* about these bizarre structures. At least, to me they seem bizarre; I cannot say with any certainty that they are. Possibly, I am the alien here, me and this unremarkable redbrick motel. Thinking through this amnesiac mist locked up inside my head, there is no solid point of reference left to me, no objective standard by which I may judge. There is only gut reaction, and my gut reaction is that they are bizarre and loathsome things.

The air out here smells like rain and ozone, carbon monoxide and chemicals I do not know the names for, and yet it still smells very much cleaner than the white room with its soggy miasma of mold and slow decay.

These spiraling, jointed, ribsy things which *might* be the skyscrapers of an unnamed or unnamable city, they are as intricate as the calcareous or chitinous skeletons of deep-sea creatures. There. I *do* have a few words, though they are utterly insufficient. They are mere *approximations* of what I see. So, yes, they seem organic, as though they are the product not of conscious engineering and construction but of evolution and ontogeny. They have *grown* here, I think—all of them—and I wonder if the men and women who planted the necessary seeds or embryos, however many ages ago, are anything like the albino who took my soul away.

And then I hear the noise of vast machineries ... no, I have been *hearing* this noise all along, but only now has my amazement or apprehension or awe at the sight of this city dimmed enough that I look for the source of the sounds. And I see, not far away, there is a sort of clearing in this urban, industrial carapace. And I can see the muddy earth ripped open there, red as a wound in any living creature. There are great indescribable contraptions busy making the wound much larger, gouging and drilling out buckets or mouthfuls of mud and meat to be dumped upon steaming spoilage heaps or fed onto conveyer belts that stretch away into the foggy distance.

And there is something in that hole, something still only partly exposed by the exertions of these machines that might not be machines at all. Something I know (and no, I cannot say how I could ever *know* such a thing) has lain there undisturbed and sleeping for millennia, and now they mean to wake it up.

I look away. I've seen too much already.

Something is creeping slowly along the exterior of one of the strange buildings, and it might be a living tumor—a malignant mass of tissue and corruption and ideas—and, then again, it might be nothing more than an elevator.

Then I hear knuckles rapping a windowpane, and when I turn my head back towards the motel, the albino woman is watching me with her bright blue eyes.

## 07. The Book (II)

*Don't ever think about tomorrow.*
*For tomorrow may never come.*

And then the albino woman lifts the phonograph needle from the record and, instantly, the music goes away. I wish she had let it keep on playing, over and over and over, because now the unceasing *drip drip drip* from the ceiling to the tiles seems so much louder than when I had the song and Marlene Dietrich's voice to concentrate on. The woman turns on her whirring robotic legs and stares at me.

"You never did tell me what happened to your arm," she says and smiles.

"Did you ask?"

"I believe that I did, yes."

I am sitting there at the foot of the bed with the scrapbook lying open on my lap, my shriveled left arm held close to my chest. And it occurs to me that I do not *know* what happened to my arm, and also

it occurs to me that I have no recollection whatsoever of there being anything at all wrong with it before she asked how it got this way. And then this *third* observation, which seems only slightly less disconcerting than having forgotten that I'm a cripple (like her), and that I must have been a cripple for a very long time: the book is open to photos .0705–.0708, page 177, and I notice that beside each photo's number are distinct and upraised dimples, like Braille, though I do not know for certain this *is* Braille. I flip back a few pages and see that, yes, the dimples are there on every page.

"That's very thoughtful," I say, so softly that I am almost whispering. "I might have been blind, after all."

"You might be yet," the white woman says.

"If I were," I reply without looking up from the book, "I couldn't even see the damned photographs, much less find whatever it is you *think* I can find in here."

"You don't get off that easily," she laughs, and her noisy mechanical legs carry her from the table with the phonograph to the bed, and she begins the arduous and apparently painful process of detaching herself from the contraptions. I try to focus on the book, trying not to watch the albino or hear the dripping ceiling or smell the dank stench of the room. Trying only to see the photographs. I don't ask why anyone would bother to provide Braille numbers for photographs that a blind person could not see. And this time, she kindly does not answer my unasked question. I return to page 177, then proceed to 178, then on to 179.

"Shit," the albino woman hisses, forcing her curse out through clenched teeth as she disconnects the primary neural lead to her right thigh. There's thick, dark pus and a bead of fresh blood clinging to the plug. More pus leaks from the port and runs down the stump of her leg.

"Is it actually worth all that trouble and discomfort?" I ask. "Wouldn't a wheelchair be—"

"Why don't you try to mind your own goddamn business," she barks at me, and so I do. I go back to the scrapbook, back to photos .0713–.0716 and that face I know I will be seeing for a long time to come, whenever I shut my eyes. I will see him in my sleep, if I am allowed to live long enough to ever sleep again.

The woman sighs a halting, painful sort of sigh and eases herself back onto the sheets, freed now from the prosthetics, which are left standing side by side at the foot of the bed.

"I picked up a patch bug a while back," she says. "Some sort of cross-scripting germ, a quaint little XSSV symbiote. But it's being treated. It's nothing lethal."

And that's when I see it. She's stretched out there next to me talking about viruses and slow-purge reboots, and I notice the puffy reddish rim surrounding photograph number .0715. This *page* is infected, like the albino woman and her robotic legs, and the *site* of the infection is right here beneath .0715.

"I think I've found it," I say and press the pad of my thumb gently to the photograph. It's hot to the touch, and I can feel something moving about beneath the haggard face of the man with the shaved head and the scar on his chin.

She props herself up on her elbows when I hold the scrapbook out so that she can see. "Well, well," she says. "Maybe you have, and maybe you haven't. Either way, sunshine, it's going to hurt when you pull that scab away."

"Is that what I'm supposed to do?" I ask her, laying the heavy scrapbook back across my lap. Even as I watch, the necrosis has begun to spread across the page towards the other three photographs.

"Do it quickly," she says, and I can hear the eagerness in her voice. "Like pulling off a sticky plaster. Do it fast, and maybe it'll hurt less."

"Is *this* what you wanted me to find? Is this it?"

"You're stalling," she says. "Just fucking do it."

And then the black telephone begins to ring again.

### 09. Exit Music (The Gun)

Sitting beneath the transparent canopy of the borrowed umbrella, sitting naked in the rain on the fire escape, and now she's standing over me, held up by all those shiny chrome struts and gears and pistons. She did not even have to open the window or climb out over the sill, but I can not ever explain, in words, how it was she exited the room. It only matters that she did. It only matters that she's standing over me holding the Beretta 9mm, aiming it at my head.

"I never made any promises," she tells me, and I nod (because that's true) and lower the umbrella and fold it shut. I support my useless left arm with my right and stare directly up into the cold rain, wishing there were anything falling from that leaden sky clean enough to wash away the weight of all these things I cannot remember or will never be permitted to remember.

"The war isn't going well," she says. "We've lost Hsinchu and Changhua. I think we all know that Taipei can't be far behind. Too many feedback loops. Way too many scratch hits."

"Nothing to be desired anymore," I say, and taste the bitter, toxic raindrops on my tongue.

"Nothing at all," she tells me, setting the muzzle of the M9 to my right temple. I am already so chilled I do not feel the cold steel, only the pressure of the gun against my skin. The rain stings my eyes, and I blink. I take a deep breath and try not to shiver.

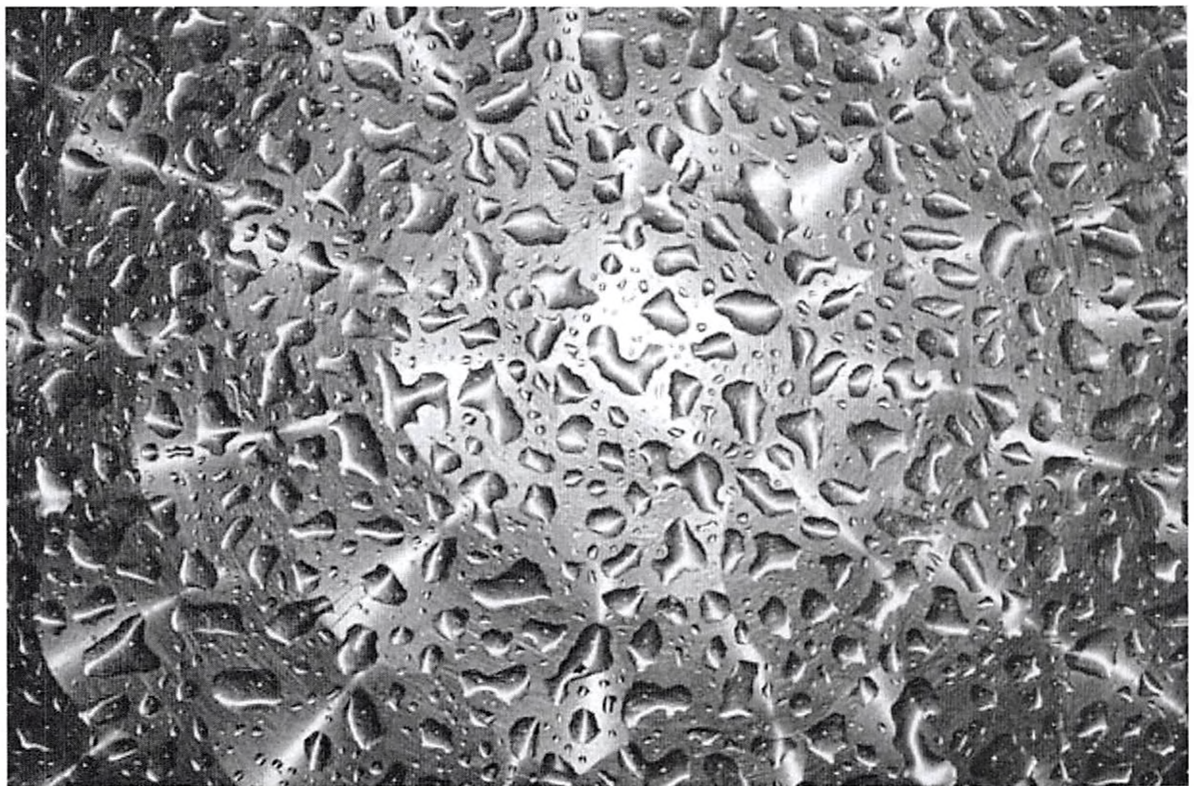
"Whatever they're digging up over there," and I nod towards the excavations, "they should stop. You should tell them that soon, before they wake it up."

"You think they'd listen … to someone like me?" she asks. "Is that what you think?"

"I don't know what I think anymore."

Above me and all around me this lifeless, living husk that might be a city or only the mummified innards of some immense biomechanoid crustacean goes on about its clockwork day-to-day affairs, all its secret metabolisms, its ancient habits. It does not see me—or seeing me, it shows even less regard for me than I might show a single mite nestled deep within a single eyelash follicle. I gaze up at that inscrutable tangle of spires and flying buttresses, rotundas and acroterion flourishes and all the thousands of solemn gushing rainspouts.

"Do not feel unloved," she says, and I shut my eyes and sense all the world move beneath me.



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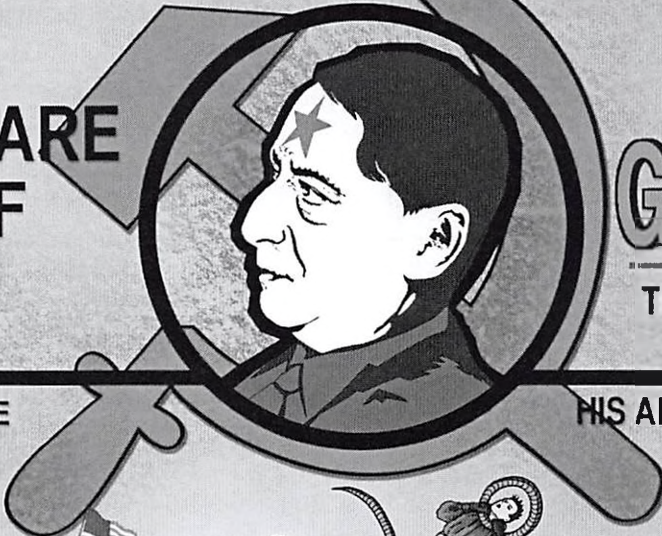

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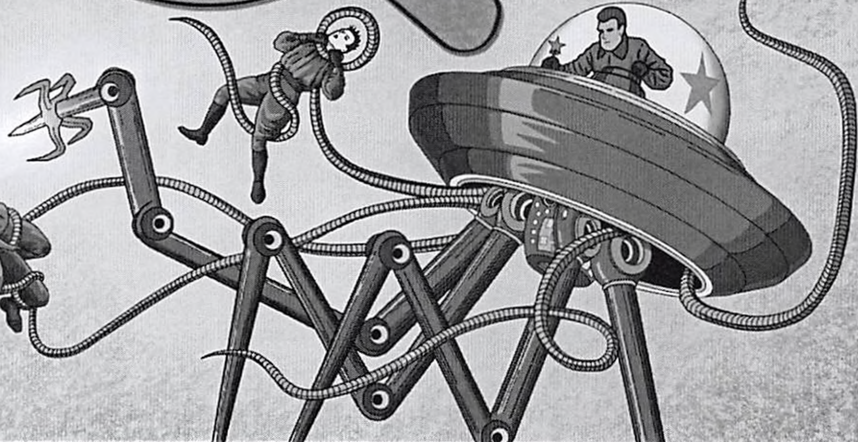

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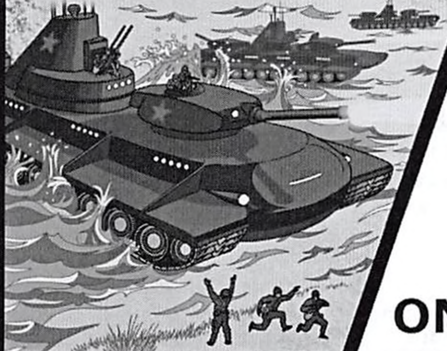

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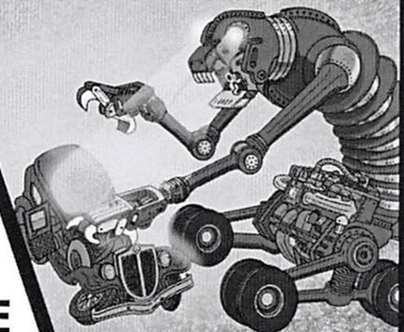

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[Note: only first print publications are shown here. Reprints, revisions, and reissues are extant in many cases. The author frequently revises her work for each subsequent publication.]

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first published in FROG

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"The Yellow Alphabet"
first published in YELLOW

OTHER

Essays, scientific publications on vertebrate paleontology, scripting comics/graphic novels (notably *The Dreaming*), poems, blogging, etc. ♆

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# Shirley Jackson's Daughter Remembers

Sarah Hyman DeWitt

My family's bedtime traditions were all about reading. Until we were about seven, Mom would sit with us in her lap in her bedroom armchair and read to us every night: I remember animal stories and the Oz books, mostly. She had them all, an entire shelf. Once we became able to read, at about four or five years old, we were allowed afterwards to take to our beds with the lights on for personal reading time until her final "Lights out!"

We all read our way fast through the local library's children's room and moved outward, to the nervous jitterings of the librarians. I loved fairy tales and mythology, and of course at home we had bookcases of world folklore, one of our father's fascinations. Every room in our house was lined with books, but they kept coming. On my eighth birthday, after I opened my presents from the other kids and the grandparents, my mother handed me a small package: one book! Disappointed tears were starting in my eyes when I opened the cover and found her note: "Forty-nine more on your bed!"

Those fifty books of fairy tales from all over the world kept me going for a long time. Slowly, my mother introduced me to new writers and kinds of fiction that she thought I might like. Every night, at the youngest child's bedtime, and no matter whether we had company or not, even if a party was going on downstairs, Mom would climb the steps slowly and move from bedroom to bedroom, saying goodnight to us. After tucking in my younger brother and turning off his light, sometimes she would slip into her room to get a book she would offer to me.

My bedtime was later than my younger brother's, so after her goodnight visit I had half an hour or so to read, and then I'd hear her holler up from the bottom of the stairs, "Sally! Lights out!" And I would yell back, "Mom, please! Five more minutes!?" and, often, knowing how delicious my particular book was, she would agree. Sometimes she would lose track of time, and I could read for another half-hour, before she went to call up to my sister and remembered me, and my light had to then snap off instantly (Mom had the ears of a bat). Somehow, every cheating trick I came up with, from slanting the book toward the faint hall light to draping my lamp with a towel or using a flashlight under the covers, was old news to her, and when she and my father climbed their weary steps to bed, she would appear suddenly in my doorway with the face of a vengeful goddess.

I remember when she presented me with *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*, and with *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Later came *The Prisoner of Zenda* and (a mutual heartthrob) *Rupert of Hentzau*. She started me on E. Nesbit, the Borrowers, Naomi Mitchison, and Kipling's short stories. (I went on to read all of Kipling; she didn't much like him, but knew that I would.) Neither of us liked *Alice in Wonderland*, but we both loved T. H. White, and Marjorie Bowen's books, first among hundreds of Victorian romances that Mom found for me, many of them books that she had read as a girl.

We both loved English novels, and Victorian slang and British spelling. I regret that I have forgotten so many of the authors we read! Many of her offerings gave us exciting worlds to discuss. She had read to me large sections of *The Hobbit* when I was four and five, too young to go to afternoon school, so we shared a common mental landscape of mountains roiling with dwarves and trolls, and woods populated by gracious elves, talking animals, and walking, singing trees. Sadly, I didn't discover *The Lord of the Rings* until high school, after my mother had died.

During my adolescence, we assumed traditional warring roles; I became too clumsy to help her cook, and assumed a hostile wit that I found dashingly romantic, but we still came together in our love for certain books. When I was fourteen or so, Mom proffered Mary Renault's *The Bull from the Sea*, in what

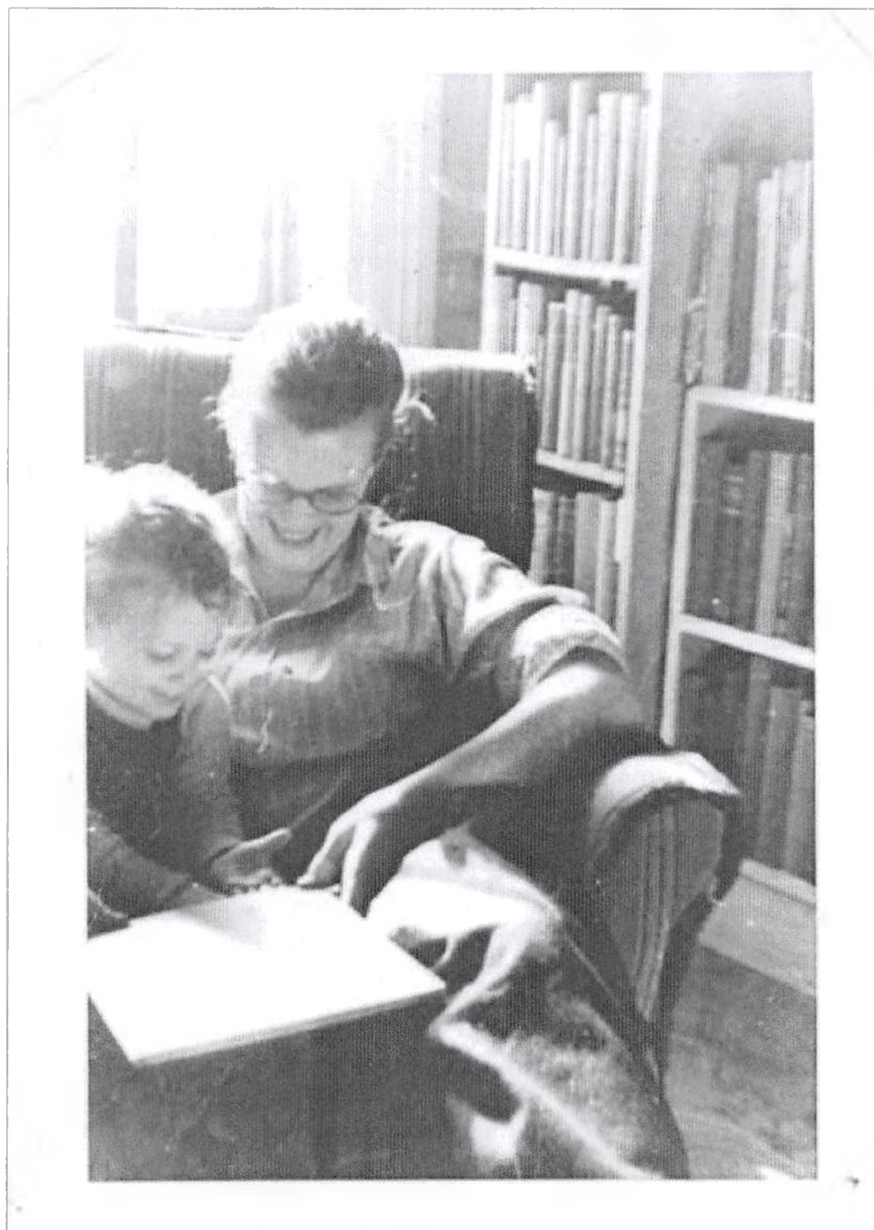
I now realize was a peace offering that honored the maturity I wanted and we both dreaded. On the night Mom opened my door bearing L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt's *Incompleat Enchanter*, she became the queen of my heart again.

She first tried with my older sister, then with me, to pass on her passion for mystery stories. I quite enjoyed Josephine Tey and Hercule Poirot, which generated some great conversations. But after I puzzled through a few of her Agatha Christie paperbacks, long admired by me for their lurid covers, the embossed daggers and roses and drops of blood, we realized I would never love mystery stories the way she did. I had no instinct for figuring out who the killer was! But she always knew after a chapter or two, or so she claimed.

One night my mother knocked and came into my room and rather shyly proffered Heinlein's book of short stories containing "The Door into Summer." I am not sure why she had bought it: possibly because one of the stories was about a cat. I finished it that night, and the next day found my way to a used book store and bought three more Heinleins. Mom looked askance at the rocket ships on two of the covers; in her mind, only boys read about space travel and science. When I was old enough for her to trust me with their crumbling pages, I read her collection of *Weird Tales* and *Unknown* magazines, marveling at the fantasy worlds of Sturgeon and Horace Gold and so many others. But I was never able to interest her in any science fiction; she could read Lovecraft fearlessly, but future fiction made her anxious. I, on the other hand, now mainly revel in the reading of science fiction and fantasy, though horror fiction often makes me nervous!

I wonder sometimes how she would have dealt with cordless phones and microwaves, Mars probes and genetic manipulation. Mom was nervous about electricity, and carried an unplugged lamp with a superstitious carefulness. If she still lived, she would be writing on her high old Underwood typewriter, scorning word processors with their mysterious dangers and demonic powers. Now that the future is here, moving us faster and faster, what with wavicles and antimatter and black holes and probability theory, she would likely blame the science fiction writers for getting us into such a time of messy uncertainty. SHE knew what SHE believed, and it was unchangeable. Ghosts existed here, perhaps, among us, but the concepts of aliens or parallel universes would be rejected with a sneer.

When I read aloud now, to grandchildren or radio listeners, I know I sound like my mother. I read the books she read us and the ones she wrote, and feel the fondness, the certainty, the humor. I share her unquestioned knowledge that life is hard, but a good book is all you need to fly free. My children and I are constantly passing books on to one another, and I mainly give books for holidays and birthdays to friends from two to ninety. Books are the one thing I cannot and will not do without. Bedtime for me always includes reading, for hours or sometimes just for five minutes. The books I read light my days and my nights; I'm not really worried about hearing "Lights out!" I'll probably be just about asleep by then anyway.



Shirley Jackson reading to son Barry.
Family photo, circa 1953.

# Probably Die in a Small Town

F. Brett Cox

As I write this, it's a staggeringly beautiful spring morning where I live in central Vermont. About a hundred miles southwest of here, in North Bennington, I'm sure it's equally beautiful. But it feels different. Trust me.

There is almost inevitably a grim undertone to most small towns and villages. It varies from region to region: the deep history of the New England village, the lunatic undertones of the Southern crossroads community, the affectless quiet of the Midwestern small town, the Martian void of the Southwest settlement. I won't argue with anyone who holds fast to happy memories of a Bradbury childhood, or who is presently at a comfortable remove from the stresses and strains of urban life. Maybe it's just my own darkly refracted sensibilities, grown steadily darker with each passing year. But in any small town I've ever seen, from the one in which I was raised in southeastern North Carolina to the one in which I currently live, here on this beautiful spring morning, the fundamental question is always there. *How can I leave? Can I leave? Tell me I can leave if I want.*

One would think this wouldn't be that much of an issue in North Bennington. Six miles south is the sophisticated college town of Bennington; thirteen miles later, you're in Massachusetts and the equally sophisticated college town of Williamstown. Keep going one way, and before long you're in Boston; go another way, and before long you're in New York. Restaurants and Wi-Fi a few minutes away, no problem.

But the afternoon a couple of years ago when my wife and I found ourselves in North Bennington, none of that came to mind. Don't get me wrong. It's a perfectly nice little town with some very nice homes and, I'm sure, very nice people. But it didn't feel as if two of the leading liberal arts colleges in the country were less than half an hour away. It felt like the place where, through the middle third of the twentieth century, a number of people disappeared for reasons never explained, most famously Bennington student Paula Jean Welden, who went out for a walk one afternoon in 1946 and never came back. Disappearances numerous enough that the area around Bennington, focusing on Glastonbury Mountain, eventually became known as the "Bennington Triangle" (so named by Joseph A. Citro, indefatigable chronicler of all weird New England things, who could speak to all this with far more authority than I). It felt that way when we crossed the railroad tracks and found what was left of a factory and warehouse district, the sort of postindustrial scab you see frequently in northeastern small towns, sometimes in the Midwest, not so much in the South. It emphatically felt that way when we went in the other direction and, near a prosperous housing development, encountered a classic New England stone wall on which a line of blackbirds perched with primal confidence as we drove by.

I go on about North Bennington because that, of course, is where Shirley Jackson lived from 1945 until her untimely death twenty years later. Her husband, the renowned literary critic Stanley Edgar Hyman (who, among other things, wrote the afterword and compiled the glossary there at the end of that orangey-yellow Ballantine paperback of *A Clockwork Orange* that, if you're my age, you probably still have), was a professor at Bennington College. North Bennington is where they lived and raised their children, where the San Francisco-born, New York State-bred novelist married to a Jewish intellectual encountered the depressingly inevitable reactions of people who have no way to leave, but also no desire to do so. North Bennington is where, for all intents and purposes, "The Lottery" takes place. It's also where, less famously but just as significantly, Jackson read the contemporary reporting of Paula Jean Welden's disappearance, reports that informed her second novel, *Hangsaman* (1951), and, even more directly, the underexamined, extraordinary short story "The Missing Girl" (1957).

And that is, of course, why we were in North Bennington on another spring afternoon. Because Shirley Jackson lived there, and we wanted to see for ourselves. And if you believe, as I do, that place is everything, you should, too. ⚘



# Life Among the Savages

Barry N. Malzberg

She came to Syracuse University (she had graduated in 1940) in March 1965 when the Shubert Fellow was two months short of leaving academia *sine die*. Shirley Jackson was 48 then and looked twenty years older; she was grotesquely overweight, hobbled by canes, almost entirely out of breath and unable to negotiate the single flight of stairs in the Hall of Languages leading to the small auditorium. So they put her in the largest classroom in the basement where about 150 faculty, graduate students, and a scattering of undergraduates listened to her ramble about her college days. (Which she depicted as a perpetual romp through Winter Weekend. The author of *Life Among The Savages* was extremely skilled at misrepresentation. Happy faculty housewife in happy Bennington, Vermont.) Question period: "Would you tell us a story?" a young man asked. The author showed the first stirrings of true attention. "Tell you a story?" she said. "Of course not. That's not what I do. I can *write* you a story but that would not be very interesting to observe or I could talk to you *about* a story but you'd find that very boring." She receded as quickly as she had appeared. A few more mumbles and she was done. Faculty surrounded and helped her exit laboriously. She was dead a few months later. Her husband, the villainous Stanley Edgar Hyman, Professor of English, quickly remarried (a 19-year-old student) and died less than two years later, also in his forties, in mid-pontification at the dinner table. Raised a finger to make a particularly exquisite point, opened his mouth, and fell dead of a stroke. Anyone want more information? The merciless Joyce Carol Oates laid out that marriage and the long dying of Shirley Jackson in her 1968 *Esquire* story, "Accomplished Desires." Second prize in the 1969 O. Henry Prize Stories. One can envision Mike Nichols in a variant of a famous routine. "I knew Shirley Jackson. Old Shirley was a lot of laughs."

Old Shirley *wanted* to be a lot of laughs. Her nonfiction chronicle of dizzy family doings, *Life Among the Savages*, was adapted as a Reader's Digest Condensed Book in the '50s and was a bestseller. Merry times in the Hyman household. Of course it was all a lie and everyone who knew that couple or their daughters knew it but some of Jackson's greatest fiction lay in those nonfiction chronicles of merriment. But the author of *The Haunting of Hill House* and "One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts" was even more capable of truth than lies and in her great if spare lexicon of fiction she gave truths of unspeakable grace, immoral power, laid them out in a line like Madeline and her classmates, gave to the world a quirkiness and perception of the true nature of the ordinary which is unduplicable. No one wrote like Shirley Jackson before she emerged. A lot of us tried to write like Shirley Jackson in her wake but that was equally impossible. Closest was Harlan Ellison in his great "Man Who Rowed Columbus Ashore" (and in his Introduction to the story in the 1993 *Best American Short Stories* he only acknowledged its influence) but only Shirley Jackson could have made a go of it, and in her last years she was too busy lying about her life and suffering that life to approach the task.

An absolute anomaly, Miss Jackson, and very close to a great writer. If she had been untempted by the Savages, she might have made it all the way. ⚘

# Shirley Jackson's "Experience and Fiction": Three Ghost Stories, Minus the Ghosts

Andy Duncan

In her 1958 essay "Experience and Fiction," originally written as a lecture and published only posthumously, Shirley Jackson relates three weird episodes that she says happened to her as she was working on *The Haunting of Hill House*.

The first is shades of Fritz Leiber's 1941 story "Smoke Ghost": an unnerving sight from the window of an elevated train in New York City, during a brief stop at Harlem's 125th Street Station. "Just outside the station, dim and horrible in the dusk, I saw a building so disagreeable that I could not stop looking at it; it was tall and black and as I looked at it when the train began to move again it faded away and disappeared" (Jackson, "Experience" 201).

Jackson writes that the memory of the "horrid building" gave her nightmares, "ruined my whole vacation in New York City," and continued to haunt her once she got home to Vermont. Finally she asked "a friend at Columbia University" to "locate the building and find out, if he could, why it looked so terrifying" ("Experience" 201). The friend's reply was unnerving:

> He wrote that he had had trouble finding the building, since it only existed from that one particular point of the 125th Street station; from any other angle it was not recognizable as a building at all. Some seven months before it had been almost entirely burned in a disastrous fire which killed nine people. What was left of the building, from the other three sides, was a shell. The children in the neighborhood knew that it was haunted. ("Experience" 201–202)

The second weird episode happened while Jackson, trying to envision Hill House, was "collecting pictures of houses, particularly odd houses, to see what I could find to make into a suitable haunted house." She found in a magazine a California house "which really looked right," because it "reminded me vividly of the hideous building in New York; it had the same air of disease and decay, and if ever a house looked like a candidate for a ghost, it was this one" ("Experience" 202). She wrote her mother, in hopes that the lifelong Californian could help identify the "ugly house," and received another unnerving reply:

> Yes, she knew about the house, although she had not supposed that there are any pictures of it still around. My great-grandfather built it. It had stood empty and deserted for some years before it finally caught fire, and it was generally believed that that was because the people of the town got together one night and burned it down. ("Experience" 203)

The third weird episode involves the most unnerving message of all:

> I came downstairs a few mornings later and found a sheet of copy paper moved to the center of my desk, set neatly away from the general clutter. On the sheet of paper was written DEAD

> DEAD in my own handwriting. I am accustomed to making notes for books, but not in my sleep ... ("Experience" 203)



Viewed even at face value, these are three fine anecdotes. In wit and chills, they beat most of the first-person contributions to Stephen Jones's 1997 *Dancing with the Dark* anthology. Each little story Jackson tells us is more intense, and more intimate, than the last: we move from a stranger's house, to her great-grandfather's house, to Jackson's own house. That handwritten "DEAD DEAD," in particular, is as creepy as the handwritten "HELP ELEANOR COME HOME ELEANOR" that spooks the tenants of Hill House. And though Jackson had a well-earned reputation by 1958 for shunning the spotlight, what better anecdotes could a publicity-seeker have crafted to promote a haunted-house novel? Jackson's nightmare was a press agent's dream.

Of course, we need not view these anecdotes only at face value. The more we ponder them, the more interesting they get, and the more appropriate to any discussion of *The Haunting of Hill House.* I am most struck by the fact that however chill-inducing these incidents, *not one is overtly supernatural.*

That Jackson was troubled by an oppressive urban building hardly demands a supernatural explanation, even if it led to nightmares and a spoiled vacation. Jackson was increasingly agoraphobic in her later years, and an early stop in Manhattan on the inbound train easily could have triggered what 21st-century readers would recognize as a panic attack. Note that Jackson does not quite tell us the place was haunted, merely that "The children in the neighborhood knew that it was haunted"—in the same way they presumably "knew" that Santa came down the chimney once a year. Jackson recounts the children's "knowledge" without endorsing it.

Jackson's discovery that her model for Hill House had been built by her great-grandfather is simply a coincidence—one that seems less remarkable when you consider that Jackson's mother's family, the Bugbees, included four prominent Northern California architects who designed houses for the wealthy in the late 19th century, including at least four Nob Hill mansions in San Francisco. Any number of the houses in Jackson's clip file might have been Bugbee commissions—something that may well have occurred to her while she was compiling it. And once again, Jackson does *not* tell us the house was haunted, merely that "it was generally believed"—but not necessarily by her mother—that the neighbors "got together one night and burned it down." Even if the arson did occur, one can imagine non-supernatural reasons: the house may have been a neighborhood eyesore, a safety hazard, a locus of crime, a breeding ground for roaches and rats.

What, then, of the "DEAD DEAD" manuscript? However expertly Jackson conveys to the reader her own unease at that moment of discovery, the fact remains that no one else in the room would have had reason to view the document as mysterious. Disturbing, perhaps—a worrying indicator of a deteriorating mental state, à la the "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" manuscript pages in Stephen King's *The Shining*—but not mysterious. And the find needn't even have been disturbing; maybe, our hypothetical bystander would have reasoned, the dark-humored Jackson had simply been testing a possibly "dead" pen, or auditioning weird graffiti bound for the fictional walls of Hill House.

More importantly, as a lifelong reader of case studies in abnormal psychology—and as the author of *The Bird's Nest*, a novel about that postwar obsession of pop psychopathology, multiple-personality disorder—Jackson would have understood that the message to herself represented classic dissociative behavior, commonly associated with stress, fatigue, and insomnia. While certainly poorly understood, such behaviors are at root psychological, not parapsychological, as the late anomalist William R. Corliss summarizes:

> Dissociative behavior occurs when normal conscious behavior is modified, sometimes overwhelmed, by subsidiary mental activity. A second self seems to control the hand of the automatic writer and the speaker's tongue in glossolalia. On occasion the secondary personality will even take over bodily activity .... Dreams, sleep-walking, fugues, and hypnotic phenom-

ena are all manifestations of dissociative behavior in which the waking mind is pushed into the background. (Corliss, *Scientific* 271)

Indeed, this is a common critical reading of "HELP ELEANOR COME HOME ELEANOR" in *The Haunting of Hill House*.

The ambiguity deepens when we consider how unverifiable these anecdotes are. Jackson does not tell us the name of the burned-out building, its address, its orientation in regard to the station, the date of the fire, the date she saw it, or the name of her friend at Columbia. She does not tell us her great-grandfather's name, the name of the house he built, the date of its completion, the California town where it was built, or the date it burned. And, needless to add, Jackson is the only stated witness to the "DEAD DEAD" manuscript.

Are we being too skeptical? Not given the context of these three anecdotes. The essay "Experience and Fiction," which includes the passage we are scrutinizing, is mostly *not* about *The Haunting of Hill House*. It's devoted, instead, to addressing the clichéd question posed to all fiction writers: Where do you get your ideas? Jackson replies, "The genesis of any fictional work has to be human experience" ("Experience" 196), and she proceeds to describe a student story so slavishly devoted to what "really happened" that it fails as fiction. She analyzes several ways the student story would be improved by deviating from what "really happened," and asserts: "There is certainly no need to worry about whether any of this is true, or actually happened; it is as true as you make it. The important thing is that it be true in the story, and actually happen *there*" ("Experience" 200).

Only *then* does she tell us her Hill House stories. In short, the context suggests that she is inviting us—daring us—to apply the "as true as you make it" principle to these hair-raisers, too.

So these anecdotes that are, at best, only ambiguously supernatural are also ambiguously presented, so it's appropriate that they purport to describe the evolution of *The Haunting of Hill House*, a masterpiece of ambiguity. But they echo the familial themes of that novel as well: the malevolent influence of the patriarch Hugh Crain; Eleanor's tormented relationship with her late mother. Anyone who reads Jackson's three best known works—*The Haunting of Hill House*, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, and "The Lottery"—comes away convinced that Jackson had, to put it mildly, family issues. Themes of household strife, of relatives turning on one another, of parents stunting or warping their children, even of matricide and patricide, are everywhere in Jackson's writing, whatever the genre. Consider her non-fiction book for tweens, *The Witchcraft of Salem Village*, or her two supposedly lighthearted domestic-comedy bestsellers, their titles indicative of less-than-mainstream attitudes toward children: *Life Among the Savages* and *Raising Demons*.

Unsurprising, then, that the most "hideous" and "ugly" house in Jackson's clip file, one with just the right "air of disease and decay," turns out to be, in a sense, her own family's house—one that the family itself may have thought was best forgotten, since Jackson's mother "had not supposed that there were any pictures of it still around" ("Experience" 202–203).

Unsurprising, too, that Jackson fell beneath the shadow of that awful Manhattan building in the company of her husband, whose presence clearly did nothing to calm, reassure, or protect her. He may not even have noticed the building in the first place; Jackson implies that only she saw it, that he was oblivious. Moreover, her husband is at least partially complicit in planning (or co-planning) the trip that took her to that Bad Place. She implies her husband's role in the trip's logistics when she writes, "My nervousness was so extreme, finally, that *we changed our plans* and took a night train home, so that I would not be able to see the building when we went past" ("Experience" 201; emphasis mine). I'm a bit dumbfounded that "we" apparently decided revisiting the awful building *by night* was a good idea; just how collaborative was this decision?

Finally, the "DEAD DEAD" message, written in Jackson's own hand at her own desk, shows that Wrongness has taken up residence in her very home. Jackson's house may not be haunted, but at least

one of its inhabitants is. One is reminded of Kelly Link's masterfully Jackson-esque ghost story "Stone Animals," in which the house's furnishings and, eventually, inhabitants become haunted in turn, one by one. Maybe Jackson's *marriage* is haunted; what better two-word summary of a burned-out marriage, after all, than "DEAD DEAD"? ...

But here I must point out that Jackson, in this very essay, seeks to prevent our going further, rebukes any attempt at armchair psychoanalysis:

> Let me just point out right here and now that my unconscious mind has *been* unconscious for a number of years now and it is my firm intention to keep it that way. When I have nightmares about a horrid building it is the horrid building I am having nightmares about, and no one is going to talk me out of it; that is final. ("Experience" 201)

In other words, Jackson claims, sometimes a haunted house is just a haunted house. How much we believe her—or believe she wanted or expected to be believed—depends largely on how reliable we find her narration of her own life. For my part, the more I read and re-read Shirley Jackson, her fiction and non-fiction and everything in between, the more certain I become that in her work, *no* reading is final, not even hers.

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[For the release of *Shirley Jackson: Novels and Stories* by the Library of America (no. 204 in their overall series of authoritative texts of American classics), Rich Kelley conducted this interview in May 2010 with volume editor Joyce Carol Oates for the Library of America eNewsletter. Reprinted by permission of Joyce Carol Oates.]

# The Library of America Interviews Joyce Carol Oates about Shirley Jackson

[RK]: Where should we place Shirley Jackson in the American canon? What was Jackson's distinguishing achievement?

[JCO]: Shirley Jackson is one of those highly idiosyncratic, inimitable writers whose achievement is not so broad, ambitious, or so influential as the "major" writers—Melville, James, Hemingway, Faulkner—but whose work exerts an enduring spell. Her "distinguishing" achievement is probably the famous story "The Lottery"—or the excellent suspense/Gothic novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*.

[RK]: The volume includes Jackson's very entertaining essay "Biography of a Story" which she frequently read before her public readings of "The Lottery." When *The New Yorker* published "The Lottery" in its June 26, 1948 issue, the story generated more mail than any story the magazine has ever published. Was it really that different from anything published before? Why do you think it caused such a stir?

[JCO]: "The Lottery" is not so very different from brilliantly rendered and unsettling short stories by Edgar Allan Poe, for instance "The Tell-Tale Heart." But it was published in *The New Yorker*, at that time far less than now a sort of bastion of proper middle-class/Caucasian-American values. The magazine tended to be prim, prissy, self-regarding, its tone annoyingly arch. Jackson's story suggests that ordinary Americans—like the readers of *The New Yorker*, in fact—are not so very different from the lynch-mob mentality of the Nazis. Of course, Jackson's vision of humankind is a bit simplistic and reductive, but hers is the art of radical distillation, like Flannery O'Connor, not subtly observed social drama like that of Henry James, Edith Wharton, or John Updike.

[RK]: *The Wall Street Journal* recently referred to *The Haunting of Hill House* as "widely regarded as the greatest haunted house story ever written." In his *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King writes that "it and James's *The Turn of the Screw* are the only two great novels of the supernatural in the last hundred years." What sets *The Haunting of Hill House* apart?

[JCO]: This is possibly true—my preference is for *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. However, *The Haunting of Hill House* is a highly engaging and suspenseful ghost story, that is, like all good ghost stories, an anatomy of its characters. Jackson's "hauntedness" is in her troubled protagonist, not in the actual house—there is the possibility that a toxic individual is a contagion to others, and to herself.

[RK]: In your review of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* in *The New York Review of Books*, you wrote that "of the precocious children and adolescents of mid-twentieth century American fiction"—and you include Frankie of Carson McCullers's *Member of the Wedding*, Scout of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and Holden Caulfield of *The Catcher in the Rye*—"none is more memorable than eighteen-year-old 'Merricat' of Shirley Jackson's masterpiece of Gothic suspense." What is it about Merricat that puts her at the top of this impressive roster—and why isn't this remarkable novel better known?

[JCO]: Merricat has a sly, mock-naive voice that is very appealing, and very seductive, yet cruel and sinister as well. Listen to how she introduces herself:

> My name is Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance. I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had. I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and *Amanita phalloides*, the death-cup mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead.

The other novels are rather more "young adult" and "good"—their appeal is to a wider audience.

[RK]: King notes that one of the motifs that Jackson uses in *The Haunting of Hill House* is to change the familiar Gothic "Bad Place" from a "womb" symbolizing sexual interest and fear of sex to a "mirror" symbolizing interest in and fear of the self. This question of whether what's happening in the novel is psychological or supernatural—was this new with Jackson or did she just do it better than most?

[JCO]: Shirley Jackson was much influenced by Henry James—you can register the Jamesian rhythms in her sentences—and so it is doubtful that she would have been drawn to write about the supernatural as an end in itself—only its psychological manifestations would be of interest to her. (In brief, this is the distinction between the "literary" Gothicist and the more popular Gothicist—in the latter, the ghosts are real.)

[RK]: In *A Jury of Her Peers*, her overview of American women writers from 1650 to 2000, Elaine Showalter finds in Jackson the "three faces of Eve" that women writers in the Fifties struggled with: the happy housewife, the intellectual and artist, and the "bad girl." Jackson raised four children but was afflicted with depression, obesity, alcoholism, and agoraphobia. What do you make of the fact that she created her two masterpieces, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), during the most troubled period of her life?

[JCO]: Writing—all art—is often compensatory for the artist. Think of the sequestered Emily Dickinson writing her incandescent verse while trapped in her "father's house"—as she called it. Think of home-bound/house-bound/debt-bound Herman Melville writing *Moby-Dick* in rhapsodic desperation, far from the high sea that so inspired him. Jackson was not exactly abused or mistreated by her husband in any obvious way but Stanley Edgar Hyman expected Jackson to be his housewife-slave to a degree, and she had to find time for her writing when she could. (Hence, Jackson's household was said to be very, very messy—overrun with cats!) She could not have been happy to know that her professor-husband had affairs with his Bennington students, who tended to adore him, while Jackson was stuck at home.

[RK]: In a 1997 appreciation of Shirley Jackson on Salon.com, Jonathan Lethem pointedly remarked that, "She's also terribly funny. Her observations are dry, her dialogue shockingly fresh and absurd, and her best stories can make you think of a collaboration between James Thurber and a secular Flannery O'Connor." Do you see this as part of her enduring appeal? Does dry humor stay fresh the longest?

[JCO]: Jackson can be very funny in her "housewife" mode—see her domestic sketches: "Charles" or "The Third Baby's the Easiest," or "The Night We All Had Grippe." She later revised these and included them in her bestselling memoirs of family life. In her darker mode—in stories like "The Daemon Lover," "The Possibility of Evil," or "The Summer People"—her humor is not so very evident. She seems almost literally to have had two personalities—in one quite large body—the one aiming for a popular readership of primarily women by way of the women's magazines—the other the "Gothic" writer who perhaps wrote to please her own criteria, and did not aim for any particular magazine market. (That "The Lottery" was published in *The New Yorker* is one of those happy accidents of publishing history. Another editor at the same magazine might have rejected it as too dark.)

[RK]: In *Private Demons*, her rather chilling biography of Shirley Jackson, Peggy Oppenheimer quotes one of the rare statements Jackson made about her writing that tied together her interest in witchcraft and in eighteenth-century fiction (her favorite writer was apparently Samuel Richardson): "I have had for many years a continuing interest in magic and the supernatural. I think this is because I find there so convenient a shorthand statement of the possibilities of human adjustment to what seems to be at best an inhuman world." Eighteenth-century novels she loved for "the preservation and insistence on a pattern superimposed precariously on the chaos of human development. I think it is the combination of these two that forms the background of everything I write—the sense which I feel, of a human and not very rational order struggling inadequately to keep in check forces of great destruction, which may be the devil and may be intellectual enlightenment." Is seeing this heroic Manichæan struggle in the mundane details of everyday life the crux of American gothic? Doesn't the dark side seem to be winning most of the time in Jackson's work?

[JCO]: In individuals who find themselves powerless in life—like women, in general, before they were "given" the vote—there is always an interest in the occult since it circumnavigates the actual bastions of power. You will not find many men in high office—men with political/ financial power—who have an interest in witchcraft, for instance. Jackson was of this sort—she so lacked personal power, the (feminist) possibility of a subversive sort of power would engage her. Of course, this supernaturalism shades into fantasy, and this fantasy shades into mental illness, in some. The artist speculates on these matters without—ideally—sinking into them.

[RK]: In the 1950s Shirley Jackson's work seemed to appear everywhere: *The New Yorker*, *McCalls*, *Redbook*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *The Ladies' Home Journal*, among others. In fact, Linda Wagner-Martin seemed to be referring to Jackson's ubiquity, rather than her influence, when she called the Fifties "the decade of Jackson" in *The Mid-Century American Novel*. Lenemaja Friedman closes her book-length critical study of Jackson with, "Miss Jackson is not, however, a major writer; and the reason is ... that she saw herself primarily as an entertainer, as an expert storyteller and craftsman." Why is being entertaining held in such low regard? Is Jackson's work too diverse to be properly appreciated?

[JCO]: These questions of the canon are very broad. To be a "major" writer one must write "ambitious" novels, probably—one must cover a larger terrain than Jackson, O'Connor, Welty set out to do. One could not possibly suggest that Flannery O'Connor, for instance, is as "great" a writer as William Faulkner; but they are each excellent, in their own scale. A single nocturne by Chopin may be as exquisite as a Beethoven symphony, though its very brevity/smallness would probably preclude it being "great." Such questions of canon—and scale—are matters of debate.

[RK]: When did you first discover Shirley Jackson? Has her work influenced yours? Do you have any favorites in this collection?

[JCO]: One of my very favorite Jackson stories was an utter surprise to me—"Janice"—written when Jackson was an undergraduate at Syracuse University. It's a gem, and previously uncollected. I also very much admire "The Intoxicated" and "The Daemon Lover." Originally, it was "The Lottery" which I'd first read, as a girl, and very much liked. I don't think that Jackson can be an "influence" on anyone—she was too quirkily original.

[RK]: Jackson wrote many other works: two memoirs, *Life Among the Savages* and *Raising Demons*; four novels, *The Road Through the Wall*, *Hangsaman*, *The Bird's Nest*, and *The Sundial*; and several dozen stories. Might there be another Shirley Jackson Library of America volume?

[JCO]: It is possible that a second volume of the Library of America Shirley Jackson could be assembled, but I am certain that this volume contains the very best work, and certainly the very, very best short stories.

# The Domestic Horror of Shirley Jackson

S. T. Joshi



Shirley Jackson (1916–1965) is something of a forgotten figure in American literature. Even the year of her birth was, until recently, a matter of doubt, since she herself cut off a few years and claimed to be born in 1919, so as not to appear older than her husband, the critic Stanley Edgar Hyman (1919–1970). Because she was not firmly ensconced in either mainstream fiction or weird fiction, critics in both genres have tended to ignore her. Although mainstream critics admire her artistry in the short story, they disdain the oftentimes grim and horrific subject matter of her tales and novels; while the horror community, noting that she published in the *New Yorker* and *Mademoiselle* instead of the horror or science fiction pulps (or, as they were on the point of dying, their successors, the digest magazines), seems to regard her as a dilettante who is merely slumming in their field.

It is unclear to me how much orthodox weird fiction Jackson read; there is little evidence, judging solely from the internal evidence of her fiction, of any significant influence—or, indeed, any influence at all—from Lovecraft or other *Weird Tales* writers or even of older figures such as the Victorian ghost-story writers, Bram Stoker, or Arthur Machen. Jackson's weird writing, intensely character-based and domestic as it is, appears to have been a kind of strange outgrowth of her family life: the mother of four children and the wife of a notorious philanderer, Jackson papered over the traumas of her life in the dozens of sketches that she collected in her two utterly captivating books about her family, *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957). So many of Jackson's weird tales involve perversions of domestic or social scenarios that no dominant literary influence can or should be brought forth to account for their subject matter or execution.

One of Jackson's relatively few comments on weird fiction occurred relatively early in her career, in 1948, when she addressed the issue of using the supernatural as a metaphor for human beings' relations to each other and to society:

> I have had for many years a consuming interest in magic and the supernatural. I think this is because I find there so convenient a shorthand statement of the possibilities of human adjustment to what seems to be at best an inhuman world.... [E]verything I write [involves] the sense which I feel, of a human and not very rational order struggling inadequately to keep in check forces of great destruction, which may be the devil and may be intellectual enlightenment. (Oppenheimer 125)

The ease with which Jackson can alternate between domestic fiction and weird fiction is illustrated by a single example. An uncollected story, "The House" (*Woman's Day*, May 1952), was included in *Life Among the Savages*—but not all of it. What seems, in that book, like an engaging autobiographical account of moving into a new house proves, in the magazine appearance, to be a ghost story about a physician (the original builder of the house, in 1816) whose presence continues to be felt.

If it is the case that Jackson's first weird tale is "The Lottery" (*New Yorker*, 26 June 1948), then we must ask why she wrote a spate of borderline horror stories at this precise juncture. I'm not sure of the answer, and I'm not sure an answer can be given. Even "The Lottery," manifestly non-supernatural as it is, fits only uneasily into the rubric of weird fiction, unless we assume that the overall scenario—the very existence of a lottery of the sort depicted in the story—throws the tale into the realm of alternate-world science fiction. What "The Lottery" is about is, of course, scapegoating—but, more specifically, it is an

instantiation of a comment Jackson made in her novel *Hangsaman* (1951): "Another instance ... of ritual gone to seed" (62). The lottery is based on the continuing belief that a human sacrifice must be made to ensure good crops, and it is precisely the townspeople's resolute determination to preserve this outmoded and irrational rite that generates horror.

Another story from this period, "The Summer People" (1949), is a potent tale of psychological horror. When a couple decide to remain in their summer cottage past Labor Day—something that has never been done before—they quickly find themselves the recipients of increasingly vicious vengeance on the part of the locals, who resent this violation of long-held custom.

Some of Jackson's most effective tales are those that tread the border line between psychological and supernatural horror, resulting in an unidentifiable atmosphere that Robert Aickman would simply label "strange." The celebrated tale "The Daemon Lover" (1949) tells of a lonely young woman, Margaret, who seeks to lend meaning to her existence by apparently fabricating the existence of a lover, James Harris, to whom she believes herself to be engaged. When he fails to show up at her apartment, she ventures out to look for him. Various individuals seem to point her in the direction where they think Harris has gone—but the perennially unanswered question is: Does James Harris have any existence outside Margaret's imagination? But if he does not, why are these other people apparently fostering her delusion?

Then there is "The Lovely House" (1952), perhaps Jackson's most subtle weird tale. Here a college girl, again named Margaret, comes to the home of her friend Carla Rhodes for a visit. The tale develops a powerful atmosphere of weirdness through the deliberately artificial dialogue—it is as if all the characters know they are in a work of fiction. Carla's mother has, throughout the story, been weaving a tapestry of the house. At the conclusion we read the following:

> "You will not leave us before my brother comes again?" Carla asked Margaret.
>
> "I have only to put the figures into the foreground," Mrs. Rhodes said, hesitating on her way to the drawing room. "I shall have you exactly if you sit on the lawn near the river."
>
> "We shall be models of stillness," said Carla, laughing. "Margaret, will you come and sit beside me on the lawn?" (*Come Along* 120)

What has apparently happened is that Margaret is being woven into the fabric of the house by way of the tapestry.

Other tales by Jackson are perhaps too tenuous—or too much on the border line of the weird—for detailed analysis. There is "The Renegade" (1948), in which a family newly moved into a country town find the neighbors recommending increasingly hideous and cruel punishments for their purportedly misbehaving dog. There is "Pillar of Salt" (1948), about a woman from the country so terrified of being in New York City that she is unable to cross a street. And there is "The Intoxicated" (1949). A man at a rather boring party encounters a girl of seventeen who is harrowingly certain that the world is going to come to an end soon. Is she right?—in which case she is (supernaturally) clairvoyant. Is she insane?—in which case the tale is one of psychological suspense. Or is she merely a kind of tease?—in which case she is a little sadist, making the tale a different kind of psychological suspense. That Jackson refrains from answering these questions attests to the artistic restraint of her work.

Jackson published six novels in her lifetime, from 1948 to 1962. Of these, at least four are of interest from a weird-fiction context. *The Bird's Nest* (1954) is perhaps the most disappointing of them: an account of a woman with multiple personalities, the novel could have been an effective tale of psychological horror were it not for its clumsy execution and the unsuccessful portrayal of the excessively rational psychologist who is treating the woman. *The Sundial* (1958) is an utterly unclassifiable tale of the Halloran family, which is convinced that the rest of the world is soon going to end. The entire novel takes place within the house where a motley array of family members are gathered, each with their own idiosyncrasies

and all of them tyrannized by the domineering Mrs. Halloran. The atmosphere of claustrophobic bizarrerie is unmatched, for all that nothing overtly supernatural occurs.

*The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) are Jackson's most exhaustive contributions to weirdness, the one from a supernatural, the other from a non-supernatural perspective. I am far from endorsing the common view that *The Haunting of Hill House* is the best haunted-house novel ever written; for my money, the palm ought now to be awarded to Ramsey Campbell's *The House on Nazareth Hill* (1996). *Hill House*—whose premise is the attempt by Dr. John Montague to enlist three other individuals (all with purported psychic abilities) to investigate the nature of the "haunting" of Hill House—is, in fact, a bit diffuse and unfocused, and its plethora of supernatural phenomena seem to be paraded somewhat unsystematically merely to create a shudder. Where the novel triumphs is in its exquisitely delicate but cumulatively powerful portrayal of its central figure, the lonely spinster (the sexist word precisely suits this context) Eleanor Vance, perhaps Jackson's most skillfully etched portrait of the weak-willed, love-starved woman. Some of the details in this novel are uncommonly fine. At one point, the guests find some crude writing on the wall—"HELP ELEANOR COME HOME" (103). The wording is significant: it is not "Help Eleanor *go* home," which would seem to be the more natural expression if the sense is that Eleanor should leave Hill House; rather, the sentence suggests that Eleanor must be made to feel *at* home, that Hill House is where she belongs—or, as she herself says toward the end, "Hill House belongs to *me*" (173). It is in this context that we are to understand the constant repetition of the plangent Shakespearean line "Journeys end in lovers meeting"—for Eleanor has made a long journey to be at Hill House, the only entity that has truly loved her and where she has become the person she wants to be. It is inevitable, therefore, that she kills herself in a car accident when she is forced by the others to leave the edifice, echoing the fate of the last occupant of Hill House two decades before.

*We Have Always Lived in the Castle* brings Jackson's satirical skills to the forefront in its searing display of the hatred and occasional violence directed at the Blackwood family for past derelictions that are only revealed at the conclusion. The town's shunning of the family, especially the sisters Mary Katherine (called Merricat) and Constance, escalates to the point where the house is finally burned down. Ostensibly, this ostracism is incited by the deaths of several family members by poisoning six years earlier, a crime for which Constance was tried and found innocent; it is perhaps no surprise that, in the end, we learn that Merricat is the true culprit. The vicious mutual hatred exhibited by the townspeople and by the Blackwood sisters, especially Merricat, raises this novel to a Biercian level of misanthropic horror.

Although the number of actual supernatural specimens in Jackson's work is quite small, her work as a whole is pervaded with an abiding sense of the weirdness that can emerge from the commonest elements of ordinary life. Her penetrating understanding of human character, and especially of human loneliness even in the midst of crowds, and the rapierlike satire that she frequently directed at the bountiful instances of greed, stupidity, small-mindedness, hypocrisy, and other lamentably common human foibles render much of her work chillingly terrifying even when nothing overtly bizarre occurs. Jackson now seems, belatedly, to be garnering the attention in the mainstream community that she deserves, as the recent (2010) Library of America volume of her work attests; it would be welcome if the weird community similarly embraced a consummate literary artist who was able to span what can occasionally seem like a yawning gulf between the mainstream and the weird.

[A slightly longer version of this monologue was performed last January by the author as part of *The American Drink Book*, a show created by the solo-performance ensemble BoyGirlBoyGirl, as part of The Rhinoceros Theater Festival 2012 at The Prop Theatre, Chicago.]

# Beldam

## Stephanie Shaw

*"Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut ... "*
—from *The Haunting of Hill House* (of course)
by Shirley Jackson

Shirley Jackson doesn't want to go outside today.

Shirley Jackson, by the time she died in 1965, was the size of a couch, agoraphobic, thin haired, puffy faced and toad shaped. Looking at her picture, I want to lick her, to see if it will produce the same sort of state as her hallucination-inducing prose. More than that, I want to sit in her filthy kitchen and sip coffee out of thick white cups. I want to see what she puts in her gingerbread exactly, and if there really is arsenic in her sugar bowl.

But she is dead and she died the same year I was born.

She is dead and I have known people who have died, but Shirley Jackson is the only dead person that I know.

Late in her life, which for her was late, which for me I have decided is sensibly middling, Shirley Jackson couldn't make it out of her front door. Huge and sweating and in the grip of an all too understandable psychosis, she would slip into the moat between her door and her driveway and the fresh Vermont air would swamp her lungs. With the neighbors watching, or worse, trying to help, she would be overcome.

[...]

Don't get me wrong: I like people. I just can't walk into a room full of them without thinking beforehand, "this is going to be a disaster. An unmitigated disaster."

And it's not that I think people are, in general, sinister or even unkind, it's just that I think they want me dead. Not in a mean way. Don't take it personally. I think planes want me dead as well. Elevators barely tolerate me. The Grand Canyon has it in for me, and my family. My *toaster* is iffy on the subject of my continued survival. The weather, I'm certain, will try to kill us *all* off, indiscriminately, perhaps this year.

And then there are banks and things.

Still we carry on—I carry on. I've got three children in the house—I have to go out and get milk.

Shirley Jackson writes: "I delight in what I fear."

Shirley Jackson writes: "I have always loved to use fear, to take it and comprehend it and make it work."

Shirley Jackson took a fistful of Dexedrine each morning, smoked a pack of Pall Malls a day, ate fried chicken, boiled vegetables in butter and made potato pudding for dinner. She took bourbon and phenobarbital at night. She listened to a far-away voice sing her to sleep. She got up in the morning and found a note on her desk, in her own handwriting, which said simply: "DEAD. DEAD." She sat down and started writing *The Haunting of Hill House*.

We will be friends, I decide, in spite of her being all reticent and dead, we will be friends in cardigans and cats-eye glasses. I may be frozen on my porch, house solid at my back, but I decide to cross time for her, to cross, even worse, a few back yards.

Fenceless, huge, country back yards with dogs on chains and the occasional chicken coop and lots of those savage rusty swing sets.

I cross the yards of neighbors who should know me, but who knows what it is they see. They stand in their impeccable kitchens and look out their back doors at me and we nod at one another; their eyes reflecting the sunlight are as brilliant and impermeable as their polite smiles.

There's a lot of burnt meat on the grill out here, and a quantity of monkshood blooming against every garden fence.

Everyone is in the middle of baking a chiffon cake.

Everyone wears a wedding ring.

Everyone holds a rock in their hand.

Not in a mean way. It's just what you do.

After all, what must *I* look like? Cutting across your back yard at a lope, glancing over my shoulder, with my hair uncombed.

Watching me go by, you stand in your back door and you smile nicely and you hold a rock. It's what you do.

A rock, like a drink, feels good, in the hand.

I reach Shirley Jackson's back door and in a panic, I rap it with my wedding ring knuckle.

She lets me in, she tells me "good lord, woman, calm down." She peers over my shoulder, at the rich greenery, the sacrificial barbeques.

"Peasants," she snorts and closes the door.

Her face is slick, but mercifully solid; it does not seem inclined to melt. Her hands are full of carrots, not rocks. She goes back to scraping them into the sink, the flesh of her giant arms vibrating. Her writing, she says, is done for the day.

Now for the business of taking care of four children and an erudite, philandering husband whose love for her genius does not deter him from fucking his students.

Shirley Jackson's kitchen smells like cinnamon on top, but there's something sweaty going on underneath. Dust bunnies scoot across the linoleum, ashtrays overflow, and there are seven grey cats (all of them grey so that her husband, who hates cats, will not recognize that there are seven different ones occupying the house at once). The acidity of the cat pee lies heavy under the aroma of coffee and ginger root. The shelves that are not stocked with dishes and cans of Carnation Condensed Milk are stuffed with her collection of books about witchcraft.

She sprinkles piles of salt on specific windowsills and marks various doorframes with black crayon in a manner nothing like a mother measuring the growth of her children.

She moves around her kitchen like a shaman in a muumuu, pockets full of matchbooks and cigarettes, preparing a stew.

I keep my hands around my coffee cup and my elbows off of the tabletop; it's sticky with orange soda. Shirley's kids take a glass of it to bed with them every night.

I won't let my kids drink orange soda.

My husband adores my genius and is so far not inclined towards students.

I have never seen a ghost.

I have never written a novel.

I will cheerfully pause in the middle of writing a paragraph in order to scrub out my kitchen sink.

Shirley won't do that.

She is a real writer.

Onionskin paper is the only immaculate surface in her house.

In her fridge there are jars of mold, liver still bloody in its butcher paper, tongue that only recently stopped wagging. Her cream is often curdled, but her glass of bourbon is always fresh.

She's going to boil the life out of those carrots.

But I'm not going to say anything about it.

I don't want her to think I am just another villager.

I don't ask her where she got the idea for "The Lottery."

That's such a stupid question.

Shirley Jackson, 250 pounds of self-proclaimed New England witch, wedges her bulk into a chair across from me. She touches my hand; her fingertips are wet and electric.

I'm going to die at 48, she says.

You can keep your clean counters: I can turn out a sentence as clean as a new spoon, commune with cats, balance the tea and the thread with the death cup mushroom and the killing of the corn maiden.

And when the neighborhood boys soap swastikas on our front windows, I don't even consider moving house.

And yes—they are trying to kill you. Why would some small part of *you* want to hide when

you saw them coming, if some small part of *them* didn't want you dead?

Shirley Jackson's smile is not polite. It is beatific.

She writes on the inside of a matchbook, "So long as you write it away regularly, nothing can really hurt you."

She reaches under my collar and tucks it into the strap of my bra, and sends me home with it.

I make it, obviously.

My walls continue upright. My floors are firm. My doors are sensibly shut.

# Shirley Jackson and the Gothic in New England

Faye Ringel

In 1948, the *New Yorker* published a short story that occasioned more comment than anything that legendary periodical had previously published: Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." This brief chilling tale is one of the most frequently anthologized American short stories, and certainly needs no further introduction for this audience. Jackson's essay "Biography of a Story" reprints mail from those first *New Yorker* readers, many of whom seem to have considered "The Lottery" to be reportage. One reader asked, "Is there some timeless community existing in New England where human sacrifices are made for the fertility of the crops?" (*Come*, 215). Jackson, living in Vermont at that time, could only wonder at such credulity and insist that "it was just a story I wrote" (212). Though Jackson never indicates where "The Lottery" takes place, the names of the characters, their willingness to follow old customs even when they no longer understand why, and to join in the ritual slaughter of scapegoats made readers assume a New England setting.

Unlike Emily Dickinson and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, her foremothers in New England's Gothic literature, and unlike Nathaniel Hawthorne, H. P. Lovecraft, and Stephen King, the genre's fathers, Shirley Jackson was "from away." Like Robert Frost, she was born in San Francisco. Both spent their childhoods in California before moving to the region for which they became an icon.

Shirley Jackson has been praised as the finest exemplar of American Gothic (Hattenhauer), but I prefer to claim her for the New England sub-species. Courses could—and should—be taught from her literary work and her life to define the history and literature of New England: the women's local color tradition of ghost stories, peculiar spinsters, and madwomen in attics; the Northern version of Southern post-bellum Gothic—family secrets, class warfare, decaying mansions; the real and imagined history of the witchcraft persecution, shunning, and resistance to change in local traditions; modern Suburban Gothic; domestic humor as Gothic; Freudian psychological Gothic. We might even call her the founder of a sub-sub-genre of Bennington Gothic, her novel *Hangsaman*, set at a thinly veiled version of the College beginning a tradition carried on by Jonathan Lethem and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History.*

Shirley Jackson, who lived for over twenty years in Bennington until her death, is the greatest stylist of New England Gothic, perhaps because she did not draw explicitly upon local folklore and dialect as Lovecraft did. Jackson's works encompass the "explained" Gothic of the grotesque in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, as well as the classic ghost story *The Haunting of Hill House*, which never rationalizes

the malignancy of its supernatural threat. Set in the decadent backwoods village of Hillsdale—she specifies no state, yet what reader has doubted that it is somewhere in New England, with its unhospitable attitude to visitors and towns named East Barrington and Ashton?—Hill House blights the lives of all connected with it. With its angles and measurements that are all "slightly wrong" (*Haunting*, 105), Hill House haunts the psychic researchers who attempt to study it as well as those who dare to read about it. Jackson's novels, along with "The Lottery," meet the primary criterion for excellence in Gothic fiction: they are as horrifying to each new generation of readers as they were at the time of their composition.

Jackson exemplified in her life and her art the strain of dark medievalism at the heart of New England Gothic. It is no coincidence that Hill House features the "Gothic spires and gargoyles" (32) of the 1880s mansions that by her day—the 1950s—were crumbling. As New England's mills closed, their owners' grand houses were cut up into apartments or turned into funeral homes, becoming the still-recognizable icon of the haunted house, or the Addams Family Mansion. In the literature of New England Gothic, the haunted and decaying Gothic Revival or Carpenter Gothic mansion plays the role of the crumbling castle of European Gothic romance. Decaying old families and inbred farmers stand in for the decadent aristocrats and peasants, and the Puritan theocracy replaces the Catholic Church and the Inquisition. Small wonder that Hill House was built by the nouveau riche Hugh Crain, or that the stern family retainer Mrs. Dudley recalls every forbidding housekeeper of British Gothic literature.

Jackson's interest in dark medievalism predates her move to Vermont: before "The Lottery" made her famous, her first short-story collection was to be titled "The Adventures of James Harris." This recurring character, seemingly non-supernatural yet always with a whiff of sulfur about him, derives from one of the oldest of the English and Scottish Popular Ballads, "James Harris or, The Demon Lover" (Child Ballads, #243), the archetypal story of the married woman tempted away from house and home by the attractive stranger who turns out to be the Devil. Jackson weaves Tarot cards, demonic possession, and witchcraft into the fabric of her most realistic mid-twentieth-century suburban tales. She was a dark medievalist publishing in that moment in American culture most inhospitable to medieval romance and fantasy. Jackson's decision to describe herself as a "practicing witch" appeared on the jacket copy of several of her books. The media attention that followed blurred the line between irony and belief. In 1949, one headline read, "Reporter Discusses Black Magic with Amateur Witch." She told the reporter that she had once caused a man to break his leg by black magic.

Biographers and critics are still arguing over how seriously Jackson meant such claims to be taken.

The editors of the popular women's magazines of the Fifties, however, were not deterred by Jackson's identification with witchcraft: they happily published her lightly fictionalized sketches of daily life in Bennington with her demanding husband and four children. These memoirs she reshaped into two popular collections whose titles ought to have warned readers of their subversive intent: *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957). It's easy to see the origins of the horrendously haunted Hill House in the more gentle but still uncanny behavior of the family's first Gothic residence that she claimed greeted their attempts at renovation with "out-of-jointness and shrieking disharmony" (*Life,* 18). Like the doors that remain decently closed in Hill House, an attic door in Jackson's home "preferred to stay latched and would latch itself no matter who was inside" (*Life,* 19). There may even have been poltergeist activities, though instead of calling psychic investigators, Jackson created a handbill in seventeenth-century style with long ſ characters, advising of "Some Poltergeist Incidents in the Residence of S. E. H., Esquire," and concluding that "Miſter H.'s only Recourſe ... is to open his Houſe to Viſitors at a Penny a View, ſince, as he ſays, it is already become ſo full of Company at beſt that he may as well Charge" (*Life*, 241).

Whether writing about haunted houses or haunted minds, Jackson's subject is always the evil that lies just beneath the surface of everyday life. Even her first and most naturalistic novel, *The Road Through the Wall,* set in her childhood home of Burlingame, an upscale suburb of San Francisco, contains scenes of mental and physical violence inflicted upon scapegoats. But in her treatment (or her imagined

treatment—the accounts differ, as they always do) by the townspeople of North Bennington, Vermont, she found the perfect objective correlative: the active persecution of the different and intellectual by the defenders of convention and propriety. Small wonder that she was attracted by the history of witch-belief in New England: her *Witchcraft of Salem Village*, published as a "children's book" in 1956, before the YA category existed, remains one of the clearest and most reasoned accounts of the outbreak in Essex County, Massachusetts.

In the realm of the "explained Gothic" or *conte cruel*, Shirley Jackson captured the tension between summer people and year-rounders in the short stories "The Renegade" (1948) and "The Summer People" (1949). As in all her work, she never explicitly mentions New England, but her villages and the village characters are unmistakable. Characteristic of Jackson's work, no overt harm is done to the summer people, yet both stories hint at indescribable vengeance enacted by the natives. Both stories contrast the pastoral beauty of their settings with the barely restrained violence of their inhabitants. In Jackson's country: "Everything was quiet and lovely in the sunlight, the peaceful sky, the gentle line of the hills. Mrs. Walpole closed her eyes, suddenly feeling the harsh hands pulling her down, the sharp points closing in on her throat" ("The Renegade," *Lottery*, 13). No clearer illustration could be found for the Maine folk-belief that there are two kinds of people: real people—and summer people.

The irritating reporter of that 1949 interview does acknowledge her greatness as a writer, coining the term "witchcraftsmanship": not a bad description for that ineffable magic that lifts Jackson's work out of the limitations of genre or category, out of the grasp of Time the Destroyer, and into the realm of the Classic. Soon after her death in 1965, in the preface to a selection of her writing, appropriately titled *The Magic of Shirley Jackson*, her husband Stanley Hyman predicted that Jackson's work "is among that small body of literature produced in our time that seems apt to survive" (ix). Nearly fifty years later, with her work canonized in the Library of America, and Readercon hosting the awards for literary excellence named in her honor, we must agree that he has proved to be a prophet.

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# Shirley Jackson, an Appreciation

## Paul Tremblay



I have to admit that I'm intimidated by the prospect of writing about Shirley Jackson and what her work means to our speculative fiction community and 20th-century literature in general. Having had the honor of spending the past five years working with the Shirley Jackson Awards, I've heard heartfelt and erudite speeches from Jonathan Lethem, Elizabeth Hand, Nalo Hopkinson, and Victor LaValle detailing Jackson's legacy and enduring influence. I've listened to and read scores of acceptance speeches from award winners and nominees who expressed their deep and abiding love of Shirley Jackson's work. I'm not quite sure what it is, exactly, that I can add beyond a humbled *what they said!*

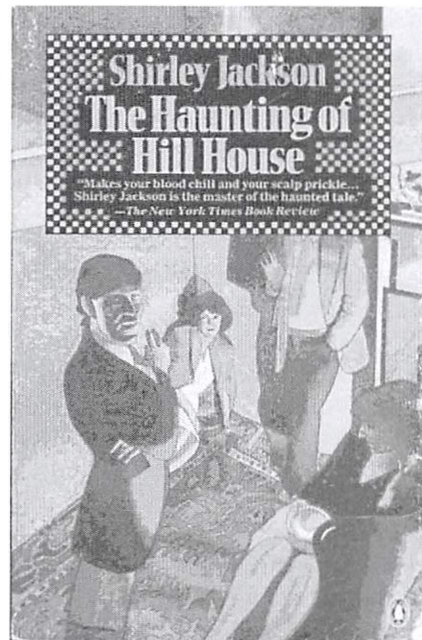
I'm equally intimidated by the prospect of writing about what Shirley Jackson means to me. Perhaps it would be best to simply walk up to you, interrupt whatever it was you were doing, and press into your hands one of her books or a hastily photocopied short story from my dog-eared *The Lottery and Other Stories*. My eyes would be those of a zealot, one whose enthusiasm is infectious but more than a little frightening. I might be smiling, but the smile might be twitching. Then, I'd say breathlessly, though not wholly unconcerned about what her work might do to you, "Here. You must read this."

∞

I sat in my middle school's library, listening to my sixth-grade teacher reading what is one of the most famous short stories written in the English language—"The Lottery." I remember Mr. Hughes pausing dramatically and shifting his position on a skeleton-thin stool; his thick, black moustache curled above a top lip gone missing. Mr. Hughes looked up from the book and down at us criss-cross-applesauce sixth-graders sitting on the floor. Some of us were nervously giggling or pulling at the frays of the Day-Glo orange library carpet, but we were all listening. Mr. Hughes didn't read the last line. He delivered it like a stage actor: "'It isn't fair, it isn't right,' Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her."

∞

I took out an old copy of *The Haunting of Hill House* from the high school library and never brought it back. It's the only book I've ever stolen. I rationalized the theft by telling myself that my fellow students hadn't taken it out enough, that they didn't deserve it, that they wouldn't get it. I am still in possession of the book. Would it be too obvious to say the book is still in possession of me? It's a reprint of the 1959 paperback. The cellophane library dust jacket protects the weakening, brightly colored cover, "holding darkness within."




∞

In the introduction to the 2006 Penguin Classics edition of *The Haunting of Hill House*, Laura Miller argues that the novel is less a traditional gothic ghost story and is instead a psychological ghost story. I like the idea of psychological ghosts and their inherent ambiguity, of being haunted from within by the question of identity, of *who are we really?*, and where the true horror comes from, according to Miller, "the dissolving boundary … the one between the mind and the exterior world."

In the novel, Dr. Montague, the proposed scientific investigator of supernatural events, and three others are to stay at Hill House for a summer. One of the invited guests, Eleanor Vance, agrees to stay at the house partly because she dreams of escaping her rural, secluded life, one in which she is forced to care for her invalid mother. The house sublimates Eleanor's dreams and fears. Eleanor is as affected by Hill House as Hill House is affected by her. The genius of the novel is in how it so neatly traps the desperate Eleanor and us the readers within those dissolving boundaries.

∞

I don't like to brag or anything, but a few years ago I digitally pressed *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* into Shirley Jackson Award-winner Kevin Wilson's hands. He won the award for his collection *Tunneling to the Center of the Earth*. In his most recent novel, the New York Times bestselling *The Family Fang*, the avant-garde performers of the family Fang gave themselves a most interesting werewolf backstory. Kevin said in an email about Jackson's novel: "I think about it all the time. I'm kind of in love with Merricat. If we ever have a girl, we will name her Merricat."

∞

Merricat is the ultimate unreliable narrator of Jackson's masterpiece, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. And, all right, I'm kind of in love with Merricat, too. She wishes that she was born a werewolf and she likes *Amanita phalloides*, the death-cup mushroom. So what if most of her family is dead and that she may or may not have put the arsenic in the sugar bowl. The Blackwoods had liked to eat blackberries with sugar sprinkled on top, apparently. Merricat's older sister Constance (who was arrested for the poisoning but acquitted) didn't use the sugar, and her Uncle Julian survived the poisoning. The three remaining Blackwoods live ostracized from the rest of the village. There isn't a page that doesn't ooze with Merricat's playful strangeness, intelligence, and menace, particularly when cousin Charles shows up to woo Constance, and to woo away the family cash the sisters keep locked in a safe. Merricat isn't a fan of Charles. When her attempts at using magic to send Charles packing aren't successful she pragmatically sets fire to the family home. In the most terrifying scene in the book, and one that echoes the finale of "The Lottery," the local villagers arrive to help put out the fire, but once it's out they set to destroying the house by throwing rocks while they cruelly taunt the sisters with a childhood rhyme. Here, there's no crutch of tradition to explain away the villagers' easy, ingrained, and all-too-real hatred for the two women who have managed to live wholly independent of them. Merricat and Constance manage to survive the near-physical assault and the almost total destruction of their family home, and they reclaim their castle. I like to think they still live there now.

I wrote a story called "We Will Never Live in the Castle," where I attempted to channel some of what Merricat has with my own unreliable, verbose, oddly charming, and quite possibly sociopathic narrator. The dude has an abiding love of death-cup mushrooms, of course. I've never had so much fun writing a post-apocalyptic story about a teen holed up in an amusement park, scheming to take Cinderella's Castle by force.

∞

JoAnn Cox (the tireless Shirley Jackson Awards administrator and member of the Board of Directors) put a copy of *The Sundial* into my big, greedy hands. It's a beautiful 1958 paperback that smells like a 1958 paperback should. *The Sundial* is totally messed up: a novel of manners that Austen (without zombies) would have approved of. However, the aristocratic Halloran family believes the world is going to end on August 30th, and only people within the Halloran family homestead will survive the apocalypse and be reborn to paradise. With deceptively simple language grounded in the everyday minutiae of familiar surroundings (a house, a family, a social gathering, a village) Jackson manages to make the ridiculous turn to the sublime. *The Sundial* is both hysterically funny and eerily foreboding, often within the same sentence. Mrs. Halloran, the controlling, contemptuous, and caustic matriarch is the star of the novel. Her wit, cruelty, and vulnerability make her one of Jackson's most memorable characters. I know Mrs. Halloran certainly convinced me of the *need* to be suitably dressed for the apocalypse.

∞

Earlier, when I was pressing a short story into your hands, it was "The Intoxicated." It's the story that I find myself returning to more than any other piece of Jackson's work. In six pages this story could serve as both an introduction to and a summary of the brilliant oeuvre of Shirley Jackson.

An unnamed attendee of a swanky suburban party winds his way to the kitchen in an attempt to clear his head as he is quite drunk. In the kitchen he finds the seventeen-year-old daughter of the hosts sitting at the kitchen table. He asks, by way of self-introduction: "You the daughter?" Which isn't so much a conversational opening as a dismissal. To him, she is "baggy and ill-formed" but at the same time he describes her as "young and fresh," a brief but creepy sexualizing of the girl who is almost twenty years younger than him. It's something that he'll continue to do throughout the story, particularly when she challenges him and his perceptions.

They make small talk about the lovely party and she makes him a cup of coffee. His attitude toward the girl remains deeply condescending as he only drinks the coffee so that she might feel like she helped him in some small way. After more small talk about her homework, she says to him, flatly, "I suppose you like parties." The partygoer grows more irritated that he has to suffer through not only this conversation, but her very presence, particularly when she reveals that she's writing a paper on the future of the world, and that she's of the opinion that the world doesn't have much of one. He again is arrogantly dismissive of her, saying, "It's really a frightening time when a girl sixteen has to think of things like that."

She says, "I'm seventeen ... There's a terrible difference."

He denigrates her by sexualizing her according to traditional gender stereotypes. Growing louder, he insists that girls in his day "thought of nothing but cocktails and necking," and that her morbid fascination with the end of the world is "a stage you go through, like being boy-crazy."

She simply explains that if people of his generation had been more scared of the future when they were young, then, "we wouldn't be so badly off today." She details the breakdown of society with churches going first, buildings crumbling into the water. She wonders aloud if the end might happen in Latin class, while reading Caesar.

The partygoer continues to berate her, telling her to forget this end-of-the-world stuff and to "[b]uy yourself a movie magazine and settle down."

In response, she simply tells him that she can get all the magazines she wants when the subways crash and go to ruin, when the big department stores are smashed, when "[t]he office buildings will be just piles of broken stones."

The back and forth between the girl and the partygoer increases in tempo and dichotomy, the disturbing images of what might be (or what will be, eventually) against the everyday horribleness of this sexist, older man makes for compelling social satire along with an underlying current of dread.

In the penultimate scene, she says, "We'll have new rules and new ways of living. Maybe there'll be a law not to live in houses, so then no one can hide from anyone else, you see." In the story, it's a simple quip that so perfectly describes and skewers suburbia. Read in the totality of Jackson's career, it foreshadows the blurring of the boundaries of self, houses, community, and society in *The Sundial*, *The Haunting of Hill House*, and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*.

The pathetic partygoer's response is as base as a schoolyard taunt: "Maybe there'll be a law to keep all seventeen-year-old girls in school learning sense."

She calmly points out that there will be no more schools so that the same mistakes won't be repeated. Defeated, the partygoer stumbles away from the kitchen, lamely offering to help her with her Latin. The girl giggles and then utters the funniest and creepiest line of the story: "I still do my homework every night."

∞

I'm no longer the little boy sitting on the floor listening to Mr. Hughes read "The Lottery." All those years ago the story was a straightforward, jarring fable about the perils of mindless tradition and mob-

mentality, with its deliciously gruesome twist ending. As an adult, however, I'm as disturbed by the cycle of perpetual violence in that small village as I'm unsettled by all the blurry possibilities in the final line uttered by the doomed Mrs. Hutchinson: Is she just the victim of blind chance? Did she believe the lottery was fixed so that her name would come up? Did she believe the lottery *was* to be fixed for someone else so her name being pulled is a horrible mistake? Is she talking about the entire lottery, or the social system and its inherent injustices, or existence itself being unfair?

As a writer, I humbly aspire to blur those Jacksonesque boundaries between humor and horror; social satire and realism; reality, identity, and the self to ultimately reveal the happy and ugly truths of the world, and reveal them in such a way that you might be left smirking while utterly unnerved at the same time. And I humbly aspire to address the ultimate questions of art and literature—*What am I going to do now? How do I live through this? How does anyone live through this?*—which are so expertly and memorably explored in a Shirley Jackson story.

A Shirley Jackson story is where a house, a family, a village, or even six simple words can mean everything.

*"It isn't fair, it isn't right."*

**[Original publication: *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, March 1954—one of the very few appearances of Jackson's fiction in any genre magazine. Sources say that she was paid $54 and a lifetime subscription to the magazine for this story. Reprinted by permission of the Shirley Jackson Estate, which retains all copyrights.]**

# Bulletin

## Shirley Jackson

(Ed. note: The time travel machine sent out recently by this University has returned, unfortunately without Professor Browning. Happily for the University Space Department, however, Professor Browning's briefcase, set just inside the time travel element, returned, containing the following papers which bear ample evidence of the value to scientific investigation of sending Professor Browning on this much-discussed trip into the twenty-second century. It is assumed by members of the Space Department that these following papers were to serve as the basis for notes for the expected lecture by Professor Browning, which will now, of course, be indefinitely postponed.)

(*From a newspaper, torn, heading reading only "...ld Tribune, May 8, 2123"*):

> ... indifference in high quarters which has led so inevitably to this distressing result. Not only those directly affected—and they are many—but, indeed, thoughtful and reasonable persons everywhere, must view with extreme alarm an act which has given opportunism an advantage over intelligent planning. It is greatly to be regretted that, among those in power who were in a position to take action, none except the unpopular Secretary chose to do so, and his opposition was, as so frequently it must be, disregarded. In any case, let us unite in hope that the possible consequences will not take place, and prepare to guard ourselves with the utmost vigilance against a recurrence of such incidents.

(*From what appears to be a private correspondence*):

June 4

Dear Mom and Dad,
I am haveing a fine time at camp. I went swiming and dived, but Charley didnt. Send me a cake and some cokies and candy.

Your loveing son,
Jerry

(*A mimeographed sheet*):

American History 102
Mid-Term Examination
April 21, 2123

1. Identify twelve (12) of the following:

Nathan Hale
Huey Long
Carrie Chapman Catt
Merry Oldsmobile
Cotton Mather
Robert Nathan
George Washingham
Oveta Culp Hobby
Sinclair (Joe) Louis
Alexander Hamilton
Grover Cleveland
Woodrow Wilson I
Joyce Kilmer
Edna Wallace Hopper
Chief Sitting Bull
Old Ironsides
John Philip Sousa
Sergeant Cuff
R. H. Macy

2. The historian Roosevelt-san has observed that "Twentieth-century man had both intelligence and instinct; he chose, unfortunately, to rely upon intelligence." Discuss.

3. Some of the following statements are true, some are false. Mark them T and F accordingly:

Currency was originally used as a medium of exchange.

The aboriginal Americans lived above-ground and drank water.

The first American settlers rebelled against the rule of Churchill III and set up their own government because of the price of tea.

Throat-scratch, the disease which swept through twentieth-century life, was introduced to this country by Sir Walter Raleigh.

The hero Jackie Robinson is chiefly known for his voyage to obtain the golden fleece.

Working was the principal occupation of twentieth-century humanity.

The first king in American, George Washingham, refused the crown three times.

The cat was at one time tame, and used in domestic service.

4. Describe in your own words the probable daily life of an American resident in 1950, using what you have learned of his eating, entertainment, and mating habits.

5. In what sense did ancient Americans contribute to our world today? Can we learn anything of value by studying them?

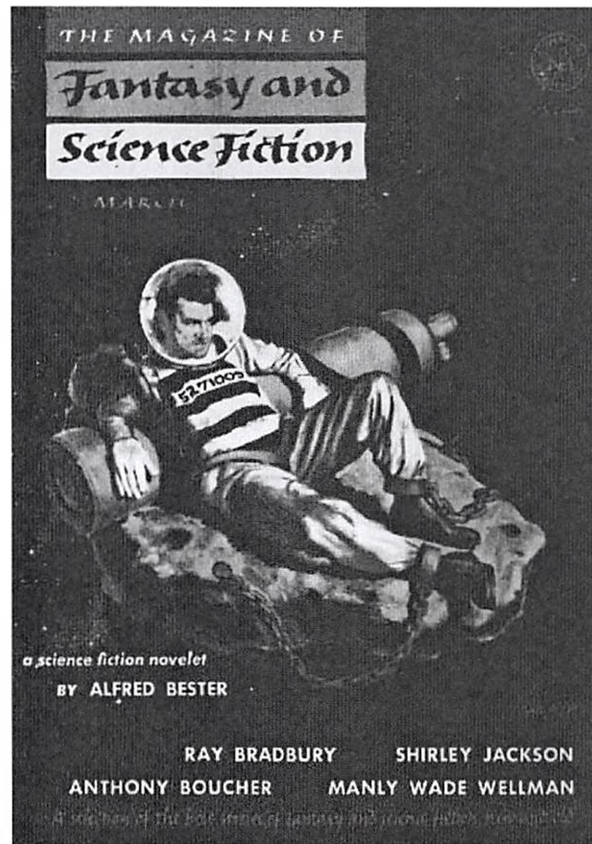
(*A narrow card, identifiably from a machine*):

YOUR WEIGHT AND FORTUNE!

Your weight is ... **186**

Your fortune for today: Expect permanent relief in minor domestic problems, but avoid too-hasty plans for the future. Try not to dwell on the past. You are determined, clear-sighted, firm: use these qualities. Remember that you can be led but not driven.

(ED. NOTE: This last item seems of great significance. It is well known that Professor Browning's weight when he left the University in the time travel element was better than 200 pounds. The evident loss of weight shown indicates clearly the changes incident to time travel, and points, perhaps, to some of its perils; there is possibly a hint here of an entirely different system of weights and measures than that currently in use. We anticipate that several learned and informed papers on this subject are already in preparation.)



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# Katherine MacLean

## Samuel R. Delany

Katherine MacLean is one of the important writers in SF. Born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, January 22, 1925, she began writing SF stories in 1947 and received a B.A. in economics from Barnard in 1950. Her first published story, "Defense Mechanism," appeared in John W. Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction*, in October 1949. Her earlier novelette, "Incommunicado," written in 1947, appeared there with a striking cover by Walt Miller in June of 1950, where it attracted considerable attention.

Kate tells the delightful story of crashing (as it were) a gathering of electronics engineers on Fifth Avenue, after two weeks' work at the typewriter, in hopes of getting a cup of coffee on that warm summer evening, to discover practically everyone there knew her story and was eager to meet and talk with her about it.

That was when she realized that members of the scientific community actually paid attention in those years to what science fiction writers had to say.

MacLean's first collection of stories, including "Incommunicado," was *The Diploids and Other Flights of Fancy*. In 1971 her novella, "The Missing Man," won the Nebula Award from the SF Writers of America and was expanded into a novel (of the same title) that appeared from Putnam in 1975.

What makes MacLean important is not just the ingenuity and resonance of her ideas, but her extraordinarily clean writing, which she shared with only a handful of writers from her generation and before: Stanley G. Weinbaum, Cyril Kornbluth, Theodore Sturgeon, and Judith Merril, who was her good friend for many years. Reading her tales in my late teens was how I first learned there was something to learn about writing; and to learn it took time and attention.

Kate is a wonderful writer, a wonderful person, and a wonderful raconteur. Find her stories, read them, and above all, say hello to her, sit down with her, and enjoy her conversation and convictions about a world that is stranger and more interesting than many of us imagine, unless we have a little push from a such a rich and enjoyable imagination. She is one of a kind—as we all are. Only Kate is a little more so.

[First page of a letter written by Harlan Ellison and sent to Katherine MacLean, dated September 3, 1973. Reproduced by permission of Katherine MacLean.]



# From a Letter to Katherine MacLean

## Harlan Ellison

Dear Katie:

I should have merely sent you an apologetic letter for holding "Ash World" since February when you submitted it, and run some fast number about how harried and overworked and fucked-over I've been--which would have been literal truth--and that's why I didn't respond sooner. But if you remember anything at all about me from the first time we met, way back when you were still married to Charlie Dye, I have no good sense about when not to tell people the truth; and the simple truth is that I am deeply disappointed in you. On a couple of counts.

The first is a business one. I've been holding open the book for a MacLean story for a long time. You knew that. Not only because I've been awed and enriched by your work since I read "Incommunicado" in Astounding back in 1950 and knew, even then, at the age of sixteen, that there was something I needed to know in that story, even though it was way beyond my powers of comprehension, and I read it six times till the light finally dawned and I knew what it was about. Not only because I've considered you one of the half dozen or so really important writers this genre has ever produced and the Dangerous Visions books would never be a total picture of what sf can do, without you. But because I've silently lamented the fact that you write so little. That your life and work-habits clearly are not conducive to your turning out as much MacLean fiction as we need to keep us going. That you've tied yourself up with guys who, as writers, weren't fit to carry your pencil case. That because there is so little of your work available there is an entire generation of readers that totemizes other scribblers who aren't half up to your standards. Because, in short, I wanted a new Katherine MacLean story that would bring me honor and praise for having pulled it out of you. And I'm disappointed because you didn't do the story. ⚘

# The Irresistibly Readable Katherine MacLean

## Eileen Gunn

Katherine MacLean's stories are so damned readable that it's hard to write about them. When I finish one story, I get drawn into the next, and the next, and the one after that. Many of these stories are more than half a century old (but, hey, so am I)—from before Cyberpunk, before Feminist SF, before the New Wave. They're fast-paced and hard-edged, with real science, real extrapolation. They are about modern, conflicted human beings who think and hurt and hurt others. If this is your grandmother's pulp, whoa, grandma!

No matter how many times I've read it (and we're talking *scores* of times), I'm always happy to re-read "The Diploids." The story is set in a gently futurized version of 1953, and its details blend almost seamlessly with 2012: police use helicopters, wall-sized video screens connect to the telephone system, people wearing "earbuttons" listen to personal music players while they walk through the city on noise-dampening sidewalks. I especially like the extrapolation that people who don't have earbuttons on chat to one another sociably, and people wearing them are lost in their private worlds and emit "a faint faraway strain of music." Bingo!

Whenever I read it, I'm envious of the people who read it in 1953 and got that ol' sci-fi hit, and at the same time I'm aesthetically pleased by how well her future meshes with today. At least until a little further on when I learn that, because burglar alarms and hypno-questioning have taken the profit out of crime, there's nothing for the police to do but manage traffic.

There's not a wasted word in the story: even the hypno-questioning and the occasional wildly mixed metaphors are completely functional. It unfolds with charm as, simultaneously, the adventure unrolls and two people who enjoy one another's company fall in love. The point-of-view is especially deft: we see the world from Mart's POV, but since he is a close observer of other people, we get detailed visual clues to their emotions and motivations as well.

And what is it about? Identity, compassion for others and for oneself, politics, conspiracy theory, and how the world works: the sweet-spot for 1950s science fiction. MacLean's future includes normal, intelligent people of both sexes and a variety of races and national origins, who are lawyers and scientists and engineers. Women in Katherine MacLean's stories tend to be smart, savvy, eminently capable, independent, and unintimidated by men or technology.

I'm not the only one to find MacLean's work irresistible. In 1949, she went straight to the top with her first published story, which appeared in John W. Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction* in October of that year. She was twenty-four years old, and she was playing in the big leagues. It wasn't the first story she'd ever written, it wasn't even the first story she'd ever sold to Campbell, he bought them so fast. Publishing is not always linear.

At that time, MacLean was part of the intense, argumentative science-fiction community in New York City that had gathered around the Futurians, the group of left-leaning New-York-based SF fans (including Judith Merril, Damon Knight, C. M. Kornbluth, and others) who became influential writers and editors. Her father, a chemical engineer and food scientist, had loved SF, and MacLean had grown up reading science magazines and science fiction novels. She had degrees in economics and psychology, and was passionately interested in extrasensory perception, a topic of compelling interest to the SF (and larger) community at that time.

Her deft, emotionally involving stories, concisely written, rich with authentic technological and scientific extrapolation, immediately made her a hot property. Her first story, "Defense Mechanism," was quickly picked up by anthologist Groff Conklin for reprint in *The Big Book of Science Fiction*, which also

included work by Fredric Brown, Knight, and Kornbluth, among other luminaries. Two more stories appeared in *Astounding* in short order, and then editor H. L. Gold *begged* her for a story for the first issue of his new magazine, *Galaxy Science Fiction.*

That was her first year in publishing, October 1949 to October 1950. The second year, she published five more stories. The third year, 1952, she published three. The fourth year, 1953, she published *ten*, so many stories that she had to use pseudonyms to avoid flooding the market with Katherine MacLean stories. She published a story each as by K. MacLean and G. A. Morris, and at least two stories, "Syndrome Johnny" and "The Man Who Staked the Stars," as by or with Charles Dye, her first husband, who was just starting to publish his own short fiction. Her stories were frequently picked up for reprint anthologies, and continued to be reprinted over the following decades.

Her most-anthologized story, "Pictures Don't Lie," in which Earth's first, yearningly anticipated contact with an alien civilization turns out to be with beings almost too small to see, was adapted for EC Comics' *Weird Science* and for the British television series *Out of This World.* Her story "The Snowball Effect" is also a classic: a sociology professor, challenged to prove his theories about the dynamic growth of organizations, rewrites the rules of a ladies' sewing circle, and trouble ensues on an international scale.

For the next few years, her publication pace temporarily slowed; she worked as an office manager, and then held a demanding job as a hospital laboratory technician. In 1956, she married writer David Mason, and their son Christopher was born in 1957.

In the late Fifties/early Sixties, while her son was small, she had another interval of prolific publication, writing her own stories and collaborating on books and stories with Charles de Vet, Harry Harrison, and Tom Condit. *Second Game*, a lively far-future space opera written with de Vet, was a 1959 Hugo nominee. It was later expanded and was published in 1962 as *Cosmic Checkmate,* half of an Ace Double. (After further revision, it was published again, as *Second Game*, in 1981.) A collection of her stories from the Fifties, *The Diploids and Other Flights of Fancy*, came out in 1962. MacLean continued to write while teaching literature and writing at the University of Connecticut, the University of Maine, and elsewhere, but published only three stories during the Sixties.

In 1971, she published a mainstream novel, *The Man in the Bird Cage*, marketed by Ace Books as a novel of "sex and suspense." MacLean, however, continued to write primarily genre SF. "The Missing Man," a novella, won the Nebula in 1972, and the novel version, *Missing Man,* which incorporated three linked stories, was a 1975 Nebula nominee. In the mid-Seventies, her pace picked up again, and MacLean's stories appeared steadily for more than a decade. She published a young-adult novel, *Dark Wing*, written with her third husband, Carl West, in 1979; her second story collection, *The Trouble with You Earth People*, came out in 1980. In 1981, Gregg Press brought out the first hardcover edition of *The Diploids,* with an introduction by the Canadian academic Susan Wood.

In the mid-Nineties, after another lengthy hiatus, MacLean published four more stories, one of which was co-written with West. The last two of those appeared in *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, formerly *Astounding Science Fiction*, the very magazine that published her first two stories.

MacLean's work, from her first story to her most recent, has been extensively anthologized, frequently in best-of-the-year collections; her story "Night-Rise," published in 1978, is included in the *Norton Book of Science Fiction.* She was made an Author Emeritus by the Science Fiction Writers of America in 2003, and received the Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery Award in 2010. Each of these awards honors older writers who made notable contributions to the science fiction genre, and is intended to bring their work to the attention of a new generation of readers. MacLean's sharp-witted, tightly written work is an exceptionally good candidate for rediscovery.

Katherine MacLean was one of the earliest writers to incorporate the softer sciences of psychology, economics, and sociology into hard science fiction. She is one of the writers who transformed and broadened Campbellian SF, expanding its content, its politics, and its style beyond that sub-genre's rather limited 1940s parameters. She has helped make the field what it is today. Honor her, and read her work. She's irresistible.

# Incommunicado

Barry N. Malzberg

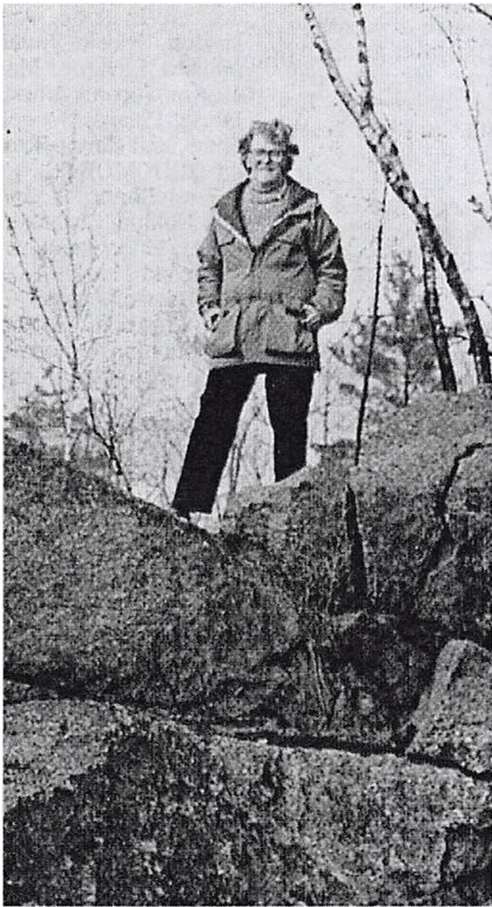
In one of my favorite passages on the writing racket, Jack Woodford speculates (and herewith I paraphrase):

> In the early days of her career the young writer finds herself assaulted by fascinating and dazzling ideas which she has never seen in print and which consequently she takes to be original. These ideas are not, however, original and that is not the reason they have not been seen. They are taboo.

In the early days of *her* career Katherine MacLean might have had a similar experience; ideas swarmed like gnats around her bleak, hermetic consciousness. What if language were arbitrary and entirely self-invented? Would communication be a blending of symbols or a collision, and would the same words in different consciousness have entirely different meanings? What if immortality, medically rendered, so separated a once-ordinary human from the race as to make her monstrous? What if that monstrousness could be equated with "soullessness?" Would an alien conception of a Deity have any resemblance to the human figuration? What if the kind of growth drives associated with the Holy Roman Empire or the Catholic Church were made into derivatives and applied to a rural ladies' weekly sewing circle? What if a religion or institution would be based upon research and assembly of such growth drives? Would it, perhaps, be called "Dianetics"? Mix, chill, and serve to taste.

That was Katherine MacLean in the first five years of what was never quite a career. Science fiction and she would occasionally intersect, often mutually repel; the lacunae, one suspects, are where she conducted most of her life. She became heavily involved with Dianetics for several years. She was a laboratory technician and researcher. She married thrice. She wrote "The Diploids." Most of the science fiction inner circle of the early 1950s knew her and she was both of and apart from that circle; she reappeared at the end of the '50s, dropped the thematically appalling novelette "Unhuman Sacrifice" into the anthropological muddle, disappeared again, reappeared, disappeared, won a Nebula for the novella "The Missing Man" in 1972, expanded that into a novel, then disappeared again for most of two decades, reappeared, disappeared. A quantum writer or perhaps it is Heisenberg of whom I am thinking; she was simultaneously here and there, nowhere and everywhere; a pattern which in its irregularity assumed a kind of periodicity that has carried her through more than six decades of presence even when absent. First living winner of the Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery Award. First female winner of that award. The bibliography, not scant, not sprawling, becomes more of a mystery every year. It aggregates to the brink of a major statement yet somehow slides off topic just as the epiphany seems about to present.

But this of course is precisely MacLean's point: the quantum writer. None of us perhaps has been more emblematic in the 87-year history of USA category science fiction. Here, there, everywhere, nowhere, she is almost exactly as old as the genre itself and she was establishing polarities when most of the writers to whom her work gave generation were barely a glint in her eye. A model's glamor, an engineer's brain, a writer's fierce and scurrying intelligence. And "Unhuman Sacrifice" is one of the scariest stories *Astounding* ever published, 54 years old this year and still retailing its Thought Experiment. Ah, Passion Unattainable!



Katherine MacLean on the rocks; family photo.

She comments: "Carl West [husband] and I saw an overgrown, forested, ancient granite quarry and wanted it. We put in two work years at the nearby Portsmouth Naval Shipyard to earn the money. We were laid off at a general reduction, but almost every extra hour and extra penny had already been put to good use. We had bought the wild land, its cliffs and many quarry ponds, plus plywood, stacks of 4-by-6 beams and studs and cement enough to hand-build a house shell with tight windows, through deep snow and hail; then we moved in and kept on building it inside. By summer with the help of Chris and friends, we had a forest home good for two decades of Maine winters."

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Logo by Brad Foster.

[Selected from the full essay (pages 79–101) included in *Fantastic Lives: Autobiographical Essays by Notable Science Fiction Writers*, ed. Martin H. Greenberg, Southern Illinois University Press, 1981. Reprinted by permission of Katherine MacLean.]

# Excerpts from: The Expanding Mind

## Katherine MacLean

[...]

I am convinced that the poet is "the unacknowledged legislator of the future." I am convinced that fiction is the major educator of all civilizations, the light of our minds. It set fire to mine.

[...]

I have sold fiction about the near future, and nonfiction articles about the behavior of possible intelligent aliens, raised in their own alien culture on strange planets with different chemical bases for life. I write about the near future instead of the far future because of calculations I once made about the relative influence of the xenophile and the xenophobe in any political power structure. "Ins" fear change, and have the power to delay improvements. I want the future old men at the top to confront a future world warmly familiar, the subject of their fondest recollections, the science fiction world of their childhood comic books and Saturday cartoons come true. They will then have less blind antagonism to changes as they arrive. Instead they might complain that changes have not moved far enough! "Conservative" might mean insisting on getting all the changes predicted by science fiction.

I write about the near future because I want an excuse to read science and economics and try to find out what is going to happen next. I don't want to be in the surprised rocking chair set, trembling before an alien world.

But it is a risky business writing about the near future. Hank, the "Boss" in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* made Merlin a laughing stock by giving him the job of predicting tomorrow's weather.

I invent new technology for my stories, put the outlines and first draft scenes into file folders and nervously frequent the libraries, looking for something that will contradict the gadget and make me look foolish. While I wait, the gadget is invented and goes into production. I had predicted it for fifty to a hundred years in the future and here it is already! I feel foolish. Science is moving fast. I can't stay more than six months to a year ahead of it now, and it takes me that long to write anything.

Is the solution to study harder, read more, or consult crystal balls? My house is cluttered with hobby gear and boxes full of books and magazines. The walls of the house are floor-to-ceiling bookcases packed with double layers of books, no room for more. I am not complaining. Would a miser complain about having too many boxes full of money?

Happily I fall over boxes, trying to thread my way from room to room. The problem of housekeeping bothers me. I would sweep the floor if I could find the floor under the boxes. I would stack the boxes, neatly categorized if I could find space to sort them. I would sort them, if I could resist rereading them.

[...]

[As a child,] I bought [an SF magazine], left the area of the magazine rack hastily and started to read, standing in a narrow alley away from view.

Suddenly I was getting onto a strange vehicle, with an old professor and a beautiful daughter. The vehicle was a Fourth of July *rocket*, very big. It begins to move. What is *space*? Where?

Away from Earth the blue air thins and I can see stars in the *daytime*! The green apple Earth spins away into the distance and is left behind. We pass the red apple Mars, pass the ponderous liquid turning of Jupiter, and flee ever faster into seas of darkness, across compressed centuries of time that seem like days,

toward the spark of another star, and there land on a planet and are welcomed by strange wise animals who evolved from a different and longer history than mankind, who treat us like children. They have built great cities, but they still carry traces of their animal ancestry in a few strange customs.

Some of them become dangerously enraged when they observe a human crew member breaking a rule the aliens hold to be sacred.

The word of the sacrilege spreads, the crew is mobbed and retreats to the spaceship, leaving the guilty crew member dead in the street behind them. Barricaded inside the ship they suspiciously accept a negotiator from the aliens, one who had been their friend and worked as their translator. The alien apologized for his people and explained that the riot was caused by their horror of our strange ugly human shapes.

Our strange shape? The hero thinks of his tact and tolerance and effort to treat the aliens as equals, since they were incredibly ugly. *Our* strange shapes?

I was lying behind the stuffed chair, reading. I laughed and looked up from the magazine. "Why would an octopus think a person is ugly—scary ugly, scared of people?"

"Because we don't look like octopuses," said my middle brother, who was only two years older. With some difficulty with words, he explained that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and every species thought its own shape very beautiful. Why? He puzzled over that for a moment. "Uh, so the males and females can stand the sight of each other, and stay together."

Family groups of octopi finding each other beautiful? I laughed and tried to see that, as they saw it. I was lying on the rug, piecing together the elements of the different viewpoint (Kepler to Copernicus). Suddenly the center of the universe moved! I felt a very strange feeling and got up. The entire world had changed. My living room was not the center of the universe. I was a speck, and my house was a speck.

I was standing on a small round planet that spun under me at a different speed from all other planets and had a different length of day. Far out through a suddenly widening immensity of space were other solar systems and other planets with other lengths of day, all equally the home of evolving life and all equally my home. The plants and animals of Earth, and its civilized mammals were in a transitional stage of evolution, just beginning to feel the effects of technology. Human cities were small and unimportant, except as promises of things to come, and men were a young race, still primitive, with savage impulses.

This was a viewpoint for calm understanding. I was a sage! How did I get to this feeling? Quickly I scanned my memory of what I had thought before it happened and made a new effort to be the octopus with eight arms, not expecting everyone to have eight arms.

It took careful adjustment of every perception. Comparing Earth people to octopoidal norms made humans look strange and amputated.

[...]

The phone rings. I answer and glance through the new issue of *Science*. The first seven billion days of creation have passed. The law of evolution has just been repealed, and it is the eighth day, the first day of creation. Time no longer needs the million deaths to improve a species, we can do it bloodlessly in a homogenizing cell blender. Graduate students will make a new species for credit points toward a Ph.D. Biochemists are gods.

I get up and pace, stirred by magnificent potentials. Think of a short, comic science fiction story. Must make money!

"The Trader." What is he trading? A native on a planet is suspicious when a "Trader" from planet Earth lands his spaceship on their untouched nineteenth-century sort of planet. What can a small ship either give or take that would be worth the long and expensive trip across the vast sea of space?

The Trader improves their agriculture by crossing strong strains and improving predators on their insect parasites. He has opened the way for a vast improvement on their wealth and leisure time by making it easier and cheaper for families to have enough food for less work, with more time for civilization and thought.

He is idolized, and leaves without apparently having taken anything. The single suspicious native is still suspicious. He wonders when he sees the Trader's ship leave. (What did the Trader take to make all his giving profitable?)

Inside the Trader's ship, the Earthman has a strange zoo of frozen plants, seeds, pollen, spores, insects. The Earthman himself, after having recovered from several short "illnesses" which had kept him isolated in his ship, is now an improved version of a human, using several talents and abilities which he had been unable to use when he arrived, talents which are peculiar to the native race of the planet he just left. Genetic trade!

I write it down and file it in a folder marked, "Trader." The plot is not yet violent enough to sell, because nobody is killed.

I cook lunch and go out to straighten out the organic garden ready for harrowing. It is sunny for ten minutes then rain drives me inside. I have made no money today.

I am wealthy beyond measure. I have the past and future, the Earth and the galaxy. I have been to the end of the universe and back.

# KATHERINE MacLEAN BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Katherine MacLean; photos by Maria Papasadora, May 2012.

# THE READERCON COMMITTEE

**Adina Adler** has been enjoying rerouting misdirected e-mail and encourages everyone to keep writing to info@readercon.org.

Just before the Summer Solstice, **Ellen Brody** dreamt that she was at a sidewalk café watching the waves break over the coast of Antarctica as it seceded from Gondwanaland, when she was suddenly attacked by hordes of marauding Readercon Souvenir Book bibliographies.

Ironically enough, Readercon founder **Bob Colby**'s life revolves more around video than anything else these days, as can be seen at http://youtube.com/user/bob1colby.

**Richard Duffy** stands awestruck at how much Readercon has evolved while also staying true to its original vision, since his experience of the very first one a quarter-century-plus-fortnight ago. It remains challenging to make non-fen friends understand why it deserves so much energy and unpaid time. The simple answer: getting to work with such excellent colleagues as named above and below, and also, communicating about reading with a daughter of Shirley Jackson!

**Rose Fox** has been Readercon Program Chair since 2011. This will sound more impressive in a few years. She lives in New York, which means she's the only program committee member who gets to attend meetings in her pajamas.

**Merryl Gross** is the committee member who knows where you all live, mwahaha. When not wrangling the membership database or answering e-mail late, she's making the world a better place through User Centered Design.

**Lisa Hertel** is a con-running slut; she's unable to say no to virtually any non-profit SF convention. She is on the committee for Arisia, Boskone, Albacon, and the occasional Worldcon, in addition to Readercon. She also is clerk of NESFA. She passed working on 100 cons some time in 2004. In her spare time she makes things out of clay and occasionally pays attention to her long-suffering husband and kids. Find her on Twitter or LiveJournal under the name cogitationitis, or on Facebook under her real name, which is much easier to type.

**Crystal Huff** spends her time saving the world and chasing down conventioneers. Officially, she is the Chair of this year's Readercon. *She loved every minute of it.* Alignment: Chaotic Good.

**Josh Jasper** co-ran the Green Room and Staff Den at Arisia and Lunacon for a number of years. He likes to feed people.

**Dawn Jones-Low** arrived at the first Readercon only to overhear a plea for assistance with some task or another so she offered to help. Then as now, volunteering to do various menial essential tasks was so rewarding that she brought another helper, **Thom Jones-Low**, to Readercon 2. They've both been trying to be useful to the Concom ever since. In response to another plea for help just prior to Readercon 11, Dawn and Thom officially joined the committee and began meta-volunteering by coordinating the wonderful people who are actually doing the volunteering. When not at Readercon, they reside in beautiful Vermont where Thom writes software and breeds horses. They live blissfully on their 40-acre farm with an ever-growing herd of Arabian sport horses, an assortment of dogs and cats, countless Legos, and even more books.

**J. Spencer Love** has been reading science fiction since 1963, aware of science fiction fandom since 1973, and providing sound and recording services for Readercon since 2003, when he was detailed to Readercon by a secret organization.

**B. Diane Martin** discovered when she was 12 years old that the only way to borrow the Ace Doubles in her local library was to volunteer so she could check out her own books. It was inevitable that she would end up at Readercon. Diane (a/k/a She Who Must Be Obeyed) lives with her husband, David G. Shaw, and their son Miles (He Who Will Not Be Ignored) in a Victorian home filled with books, games, music, and cookware.

**Rebeca Oliveira** is just here for the food.

**Kim Riek** was raised by particularly literate wolves, so she is well-read if not always well-adjusted. She comes to Readercon by way of Crystal Huff.

**David G. Shaw** is a web designer, cook, parent, blogger (blog.belm.com), skeptic, and atheist, in no particular order. He has a biology degree from MIT, and worked for the General Foods Corporation—experiences that occasionally get in the way of his attempts to cook more intuitively than scientifically. He is married to She Who Must Be Obeyed; together they live in an uneasy truce with their son, He Who Will Not Be Ignored. He is currently in charge of Readercon publications.

**William A. Sherman III** attended his first Readercon in 2001 as a one-day visitor. From then, he has become an annual full attendee and frequent volunteer. So much the volunteer, in fact, that the Concom elected him to membership in 2010. (Please, help me.) An attendee of both MIT and Salem State College, he has attained B.S.'s in Mathematics, and Business Administration-Accounting, and a humble B.A. in English Literature, with minors in Economics and Spanish. He comes from careers in long-term healthcare management and real-estate management; yet, his real preparation for Readercon began in 1976 when he first read Jack Williamson's *Trapped in Space*, and 1983 when he joined MITSFS. He resides in Boxford with his parents, two bulldogs, and about two thousand books and SF pulps.

**Rachel Silber** is still working on her biography. She's also still working on Readercon Guest Liaison tasks, for her third year on the committee. In whatever time is left over after Readercon and her role as conchair for Arisia 2013, she has her art projects, family, and software QA job.

**Nevenah Smith** is still in New Orleans, etching glass, selling fine writing implements in the French Market, and serving the whims of three cats. She is also still enjoying designing the souvenir book.

The last bio **Sonya Taaffe** wrote for Readercon was in Latin. This should tell you whatever you need to know.

**Eric M. Van** is no longer Program Chair of Readercon, leaving him much more time for a long list of other pursuits (cf. his bio in almost any previous Souvenir Book). Last year, he stated that he looked forward to "someday accomplishing something more impressive than being nominated for the World Fantasy Award, so that he can rewrite the first sentence of his standard bio (the one in the Program Guide and for other conventions)—which otherwise seems all too likely to remain unchanged in perpetuity," and guessed that the brain "had a pretty good shot" to be the pursuit responsible. He is now mildly terrified that he is about to overshoot that goal by parsecs, but is nonetheless resolutely continuing to write up his rigorous and finely detailed solution to mankind's greatest scientific, philosophical, and metaphysical mysteries. Anything for a buck!

**Robert G. van der Heide**, though not yet dead, is however both white and male, and is an active participant in the military-industrial complex.

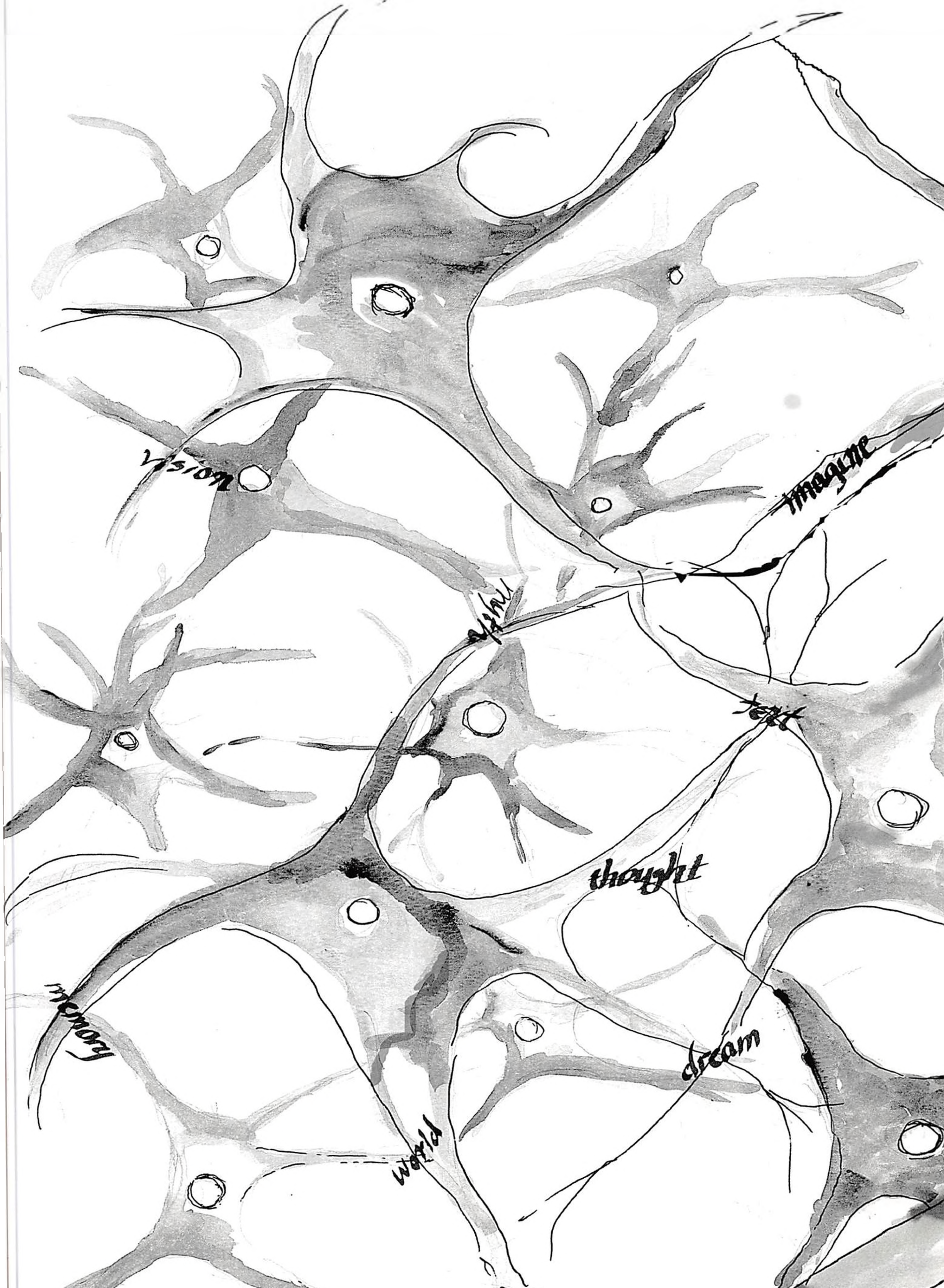
**David Walrath** attended Readercon 2 and was quickly roped in; he is currently the Readercon treasurer. David is the father of two young book-lovers, Rosa and Matteo, and lives in Stow where he serves as the Town Moderator. David spends his days writing software to optimize performance for very large databases, but when tired of technology, he and the family dress in funny clothes and live in the 18th century.

Longtime Childcare Professional and Cat Herder **Louise J. Waugh** put in a couple of years providing superlative childcare for Readercon, and a year following Diane Martin around, trying to learn how to chair a con. Louise was then the Readercon Conchair four times. She is still as sane as she ever was. You may make your own determination of just how sane that is.

**Mary Ellen Wessels** juggles being a curriculum editor, a singer, a mom, and a wife (and fits in reading when she can). She was lured into fandom in 1981, discovered filk music shortly thereafter and she hasn't looked back since!

**Nightwing Whitehead** spent her early years playing with the encyclopedias in the living room and the Science Fiction pulps in her father's room, and she also learned to read them. After more than a decade talking to room-sized computers, Nightwing was sent for retraining, and has since been trying to reclothe the world including creating wearable versions (wearable by the author that is) of as many SF/F covers as possible, reading them all first to make sure she gets it right. When not otherwise occupied with being the Green Room Goddess, she can be found steampunking around town, hanging out with the gypsies, or howling at the moon.

Committee members preferring to remain incommunicado: Mandy Eberle, Steve Huff, Rick Kovalcik, and Rachel Sockut.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