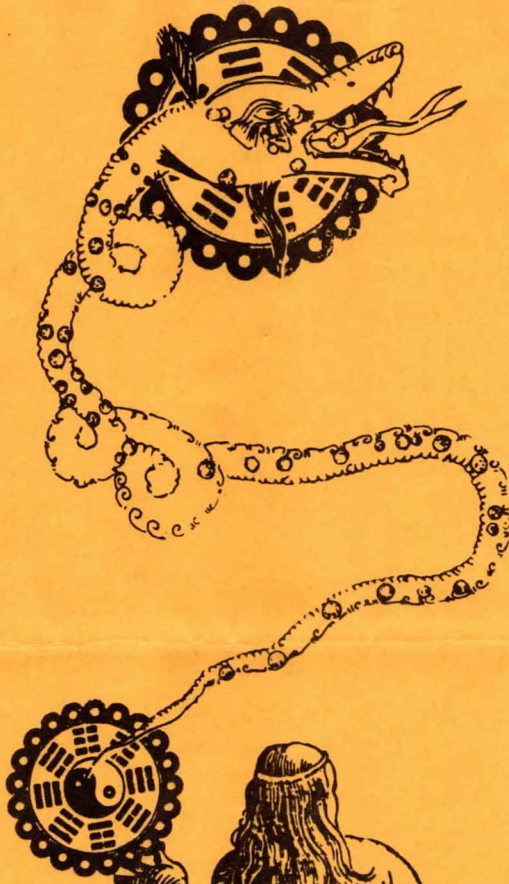


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Horror & Nameless Abomination Consultant:

Bernadette Bosky

Other Mental Ward Staff: Victoria and Kadmon, computers; Amaretta and Belphebe, cats.

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Well, we're a little late, folks. This was supposed to be the last issue of 1989, or at least to come out at the end of January. Excuses are boring. I'll put together what I have now, and do another four issues during 1990.



Colophon fans may have noticed a change in the Mental Ward cast. Late this summer we adopted two kittens, apparently sisters, with tortoise-shell colors over (or under) a gray tabby pattern. We named them Amaretta and Belphebe (Amy and Bel for short) after characters in *The Faerie Queene*. (Some of you will also recognize Bel's name from *The Incomplete Enchanter*.) Ruby, our old cat, immediately left in a huff or other small vehicle, perhaps offended by the presence of cats who actually deigned to recognize the existence of human beings. Thus we had two cats living in our yard. (Our allergies force us to keep them outdoors.)

Amy & Bel are delightful creatures, but they turned out to be accident-prone. One evening, late in October, Amy was hit by a car. It was a glancing blow to the head, and the emergency vet was able to keep her alive until we could take her to the N. C. State Veterinary School Hospital. At first, it was feared that she might be so brain-damaged that she couldn't even stand up properly. Then, she improved to the stage of minor brain damage (perhaps nothing worse than a desire to vote for Jesse Helms). By December she seemed to be OK, but then Bel, perhaps jealous of the attention Amy was getting, also decided to play Tire Tag. She also suffered a broken jaw, but otherwise was unhurt. They are now healthy, and almost as car-phobic as we would like them to be.



They tell me the Iron Curtain is coming down. Could be. Certainly, it didn't seem likely that after wiping out a few tens of millions of people in terror famines, show trials, gulags, and assorted governmental blunders, the leaders of the Communist countries would admit that the Great Cause they had made all these sacrifices to wasn't working and they had no idea what to do next. I know of no one, from think tanks to sf writers, who predicted anything like it, but it appears to be happening.

I am cheered by the whole thing, and the concomitant realization that we need never again take Marxism seriously, but I'd feel a lot better if I thought someone—anyone—in the US government had some idea of what to do about all this. But no. It is as if the shock of this unexpected development has reduced everyone in Washington DC to the intellectual level of Dan Quayle.

President Bush hasn't a clue. Indeed, he is making nice-nice to the unreconstructed tyrants of China, perhaps out of a nostalgic feeling that they, at least, are acting the way an Evil Empire is supposed to. The Pentagon can say nothing but, "There won't be a peace dividend." And so on.

There are a few people in the private sector who are reacting intelligently. I am sure that even as I write these words, Joe Bob Briggs is working on plans to bring a chain of drive-in theaters to the other side of the fallen Curtain. But can't anyone in the government think of something to do?

Art: Bernadette Bosky—cover; Cheryl Birkhead—3
& Marc—4; Laurel Beckley—5; Teddy Harvia—6

I would not like to live in a Philip K. Dick novel. Consensus reality (or, as some call it, "reality") may not be the most hospitable place there is, but it has certain comforting aspects, like predictability. The past doesn't change. In a Philip K. Dick reality, you could wake up and discover not only that there were new cultural phenomena, but that something you had never heard of was now being discussed as a Beloved Old Favorite that Everyone Knew. And in fact, those around you would remember it as if it had always been there. Perhaps they had been implanted with false memories, and you had somehow been missed. But that doesn't happen in real reality...does it?

A few years ago, I started hearing about a movie called *It's a Wonderful Life*. It was an old picture from the Forties. OK, every so often, some forgotten work gets dug up, it speaks to the current age, and it belatedly becomes a classic. But that's not what I was hearing about *It's a Wonderful Life*. No, it was *always* a favorite; it was *always* shown on every TV station around Christmastime; it was *always* a major part of our cultural heritage. ~~We have always been at war with Eastasia.~~ And I swear I've never heard of it.

Is it a selective flaw in my perceptions, or did THEY introduce this cultural artifact, and give everyone fake memories of it, at some time in 1983 or so, when I was out of town? (Bernadette doesn't remember it, either.) I don't live in a Philip K. Dick reality, do I?

{I'm writing this at the assistant's desk in the Computer Lab, and it's the first week of the new semester. Judy Wood, who teaches Online Searching, just led in a class of hers. I recognized Rebecca Moore and Allen Hayes and one or two others, but there were about two dozen people I don't know at all; there are a few new students this semester, but nowhere near that many. So I asked Dr. Wood, and she informed me that most of them are from the Journalism School, here for an interdisciplinary course. I heaved a sigh of relief that she didn't say, "Don't you recognize them all?")

Names

Two and a half years ago, when Bernadette and I moved, I purchased a post office box in Shan-

non Plaza. It is possible that this apparently simple act affected me in ways that were not obvious for months or even years. One who worries about mysteriously implanted movie memories can easily suspect that the choice of a PO box put me under the influence of Claude Shannon, one of the communications geniuses of this century. Evidence for that would be the fact that I began studying material in Claude Shannon's area: Information Science.

Curiously enough, the people who moved in next door to us a year or so ago may also have been affected, as they now own a German shepherd bitch named Shannon. The canine Shannon is an information scientist of sorts. She carries out experiments on increasing entropy by scattering our newspaper all over the lawn.

Meanwhile, our nearby shopping center continues to display that simplest and cheapest simulation of elegance and venerability: old-fashioned spelling. It is still called Shoppes at Lakewood. There is a recycling center there, and Bernadette and I figured that, in the same great tradition, it should be called Droppes at Lakewood. Likewise, they could add a police station (Coppes at Lakewood), a hyperelegant men's store (Foppes at Lakewood), kitchen supplies (Moppes at Lakewood), and—though this would be politically incorrect and perhaps dangerous—a pizzeria (Woppes at Lakewood).

Although our suggestions haven't been taken, there are signs that the effect of the spelling is being felt. The supermarket was first called Lyon's. That could be coincidence, but then it was changed to Byrd's. I presume that other possibilities they considered were Tyger's and Hyppo's, and perhaps a branch of that old chain, Pyggeley Wyggeley.

Then there's the Kangaroo Caper. You've probably seen those places where you can rent small windowless rooms. They're called self-storage centers, which sounds cryonic; one, along one of the Durham highways, was called the Kangaroo Self-Storage Center. Bernadette and I considered renting one of their rooms, but decided in favor of another self-storage center, with more secure facilities. Still, we would drive past it and say, "There's the Kangaroo Self-Storage Center, where our stuff isn't stored."

A road was built, running to the Kangaroo Self-Storage Center, and it was called Kangaroo Road. A post office was built there, called--what else?--the Kangaroo Post Office. (Some suggested a courthouse might have been more appropriate.)

But then things went wrong. For some reason, the name of the storage center was changed, to the Colonial Self-Storage Center. Bernadette and I were disappointed, and seriously considered no longer referring to it as the place where our stuff wasn't stored. Perhaps we weren't the only ones displeased: Shortly thereafter, there was a tornado in the area. As tornados do, it mostly flew overhead, occasionally coming down, like a Foot of God, upon a single building. And lo, the new Colonial Self-Storage Center was one such building. A huge hole was ripped from the roof and the front wall, tearing down most of the sign. What was left may well have been a warning. Would you want to store anything in a place called merely COLON?



The late Robert Ruark once summarized the current state of civilization in an article entitled, "Nothing Works and Nobody Cares." That was about thirty years ago, and it is at least as good an approximation now.

That title, of course, makes me think of the Post Office. Last time, I complained about some of their stamps. It's gotten worse. They are printing up all sorts of different stamps, in as many different colors, shapes, and sizes as possible, in order to get lots of money from stamp collectors. (This approach was hitherto confined to tiny European duchies and desperate third-world countries.)

I don't mind that. In fact, since I've always been the sort of person to whom the word "garish" is a compliment, I use these stamps to mail letters, zines, etc. I have recently run into a problem with that. The post office now has so many different kinds of stamps that its own employees cannot recognize them all. And so I had a package returned to me, and I had to go back to the post office and talk first to a clerk, and then to the manager of that branch, and point out to them that those obvious frauds that looked like cheap photographic reproductions of real stamps were themselves real stamps, sold to me by the Post Office, and worth the value printed on the front of them. That was annoying, but then I found out that they're having the same

problem with their new plastic stamps. (Yes, plastic stamps. I don't make this stuff up.) They consider these so wonderful that they charge more than face value for them. Now the plastic ones are being rejected by confused postal employees, so the people who buy them get to pay a premium for having the Post Office refuse to honor its obligations.

But that's not what I meant to tell you about. What I mean to tell you about is a classic of bad design created by our local PO. Suppose you wish to mail a package too big to put in an ordinary mailbox. The only post orifice of sufficient size is at the main post office downtown. So, with this large package in your hand, you come to two doors, both of which open out. If you get through that, the actual chute requires at least two hands to open, and there is no surface nearby that is large enough to rest your package on. The package then may have to be arranged so that it doesn't jam the rear opening of the door, but that is too far back for anyone on the user's side to reach.

Don't try this at home; these are professionals. But it still particularly annoys me to see a design mess like that. It's not as if anyone has to keep doing it right. All you have to do is get the thing right once, and it's right forever and ever. But no. The world is full of doors which make you guess whether to push or pull them; watches that are as sophisticated as small computers, but have to be programmed by means of four tiny, almost unexplained buttons; and occasionally a major design breakthrough like the one I just described.

The good news about this sort of thing is that someone cares, and it's someone who knows what he's doing. Donald A. Norman has written *The Psychology of Everyday Things* [Basic Books hc], a look at designing things so that they work, and so that the user can see how they work. This is a book, like Robert A. Axelrod's *The Evolution of Cooperation* (which tells how to work productively with people or countries you have no reason to trust), that I would recommend that every intelligent person read.



It is a commonplace of sf criticism that a story set in another writer's reality is necessarily second-rate. *Foundation's Friends* [Tor pb], an anthology of original stories about Isaac Asimov and his imagined future, seems through most of its length to support that theory. There are enjoyable tales, by Robert Silverberg, Connie Willis, George Alec Effinger (another appearance of that indomitable cyberprep Maureen Birnbaum), and Frederik Pohl, among others, but these offer minor pleasures, those of pastiche, inside joke, and what might be called Robotic Revisionism. Then we come to the book's last story, a novella called "The Originist," by Orson Scott Card.

"The Originist" strikes me as a major story, with no qualification or condescension. I suspect that a reader unfamiliar with the Foundation series would guess that it is part of a larger whole, but would regard it as self-contained and successful. It succeeds as a story of ideas (Card's theories of the importance to a community of shared legends) and as story of character, while telling an ingeniously plotted tale of someone who is apparently rejected by the Foundation.

I wonder if this idea of the inferiority of stories set in someone else's world comes from the same intellectual sources as the old and discredited belief that sf is necessarily superior to mere "mainstream," "mimetic," or "mundane" fiction because of the former's imaginative content. Why can't a major story be set in Asimov's reality if one can be set in that of the Great Mundane Realist in the Sky?

Robert A. Heinlein's *Grumbles from the Grave* [Del Rey pb] is a must-read, at least for those, like me, who find him one of the most fascinating figures sf has yet produced. This posthumous collection of his letters tells us much about him, from his plans (never realized) for nonfiction books to his surprising admiration for John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*. Heinlein shows himself as cantankerous, curmudgeonly, sometimes brilliantly acute and sometimes plain wrong.

The part I find most interesting is his series of battles with a children's book editor who represents a type that now may be extinct, the liberal Protector of Youth with a mind at least as dirty as that of Sigmund Freud himself. (Frederic Wertham was the best-known example.) With the best will in the world, this Protector would set out to keep the tender minds of the young from anything that might offend, but followed Freud enough to believe that the little ones could be harmed by any description of anything longer than it is wide. The harmful things Heinlein's editor purged from his work are here revealed, and a remarkably innocuous lot they are.

Mike Resnick's alleged novel, *Ivory* [Tor pb], is what A. E. van Vogt has called a "fix-up": a collection of short stories combined into something novel-like. The more traditional approach to the fix-up merely piles the stories up in sequence, with perhaps a few changes for consistency. *Ivory*, on the other hand, represents the more ingenious approach of adding a frame, thus permitting a wider variety of constituent stories, with less sequential or other relationship between them. The stories are, for the most part, clever and fascinating tales of greed, power, and betrayal. The frame story is less good, perhaps setting up unsatisfiable climactic expectations.

WHAT DOES OFFICE FURNITURE
HAVE TO DO WITH PUBLICATIONS?



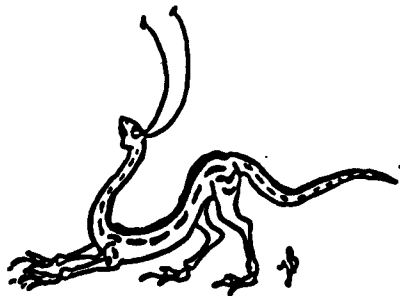
Science-fiction writers sometimes go on to "make good," or at least make money, in other fields. These have ranged from John D. MacDonald, and his widely and justly praised Travis McGee books, to John Jakes, who has generated a vast series of bloated historical sagas. As they range in quality, so they range in love for their roots.

Donald E. Westlake used to write sf. As Richard Lupoff recalled in a recent SCIENCE FICTION EYE, Westlake eventually made himself *persona non grata* in the field with a fanzine article dissecting the follies of the editors he'd been selling stories to. With his bridges burned behind him, he became a star of the mystery field with books like the utterly hilarious *Dancing Aztecs* (recently reprinted as a Mysterious Press paperback).

Now Westlake has decided to admit to his past, with *Tomorrow's Crimes* [Mysterious Press hc], a reprinting of some of his old sf. The first half of the book is a collection of skillfully done stories; the second is a short novel originally published as *Anarchaos*, by "Curt Clark."

I have no idea what inspired Westlake to rescue this work from the decent obscurity of pseudonymy and the OP lists. It is the archetypal "Bat Durston" book, a mindlessly bloodthirsty Space Western in which the hero returns to the frontier town to get revenge on the owlhoots who bushwhacked his brother, but he gets there by rocket ship instead of stagecoach, and he uses a blaster instead of a six-gun.

(Westlake, like Keith Laumer, has created an *oeuvre* which can be divided almost entirely into the funny and the unredeemably violent. But like Laumer with *The Long Twilight* and *Night of Delusions*, Westlake can claim a few fascinating exceptions, the latest being *Sacred Monster* [Mysterious Press hc], a compelling study of a Hollywood star big enough to get away with almost anything.)



But the archetypal current successful ex-sf writer has to be Dean R. Koontz, now apparently the world's second-best-selling horror novelist, behind only Stephen King.

I started reading Koontz's sf in 1970, when he was turning out the books that he now autographs with the phrase "Early Koontz: Collect, Do Not Read." A few of the books were every bit as bad as that phrase would suggest. One or two, like *The Flesh in the Furnace* (which I believe will be reprinted soon), seem quite successful. But most (*Beastchild* and *The Haunted Earth* come to mind) struck me as precisely the sort of book that gets called "promising": derivative and/or flawed work with a few moments that make the reader hope that the writer will eventually learn to write whole books like that.

A few years later, he was out of sf. He wrote a marvelously cynical book called *Writing Popular Fiction*, in which he told how to produce successful books in any of a number of categories. (One bit of advice I particularly remember is that the one sin readers of Westerns will never forgive is making even a single mistake in describing the guns.) Seemingly following his own principles, he had turned to writing horror novels.

In the early Eighties, he wrote *How to Write Best-Selling Fiction*. This was a revision of the previous How-to book, as he pointed out that the NY TIMES hardcover bestseller list was mostly filled with Category Fiction: either traditional categories like SF, Mystery, and Spy, or books obviously categorizable as, let us say, Hi-Tech Suspense or (as the Judith Krantz books have been called) Shopping and *Schtupping*.

Again, Koontz seemed to be following his own advice. He was producing approximately one horror novel a year and finding his way to the top of the General Fiction bestseller lists. PUBLISHERS WEEKLY was interviewing him and speaking of him as a celebrity. His books had their very own dump near the front of our local B. Dalton. (I must say that if I were a bestseller writer, I would crusade for a more impressive-sounding term for that display structure.)

From time to time, I found myself remembering the good stuff Koontz used to write, and wondering if his current work might not be even better. At the same time though, horror has never

been a favorite category of mine, and I was uninspired by the prospect of dealing with presumably formulaic and otherwise low-rent writing.

Recently I was faced with that traditional occasion for the reading of trash, a plane ride. Koontz's latest novel, *Midnight*, had just been published as a Berkley paperback, and so I picked it up and read it.

I am amazed by how much I enjoyed it. Within certain limits, mostly those imposed by the market, Koontz has done his job brilliantly. To be sure, *Midnight* is Formula Fiction, but the formula is a good and complex one.

Begin with a small group of Heroes. Koontz gives us four. His male lead is a fairly standard sort: early middle age, disillusioned by the death of his True Love. His female lead is the sort that feminists reasonably insist on, strong and intelligent. (Even at his worst Koontz rarely if ever stooped to the Standard Adventure Story Bimbo, there only to ask dumb questions, scream in terror, and be awarded as a prize for the Hero.) There is an adolescent girl, spunky but not emetically so, who compares her adventures with those she's read and seen. (Even the allegedly postmodernist virtue of intertextuality can be fitted into the formula if you know what you're doing.) Finally, we have a Vietnam vet in his wheelchair, and he has a remarkably talented animal, the dog Moose, who turns out to be not a fantastic element, but based on the products of an actual dog-training outfit known as Canine Companions for Independence. Not milestones in the history of fictional characterization, but likable, believable human beings.

The Menace, which leers out from behind the doors of New Wave Microtronics, is a chilling one. You might at first think it will be just another example of Nasty Old Science and/or Nasty Old Business, but Koontz has given us something far more complex and interesting than that, and the tale of how the creator of the horror got to be that way is, when we finally learn it, one of the book's most fascinating aspects.

It turns out the way you expect it to, and on the way there is crisp dialog, skilled description, and a modicum of wit. It has enough moral virtue to satisfy John Gardner or Orson Scott Card--not sectarian special pleading, but a believable presentation of the values of such things as courage and compassion. Reading this book is an experience I recom-

mend; and if you enjoy it, you might like his other recent works, such as *Watchers* [Berkley pb], *Strangers* [Berkley pb], and *Shadowfires* [Avon pb, by "Leigh Nichols"].

Oh, yes, and Koontz is in a way true to his sf roots. In a REASON article, Martin Morse Wooster says that both the popularity and the goodness of Tom Clancy's spy novels can be explained by Clancy's "science-fiction approach": carefully figuring out and explaining the consequences and implications of his high-tech innovations. Koontz does the same for Horror, a field where even some of the best writers believe that an utter lack of logical connection adds to the *frisson*, or at least doesn't get in the way of it.

For some reason, I am reminded of Peter Straub, who has recently switched categories. In fact his new book (published in hardcover by Dutton) is called *Mystery*.

It is quite a good book--in a way, several good books. It is a *bildungsroman*, a Hammettesque tale of uncovering the corruption in a small society, and a formal mystery. (In this one, Straub does maintain the tight logical consistency that his new category calls for.) There's also a delightful love story, a mesmerizing account of a near-death experience, and a cast of characters ranging from lovable to horrendous. The book is not perfect: One account of a character's complicity in an attempt on another's life strains my credulity past the breaking point, and Straub occasionally backslides from the full disclosure mystery novels usually offer to the reticence and indirection sometimes permitted by Horror and Serious Lit. Nonetheless, this book is a first-rate--you guessed it!--mystery.

