



The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

SF Renewed

By Bret Funk

A little more than three years ago, a wonderful thing happened to me: I began a family. Of course, as with all wonderful things, there are often unforeseen consequences that wreak havoc on your previously idyllic lifestyle. Anyone with children can probably empathize, but my particular crisis came in the mysterious disappearance of free time. My writing all but evaporated, my appetite for reading went from ravenous to not-very-hungry-because-I-just-had-gastric-bypass, and even my ability to watch SF-related movies and television faltered. Once the kids were in bed and the house was repaired from their daily whirlwind of destruction, two hours (or more) invested in a movie steered dangerously past my bedtime, and financial considerations prompted us to dispose of cable television, denying me access to many of the mind-numbing channels that sucked away time during my post-Katrina refugee days.

Throughout that period of sensory deprivation,

I was able to reboot, I suppose, to flush out my preferences and preconceptions. When I did find time to write, it was never enough to work on my novels, so I switched to short stories for a time. The rigors of that different discipline taught me a lot about writing, and I would hope improved my overall craftsmanship. My "reading" was confined mostly to the car, where I discovered I prefer to listen to nonfiction (less of a distraction, and less rewinding required), so I branched out from SF to

lecture series and history books, which provided me with fresh perspectives and a multitude of new facts and stories from which to draw upon. When pockets of time appeared for actual reading, I dove into shorter works, some mysteries and some classics, re-igniting a general love of reading that had narrowed to a laser beam focused on speculative fiction. Netflix allowed me to ease back into video, providing me with access to a number of shows I never would have seen for lack of channels (and saving me 33% of the time by removing all the commercials).

Then, about six months ago, a wonderful thing happened to me: My children began to sleep past 5:30AM and started to want to play by themselves a little bit. As with all wonderful things there are consequences that wreak havoc on one's previously idyllic lifestyle, but I try to shrug off my children's growing independence and good sleeping habits and refocus my energies on the things I had to give up.

A freak snowstorm and power outage gave me the opportunity to devour Charles Gramlich's second Talera book, for which I hope to have a review prepared by next edition. I've found time to watch more shows that piqued my interest, from *Battlestar Galactica*, to BBC's *Jekyll*, to the still incomprehensible *Lost*. I've been able to sit down with actual thick books, and have delved into old, favorite authors (George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*) and explored new ones, both contemporary and classic. Best of all, I've managed to resume my early morning writing schedule with something approaching regularity, and my own work is beginning to flow again.

Another unforeseen consequence of my forced isolation from SF has been an awakening of new ideas, in part because of the break, in part because of the new influences I exposed myself to while clawing back from the daze of parenthood. Two years ago, I would have told someone that the key to becoming a great SF personality (be it as

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Teaching from Tragic Characters

by Terry Crotinger/montanasing

Japanese fairy tales influenced my love and horror for the Asian culture, long after I was a child and had stories read to me. In my early teens, one of my well-meaning parents dug up a book, *Japanese Fairy Tales*, by Lafcadio Hearn (aka Koizumi Yakumo, 1850-1904), that had been in the family and presented it to me, thinking, I'm sure, it a worthy companion to the fables and tales I'd loved snuggled warm and safe every night.

As it was not, I struggled with this twisted message my parents apparently wanted me to understand. These were horrendous, gory stories that spoke of stepmothers beheading their non-blood relatives and fathers leaving helpless children to be devoured by wild animals (and second wives). Hinted somewhere in the melee was the poor soul who went hungry or unloved (or died) and how noble their struggle was—made more poignant by my own safety. When I heard the phrase about starving children in India, I thought more about the trapped child in China who went hungry because they were the beautiful (or ugly) stepchild.

I sided with the underdog. My essays in school reflected it, my choice of television programs (*Incredible Hulk* and *Underdog*, of course!) and even the group of schoolmates I ran with pointed to the less-than, have-nots, and how-bad-was-it-last-night-with-your-dad? relationships.

Anime, when not being sugary sweet with wide-eyed, prancing, bejeweled and short skirted semi-bimbos being helpless because the current love of their life wanted to play with his friends instead of paying attention to *her*... The other Anime is rife with downtrodden, disadvantaged and unlucky souls playing with Mecha, shooting and maiming, and/or trying to outsmart each other and stay king of the hill. I realized that the plight of the "Tragic Character", one of the main themes in writing, is present, often the focus for an anime series (that doesn't ooze innocence and high-pitched laughter). A few general examples:

The boy/man whose fiancé' dies the day of the wedding—he never recovers...

The shy boy/man/girl who is thrust in the spotlight and screws things up...

The evil spirit or a generational curse marks the individual as an outcast...

The individual who let their comrades down/die and can't forgive themselves...

The anime series, *Naruto*, has been my focus lately. I'd confessed to Chance (my mutual beat-up buddy) before our martial arts class that I thought it was a stupid series. He looked wounded and begged me to give it another chance and offered to let me borrow his "Uncut" boxed set of the opening episodes, *swearing* that if I understood *Naruto*, the boy, I would like it. "It even makes me cry," he confided. Not passing up a chance to watch anime, I consented. By the end of episode two, I agreed with Chance. There was the usual school-kid pranks and 12-year-old angst, but when I realized *Naruto* was the underdog, an orphan, *and* hyperactive, I quickly aligned myself as a loyal fan. After 80+ episodes, it occurred to me that every one of the ninja-wannabes in the series had some kind of personal deficit that qualified them as the underdog/tragic character. This spurred speculation about the themes in Japanese/Asian media: anime may, in fact, be the updated version of Japanese Fairy tales!

The title character, 12 year old *Naruto*, has been shunned by the entire village because he has the spirit of the Nine Tailed Fox intentionally placed inside him. The fox almost destroyed the village ten years prior and the Hokage (Hoe-cog-A) the main ninja political figure was able to subdue the fox, but needed a vessel to contain it. In the process, the viewer is led to believe both parents were killed, leaving toddler-*Naruto* to depend on charity to survive. Taking care of himself, including food (the boy loves his ramen!) and housing, started very early. Social skills suffered as few were willing to teach him, so he's sometimes the "rebellious destructive kid" and inadvertent class-clown. With the first episode, he's ready to take the test to become a first-level ninja. When he actually passes the exams (no one takes his martial arts abilities seriously), he begins to develop more of his internal survival skills—not taking defeat as defeat, but as the next challenge. His goal is to be the next Hokage (the equivalent of Ninja Mayor of the Village Hidden In The Leaves) and

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The Writer's Block: Word Count Ruthlessness

by Charles Gramlich

Novels have room for words, lots and lots of words. That doesn't mean you can spend them unwisely, but it does mean you can loosen the cinch on your story a "bit without losing your saddle. Not so with short stories. I've heard that writing novels and short stories are two different art forms, and I believe it. Short stories require a ruthlessness that most novel writers seldom need to match.

I was talking to a young writer not long ago about short stories. She was explaining how all her stories ran long because there was just so much to tell. One idea led to another, one twist to the next. And then she found herself wanting to explore every quirk of her characters.

My advice to her was to: "Stop that! I added: "Such distractions rear up in my own stories sometimes. I beat them about the head and ears until they go away. "Distractions!" she said. "But those are the kinds of things that made me want to write the story in the first place."

"Then you're thinking primarily like a novelist," I responded. "There's nothing wrong with that, but it's different than thinking like a short story writer. Short stories are hard enough to publish for money as it is. But when you trowel in sub-plots and layers of characterization for multiple actors in the story you're virtually assuring that you'll never sell it as a short."

Nine and ten thousand word short stories very, very seldom sell. Unless you already have a big name, which you probably got from writing novels. I wish this wasn't true. I enjoy reading longish short stories and novellas, but there isn't much market for them today. In fact, there hasn't been in my memory, because in my early days of writing, my stories used to run long too. Especially my fantasy stories. And selling them proved extremely tough.

So what's the solution? How do you tell the story completely in the way you want to tell it and still sell it? The solution for me was to take those long stories and rip their guts out. Sub-plots? Gone! Character development for secondary characters? Gone! World building? Minimized! Description? Intensified but minimized! Twists? Leave one or two and throw out the rest!

I still have story files on my computer with titles like "Riderorig," which stands for "The Evening

Rider, original version." Then there's a second file just called "Rider." The second version is three thousand words shorter. Guess which version sold.

You can always write a story for yourself, save it, then revise it under another file name strictly for the reader. The existence of one doesn't hurt the other. So have your cake, or your story. And sell it for cash so you can eat too.

Technological Withdrawal by montanasings/TerryCrotinger

It's come down to a major decision at our house: having cable and internet vs. buying my husband's medication. Since we both work across the street and can use the internet as needed, websites can provide news and weather so giving up these technological wonders (essentials? luxuries?) would save us a good bit of cash. I'd eventually get over the silence of the mainly mindless tube as was my viewing habit on autopilot.

But I was wrong. No Sci Fi Channel, no anime or Cartoon Network (anime)? Even contemplating this loss gave me baby panic attacks. Could I really live without my internet/TV? I had to find a way to make peace with what I hoped was a temporary situation.

We ended up with the "survivor" package of \$10 a month for the basic network channels, so hubby and I didn't have to stop watching cold turkey—we get to keep our news and weather. But we'll be weaning ourselves—we only have six months to get used to no cable.

This experience may be temporary, but already I have re-evaluated priorities. Just how much is necessary? What is the absolute minimum of high-tech gadgetry I *must* have? Television is not a habit anymore; it is an addiction. Sadly, there are no anonymous support meetings or rehab for this kind of technological withdrawal. I'm a therapist; I feel so shamed

Nationally, other families are in a similar quandary. For our household, it's just technology and non-essentials we release. I can't imagine how I'd react if my entire house and livelihood was taken like our Editor Bret Funk had done when Hurricane Katrina hit...

I think our nation is in for interesting times.

Reviews

Ill Met in the Arena

Dave Duncan

Tor, 2008

ISBN-13: 978-0-7653-1687-5

285 pgs

Review by Danielle Parker

One of the great pleasures of speculative fiction is the chance to immerse oneself in a convincingly portrayed alien (or at least foreign) culture. When it's done *right*, it's a world with its own internal cohesion; rules that may be unfamiliar, but ones we can still *get*; characters that convince and stand up from the page. Often, these worlds echo the familiar, with just enough strangeness to entertain. Thus we have settings that riff on Nordic mythology, Hindu castes, Nazis, Celtic legends. Some rare authors even manage to bring us successfully into a completely new and alien setting.

Dave Duncan does well with the stage setting in *Ill Met in the Arena*. There's an art to imparting background information without belaboring the author with the fantastic version of a history lesson, which no one enjoys (although my twelfth grade history teacher kept *his* class of slackers thoroughly entertained, because he taught history as if it were the world's longest gossip fest. Did *you* know that Napoleon liked to write Josephine and tell her not to bathe before he came home?). Right away, the setting of Duncan's novel catches our attention. We have a matriarchal society, with sex-specific paranormal powers; we have males competing in a formal contest of psychic powers to show their fitness to be mates, King Kongs beating their chests to show who's got the mostest. The genealogy-quoting matriarchs who play Cupid in this future society have computer matchmaking beat to pieces.

Of course, we all know that once in a while, blood doesn't run true. Or, more to the point, incest does have its risks (although consanguinity can work out just fine in a few families, as the Rothschilds should know). Quirt, a man stripped of his former royal name for failing to protect his consort, has a monster for a father. He's spent his life searching for the rapist who fathered him and killed his new bride. He's getting closer to finding his enemy, but his search has become more complicated. He's just met and bested his younger but monstrously strong half-brother in the arena. But arrogant young Humate won't accept that their father is a monster, nor that the nameless Quirt is his half-

brother. Winning Humate's help is vital, because their father is searching for the bastard he whelped *and* the woman he thought he had killed, and Papa is more than violent and strong enough to finish off *both* of the brothers...

I confess to really enjoying this book. Duncan's lively writing reminds me somewhat of Steven Brust's. This is the first work by Duncan that I've read, although by looking at the list of his writing inside the front cover of the book, I can see he's been a busy man. Here's hoping more books by Duncan come my way soon. Enjoy!

The Somnambulist

Jonathan Barnes

Harper Collins, 2008

ISBN: 978-0-060137538-5

353 pgs

Review by Danielle Parker

Ah, the eternal fascination of Sherlock Holmes. How often have we the readers visited that logical egoist and his many imitators? It's not just the man, of course, but the milieu. There's something about peering under the prim and proper skirt of Victorian society to see its dark underbelly—a rather naughty pleasure, like catching the priest leaning over to check out a parishioner's cleavage. Rather like seeing Sherlock Holmes injecting cocaine, when he ought to know better.

We don't have Sherlock Holmes in Jonathan Barnes' *The Somnambulist*, but Edward Moon, conjurer extraordinaire and genius detective, makes a fair imitation. He's a little sleazier than Sherlock Holmes (his retreat from boredom is not white powder, but a fetish for bearded ladies. Unlike Holmes, Moon is not a lust-free zone). His Victorian London is correspondingly darker and sleazier. Moon's sidekick, no Watson, is a milk-guzzling, blood-free giant (golem, perhaps?) with limited conversation and a serious spelling problem (the Somnambulist of the title, who does not deserve his top billing).

Moon's true Watson, however, is the mysterious and envious narrator of the story. Through this unreliable narrator we follow Moon on a gruesome case of death by defenestration (the window in question being unfortunately at the top of a high tower). Witnesses attest to the presence of a nauseating gray-scaled killer with a sticky gecko fondness for heights.

But there's more cooking in the cauldron:

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dominant and homicidal mothers; vengeful criminals from Moon's past; drug-addicted dead poets; zombies, brain-washing and bad-Christian cults. Not to mention the mysterious origins of Moon's gigantic sidekick, and an ugly stranger by the name of Thomas Cribb who keeps dropping oracular hints (and appears to live time backwards, for no reason I could figure out). No, we've got more, including a crazed counter-intelligence Directorate and a pair of supernatural schoolboys with a taste for bloody mayhem. Oops, did I forget to mention the glowing green glop, and the assassin posing as the bumbling lover?

You might guess from the list above that there's indeed a bit too *much* cooking. We don't end this story with the Sherlock Holmes wannabe proudly explaining how his superior intellect deduced the solution from the scent of Bulgarian roses emanating from the silk kerchief donned by the culprit at 10:15 on the night of the killing.

What we have instead is more like the cooking cauldron exploding into nuclear orbit and unidentifiable splatters. I was intrigued by the book's first two-thirds. The ending was wilder than I could handle, including the less-than-convincing revelation of the secret narrator's identity. But we *certainly* lost all sense of Holmesian redux.

So I can't say recommended for Sherlock Holmes lovers. If you're into zombies, cults, bearded ladies and the Moriarty of crime as a classic crazy Frankenstein, however, you'll find something more to your taste. Enjoy!

A Spell For Chameleon

Piers Anthony

Del Rey, March 12, 1987

ISBN-13: 978-0345347534

Review by Terry Crotinger

Piers Anthony, prolific writer and lover of veggies, wrote the delightful, sometimes tedious and frequently punny series of fantasy set in the mythical realm of Xanth. Catchy titles and teasing cover art (usually showing well developed, muscular men—always from a side or back view, darn it!) lure the unaware reader into accidental (and otherwise) adventures with the common (and not so) folk of Xanth, as far away from the Mundane you can image.

The first book, *A Spell For Chameleon*, deals with Bink's need to find his "talent" before he reaches his 25th Birthday, or else be expelled from Xanth into

Mundania. Traveling with a cantankerous Magician and meeting new friends and love interests along the way help him to decide what his talent is. Obviously, it's not very obvious (or I'd spoil it for you). While this first book isn't the brightest pun in the fun-box, it sets up the reader to fall in love with Xanth much like McCaffrey readers love Pern (well, maybe not quite as much). But apparently Mr. Anthony wasn't ready to write just one.

Each book is a stand-alone offering and moves with just enough grace to forgive the pain from repeated grimaces due to horrendous humor. Without repeating details in each book ad nauseum, the reader tracks their favorite characters throughout the series, each of which has individual talents and special gifts to add to the adventure or Quest, often finding their talents or discoveries about their own uniqueness as part of the adventure. Somehow, Mr. Anthony makes it worth it, even 36 Xanth books and treatises later.

The puns... The puns can be awful. And yet, reading about a cloth-and-stick-golem (who wants to be human) and centaurs and wizards, princesses and magic dragons, men and horseflies (horses that fly) AND where the source of Xanth's magic comes from, the puns fit. Unmistakably, Mr. Anthony, blessed with a savant's portion of wit, seems unable to stop the madness.

Punny or not, he is one of the few authors able to write (and sell) over 100 novels, articles, short stories and other works in his long life, and not everything he writes is frivolous. He can run the reader into logic knots and stay in serious reality, when desired. Xanth characters become old friends quickly, (no matter if it does take someone decades to read the entire series...) Starting a new book is delightful, even years later after reading the last one. With a board game (Xanth, The Board Game), fanfic, audio books and even figurines of the Xanth characters, starting a collection might be worth the investment. These are timeless books appropriate for any generation.

The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerant uncertainty: not knowing what comes next.

— Ursula LeGuin

Reviews

An Evil Guest

Gene Wolfe

Tor, 2008

301 pgs

ISBN: 13-978-0-7653-2133-6

Review by Danielle Parker

Does anyone remember how often those distorted mirror fun-houses showed up in the old movies? They were practically a staple of the old Charlie Chan series and a number of the early Twilight Zone movies. Evil fun-house mirrors even showed up to distress a modish Emma Peel and John Steed (at a Christmas mind-game party, no less).

Perhaps thrills and chills were more simply obtained back then. It was worth the price of a few coins to gawk or giggle at one's vastly distorted image, now rotund as a Buddha or skinny as a witch, in a simple frame of glass.

I was reminded, somehow, of those distorted reflections, those off-kilter mirrors, while I read Gene Wolfe's latest, *An Evil Guest*. We have a setting, which is somehow weirdly past, but definitely the future, too; we have events warped out of sequence, so that the future visits the past—or, maybe it's the past visiting the future. We have two men that seem to be sort of the same man, but just as clearly, *can't* be. Or is one turning into the other? Which one's the hero, and which one the villain?

Such wonderful fun-house *distortions*. Ye who like to see in a glass clearly, don't pick up *this* mirror.

The story is fairly simple on the surface. The U. S. government (and there is still a government) has its eye on Bill Reis, its former ambassador to the Woldercan, the only aliens humans have reached visiting terms with. The government would like to get their hands, or rather their handcuffs, on Mr. Reis, but he proves remarkably—indeed, seemingly *supernaturally*—elusive.

So the government enlists another elusive figure to help with the handcuffing. Their agent is Gideon Chase, who some say is a wizard. And he, in turn, enlists the aid of an alluring actress as bait for Mr. Reis.

Only the thirtyish, never-quite-a-star Miss Cassie Casey isn't *quite* Venus flytrap material yet. To get there, she agrees to a deal. The wizard brings out her latent superstar quality, in return for her agreement to allure, and possibly betray, the elusive Mr. Reis.

But as usual in supernatural deals, there's a

somewhat misleadingly worded downside. As Mr. Chase remarks, it's hard to go *up*, but so easy to go even further *down* again...

An Evil Guest, I am glad to say, shows Gene Wolfe back in top form again after the glacial *Pirate Freedom* (which could have used an infusion of Captain Blood, or some similar dose of much needed piratical action).

Few authors other than Wolfe can give us glimpses of futures where space and what we meet out there so profoundly alters our humanity. Space isn't just stars to Gene Wolfe; it's a moral and spiritual metamorphosis. If understanding of the metamorphosis he depicts is sometimes elusive—well, it would be, wouldn't it? How can who we are now truly comprehend what we might become?

But I love the hints Wolfe gives us. To paraphrase the dead man, what a long strange trip it might be. Enjoy!

Chalice

Robin McKinley

G. P. Putnam, 2008

263 pgs

ISBN: 978-0-399-24616-0

Review by Danielle Parker

What do all fairy tales have in common? They are the triumph of the underdog. The youngest son, the stepdaughter, the poor waif, the penniless tailor—all climb to glory and justly earned reward.

Of course, anyone can see these tales are purest wish fulfillment. In reality, no seven dwarves rescued the abandoned Snow White. The wicked stepmother triumphed, as the wicked usually do in the real world, and poor Cinderella slept in the ashes until her hair was the same gray. That's life, not fairy tale.

Robin McKinley's *Chalice* is a sweet fairy tale about a barefoot beekeeping maiden raised to sudden high estate. Little Mirasol is magically selected to step into the shoes of the old Chalice. The role of Chalice is a keep-everything-magically-humming second in command to the lord of the manor.

Only no one trained or wanted Mirasol in the role. She's sweet and willing but naïve and frankly ignorant, so she has trouble. Not to mention that in the reign of the previous dissolute lord matters in the demesne went seriously awry.

So there's a new lord of the manor chosen, the younger brother of the deceased. But the heir has

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to come back from the fire (literally, since he was training to be a priest of Fire, and is already less fleshly than flame). What he comes back to proves to be a frying pan. The ambitious Overlord has designs on the estate, and sends a usurper to challenge the young lord and to wed the new Chalice, Mirasol.

Only Mirasol has drawn close to the struggling true heir, and she and her bees have something to say in the succession crisis.

It's a sweet story, suitable for young adult readers, and follows the classic model of the good underdog triumphing over the powerful baddie.

I wonder, however, how interesting younger readers will find the story. Very little immediate *happens* in this tale; just about everything is told in Mirasol's head, through reminiscences, flashbacks, ruminations and so forth. We're wrapped in thick cotton wool, and the lack of action and interior monologues distance the reader from any emotional connection with McKinley's story and heroine. At least it did for me.

So next time, Ms. McKinley, let's try to stick to just what's happening *right now* in your story, please? Past perfect tense usually puts me to sleep.

I want to commend the artists (Cory and Catska Ench) on the book's beautiful Pre-Raphaelite-style cover art. Lovely work—tell us where we can buy the poster, please!

SF Renewed (con't)

an actor, an author, or otherwise), was to immerse yourself in the field, to understand it completely, in all its many and varied forms. While I still think such a familiarity is important, I now also believe that it is important for all of us, whether reader or writer, director or viewer, to step back from time to time, to unplug from our comfort zone and see what else is around. By doing that, one not only opens up new possibilities, but also enriches the old.

After all, live too long in a garden of roses, you begin to forget how good they smell.

The two most abundant things in the universe are Hydrogen and stupidity.

— Harlan Ellison

Teach from Tragedy (con't)

makes sure all the people around him understand that he's not going to fade away—like some of the village people would prefer, is not going to allow shortcomings to stop him, and can reframe disappointment into resolve. What the viewer gets to see of this tragic child is that he is tough and tender, emotionally wounded, though has learned not to show it, and that he's going to have to prove himself to everyone before getting respect. Remember what Junior High was like? Throw in the townsfolk turning their backs or openly stating their dislike for this young man into the mix of immature kids and *their* nasty words and tricks, and you get an idea what Naruto is up against. The ending theme says it best. Naruto is laying face-down with people milling around him while the *singer proclaims awkwardly:

Don't try to live so wise;
don't cry 'cause you're so right.
Don't drive with fakes or fears,
'cause you will hate yourself in the end.

Compare *Naruto* (the series) to a Western bedtime story—it makes a convincing story worthy of fairy tale status. However, this tale is huge! With over 200+ episodes, it becomes a “to be continued” fairy tale to last a lifetime. The cast of characters, though animated, rivals any ensemble series to date other than *Pokemon* and wisely includes all age groups!

The tragic character in this series is like a dog getting kicked by a stranger for no apparent reason. The viewer automatically becomes the witness and is set up to be a sucker for the downtrodden. We can't resist this kid/theme, unless we have no heart.

Reviewing all the *Naruto* characters is like labeling the kids I went to school with—each had their own obstacle to overcome and tragic tale to tell. So, to say I like the *Naruto* series is like saying I can pass up *Lays* Potato Chips (“You can't eat just one.”). I'm hooked and have found wisdom in the plights and escapades of this young, animated character—courage and fortitude being only two character qualities. I could list many, many more. While not a traditional Japanese Fairy Tale, though violence abounds, it is a cultural cautionary tale that has my attention. (Chance, I owe you. I cried, too!)

**Wind, sung and written by Akeboshi*