

The Devniad, Book 6

Bob Devney, 25 Johnson Street, North Attleboro, MA 02760
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Z

Zelazny. Unless you're Polish, it's an exotic name. I think for quite a while, first reading him as a teenager in the 60s, I pronounced it in my head (having no one to whom it would occur to me to say the name out loud) as Zuh-lane-ee, missing that second z. Unconsciously linking him with Samuel Delany, another writer who was cracking old idols and creating new ones then.

Roger Zelazny loaded his work with references, situations, and insights from the liberal and literary arts. Wide swaths of poetry. Great, vivid energy crackling through the prose. Characters with new sensibilities, darker and denser than I was used to. Contexts rich in philosophy and religion. Steeped in history. His work cut new channels next to all my beloved stories written by scientists and engineers.

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This June, Roger Zelazny died. Liver cancer, at 58. It seems like an eternity since his long green springtime of the 60s and 70s. I haven't read a new story of his in a decade or more. He lost me somewhere in Amber.

But he was still one of the great ones in my personal pantheon.

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Speaking of pantheons...There's less religious and cultural chauvinism in science fiction now. But before Zelazny did it with *Lord of Light* in 1968, who else would write a novel about a starship colony where the technocratic crew rules

the mass of Hindu passengers by taking on the attributes of Vedic -- and Buddhist -- deities?

You've got to worship that great initial paragraph, whose quotation is obligatory in any review of Zelazny (including this one):

"His followers called him Mahasamatman and said he was a god. He preferred to drop the Maha- and the -atman, however, and called himself Sam. He never claimed to be a god. Then again, he never claimed not to be a god. Circumstances being what they were, neither admission could be of any benefit. Silence, though, could."

I shared that with a girl I was trying to date in college. It didn't turn her into a science fiction reader, but she thought it was interesting, and a little of its luster rubbed off on me. She called me Mahabobatman -- "great-souled Bob" -- for a while, and we went out. Never let it be said that literature has no practical use. Thanks, Z.

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One early reaction to Zelazny's passing is that 58 is way too young to die. (Especially as one approaches that span oneself, at the relentless rate of one day per day.) But Zelazny is in good company with others who died at that age, including Dickens, Brecht, Flaubert, and Thomas More.

He's been in good company before. On the back cover of my 1969 copy of *Damnation Alley*, in analyzing Zelazny's strengths Harlan Ellison is led "inexorably to the conclusion that Roger Zelazny is the reincarnation of Geoffrey Chaucer." Without skipping a beat, the

back-cover bio continues, "Mr. Zelazny was born in London in 1340, and served King Edward on secret missions in Flanders in 1376-7..."

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The first Zelazny I remember reading was the great short work "A Rose for Ecclesiastes" in 1963. It was many people's first look at this new talent, and what an opening. What a story. About a poet -- a poet! -- on a Mars expedition, valued for his linguistic skills, disliked for his turbulent personality, ultimately the only hope for rescuing the fading remnants of the old Martian race from suicide. It had everything. Poetry and judo, youthful arrogance and ancient ceremonies, sex, sand, and syntax.

Remember the names? Gallinger the poet. His books, *Pipes of Krishna* and *Martian Madrigals*. The temple to the god Malann, with the bouncer/enforcer/temple guard called the Fist of Malann.

From all the stories, the characters stay in your mind. Gallinger. Conrad the immortal. Cassidy, the college student with the thing for heights, who spent more time on the library roof than in the stacks. The Hangman, a monster who turned into a saint. Charles Render the shaper of dreams, and Francis Sandow the shaper of worlds.

What do all these men have in common? Well, they're all men, for a start, except for one man who's a machine. I've never considered this before, but did Zelazny write any protagonists who were women?

Gender aside, there are plenty of other similarities.

Zelazny's heroes must be among the most self-confident in SF. If gloomy, still self-confident.

Sardonic, of course. They stand apart from their worlds and from the people around them, quirking an eyebrow and canting an eye at life's foibles. Zelazny himself smoked a pipe, and I think the kind of detachment this can imply would perfectly characterize most of his people.

Remember his character in the short story "Dismal Light," who loved a woman that fended him off? He kept a pipe in his mouth to keep himself from kissing her.

All of them have some pain in their backgrounds. Most tend to be misunderstood by many around them. (Much like your average NESFAn, for instance.)

Constantly pondering things. Deep thinkers, certainly. Always with a fund of background or secret knowledge, and usually with a scheme that's concealed from you at first. Zelazny's heroes may be bitter or wounded or desperate, but there are always inner resource of serenity to draw upon. And they always possess a plan.

I don't know to what extent these qualities were shared by Zelazny himself. He quotes Gore Vidal to the effect that a writer has a repertory company who apply different makeup to enact all his tales. But in Zelazny's case, the result was certainly a gallery of unforgettable characters. If they were all the same man at heart, the more power to that protean personality.

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As stated, Zelazny's body of work had its low points. I thought all those Amber novels were crap. Obviously, several hundred thousand people disagreed with me, and they made Zelazny's fortune. But the books left me deeply disappointed.

In the end, though, here's the thought. To have written a number of just-fair books, perhaps even some poor ones, doesn't obviate having written a number of great books and stories. Zelazny did that. How many can say the same?

Maybe we can best appreciate a writer's work as we do sculpture. You just wander around the park and spend time in front of the stuff you like. Let time and the pigeons cover the work that doesn't satisfy.

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After he died, I went into Pandemonium in Harvard Square. Tyler Stewart had a table with copies of all the Zelaznys he had in stock. I picked out a copy of *A Night in the Lonesome October*, published in 1993. Reviews said it was his best in a long time. One even said it was "perhaps his best ever."

I don't have to believe that. It's enough to know there's a promising new Zelazny to read.

The great 1969 Costa-Gravas political thriller *Z* is about the killing of an independent thinker and leader by reactionaries. At the end of the movie, defiant students paint a giant, ragged *Z* onto a city street.

It's explained that in the Greek tradition, the letter *Z* stands for "He still lives."

Backchat

on last time's APA:NESFA
(# 302, July 1995)

To Ray Bowie

For me, the drawback to committing suicide because I haven't accomplished anything is that suicide pretty much precludes remedying that situation.

Also, with suicide, you're not just hurting yourself. (Done correctly, you shouldn't feel a thing.) You're hurting anyone who ever liked you.

To Paul Giguere

Welcome! I like your banner. Also your writing style. When they talk about the decline of education and of composition skills, it's amazing how many good, clear writers there are in *PB* and the *APA*. Of course, maybe we're self-selecting for verbal aptitude.

I thought *Apollo 13* was a fine piece of craftsmanship. However, Ron Howard isn't a director who tries for art. So I miss the edge that, say, Philip Kaufman brought to *The Right Stuff*.

To Leslie Turek

Re the similarities between your impressions of Toronto in the 1970s and ours today: next time, Queen Maureen and I should take you on vacation with us. You're certainly on our wavelength.

Ontarian ice cream has advanced some since your sojourn. There are ice cream places about, with decent product. But we found nothing comparable to a butterfat bonanza like, say, Herrell's Harvard Square.

To Michael Burstein

Welcome! You certainly seem to be diving into fandom at max acceleration. I'm already envious of your chockfull con schedule.

Why not do an article about your Clarion workshop experience, too? The truth about the blood oath, code word in submissions, and secret handshake....

Re your appreciation of the fortuitous timing of my Toronto article, glad I was able to help out on your honeymoon. (Hhmmm. Perhaps that needs rephrasing.)

To Tom Endrey

Re *First Knight*, with Richard Gere as Lancelot. I knew we were in for a truly authentic evening in the first scene. Having whupped his opponent in a festival swordmatch, Lance exhorts the crowd just as I'm sure Malory would have it: something like "He fought well. Let's give him a big hand!"

To Mark Olson

Thanks once more for your neverending stream of reviews. A real resource. I must get to Judith Tarr.

Your ambitious vacation report -- what a pleasure! The stores that sell clothing for duding up your goose. Vivid descriptions of gorges, calderas, basins -- why do I think you're a John McPhee fan? Insider views on not one but two cons. Most of all, your store sign epitomizing Oregon: "Nightcrawlers/ Espresso."

To Elisabeth Carey

The French are polite, mimic American fashion, and your Parisian hotel resembled a kind of dormitory? It's like every other travel writer is entwined in some vast conspiracy, and only the NESFA underground dares to print the unspeakable truth.

Oh well, at least the food was as advertised.

Seriously, I like the way you capture the surrealistic feeling of spending just a few days in a foreign place and culture. Your mind working overtime, spinning your compass, coming upon odd illuminations, groping to construct themes and patterns, passing hot days and too-bright nights in a whirl of surmises, decisions, and adjustments.

To Tony Lewis

We were never hassled by Canadian customs in three or four back-and-forth

crossings. Perhaps we look like tourists, whereas you seem a personage of such obvious importance that your claim to be on tour is met with puzzlement and dawning suspicion. Next time loose the beard, don a Pocahantas teeshirt, and clutch a can of Mountain Dew.

I agree about *Sink the Bismark* -- an absolute stunner. And with Kenneth More, Laurence Naismith, and Michael Hordern, nothing could be more Britflickish. I believe Hordern --the guy with the highest brow, beakiest nose, and fruitiest voice in the Western Hemisphere -- died just recently.

To Joe Ross

Very jealous of your new 486/100. My 386/25 with 4 MB RAM, a Gateway 2000 purchased in November 1990, still works fine -- if you're reading this, it got me through yet another project. But you know it's time to spend several thou on a new one when your current PC doesn't have the muscle to support the latest upgrade of your prime application. I'm still using Word for Windows 2.0, can't move up to Word 6 -- with its tempting multiple levels of undeletes and other goodies -- because I fear the performance hit would be too much. And I wouldn't dream of dropping Windows 95 on this thing's head. It just couldn't bear it, poor dear.

Great potpourri of quotes again.

Liked your research on old town names. I'll be sure to show it to my sister Darcy, a resident of "West Cambridge" (Arlington). And my brother Michael, squire of "Newe Towne" (Cambridge).