

The Devniad, Book 15

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White Magic

Mighty few authors manage to make a mark by being decent. However, that forthright bit of legerdemain is just what the Irish writer James White has accomplished. He's been writing science fiction marked by decency, goodwill, and a gentle good humor steadily since 1953.

God, I can feel prospective White readers swooning away with every word I write, paralytic with anticipated boredom. It's all true, dammit! But he's also fun to read, he really is....

In fact, White is still producing decent stuff, and will be recognized as Guest of Honor at this year's SF world convention in LA. So nice guys do finish first. Eventually. Sometimes.

Mark Olson was looking recently for recommendations on White short stories, I believe to select for a con GOH book. Given my luck, he's probably already gone to press. But the request prompted me to go back and reread some White. Let's see how Mark's selections match mine in the two short story collections I've recently had a chance to reread.

First, though, let me mention the novels. A fair proportion of White's output continues to fall within the Sector General medics-in-space series he began with *Hospital Station* in 1962. This is by far his most popular stuff, stories from *Hospital Station* to *Ambulance Ship* (1979) to *The Genocidal Healer* (1992) dealing mainly with the complex problems of

medicine and surgery on a multi-species space station hospital.

Picture *ER* drawing its casualties from the *Star Wars* Cantina and you can imagine the possibilities. But probably not as many as White has envisioned, and not with such fascinating details of bizarre anatomy, pathology, and psychology (and that's just among the *staff*....)

For me, though I quite like the Sector General books and have a deep fondness for the undersea colony in 1966's *The Watch Below*, White's single most satisfying and sustained work is *The Escape Orbit* (1965), about a breakout attempt from a prison planet in a future war. It's 188 pages of the best problem-solving, old-fashioned adventure SF with never a wrong note or missed beat. And for those put off by the word "war," I should note that White is far from a militarist or war-lover. Rather, as we discover here, the reverse.

On to the short stuff. From the collection *Monsters and Medics* (1977), I'd recommend the introduction, "Reality in Science Fiction," a nice little essay on the eternal "Where do you get your ideas for stories?" question. Not surprisingly, it explains where he got his ideas for these stories. Plus "Counter Security," about a very strange break-in puzzling a night watchman in a big department store. And perhaps "The Apprentice," about another store with a new extraterrestrial staffer who's giving Personnel fits.

White spent 6 years as a department store tailor-shop clerk himself, so the background for these is convincing and the humor grounded in wry observation.

“Second Ending,” a long story in the same collection, is more problematical. This combination last-man-on-earth and far-future tale was actually nominated for a Hugo as best novel in 1963. At 108 pages, guess it would be cast in the novella category today. But brevity probably wasn’t the chief reason it lost the award that year. It must have sounded a bit dated even when written, and despite a grand subject and some (consciously) noble writing, whole chunks of it just don’t convince.

Besides, as White himself might put it with his endearing stylistic habit of detonating a surprise and then using ellipses to let the irony linger in the mind as the bits tinkle down all around you: in the 1963 contest his story was up against something called *Stranger in a Strange Land*...

By the way, whoever edited this Del Ray Book for Ballantine in 1977 should be shot for that title. Granted, a few peripheral medical personnel are mentioned here and there in passing. But a James White collection called *Monsters and Medics* certainly sounds like it’s got at least a few Sector General stories. Bzzzttt — wrong!

The collection *The Aliens Among Us* (1969) contains lesser stories, all but one from the 50s.

Two stand out among a pack of White’s early and sometimes awkward efforts. “Countercharm” from 1960 leads off strongly as one of White’s first stories about Dr. Conway, in a how-to-perform-surgery-on-aliens plot described below. (Note that despite starring in many other Sector General

stories over the next 30 years, Conway, as the ever-alert *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* points out, has never to date been given a first name.) And perhaps White’s best story of his debut decade, 1954’s “The Conspirators,” showcases his charming way with animals in a satisfying tale about a spaceship’s cat — plus its mice, guinea pigs, and canary. The amusing rodents-in-free-fall scenes weren’t matched until their darker echo in the Niven-Pournelle classic *The Mote in God’s Eye* 20 years later.

One of White’s greater magics lies in his ability to clearly and interestingly describe complicated problems and their resolutions. Such as the steps involved in escaping from a primitive prison planet, starting more or less with your bare hands and concluding 3 years later with the intricate hijacking of a technologically advanced guardship space shuttle (*The Escape Orbit*).

Or how to cure a giant intelligent crab of life-threatening diabetes. (No, NOT just by cutting down on crab cakes. The solution, of course, is to surgically implant an artificial giant-intelligent-crab pancreas, as shown in “Countercharm.”)

But in most of these cases, White wisely keeps the fascinating details percolating along in the background, reserving the foreground for strongly drawn, humanistic (even if alien), decent (there’s that word again) characters trying their best to do the right thing, often with conflicted emotions, in puzzling or adverse circumstances. For the reader, that’s the real magic of White.

FlimFan

Noteworthy movies seen in the last month or so: *Mission Impossible: The Arrival*; *The Phantom*; *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* (on HBO); *Cracker: Brotherly Love* (on A&E).

Admittedly, I was skeptical about the casting. As I commented to my friend and main movie man Steve:

“Finally, Charlie Sheen in the role he was BORN to play: A brilliant radio astronomer....”

But by the time the conclusion of *The Arrival* arrived, I thought it was a solid SF flick with a fairly intelligent script, good performances, a few laughs (mostly intentional), and fine direction and atmosphere. Excellent scorpions-in-the-bed scene especially. Even Charlie did well. Steve concurs. Recommended — on video or cable, since it lasted a measly week at my hoodplex.

Much more brilliant but seen by even fewer people: the latest *Cracker* film. This is about sixth or seventh in a series of bloody fantastic British TV movies about a fat, brilliant, self-destructive, charming, can't-not-joke-to-save-his-life (why am I so *drawn* to this material?) Brit police psychologist named Edward “Fitz” Fitzgerald. Fitz eats, drinks, and gambles way too much; commits the odd spot of adultery; at one point in this episode responds to his wife's groans in the delivery room during labor by inquiring lightly, “Still think God's a woman?” — and yet manages to get inside the heads and under the skins of tough suspects during interrogation with relentlessly insightful monologues that crack their shells and split open the dark hearts of their motivations for the crimes. Usually. Unless he's wrong. I *told* you this was quality stuff.

The shows are written by a lone genius, Jimmy McGovern, if I read the credits right. I don't know anything else about him. But feels he deserves a paragraph to himself anyway.

In Britain, they combine Oscars and Emmys into something called the BAFTRA awards. This show has won two BAFTRAs as best drama. Consecutively. And the incredible Robbie Coltrane (remember the garage guy in *Mona Lisa*? OK, OK, how about the fat one in *Nuns on the Run*?) has won three as best actor for Fitz.

Yet chances are you've never seen the show. Or heard of it.

Still think God's a film fan?

My friend David Rice, playwright, economist, and weird-furniture artist, called from St. Louis to mention I completely missed the boat last month in reviewing the Dutch film *Antonia's Line*. Ignored all the symbolism: Antonia the strong woman is postwar Europe. The farmer (Boer Bass) is the prewar patriarchal Dutch society for which she has some almost nostalgic affection but by whose rules she cannot live. The character Crooked Fingers is European intellectualism: nihilistic, circumscribed, suicidal, doomed. The fascistic farmer's son who joins the army to continue his career of bullying, intimidation, and rape? Obviously the modern European male. And so on.

I guess Antonia's life of suffering and struggle against male oppression, climaxed by her laying down to die, is not exactly the brightest omen for Europe today.... So why did we leave the theater smiling and humming?

But thanks for the advisory, Dave. Maybe next month we'll discuss Christ symbolism in *The Arrival*.

(Well, Charlie Sheen has a beard. Hears messages from above. And in

case that's too subtle for some of you, at one point I actually heard him say "Christ." I rest my case.)

Backchat

on APA:NESFA #312, May 1996

To Nicholas Sheckman

Welcome to the APA!

Your note about people's misspelling Lissanne Lake's name in the flyer announcing her as artist Guest of Honor at Arisia reminds me of one small surprise I was handed when I started producing these columns. To do it right, you must undertake a fair amount of research about dates, titles, names, so on. (You think I trusted myself on "Sheckman" first time out without looking?) I'm sure that, say, Tony Lewis or Mark Olson pluck facts perfect and fully formed from their vast eidetic storehouses of memory. But for the rest of us, it can be slog slog slog.

I don't think we've met, but it sounds like you've been around fandom a while, are into con-running, and did some heavy lifting for Arisia. Let's see, what else can I discern from the aura your article emits? You've never been to eastern Turkey ... you once were attracted to a person with brown hair; things didn't work out ... you dislike caraway seeds, although you may not know this ... you feel tender after surgery.

How'd I do?

To Tony Lewis

I'm not familiar with Panshin's Syndrome. I thought it would involve Alexei Panshin, but then you mentioned Tolkien and Asimov, so I'm clueless. A familiar state, but still distressing.

Interesting list of your ancestors' occupations. Quite a few vanished trades: wheelwright, blacksmith, tinsmith. The only occupation I know of from a few generations back in *my* family was that one great-grandfather was the youngest school principal in his part of the Emerald Isle.

Suspect, though, that the customary occupations for my ancestors were town drunk, village drunk, hamlet drunk, etc.

And those were the *women*...

To Nomi Burstein

Like you, some of my main stops when raiding a bookstore are SF, mystery, reference, language (or linguistics, or whatever they call it thereabouts). But I must say my first stop is always the NEW BOOKS sections, both soft- and hardcovers. I admit it, I've read books outside our genres and specialties from time to time. Don't hate me because I'm general.

Will have to try the new Borders in Downtown Crossing, since you're so gaga about it.

To Leslie Turek

Great to see you at the *Proper Boskonian* collation (part 1 of *n*). Loved your story of glancing down at a sheet you were collating to find my mention of the name of a New Orleans fanzine contributor, Binker Glock Hughes — and recognizing that this was probably the Binker Glock (how many can there be?) who was your sole simpatico colleague while waitressing in Memphis many moons ago. You were going to write to the editor of the fanzine — I realized later that he probably published her address right in that issue. It's *Challenger* No. 3, Fall/Winter 95. I've already returned it. But if it's not in the clubhouse fanzine archive, it was probably one of Ken Knabbe's personal

collection, and you could call him for her address. Hope you manage to get reacquainted soon. Don't you just love happy endings?

Very nice, comprehensive description of your orienteering experience. Does sound like a lot of fun — rambling with a rationale. Will put it on my list of things to try after I lose a few thousand pounds.

To Ray Bowie

By now, the kidney stone surgery you announced last time must be just a fading if not fond memory. Congrats on surviving yet again.

I agree with you on William Holden — “although he played misfits and rebels I always thought of him as an authority figure ... there seemed a streak of honesty and dignity in [his roles].” Very well said. Caught a glimpse of him on cable the other night, was thinking how handsome Holden was. Something really square and forthright in his expression. The closest I can think of today would be Harrison Ford. Ford plays smarter, perhaps, and with none of Holden's occasional bluster. But a little more lightweight?

To Mark Olson

Have you picked up *Harbors and High Seas* yet? As I said, it's a book of maps and explanations about “the physical world” in Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey-Maturin novels of the Nelsonian age of sail. Done by Dean King and the same crew that did last year's Olson-recommended straight glossary for the novels, *Sea of Words*.

The Diana Wynne Jones you mention, *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*, sounds great. Though as yet unfound.

So author Paul Davies' specialty is “frontier physics.” As in, say, the riddle of Schrödinger's Dogie?

You're rereading C. S. Forester's Hornblower series, what a treat. Know something he does very well, that never gets mentioned? The little set pieces that find Hornblower on shore, usually for a few pages at the start of a book.

Many of even the most exciting sea scenes can merge in memory after a time. But what sticks with me without checking the books are Lieutenant Hornblower beached on half pay and trying to keep brass in pocket by playing whist with sharpers ... Lord Hornblower sweating during a boring ceremony in the chapel with fellow Knights of the Garter ... young Hornblower stuck in a hasty marriage with poor red-faced Maria, the innkeeper's daughter.

Oh, the humanity.

To Michael Burstein

Re your entitling last month's article *The Bob Devney Edition* and working my name into every section. As Jackie Gleason said when asked about his nickname, The Great One, “I'm really not offended by it.”

So what's this poll you took at Lunacon about how 97% of the people in the room had carnal knowledge of James Branch Cabell?

Thanks for putting me down for Best Fan Writer. My blushes, Burstein. However, I'd need a tad more presence outside, say, the 617 and 508 area codes before I start polishing one-liners for a worldcon acceptance speech. It's not as if I had won *Analog's* Analytical Laboratory recognition as thousands of readers' favorite of the year or anything, like someone else I could mention.

Love your phrase about styling the “A” in your title “TeleAbsence” — “the inherent coolness of intercapping.” Never ran across the word before, but think it's great. Shall steal it at the first opportunity.

By the way, I'd like to publicly congratulate you and Nomi on the upcoming first anniversary of the blissful event you refer to as "WeddingCon." My intercap's off to you both. Many happy returns.

To Craig McDonough

So much earnest botany talk this spring from NESFA people. Maybe we should change the name to the New England Sedulous Farming Association.

Congratulations on your new D&B contract job. If you like it, hope it turns long-term. And about not being used to commuting less than an hour — I know what you mean. Read somewhere that the average American commuter has 45 minutes each way. Ouch. Right now I spend only about 35 miserable, heavy-lidded, frustrating, life-threatening minutes on the road coming in to really set me up for a happy day at the office.

See you at Readercon if not before. Really looking forward to it.

To Paul Giguere

Glad to hear you dumped that non-SF SO. Actually, I hear top NESFA officers used bribery and threats to break up your romance so you'd have more time to devote to scanning for NESFA Press. More on this budding Gigueregate scandal next ish, perhaps.

So you opine that the Giguere, Lewis, and Devney clans are all somehow related. That suggests some fascinating avenues for genetic research: like The Quest for the SF Gene. Or is it just some aberrant, deeply flawed, anti-survival, pink-monkey mutation?

To Anna Hillier

Speaking of the Hubble Space Telescope, it's alluded to in one of the more amusing moments of *The Arrival* (see review above). Don't want to give

too much away. Let's just say that Sheen's character is offered proofs of alien interference on Earth. Someone asks him, Do you think NASA would really send up a \$10 billion telescope without checking the optics? Unless.....

But for me, the problem with all conspiracy theories is simple. Do I think people are more likely to successfully engage in clever, convoluted, cryptic maneuvers with malign intent — or to just do stupid stuff?

To Joe Ross

Your quotes were great fun as usual.

Ah, The Interview That Buried Mitt Romney — the *Globe's* little chat prior to the election with the candidate's moneyhoney wife Ann. Talk about digging his grave with her tongue....

My office friend Laurie Noyes drives a vehicle still festooned with a Romney bumper sticker (so naturally I've christened it the Mittmobile). She and other Republicans are always rocketing me about Ted Kennedy. At least, for millionaires, the Kennedys sometimes seem to have the ghost of a concept of how the po folks live.