

Tightbeam 366

March 2025



The Reader
by Alan White

Tightbeam 366

March 2025

What is Tightbeam? We are the N3F literary fanzine, not the novel and anthology fanzine, but the fanzine that tries to cover all tastes in fandom, such as anime, comics, cosplay, films, novels, biographies, poetry, music, short stories, food, ...

The Editors are:

George Phillies phillies@4liberty.net 48 Hancock Hill Drive, Worcester, MA 01609.

Jon Swartz judgeswartz@gmail.com

Art Editors are Angela K. Scott and Jose Sanchez. Art Contributors are Tiffanie Gray, Alan White, Cedar Sanderson, and Artist Fish.

Anime Reviews are courtesy Jessi Silver and her site www.s1e1.com. Ms. Silver writes of her site "S1E1 is primarily an outlet for views and reviews on Japanese animated media, and occasionally video games and other entertainment." Cedar Sanderson's reviews and other interesting articles appear on her site www.cedarwrites.wordpress.com/ and its culinary extension. Jason P. Hunt's reviews appear on SciFi4Me.Com Jim McCoy is now found at Jimbossffreviews.substack.com. Heath Row publishes The StF Amateur.

Tightbeam is published approximately monthly by the National Fantasy Fan Federation and distributed electronically to the membership.

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To join or renew, use the membership form at <http://n3f.org/join/membership-form/> to provide your name and whichever address you use to receive zines.

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Editorial Note

I have slightly reordered articles from our usual custom, to bring shorter articles forward and longer articles toward the back.

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Letters of Comment

Dear George and Jon,

I found the most interesting part of Tightbeam – which the colophon calls a “literary” fanzine, although it is effectively a review zine – is the movie review column by Heath Row. Admittedly this is partly because he reviews *Gattaca* and *Predestination*, featuring Ethan Hawke, and partly because he reviews *Under the Dome*, which is when I first saw *Rachelle Lefevre*. Now I want to go online and binge-watch *Under the Dome*.

Yours,
Garth Spencer
Vancouver, BC

Dear George and Jon:

I have Tightbeam 365, and it’s time for a loc. I am not sure what I can do, time is very tight with writing, editing, and getting ready for a provincial election we’re working in a few days. I will see what I can do here...

Hello to Heath Row! My own interests in fandom do move about, and have done so for as long as I’ve been involved. With my involvement with *Amazing Stories*, those interests are more literary than anything else. Some interest have had to fall by the wayside, especially with limited time and money, but we will continue on. 2027 will mark my 50th year in fandom.

My letter... *Amazing Stories*, Best of 2024 is compiled, and I believe our Art Director, Kermit Woodall, is working on its overall design. I hope he can find a cover as striking as the Best of 2023 had. We have many more interesting books coming up this year.

I honestly wish I had more for you...but I don’t. So much to do...once this election is done, I’ll have more time. In the meantime...thank you.

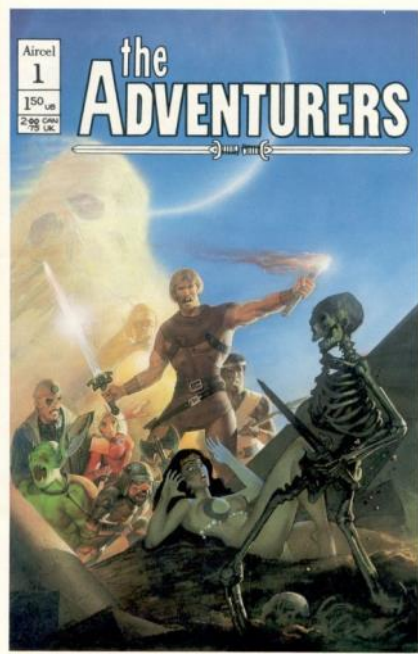
Yours,
Lloyd Penney

Comics

Adventurers #0-1 Review by Heath Row

Written by Scott Behnke and drawn by Kent Burles (#0) and Peter Hsu (#1), this mid-1980s black-and-white independent comic book—Adventure Publications was based in Fairfax, Va.—isn’t a media tie-in but might still be of interest to roleplaying gamers. It might also offer some ideas for your game sessions!

In #0, Tarrus One-Eyed, lord of Liam, seeks the keys of Telku to unlock the Gate of Chaos. (There’s a campaign idea right there!) The second key is located in the ruins of Tecumeth, once home to necromancers. Now inhabited by the Groggs, led by Delgar the Beast. Tarrus’s soldiers defeated, a party of adventurers is assembled to venture forth: the warrior Tirian, the archer



Shadolok, Sultar the rogue, the sorcerer Erikor, Bladehelm the dwarf, an assassin employed by Tarrus, and the mysterious Coron. The series' origin story also includes a two-page map of the world of Anoria, a brief history, a profile of Tarrus, and letters of comment.

The actual first issue of the series—#0 was published subsequently—#1 jumps right in as the party enters the ruins of Tecumeth. The party possesses a cryptic scroll that describes the key's location, and once inside, the group must determine where it is.

While Burles's artwork in #0 is excellent—his portrayal of structures, ruins, and the two-page spread depicting a battle with the Groggs on pp. 8-9 are particularly wonderful—Hsu's artwork is even moreso. The panels detailing Tecumeth are astounding: statues and structures, a long-range view of the complex, a giant serpent, and corridors. Both

issue's black-and-white artwork is heavily penciled, suggestive of watercolors in their shading. Hsu's use of perspective and knowledge of anatomy are impressive.

The issue ends with additional details about the creation of the comic book's characters and a back-up story titled "Elf Warrior"—which reminded me of *Weirdworld: Warriors of the Shadow Realm*. Behnke put a lot of effort into the worldbuilding and characterization for this comic series, and I'd read subsequent issues without hesitation. It looks as though the series, also published by Aircel, ran 10 issues. I'll have to keep my eyes peeled. This might be one of the best fantasy series I've seen emerge from the 1980s independent boom.

Fandom

The Fangirl's Guide to the Galaxy: A Handbook for Girl Geeks by Sam Maggs Review by Heath Row

Written by an associate editor for *The Mary Sue*, this well-designed, light-hearted volume is an excellent introduction to fandom for young women—as well as any neo, really. It reminded me of the enthusiasm I felt when I first encountered fandom, as well as the sense of wonder—and occasional confusion—as I reached out to others to learn more about who's who, what people do in terms of fanac, and how.

The book focuses on its subject in the context of being a geek. Even though that term is now commonly used in relation to fandom, I consider the two slightly different. (I, for example, consider myself a fan and geeky, but not necessarily a geek. All the same, "geek" has more positive connotations to the related term "nerd.") Regardless, the use of the term wasn't too off putting or distracting. The book also considers fandom broadly—including literary sources, as well as television shows, movies, anime, manga, and video games. Science fiction and fantasy both come into play; horror does less so.



After offering snapshots of various fandoms in which young women (people, really) can get involved, Maggs provides a glossary of fan-speak, terms that will be recognizable by younger fen, but perhaps not the slang older fen are used to: “feels,” “glomp,” “OTP,” and “shipping,” for example. The author also offers advice on how to get friends involved in your enthusiasms. Attention is given to where to find fellow fen: movies, maker spaces, game days, trivia nights, Renaissance fairs, and the like. For those longer-time fen who might still be looking for folks to hang out with, it’s a valuable reminder. We’re everywhere. You just need to be open and friendly. Maggs discusses fandom online—and basic netiquette and handling trolls—as well as writing fanfiction. After exploring the basics of attending cons (the book lists Anime LA and Indiecade in the Los Angeles area) in some detail, the book also addresses cosplay. The small-sized tome ends with a section on “geek girl feminism,” which is welcome and important. Throughout are page-long Q&A pieces featuring a number of notable women engaged in fandom-related activities and media.

This is a very good book. You might not need it yourself, but if you know young women whom you think would enjoy such things, *The Fangirl’s Guide to the Galaxy* would make an excellent gift. Tools like this might also be useful as older fen strive to involve more younger fen—and people engaged in other fandoms—in our activities.

Magazines

Clarkesworld Review by Heath Row

Neil Clarke, the founder and editor of this e-zine, won the Hugo for Best Editor-Short Form this year. It was his third win in this category. This was a sample of the stories he published in 2023, and two of them were finalists for the Hugo.

Anna, the main character in “To Carry You Inside You” by Tia Tashiro, was given an implant when she was six years old so that she could be a better child actor. It allowed adult actors to feed her lines and emotions, and it worked while she is still a child, but not after she grows up and has to compete with adult actors for parts. Instead, she uses the implant to make a living as a host for the stored personalities and memories of the recently deceased so that the survivors can spend more time with their lost loved one. This was the author’s first professional sale, and it is an impressive debut.



The title character in “Window Boy” by Thomas Ha is a homeless person who appears at the delivery door camera of the secure house of Jakey, a boy about the same age, who secretly gives him scraps of food. Jakey and his parents never leave their house. He is schooled via remote learning, his father works remotely at some sort of high end job, and his mother is usually self-medicated. This future is one

in which civil society has almost collapsed, and the house reminded me of the ones in the film *The Purge*.

The crew of a spaceship have all been killed in “Somewhere, It’s About to be Spring” by Samantha Murray, but the AI that controls the ship survives as do some of the robots that perform maintenance. It names itself Lacuna, and the robots and shuttles also develop their own identities and personalities.

Morag is a middle-aged organic farmer in Wales after the collapse of civilization in “The Spoil Heap” by Fiona Moore. She has the talent and the training of a computer/robotics tech, so she regularly visits a place the locals call “The Spoil Heap” for salvageable electronics. One day she discovers a barely functioning security robot, which she restores and names Seamus. A visit by an old acquaintance triggers flashbacks to her life 20 years earlier when she worked security for an American tech billionaire (“Call me Steve”) at his estate in Wales fairly close to where her farm is now.

“Such is My Idea of Happiness” by David Goodman depicts a future in which a class of white collar workers called “red-eyes”, because they never get enough sleep and rely on stimulants to get through the day, toil for years in the hope of becoming “brights”, their bosses. The main character’s idea of happiness is a good night’s sleep.

The title “To Sail Beyond the Botnet” by Suzanne Palmer reminded me, of course, of Heinlein’s *To Sail Beyond the Sunset*, his last novel. However, the three stories featuring Palmer’s diminutive maintenance robot Bot 9 have always reminded me more of Thomas Disch’s “The Brave Little Toaster”. Hopefully, this is not the last story to feature the character. It starts with Bot 9 being ejected into space, because a hostile species called the Ysmi have taken over Bot 9’s ship, referred to as “Ship”. Bot 9 is picked up by the Ohmnoms, a species enslaved by the Ysmi. They have hijacked a ship and escaped, and they decide to combine forces to re-take Ship.

Tara Jacksingh is a young commander of a base on a moon in “An Ode to Stardust” by R.P. Sand. Her job is to run a mining operation that employs a native species called the Esslugai, aka the Slugs. She makes friends with Bikbik, the granddaughter of the head Esslugai. She discovers a secret about them that causes her to question what she is doing.

The first title character in “The Librarian and the Robot” by Shi Heiyao, translated by Andy Dudak, is known as The Curator. After her home world is destroyed in a war, she steals a spaceship and returns to the Earth long after it was abandoned. She intends to rescue as many books as possible and restore a great library. It doesn’t help that the Earth is in the middle of an ice age. The Curator also discovers a damaged war robot, the other title character, that had crashed nearby, and she reprograms it to help her.

Interstellar travel without a faster-than-light drive is given a new twist in “Gel Pen Notes from Generation Ship Y” by Marisca Pichette. Instead of a generation or hibernation ship, everyone on this voyage has been genetically engineered to not age or have children. They can still die from some illnesses or by human agency. Suicide, for instance, is the leading cause of death.

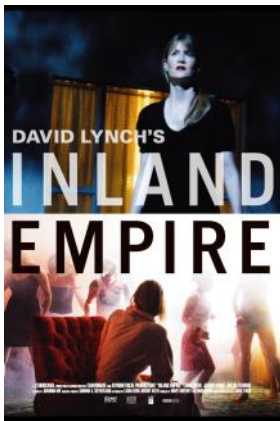
The narrator of “Silo, Sweet Silo” by James Castles is TK-115, a smart missile in Scotland that failed to launch at the onset of a nuclear war. It gives shelter and support to a group of survivors, finding a purpose now that the war is over. Hahn, a graduate student, is trying to get her

obsolete robot James repaired in “Cheaper to Replace” by Marie Vibbert, but is having a difficult time of it. Eventually, she is helped by an old professor who drives an ancient gas guzzling car.

The title character in “Zeta-Epsilon” by Isabel J. Kim was the test subject of his parents who implanted a connection to a spaceship AI when he was just a boy. Zed, as he is known, effectively has a split personality and thinks of Epsilon, the AI, as his twin sister Ep. Early in the story, the reader learns that he went through an airlock without a spacesuit, and the story follows his life up until his suicide.

Movies

Inland Empire Review by Heath Row



In memory of David Lynch, my wife and I watched his 2006 movie *Inland Empire* last weekend. While a “surrealist experimental psychological thriller film” according to Wikipedia, I’d suggest that it’s also a fantasy. There are certainly fantastic elements.

With a three-hour runtime, it’s a long film, and it’s an exercise in stamina, a durational movie, almost in the sense of durational music. Shot using digital video, it’s visually interesting, though digital artifacts were occasionally apparent while streaming it at home.

I won’t go into the plot too much, but the gist of the movie is that the cast of a film project—at one level, it’s a movie about making a movie—is endangered because the production is a remake of a movie that wasn’t finished the first time a cast and crew tried to film it. Apparently, there’s something in the screenplay itself that led to the death of the previous production’s two leads. That’s an intriguing fantastic element: a malevolent force present in a text. A virus in the script.

Laura Dern plays what might, in the end, be four characters, even if they’re not clearly delineated. She plays an actor cast in the movie, portrays that actor’s character in the movie, in some scenes seems to embody a Polish wife and mother, and also portrays a street-walking prostitute who’s in an abusive relationship. The membranes between those characters and the worlds they inhabit is semipermeable, and it’s not always clear how or why the change in perspective occurs. In one situation, Dern’s actor character experiences the intersection of actor and character, confusing the film world with the real world, later asserting the real world in the film world.

There are also a number of scenes featuring characters wearing rabbit masks, filmed as though they’re in a television situation comedy complete with laugh track. One of the rabbit characters seems to intersect with another character in the prostitute sequence. Those sections reminded me of *Eraserhead*.

While occasionally confusing and not entirely sensible, *Inland Empire* is an intriguing movie that’s worth muddling through.

My Old Ass Review by Heath Row



This 2024 coming-of-age comedy drama film is also a subtle fantasy. An 18-year-old Canadian woman preparing to leave her family and home—and the life of a cranberry farmer—encounters her 39-year-old self. Initially meeting on Maude Island while high on mushrooms, the two are able to send each other text messages and talk on the phone, as well as encounter each other again several times.

That leads to the young woman’s older self giving her some advice that proves challenging to heed, and the movie is largely about developing emotional maturity, living life fully, love, and loss. There are also small suggestions that the future—though the older woman is satisfied with her life—isn’t that bright a future. The older character comments on certain animal life being more rare and restrictions on how many children a family can have.

In one scene, while on the phone, the sound of a siren is heard, and the older self says, “Basement! Now!” The full picture of the future is never painted, but the cli-fi aspects of the film are noteworthy, though it primarily focuses on their interactions and the changes made in the young woman’s family life.

The film also addresses the distancing from family that can occur in young adulthood, and how important it is to maintain those relationships and focus on those you love. And it’s a loving portrayal of youthful sexuality. *My Old Ass* is a wonderful movie, and I was totally unaware of it until two different friends recommended it. I heartily recommend the movie and think it should be more widely known than it is.

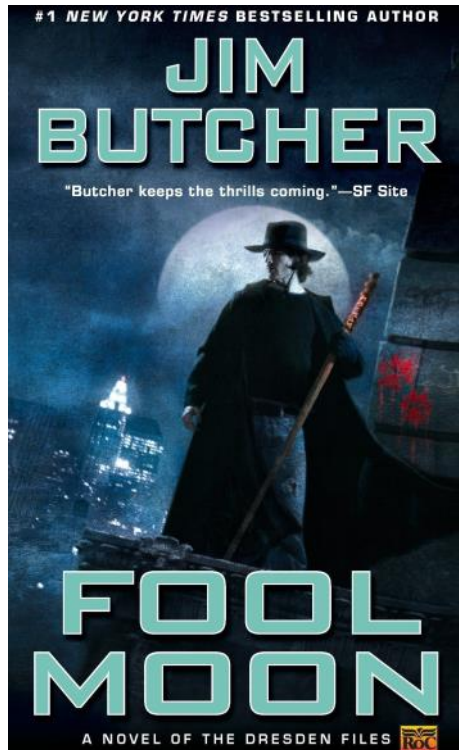
Thematically, it resonates somewhat with *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* (see above). Both consider communication from the future to the past and what we might say to someone we no longer have in our lives. In the film’s case, that person is our self. What advice would you give your younger self? What would you tell them to avoid or embrace?

Those are thought-provoking questions.

Novels

Fool Moon by Jim Butcher Review by Heath Row Faculae and Filigree

I’m pretty sure I started reading the first Dresden Files novel, *Storm Front*, but I don’t seem to have finished it—and this, the second novel, was more readily at hand to read shortly after finishing Brandon Sanderson’s *The Lost Metal* (below). While Butcher might not have achieved as much commercial success as Sanderson, he achieved quite a bit, and I somehow equate the Dresden Files with *Mistborn*. I appreciate the work of Butcher more.



Regardless of whether I still need to finish *Storm Front*, *Fool Moon* is not a bad introduction to the Dresden Files—and the writing of Butcher. In the Author’s Note at the end of the book, Butcher describes the foundational influence of the *Lord of the Rings* and Brian Daley’s *Han Solo* novels when he was 7 years old. “I was pretty much doomed to join SF&F fandom,” he writes. “My first love as a fan is swords-and-horses fantasy.” Butcher read Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Lloyd Alexander, Fritz Leiber, Roger Zelazny, Robert E. Howard, John Norman, Poul Anderson, David Eddings, Margaret Weis and Tracey Hickman, Terry Brooks, Elizabeth Moon, and Glen Cook before proceeding to write his own fantasy novels.

Those in turn led to sf, mystery, and contemporary fantasy—all experiments that eventually led to the Dresden Files. (Butcher has since returned to traditional fantasy with the *Codex Alera* series.) That long path to urban fantasy might help explain why the Dresden Files books work so well right out of the gate. The books are similar to modern thrillers, and they’re very fun to read.

Harry Dresden, a professional wizard in Chicago, is a compelling character. He’s very much a noir gumshoe, and the structure of the novel is heavily influenced by mysteries and police procedural stories. Dresden’s magic is strong, though his grasp of it sometimes falters, and his abilities occasionally have detrimental effects on nearby technology. He is not infallible. Potential love interests include a police detective who specializes in supernatural cases and a journalist who works for a local New Age publication, *The Arcane*.

Fool Moon seems to be the werewolf novel of the series, presuming that it’s a Monster of the Week gambit. (There might be more than one!) A magically aware skull named Bob describes the various forms of theriomorphs in the world of the Dresden Files—hexenwolves, werewolves, lycanthropes, and loup-garou—and Dresden sets out to figure out which beastly creature—or creatures—has been killing people in recent days.

There’s a wolfen lady from the Nevernever, a group of college students called the Alphas that is enamored with wolfism, a wolfen motorcycle gang called the Streetwolves, a formidable crime boss, and several FBI agents who are also involved with what initially appears to be a murder spree undertaken by a theriomorph investing in a real estate deal that will establish a nature preserve in which others can live without fear of repercussion.

Part of the mystery entails figuring out the alliances between all the characters and groups, and then things get really interesting. It’s a light-hearted read, occasionally relatively funny, and the supernatural and fantastic aspects aren’t heavy handed or afterthoughts. Dresden is spaghetti western and Mike Hammer cool. The series was even adapted for television: *The Dresden Files*, which only lasted one season. The book series lasted longer: 17 books between 2000-2020. I might not need to read them all in a row, but I’ll definitely read another.

Rolegaming

Judges Guild Magazines Review by Heath Row

Pegasus was the Judges Guild magazine, published between 1981-1983. I recently read two issues, #3-4, the earliest physical issues in my collection, both published in 1981. As a house organ—like *Dragon* and *White Dwarf*—the magazine is a good survey of Judges Guild activities at the time, as well as a snapshot of the hobby more broadly.

The 96-page third issue includes an interview with Judges Guild employee Dave Sering, who describes how he got involved in gaming and with the company, his job, and the role of roleplaying games; Clayton J. Miner's column "A Stroll Through the Marketplace" explores recent products from a number of publishers; there's a con calendar; reviews consider games in greater detail; and advertisements throughout showcase other available resources.

But the bulk of the material is gaming aids, all of which you can still use today, perhaps with gentle adaptation. Jennell Jaquays, then known as Paul Jaquays, offers an expansion of *Deathdrake Temple*, "Duck Tower." Tom Jones's "Physical Descriptions" tables are still extremely useful. The issue also offers new monsters, the Sea Mage class and relevant spells, a piece on catapult warfare, and a *City State* campaign installment, "Isle of the Blest." Additional content includes combat revisions for *Traveler*, encounter tables for wilderness roads—still very useful!—trade charts for merchants, and another short adventure.

The fourth issue, also 96 pages, includes much of the same front and back matter, as well as a number of more specialized features. Perry T. Cooper offers "A Realistic System for Handling Missile Weapon Combat;" Paul Andrew Denisowski considers more aggressive spells for clerics; and Joseph R. Ravitts discusses monotheism in fantasy games, referring to examples from fantasy fiction. The main supplement is a *City State* campaign installment, "Isle of Tirnanog;" and additional material touches on hit locations (a notable resource), the combat effects of injury and blindness, a *Tunnels & Trolls* scenario, and a code players and GMs could use to more efficiently share PC and NPC stats. Similar to #3, short fiction is showcased, and Aaron Arocho's comic feature "Questing" is impressive.

It intrigues me that so many RPG magazines over the years have largely been house organs: *Dragon* and *Dungeon*, *White Dwarf*, *Adventurers Club* (Hero), *Challenge* (GDW), *The Rifter* (Palladium), *Pyramid*, and *Roleplayer* (both Steve Jackson Games).

Pegasus, though a house organ for Judges Guild, strikes me as somewhat different. Even though it promotes and focuses on materials published by the company, because Judges Guild offers gaming aids for a wide variety of games—occasionally publishing system-agnostic materials—Pegasus feels more broadly applicable. It's also delightfully homegrown, featuring a pleasantly do-it-yourself design and production elements. Pegasus is as much a fanzine as it is a prozine.

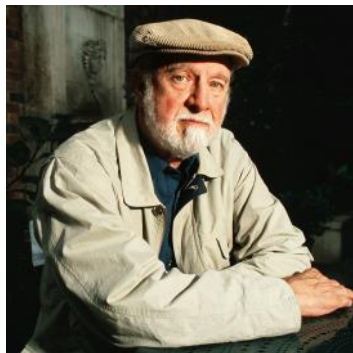
SerCon

Richard Matheson Bio-Bibliography

by

Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D.

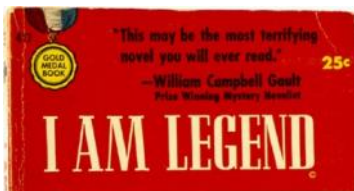
N3F Historian



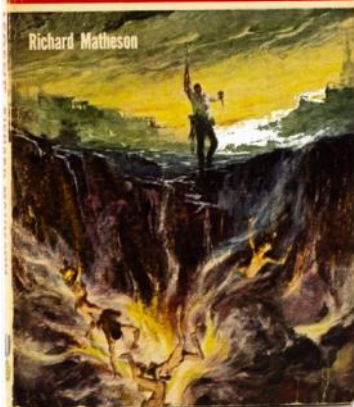
Richard Burton Matheson (February 20, 1926 – June 23, 2013) was an author and screenwriter, primarily in the fantasy, horror, and science fiction (s-f) genres. He is known best today as the author of *I Am Legend*, a 1954 horror novel that has been adapted for the movies three times, although some of his other novels also have been adapted as major motion pictures, including *The Shrinking Man*, *Hell House*, *Bid Time Return*, and *A Stir of Echoes*.

Matheson also wrote numerous television episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, including “Nightmare at 20,000 Feet” and “Steel.” He also adapted his 1971 short story “Duel” as a screenplay which was directed by a young Steven Spielberg for a TV movie starring Dennis Weaver.

Early Work



Matheson's first short story was published when he was only eight years old, appearing in *The Brooklyn Eagle*, his local newspaper. After graduating from high school in 1943, he served in the US Army. After the war, he studied journalism at the University of Missouri, graduating in 1949.



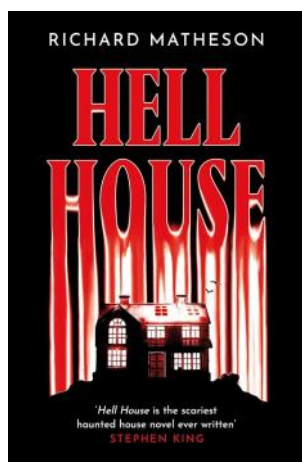
His first novel, *Hunger and Thirst*, was ignored by publishers for several decades; but his short story “Born of Man and Woman,” was published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* (Summer, 1950 issue), the new digest’s third issue, and attracted considerable attention. It is the tale of a monstrous child chained by its parents in the cellar. Later that year, Matheson placed stories in the first and third numbers of *Galaxy Science Fiction*. His first anthology of his work was published in 1954. Between 1950 and 1971, he produced dozens of stories, frequently blending elements of the s-f, horror, and fantasy genres. He was a member of the Southern California School in the 1950s and 1960s (also called *The*

California Sorcerers), a group of young genre writers that included Charles Beaumont, Ray Bradbury, Jerry Sohl, Chad Oliver, George Clayton Johnson, William Nolan, and others. Nolan called them *The Group*.

Pseudonym

He occasionally used the pseudonym of Logan Swanson in his work.

Critical Comments



Several of his stories, like “Third from the Sun” (1950), “Deadline” (1959) and “Button, Button” (1970) are usually seen as “simple sketches with twist endings,” but others, like “Trespass” (1953), “Being” (1954) and “Mute” (1962) “explore their characters' dilemmas over several pages.”

Some tales, such as “The Funeral” (1955) and “The Doll that Does Everything” (1954) “incorporate humor at the expense of genre clichés, and are written in an overblown prose very different from Matheson's usual pared-down style.”

Others, like “The Test” (1954) and “Steel” (1956), “portray the moral and physical struggles of ordinary people,” rather than scientists and superheroes, in situations which are at once futuristic and everyday.

Still others, such as “Mad House” (1953), “The Curious Child” (1954) and perhaps most of all, “Duel” (1971), are “tales of paranoia, in which the everyday environment becomes inexplicably alien or threatening.”

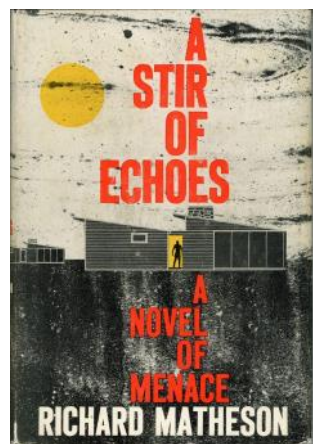
Some Conclusions

“Nightmare at 20,000 Feet,” on The Twilight Zone, starred a young William Shatner, and is still remembered vividly by genre fans today.

In 2011, a feature film, *Real Steel*, starring Hugh Jackman, was issued based on Matheson’s 1956 short story “Steel.”

His son, Richard Christian Matheson (born 1953), is also an author. He has written over 100 stories, including the genre novel *Created By*.

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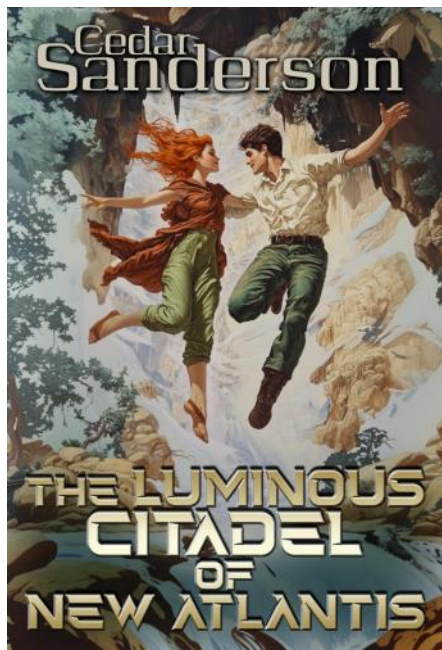
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Note: In addition to the above, several Internet sites were consulted, including Fancyclopedia 3, ISFDB, and Wikipedia.

Food of Famous Author

Apple Dumplings Cooking by Cedar Sanderson



A quick and easy dessert

I'd volunteered to make dessert and my husband knew I wanted to use most if not all the apples from the fruit bowl.

"What about apple dumplings?" He asked me, "I don't remember how they are made exactly, and I never made them because dough..."

He's a good cook. Baking and pastry worry him, so he generally doesn't.

In this case, though? I can do the pastry, but I didn't. I didn't have enough time, was making two different desserts (the story of EOD cheesecake will have to appear another time, if I ever master cheesecake in the instantpot), and decided that I would take a shortcut on the pastry. They turned out delicious, so I may just keep doing them this way!

I bought buttery crescent rolls in the can, is what I did.

Apple Dumplings

Preheat oven to 375F

8 medium apples, peeled and cored¹

3 cans crescent rolls (makes 8 rolls each can)

brown sugar

butter

spices²

Sauce:

1/4 c butter (one stick)

1/2 c water

3/4 c brown sugar

1 tsp spice mixture

Unroll a can of the crescent rolls into a flat sheet. Take two of the roll triangles, which will make a rough rectangle, and pinch together the seam between the pieces. Place the apple on this, then put a pinch of spices (large pinch on my part, maybe 1/4 tsp) into the cored hole (and all over the apple, and the dough... I'm not a neat baker). Follow that with a spoonful (I was using a table teaspoon, so this is more like two teaspoons measured) of brown sugar, then a little knob of butter enough to fill up the top part of the hole. Take the two opposite corners of the

pastry, bring them up over the top of the apple and press together, then repeat with the other two corners. Press and pinch seams, and take part of a third 'roll triangle' and fill any gaps.

Place the dumpling in your baking pan. I was using a deep 9x13" pan for this. Repeat for all the apples.

Place apples into the oven to bake for 20 minutes. While they are baking, make the sauce.

In a saucepan over medium heat, melt the butter into the water, stir in the brown sugar and spices and then stir occasionally until the sugar completely melts and the mixture gets bubbly and thicker. When the dumplings have baked for twenty minutes, pour the sauce into their pan, then return to the oven at 350F for another twenty to twenty-five minutes. Test for doneness with a cake tester or fork, the apple should be tender.

Remove from the oven and allow to cool a bit, but really these would ideally be served still warm, cut in half, and a scoop of vanilla ice cream in the center of each half. Spoon some of the sauce from the baking dish over each portion. Serving size will be half a dumpling for most people unless you have teenagers, in which case the whole thing and two scoops of ice cream served in a nice big shallow pasta bowl!

What kind of apples you use will make a difference. Granny Smith will remain quite firm, with some crispness. A softer apple like a Macintosh may need less baking time. Most commercial (the ones you get in a grocery store) apples will stay firmer, so if you can find those rare heirloom apples meant for apple sauce like Duchess of Oldenburg and you like a soft filling, those will be perfection. I sometimes miss living in apple country.

1 I don't have one of those reamer tools, so I used a melon baller, the smaller end, and it worked nicely to take scallops out of the apple halfway through, then turn the apple over and come in from the other end. Improvisation for the win and save me buying a single-task tool!

2 I was using a pumpkin pie spice mix, but you could do this with garam masala, Chinese five-spice, or even just cinnamon.

Anime

Mononoke Week 1: Bakeneko Review by Jessi Silver

So, this series of posts has been a long time coming. I've wanted to do a deep-dive on Mononoke for several years but never felt equipped to take it on. Part of that is because I like the anime series so much and really, really want to do it justice in the way I talk about it. I have some baggage about this series that I've mentioned in the past and won't go into detail about right now (the short version is that I got ridiculed for liking it because I couldn't properly articulate why it wasn't just something that "looked cool"), but ultimately it only drove me to attach to the series even more. I suppose maybe I'm just petty like that (or I just really, really like great anime!).



It's a series of several stories that are all interesting to me, and some of them I believe speak to me on a personal level in a way that's unlike so many other anime (even anime I like a lot!). Many people believe that the original story, which we'll be covering this week, is the "best" one; I'd have a difficult time arguing that as it's self-contained and arguably unlike pretty much anything else that came before it (it's also absolutely the best of the three stories in the anthology series from which it originated). Despite that, though, the series as a whole sets a standard that I feel few can match, as I hope you'll

eventually agree!

I'm planning to eschew constructing any formal questions this time around; with Kino I felt like I was consistently posing leading questions and I'd rather hear people's free-form reactions and see if a discussion forms organically that way. I will still be posting my reactions and interpretations as I go.



I'd also like to mention once again that this week's story arc, Bakeneko 1, isn't really available in a legal form unless you'd like to find a copy of the extremely out-of-print Geneon release (it's not super expensive but probably more than most people would want to pay for a used DVD) or the Japanese Blu-Ray release of the series in its entirety which I don't believe is subtitled (good luck). I'm not planning to tell you where to find the story arc, but I'll mention that I've seen it online in the past and I assume it's still floating around out there in case you'd like to watch it and can't obtain it another way.

Act 1

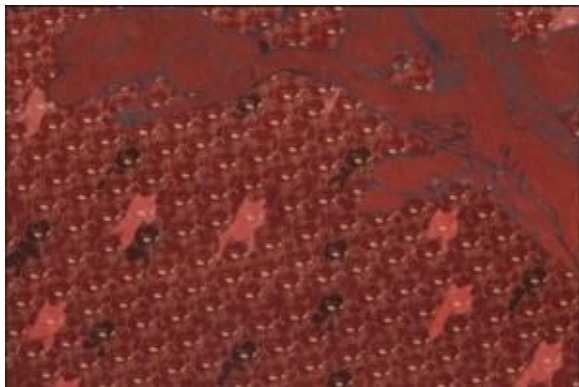
Lady Mao is set to be married into the Shiono family; the marriage is not so much for her own good, but to help to eliminate her family's many debts. A Medicine Seller arrives at her home on the wedding day to peddle his wares, though it's possible he senses something amiss. Kayo, a servant, allows him inside and is more than excited to gossip, but it's soon time for Mao to leave for her future husband's home. As she crosses the threshold to the outside, Mao is struck down by some unknown force and breathes her last. The household is thrown into a panic and believes there to be an assassin on the loose, but the Medicine Seller recognizes this as the likely workings of some supernatural force.

The household regards the Medicine Seller with suspicion, but as terrifying hallucinations of sight and sound become more frequent and the violent death of a servant causes tensions to rise further he easily breaks out of his bonds and begins putting up wards to keep the demonic presence away. Unfortunately this is just a temporary measure. He carries a sword used to exorcise

demons, but it can only be used once the type of demon is identified, the truth of why it appeared is discovered, and its reasoning for haunting this place is known. The family must reveal what they know in order for the Medicine Seller to help them.

Act 2

The Medicine Seller makes his way to the kitchen, Kayo and Odajima in tow, to retrieve salt for a salt barrier (and sake for the home's mistress). He then sets up several "scales" that measure not weight, but the strength of the mononoke's presence in the area. After that he gets down to business, grilling the residents about any reason why a vengeful spirit may have taken up residence there. Why are there no cats in the home to control the rat population? It appears that the family procured several cats in quick succession for the purposes of testing the sharpness of their swords, but could this alone account for the mononoke's rage?



Lady Mizue awakens from her unconsciousness as the mononoke prowls outside the room, tilting the scales as it walks by. Its power begins to overwhelm the Medicine Seller's defenses – first the salt barrier, and then eventually the seals begin to melt. Mizue crawls towards Mao's deathbed and removes the cloth from her face, only to immediately start going mad from a vision of a woman she calls Tamaki. The group witnesses a vision from within the opened sliding screen of a woman in white sending a swarm of blood-red cats into the room, devouring all as they go. The members of the group still alive rush further back into the home, and the Medicine Seller becomes more intensely focused on his questioning, more so as a secret passageway is revealed, leading to a hidden inner room. This family's secrets appear to be even more sinister than first suspected, and old Lord Yoshiyuki has a story to tell.

Final Act

Yoshiyuki tells the story of a night 25 years ago when he, as a younger man, came upon a country bride being transported to her new home. He kidnapped her, intending only to give her a fright, but because she never screamed nor fought him off it was almost as if she came with him willingly. By that point it would not have been a happy reunion if she were to return so he kept her locked away, providing her with the finest food to eat and beautiful clothing to wear. But having taken her in the prime of her life, he speculates, it must have been her grudge for a life not lived that possessed her pet kitten and caused it to transform into a mononoke. This appears to be an incomplete truth, as the sword cannot yet be unsheathed. As the Medicine Seller begins to physically collapse keeping the Bakeneko at bay, he sees pieces of a vision that paints a very different picture from what Yoshiyuki is claiming to be true. As the Bakeneko consumes and dismembers the other members of the family, Kayo, Odajima, and the Medicine Seller are shown the Bakeneko's "Truth."



As the Bakeneko consumes and dismembers the other members of the family, Kayo, Odajima, and the Medicine Seller are shown the Bakeneko's "Truth."

In reality, Tamaki did not stay in the home willingly, nor was she treated well. The underground room where she was held captive had become a den for many cats, which were killed in front of her as she was kept in a cage. As Tamaki began to refuse food, she heard the faint sounds of a kitten who had been hiding, and she used her meager meals to nurse it to adulthood. As a final act of rebellion, the cat attempted to guard her from being raped by one of the master's son's. Tamaki was killed soon afterward, her body dumped down a well. Now in possession of the full story, the Medicine Seller uses his power to exorcise the mononoke, allowing Tamaki's spirit and her cat their final rest. The survivors go their separate ways, but as the Medicine Seller leaves he wonders if he might have seen a woman in white and her black cat pass over the home's threshold.

Thoughts and Reactions

This is a series that I've seen many times and I'm very familiar with each story arc, but every re-watch reminds me of or introduces me to many details that are otherwise foggy in my own memories. Unsurprisingly, the concept that kept jumping out at me during my viewing of this story was the relationship between women and cats (imagine that). As a cat-lover myself, one thing I'm constantly having to deal with is the idea that cats are an animal typically more associated with women (think witches and "crazy cat ladies"). When you get into the reasoning behind the existence of that idea, there's not much of a positive association; there are people who consider cats selfish or fickle (compared to the simplistic loyalty of dogs), and these are traits that some people may apply in a blanket way to women. There are those that also consider cats representative of or connected to women's sexuality. Cats are associated with witches and witchcraft, symbols of women's empowerment (and therefore dangerous and transgressive). Considering the arc of this story in particular, it seems that the choice of a cat demon as a reflection of Tamaki's sickening treatment, assault, and death is especially appropriate.

I understand that people in dire circumstances will usually put the well-being of their pets ahead of themselves. To have to choose between one or the other is an upsetting thought, but I feel as though there's an element of human selflessness that reveals itself when providing care towards an entity that's less capable of providing for itself (that's kind of a cold, analytical way of saying that I find some beauty in people's ability to put something else ahead of themselves). I found it especially heart-wrenching as Tamaki continued to take care of the kitten, watching it grow as she withered away to skin and bones; to reach a point where you give up on yourself to ensure the survival of your will through the entity you're caring for definitely has an element of tragedy to it. Looking at that further, I feel like that concept applies to other women in this story as well. The women are used almost like currency as a way



to seal alliances and conduct monetary transactions between families (Mao's marriage, if you recall, is partly to help abolish her family's debts). In the brief glimpses we get during the Bakeneko's flashback, it seems as though at least one other woman marries into the family unwillingly, and perhaps investing in Mao to allow her to escape and join another (perhaps better) family is her way of continuing in this sad tradition. This is an idea that reappears multiple times throughout Mononoke, and while it would be tempting to say that it's just an aspect of Japanese upper-class culture from that time period, I feel like it's something that we still do today when we become obsessive



about our children getting ahead in school, having the right friends, being in sports and other activities. We want for them to have a better life than our own, but we also may want to live vicariously through their experiences and in that way have a second chance to fix the mistakes and regrets in our own lives. The degree to which this is helpful or harmful depends on the people involved, and it's complicated; sometimes a well-meaning action is tainted by the strength and nature of the emotions behind it.

I think that the concept of “thresholds” hangs heavily over this story. As it begins, there's a sense of foreboding as the Medicine Seller enters the home; the scene pauses and there's an uncomfortable sound as he steps through the doorway. Mao is killed just as she walks across the threshold to the outside world. The mononoke's power doesn't respect the salt barrier, nor the sliding doors and seals that seek to contain it. It's a motif that's repeated throughout the story – crossing the threshold spells doom and destruction. There's a tradition in the West of the bride being carried across the threshold on her wedding night, and I wonder if that isn't partly echoed here. I'm also reminded of the anime series *Kurenai*, which features a family so steeped in tradition that the family's women are kept within an inner sanctum that has a threshold which they may never cross (and of course there's a very symbolic shot near the end of the female lead walking across it without issue). I don't know if it's reaching to say that this idea in itself might be included as a nod towards the situation so many women in history have found themselves in – contained within the homes of their parents before then becoming contained in their husband's home, only breathing the outside air as they're sent from one to the other. Even this simple experience, this one chance, was something that was forcefully stolen from Tamaki. This idea of women being contained or trapped is a story element that repeats itself in later stories, I'm realizing.

I'm amazed at how well this story speaks to the general tendency for human beings to safeguard themselves and their own mental state by bending facts to absolve themselves from responsibility. Lord Yoshiyuki's version of Tamaki's kidnapping paints him as an arrogant younger version of himself, committing a prank that went too far. His story of how Tamaki, after being taken captive, came on to him and lived out the short remainder of her life cloistered and taken-care-of gives the story a tragic bent, and provides others with more room to forgive him for what he may have done. Generally dead women can't speak, so had the Medicine Seller never arrived or no mononoke been brought into existence, this version of the “truth” may have stood unchallenged forever. I like how the episode uses a lot of visual symbolism to point out this duplicity, even prior to the Medicine Seller's experience within the Bakeneko's mind; there are some split-screen shots of the younger and elder Yoshiyuki – a young, virile samurai mirrored against the ugly old man spinning lies that he becomes. There are also similar scenes of a vibrant Tamaki receiving a black kitten as a gift, and then her haggard, starving body discovering the black kitten somehow spared from the cruel death of its brethren. The delicious gourmet meals, compared to the meager fare that was actually provided.

When I think about this story, the phrase “he-said, she-said” comes to mind. It's a turn of phrase that's unfortunately often used when discussing rape or sexual assault situations – it's her word

against his, a duality of stories in which the “truth” is derived from whose story is most convincing. Considering the power dynamics that are often present in those situations, as well as the reality that witness testimony is its own evidence, at least in practice it has often come down to how much social clout each person in the situation has. While things have improved somewhat over the years, it’s still common to hear things like “oh, she’s just trying to extort him for money” or “if she was really assaulted why did she wait 5/10/20 however many years to talk about it?” We idolize the wealthy and powerful and hold their words in high esteem, so when a common person speaks out against them, instinctually it’s easier to call it “sour grapes” rather than a legitimate accusation. Yoshiyuki is the head of a wealthy family; who would believe the word of a simple country girl over the word of a respected, powerful, wealthy man? Whether or not this is something he’s consciously aware of, I believe it’s definitely something that influences his behavior and his ability to lie about the crime he committed.

There’s a moment in the third act after Lord Yoshiyuki tells his version of the story that really sticks with me and speaks to this point. It’s assumed that, if the mononoke is somehow the product of Tamaki’s grudge, it must be due to her jealousy of other soon-to-be-married women leaving the household (something she was never able to do). A male character states that “A woman’s grudge is incorrigible indeed,” which causes Kayo (the best character) to roll her eyes with skepticism. It’s a generally accepted “truth” (heavily in quotes) that women, like cats, are fickle and emotional beings, so of course this entire mess must be the product of a woman’s misdirected rage. Later, following his vision of the actual facts in play, the Medicine Seller states that he’s seen the mononoke’s (and Tamaki’s) truth, and has “taken it to heart.” Speaking as someone who’s been through several situations in which my truth has been questioned, this moment is perhaps the most emotionally powerful of the entire episode. Speaking also as someone who’s seen the entire series before, I think it’s a good introduction to what I interpret the series as being about – learning women’s truths, believing them, and then using that to try to cleanse society of the injustice done to women day-in and day-out.

I love what the Medicine Seller says to Lord Yoshiyuki upon leaving the compound; it’s something to the effect of “this is your truth that you’ve been protecting.” Not the truth, but Yoshiyuki’s truth, one that he’s nurtured and allowed to blossom over the unmarked grave of his own guilt.

I can’t remember where, but I read something recently that interpreted the Medicine Seller in this story arc as being apprehensive and inexperienced compared to the persona he exhibits in Mononoke proper. I suppose any differences might actually boil down to the voice actor, writer, and director not quite having a handle on the character’s portrayal just yet, or having a different vision of him in this single story arc than later on in the series. What I will say is that I feel like the character is more involved in the story here; things come as more of a shock to him and he’s more emotional upon discovering the truth. I get the impression that the experience of being swallowed by the mononoke and seeing its story played out was deeply affecting to the character. In later story arcs the character seems more worldly, aloof, and willing to let the involved characters talk themselves into their own demise. The differences may be more evident later on, especially in the late reprise of this same story. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

That’s about all I have to say about this story arc. It’s probably the one I’ve watched the most out of all of them, and yet I still find it deeply affecting each and every time. I hope that if you get a chance to watch it, you’ll agree. Next week I’ll be continuing with the first two episodes of Mononoke proper, which is available on Crunchyroll. I hope you’ll check it out!



Unexpected Dinner Guests
by Tiffanie Gray