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Confessions of a Freelance Fantasist

by Isidore Haiblum

A SURVIVAL GUIDE IN THE FORM OF A MEMOIR,
BY THE AUTHOR OF *THE TSADDIK OF THE SEVEN WONDERS*.

Part One, In Which Our Hero Learns that the Journey from Coney Island's Boardwalk to Easy Street Is Somewhat Longer than Expected.

It was an overcast afternoon in March 1969. I was somewhere in the mid-forties on Manhattan's West Side, standing in front of a swanky restaurant. I was waiting for my benefactor, a paperback editor who had promised to take me to lunch—my first lunch ever with an editor—and to purchase a novel I had written.

I had sweated for this long-delayed day; I had dreamed, schemed, and plotted, and now it was finally here. Could Easy Street be far away?

Easy Street and I, it should be pointed out, are still far from buddies, and my own origins lie a good distance from the glitter of Publishers' Row.

MY UNLIKELY BACKGROUND

I was born in Brooklyn—a Brooklyn few would recognize today. Horse and wagon peddlers roamed the streets, their carts piled high with fruits and vegetables, old clothing, or junk metal. Uniformed sanitation men wielding long-handled brooms cleaned up after the horses. No garbage littered the pavements. El trains rumbled overhead, while trolley cars clanged below. Neither were disfigured by graffiti. The air, as a rule, smelled sweet and clean. Automobiles all had running boards you could stand on, and in winter the snows seemed very high indeed.

Mother and Father first met in famed Carnegie Hall, brought together

by a love of classical music. My dad, who in those days earned more as a chess and bridge player than as a fancy leather-goods cutter (his sometime trade), hobnobbed in the gaming clubs with the likes of Jascha Heifetz, and our Coney Island home was always filled with the strains of Beethoven, Brahms, and Schubert.

Between them my parents spoke four languages perfectly: English, Yiddish, Russian, and Polish. But during my early childhood, not an English word crossed their lips in my presence. I was the victim of a massive conspiracy. Both my parents were Yiddishists who believed, with millions of other Jews, that the Jewish people were a *nation*—not merely, as some would have it, a religion—and that all Jews should speak Yiddish.

On the day my parents tried to enroll me in Yiddish school, the teacher heard me out and shook his head. "It's too late," he told them. "He already knows too much for the class." When at last I ventured out on Surf Avenue, within sight of the boardwalk and earshot of the Atlantic Ocean, I found to my consternation that all the natives were chatting away in a totally incomprehensible language called English.

I began making the rounds of Yiddish clubs as a one-boy vaudeville act. I wore a large green silken bow tie, told jokes, and sang snappy songs—all in Yiddish. At one of these recitals, the



When the author spoke only Yiddish.

director of the famed Yiddish Art Theatre offered me a part in his upcoming play on Second Avenue. My mother, after much soul-searching, declined the offer on the grounds that I was too young for a full-fledged thespian career. (Somewhere, in an alternate universe, that great actor, Isidore Haiblum, is bringing the house down. No one has heard of English. Everyone in the country speaks only Yiddish.)

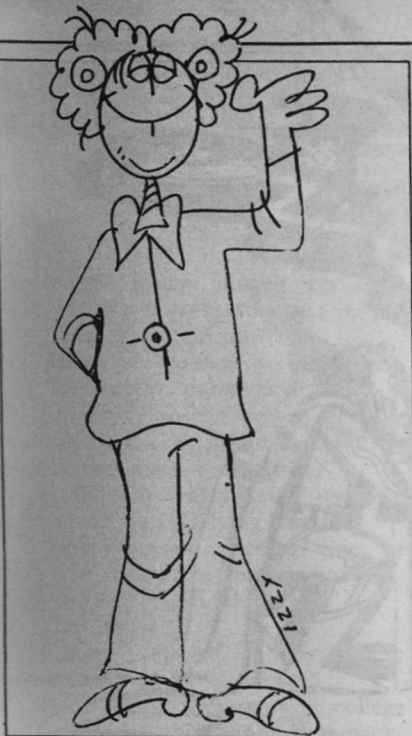
Meanwhile, I was learning English from my neighborhood pals as we frolicked under the boardwalk. There was only one slight hitch to my mastery of the Bard's tongue: to this day I speak it with a strange foreign accent as though I were a fugitive from Minsk.

Aside from that, I grew up like any other normal, healthy American boy. Almost.

OFF TO THE STICKS

During the hectic years of the Second World War, leather became a scarce commodity, all of it channeled into the war effort. Father, with Mom and me in tow, moved to Detroit to work in a war plant. The auto industry in Detroit had been converted to the production of jeeps, tanks, and cannons, and the town's population had tripled overnight.

This was long before the Salk vaccine, and polio epidemics, abetted by overcrowding, periodically laid waste to the city. My mother, a disciple of the noted health faddist and crank Bernarr [sic] Macfadden, followed her guru's advice in *Physical Culture Magazine* and kept me out of school lest some polio bug zap me. (The disease was contagious, of course, and I have



The author today.

often wondered if—again—in some alternate universe my doppelganger who *did* go to school isn't at this very moment making his way down some crowded street on crutches.)

When the truant officers came calling, alerted to my absence by keen-eyed public school officials, my mother promptly enrolled me in an Orthodox yeshiva, a religious school governed by rabbis with one eye fixed on the Torah (the Old Testament) and the other on heaven. The classrooms were small, dusty, and crowded, the hours long and tedious, and the course of study right out of the Middle Ages. Only the sounds of traffic outside reminded me that I was still part of the twentieth century.

My parents, I should add, weren't even remotely religious; they were Secular Yiddishists, another concept entirely. But my dotty mom had her reasons for inflicting this burden on me. The long-bearded, otherworldly rabbis couldn't have cared less whether I showed up or not in the yeshiva, as long as their monthly bill was paid.

Mostly I didn't show up.

But every now and then during winter, when the bug took its annual powder, there I was, an authentic, certified yeshiva *bukher*, seated dreamily in a classroom whose archaic goings-on, to this very day, remain a deep, dark mystery to me.

SUPERKID

During most of spring, summer, and fall, I was on permanent leave from the classrooms and from Detroit itself. The first year, I was stashed at a farm in upstate Michigan where the livestock

and my mother kept me company. The bucolic setting and absence of rabbis seemed like an ongoing picnic to me.

To fill the long hours I took to reading: *Treasure Island*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Huckleberry Finn*, Jules Verne's *Mysterious Island*, *Nevada* by Zane Grey, James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, the cartoons of Peter Arno. Anything that came my way, I read.

But the classics usually took a backseat to popular culture, especially in Detroit. Peculiarly clad characters in multicolored capes and costumes dove straight out of the comic books, radio speaker, and silver screen of the Saturday matinee and right into my sense of self. My true, hidden identity—which I shared only with other eight- or nine-year-olds—revealed itself most tellingly in the nighttime hours as I lay in bed waiting for sleep to overtake me. The local newsboy always made his round at this hour, calling out, "Free Press, paper-r-r," his voice growing fainter as he moved off through the city, until it faintly faded into the night.

This voice, which still echoes at me across the decades, sparked my imagination, and, garbed in a cape, boots, and a bright red or blue union suit with a lightning bolt or a large S emblazoned on my chest, I would fly over the city's rooftops, battling crime. In this world of darkest night, crime occurred on every street corner. Thugs with blazing pistols and tommy guns stuck up scores of banks, candy stores, and supermarkets, shot citizens by the hundreds, tied traffic into knots, and even menaced an occasional damsel. The cops were either on the run or had left town altogether. Only the brave

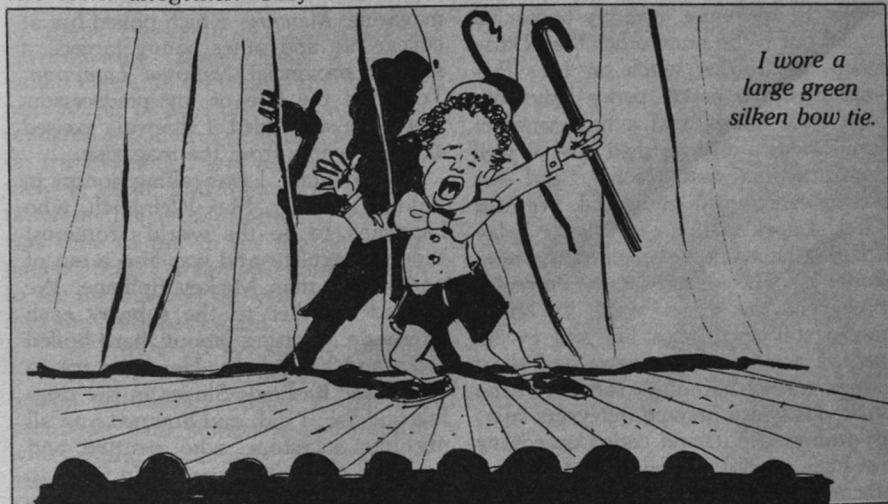
flying lad in cape and union suit stood between mankind and utter chaos. Thank God he was up to the job!

For how many years did I dream myself to sleep in this way? Did I ever suspect that these flights of fancy—and the five- and six-page homemade comic books I both painstakingly narrated and drew, down to the last *wham!* and *splat!*—were the first hesitant steps of a future writer? Not on your life!

HIGHER EDUCATION

I was twelve years old. When it came to the popular arts by now, I was second to none. B-movies (Wild Bill Elliot as two-fisted Red Ryder; Tom Conway's urbane crime-fighter, The Falcon; the madcap Laurel and Hardy setting the world on its ear), the Sunday funnies (The Spirit, Alley Oop, Li'l Abner), mountains of comic books (The Human Torch, Plastic Man, Captain Marvel), and endless radio programs (*I Love a Mystery*, *Inner Sanctum*, *Jack Armstrong*) filled my days. I was especially fond of a classic kiddie radio program called *Let's Pretend*, which specialized in myths, magic, and adventure. Every Saturday it came calling at our home. One of its stars was Daisy Alden, who often, with great relish, played the witch, and was to play, several years hence, a prime role in my life.

Unlike most future fantasy writers, I read little science fiction or fantasy in my youth. In the early fifties, however, I listened to radio's *Dimension X* and its successor, *X-Minus One*. The stories of Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, and later Robert Sheckley, Frederik Pohl, and their confrères zoomed through the airwaves, bringing me "From the far hori-



I wore a large green silken bow tie.

Confessions of a Freelance Fantasist

zons of the unknown . . . tales of new dimensions in time and space." (At least that's what the announcer said.) And I became hooked on the radio shows. But to read the stuff, let alone write it, never even crossed my mind.

One afternoon I strolled into a Woolworth's five-and-dime store, where a display of paperbacks caught my eye, their covers depicting various scenes of gore, violence, and mayhem. Nothing new there—I thrived on the stuff. Browsing, I came across a truly striking cover: a hand-held pistol was shooting a hole through a huge, air-brushed golden badge that bore the intriguing inscription, *The Return of the Continental Op*. Above the badge it said "Dashiell Hammett" and below, "A Dell Mystery." I shelled out twenty-five cents and carried my prize home.

The volume contained six Continental Op stories, and each was a marvel of action and mood. They were out-and-out fantasies done up in factual detail. Their language was loaded with slang, idiom, and argot which went off like fireworks on the printed page. And their first-person narrator, a lone man pitted against hostile strangers, was obviously—me!

DAISY ALDEN

Detroit, rabbis, and my annual outings had long since palled, and I breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief when at last my family returned to its senses and headed back to civilization—namely, New York. I attended Manhattan's High School of Industrial Art (today known as Art and Design), bent on becoming a commercial artist. Not for nothing had I spent years drawing my own comic books. In my junior term my lit teacher turned out to be none other than Daisy Alden, the former witch on *Let's Pretend*. Daisy, a petite, perky lady with large eyes, bangs, and a neat sense of humor, was a distinguished poet as well as an actress and teacher, and her classes were something special. We read Karel Capek's 1921 sf classic play *R.U.R.* (the work that coined the term "robot"). The Dada and Surrealist movements we studied were, in Daisy's hands, still aboil with life and excitement. I wrote book reviews and short stories, mostly humorous satires not too unlike (as Daisy pointed out years later) my future output, and ended up editing the high school yearbook and literary arts magazine. I enjoyed lit more than

My true, hidden identity.

drawing and decided then and there to become a writer.

On graduation day I also walked off with the English medal, but not without a hassle. The department chairman objected that I couldn't spell my way out of a paper bag, but Daisy and her cohorts voted him down. (After all, as she later explained to me, Ernest Hemingway was a lousy speller, too.) This triumph of illiteracy prompted me to forgo brushing up on my spelling for the next couple of decades.

COLLEGE DAYS

I enrolled at CCNY and majored in English. My lack of early schooling had left a few gaps in my education. My mastery of math was all but nonexistent, and I carried three spelling variants of every word in my head, all of them wrong. My years of heavy reading, however, put me in good stead. I zipped through my English and social science courses like a quiz kid, my lamentable spelling deemed a mere eccentricity by my profs. Little did they know.

I also edited the college humor magazine, *Mercury*, which poked fun at college life and other handy targets, a sort of provincial *National Lampoon*. To avoid the fate of my predecessors who were suspended, I shrewdly excised all dirty words from the magazine.

Meanwhile, I was taking honors in Yiddish with Dr. Max Weinreich, who happened to be the world's foremost Yiddish linguist—and was also a fan of none other than Mickey Spillane. We strolled together to the subway each afternoon chatting about hard-boiled dicks and Yiddish lit. He urged me to read Isaac Bashevis Singer in the original Yiddish. I did, and bumped into all my lost ancestors, who strutted and cavorted through his pages. In years to come I would reread Singer's works

time and again and always rediscover my Yiddish self.*

ON MY OWN

By the time I graduated, I was looking forward to a career as a professional writer. Easy enough for a hotshot like me, right? I decided to emulate my humorist idols, Benchley, Thurber, and Perelman, and proceeded to bombard *The New Yorker* with short—and what I considered to be side-splitting—essays about my family, friends, and Upper West Side neighborhood—essays which *The New Yorker* immediately shot back by return mail.

Lowering my sights, I went off to visit Harvey Kurtzman, then editor of *Humbug* magazine, in search of a freelance assignment. Kurtzman had founded *Mad* in 1952, and the work he did during the following three years, before jumping ship in a policy wrangle, had helped set the tone of American humor in the sixties and beyond. Kurtzman would make an ideal boss, I imagined, but I never even got to meet him.

Harry Chester, *Humbug's* business manager, was the only one holding down a desk when I arrived at their small Madison Avenue office. He looked through the material I'd brought along, mostly my old *Mercury* pieces, and shook his head sadly.

"Let me tell you something," Chester said.

"Anything at all," I assured him. "Anything."

Chester sighed. "*Humbug* is on its last legs. We've got distribution problems." *Look for Isidore Haiblum's interview with Singer in an upcoming *Twilight Zone*.—Ed.





lems—we're losing money on each issue. We're not going to make it."

"Then there's no job?"

"Hell, there's almost no magazine."

"What about my work?" I asked.

Chester glanced down at my material. He grinned. "Not bad. But let me give you a piece of advice."

I told him that I could use any good advice he had lying around.

"Find yourself another line of work," he said. "Anything except freelance writing. It's for the birds."

"The birds?"

Chester nodded. "There's no money in it, son."

None of my professors at college had mentioned this minor drawback. Maybe they didn't know? The only ones to have previously raised the issue with me were the frantic parents of the girl I'd hoped to marry. (I didn't.)

I left Chester's office more disheartened than ever, but still determined to be a writer. If the great Hammett could do it, why not I? Besides, what would my ex-profs think if I called it quits so soon? What would I think?

HARLEM

All literary ambitions, however, were quietly put on the back burner when I received my draft notice. The hitch was good for two years, which was two years more than I wanted to serve. I tried to enlist in the National Guard instead, but I was given the brush-off. The Guard was booked solid for the next year.

It was midsummer. I could still apply to grad school, thus buying time, but it was too late to put in for a scholarship. And I was flat broke. Someone suggested that I get a job with the New York City Welfare Department as a social investigator.

The what?

I was totally ignorant of such matters. City College was no ivory tower, but my closest brush with poverty during my four years as English major had been confined to the pages of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In desperation I signed up with the Welfare Department anyway. After a three-week training period, I was dispatched to the Harlem Welfare Center. It was my job to interview dozens of welfare recipients in their homes and ascertain whether they really needed the money Big Brother was dishing out to them. At the same time, I entered

Freelance writing is for the birds.

NYU grad school, thus postponing my military service.

My welfare charges were called "clients," and nosing around in their lives was a disheartening affair. Whole families had been on welfare since the Great Depression. The poverty I encountered was absolutely appalling. Sour-smelling flats in ramshackle tenements looked like war zones, with cracked and peeling walls, broken furniture, and shattered windows. Illness, illiteracy, anger, and despair had savaged these people. Armies of social workers armed with blank checks and scores of training programs could hardly have been expected to make a dent in such conditions.

In those days clients were not allowed to own televisions, which were considered luxuries. But half the homes I visited had a tv set. To report it would have gotten the previous investigator in Dutch for failing to note this misdeed in his report; it would also have put the clients in hot water and tied me up for days in unseemly and embarrassing investigations. Everyone involved would have hated it. I turned a blind eye to these and other violations, and clients began to greet me as "the good investigator." Finally I'd made good.

A friend had been punching me in and out on the time clock, so I was able to attend classes at NYU. Instead of "investigating" three clients a day, I would check up on twelve and take the next couple of days off. But when a fire rendered a houseful of clients homeless on the morning I was ostensibly interviewing them, and they showed up in tatters at the welfare center, I knew it was time to put in for my retirement papers. Still, I'd earned enough dough to see me through the year and get me into the National Guard.

As I went off for six months' active duty, I received a gift from my bosom pal Stuart Silver, a one-time roommate and sometime collaborator who would eventually land in the history books by designing the famed King Tut and Vatican exhibitions at

the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Stuart slipped me Robert Sheckley's Ballantine original *Untouched by Human Hands* and *The Puppet Masters* by Robert A. Heinlein. In the service I spent lots of time standing on long, seemingly immobile lines, and so could give these books my full attention. Now I became a fan.

I survived two months of basic training at Fort Dix and four months of duty as a medic in sunny San Antonio and, upon my discharge, returned to New York, noting with some dismay that I was back where I started from—namely, unemployed and going broke. I resumed writing small, unpublished pieces and got a part-time job with a national patriotic institute. For four hours a day I sat in a small, stuffy cubbyhole, stuffed envelopes with various pamphlets extolling the virtues of democracy, and sent them off to inquiring school kids. The job—and the entire institute—consisted of this and nothing more. To lessen the tedium, I installed a radio, turned to WQXR, and caught Brahms, Mozart, and Rachmaninoff as I worked. It didn't help. I took to drawing little grinning Uncle Sams in top hats and stripes, prancing about and waving. I captioned these, "Hi, there!" and inserted them in the envelopes along with the pamphlets.

An envelope was misaddressed and returned to my boss, an ex-colonel. He called me into his office. In his hand was one of my Uncle Sams.

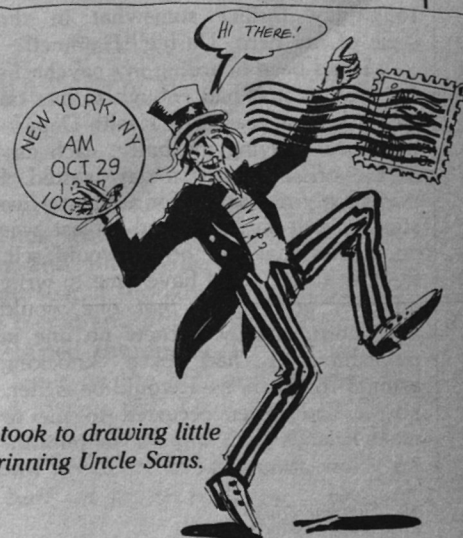
"Did you do this?" he demanded.

I admitted it.

"YOU'RE FIRED!"

I turned to go.

"You've got the wrong attitude, Haiblum," the colonel yelled after me. "You won't get far in the job market."





Have an agent find you an editor.

The colonel was right.

Following the guidelines laid down by my college English prof, Irwin Stark, I continued to stay far away from any job requiring writing. ("It will only drain you," Stark had warned me.) I found work, briefly, as a Canadian booking agent for a bunch of folk singers, and ended up spending hours on the long-distance phone with coffee-house managers throughout Canada, pleading vainly for engagements. I joined a part-time survey on sex sponsored by Columbia University, and another on health, happiness, and mental stability, while I waited for fame and fortune to find me. (They didn't.) These jobs all look swell when adorning a dust jacket, but in real life they are strictly the pits.

When the Health Department suddenly phoned me—my former survey boss had recommended me—and offered me a full-time post which entailed lots of sitting around, I grabbed it. And over a period of months, while waiting for work to materialize on my desk or riding the subway to and from the office, I wrote my first novel, a tough-guy thriller somewhat in the style of my hero, Dashiell Hammett.

I had been hoarding my paychecks for months and had enough to live on for at least a year. The Health Department was driving me batty; each day in the office seemed a day wasted. I was simply not suited for a nine-to-five stint. I quit my job, and at last was convinced that my novel would sell. Even if it didn't, I'd have time to write another, and surely *that* one would sell. Unfortunately I knew no one in publishing. I had been knocking around for years as a would-be writer, but it had never occurred to me to make friends with *anyone* in publishing. How about that?

THE BUSINESS

I pause here, for it occurs to me that many readers of this piece may themselves be beginning writers who share this problem.

There is more than one way of breaking into the field, I am glad to report. But before noting any, a cautionary word from the industry itself might be in order.

According to the *New York Times*, publishers complain that "theirs is an industry which turns out the equivalent of 40,000 new products a year, loses money on eighty percent of them, and earns on average less than half of what it could earn simply by investing in municipal bonds rather than books." Neat, eh?

The *Times* also quotes writers' groups to the effect that their members earn an average (give or take a buck) of \$5,000 a year.

Frankly, I believe neither writers' groups nor publishers. But I am discouraged by their figures nonetheless.

If you are not discouraged and are still intent on being a writer, here's the simplest way of getting into the business; mail your unsolicited masterpiece to the publisher of your choice.

This method, though, is not highly recommended, for you will land in the slush pile, where you will either be ignored or come to the attention of the editorial assistant, which is virtually the same thing.

Other and better methods are:

Have a writer send you to his agent or editor. Have an editor find you an agent. Have an agent find you an editor.

You can meet writers, agents, and editors through a buddy, at conventions, and even at the neighborhood bar sometimes. And you can always ask a friend to ask a friend, etc. Right?

Recommendations are the key to all three groups.

Agents who charge a fee for evaluating your work are more apt to give you the business than get you into it. The few in this category who *are* on the up-and-up will *still* not personally peruse your ms. Again, you'll be in the hands of the assistant office boy. And paying for the privilege to boot.

I was lucky. My old friend Stuart Silver came to my aid. His wife had an uncle who was a stockholder of Lancer Books, a small, now defunct paperback house. (You were expecting maybe Farrar, Straus & Giroux?) This uncle, whom I never even met, set up an appointment with Lancer editor-in-chief Larry Shaw.

THE LONG WAIT

Shaw is currently rumored to be an agent in Hollywood. But in the fifties he wrote science fiction and had edited two well-thought-of sf anthologies. My Hammett-like novel—replete with dated thirties slang, improbable events, and outlandish characters—appealed to Shaw, who, no doubt, had been reared on similar genre shenanigans. He offered to buy it. But his boss, who owned the company, had been checking sales figures, and noted that mysteries were doing poorly that year. He vetoed the sale. Thus my first—and what turned out to be my *only*—offer for this opus went by the board.

But before too long, Shaw had left Lancer, moved to Dell, and asked to see me about purchasing a novel. Could fame and fortune be far behind?

I waited for Larry Shaw, my benefactor, that spring day for close to an hour, but he never *did* appear. My worst fears seemed to be realized. Shaw had changed his mind. As I headed home, I saw my career in ruins, finished before it even began.

But Shaw phoned the next day. His son had been in a traffic accident, and he—Shaw—had had to rush to the hospital . . . Another lunch date was set, one that was kept. I sat in a restaurant, not sure who was supposed to pay the bill, writer or editor, and listened to Shaw tell me what turned out to be rather fateful news: He could no longer buy my private-eye novel, or for that matter *any* mystery or detective story I might write, because editor Shaw's sole province at Dell was—of all things—science fiction. **17**

—To be continued



THE SITUATION WAS AS SIMPLE AS AN E.C. COMIC.
UNFORTUNATELY, HARRY WAS A BIT SIMPLE, TOO!

I feel bad because I'm always making trouble for people. I know the reason, too. It's because I'm simple-minded. The kids at school teased me because I couldn't pass the exams. Mother told me not to pay any attention when kids called me retarded. But from the way she looked, I knew I was doing something wrong. Even though I'm fifty years old now, no matter how hard I try, I'm sometimes still a bother to people. Mostly I upset people I care about, like my friend Freddie and my wonderful wife Virginia.

The worst time I was a bother to my Mother and Dad happened when I was fifteen. We had this car

and it was a Sunday and we went on a picnic. It started to rain, oh boy it was raining hard, so Mother and Dad got in the back seat to finish the sandwiches, and they were talking and not paying too much attention to me in the front seat. I thought it would be nice to let them enjoy the picnic and not bother them about driving home, so I started the engine by turning on the key. Then I put the lever on the "D" and stepped on the gas, just like Dad always did. Dad yelled because someone had planted a tree too close to the side of the road and we had a bad accident. Mother and Dad got killed, and that tree hurt me pretty bad, too. I lost an

HARRY'S STORY

eye and hurt my leg and my face got burned. I still have the scars.

After I got out of the hospital, I got a nice glass eye and went to a special school for a while. When I got out I went to live with Auntie. She's dead now, but she told me things like I shouldn't drive cars because it's dangerous and can get me into trouble. So I don't drive. I always take buses to work, except for when Virginia had a car and she drove me to the company and back. She used to be real pretty.

You want to know how I met Virginia? I got a job in the office of Morris Industries. They make file cabinets, and I work as a file clerk. Everybody thinks that's pretty funny—file clerk in a file factory—so it must be. Virginia, she was doing some typing in the office when I got hired. She used to tell me she wasn't paid enough. I could tell right off she liked me, because she said I was the only idiot she could complain to without getting into trouble. Our supervisor doesn't like complaints.

I told Virginia I was sure glad I didn't need more money. In fact, I put most of it in the bank.

"Big deal, Harry," Virginia said to me. "You got three thousand saved, I bet."

"No," I told her. "I got one hundred and fifty thousand saved." She laughed and said, "On your salary?" That's what she asked me, like she didn't believe me.

Well, you should have seen her face the next day when we were alone and I showed her the bankbooks. Of course, I told her how a lot of the money came from what Mother and Dad and Auntie left for me, but every two weeks I put even more money in. I took out house taxes and clothes and food money, and the rest went in the bank.

Well, oh boy, I could tell right away that Virginia liked me better than ever. Later that morning she asked me to go out on a date, and she explained what a date was. It was fun, I'll tell you.

The supervisor told me to stay away from Virginia because all Virginia wanted was money. I told Virginia that, and she explained that the supervisor was a crazy lady and I shouldn't tell her anything about our dates because she didn't have a man of her own and she would be jealous. Virginia asked me if I could keep our dates a secret.

Oh boy, was that fun, keeping it a secret. I didn't even tell the supervisor about Freddie, my best friend. He wasn't really my friend at first. He was Virginia's friend, but he liked me and he became my best friend. In fact, he was the only real friend I ever had, though I don't get to see him very much anymore. There is a fellow at work, Joe, and we have a cup of coffee once in a while, but he isn't a real friend. A real friend talks to you for more than five minutes. Freddie used to talk to me for more than fifteen minutes,

telling me how lucky I was that a good-looking girl like Virginia was crazy about me.

Oh boy, I couldn't believe how lucky I was to have a girl like Virginia crazy about me and a friend like Freddie who said he would be my best man when Virginia asked me to marry her. We all drove to Reno, and Virginia and me got married in this Courtship Chapel and it only cost thirty-five dollars, and then Virginia and Freddie and me drove back. We used Virginia's car, because since age fifteen I don't drive anymore.

Well, when we got back to town, Virginia moved into my house because it was bigger than her apartment. I'm glad we got married, but I don't see what the fuss is all about. The only difference between married and not married is you live in the same house and you spend a lot of time together. My friend Freddie spent a lot of time in our place with Virginia and me, and that was nice too. I miss Freddie almost as much as I miss Virginia.

My wife did two wonderful things for me. Every night she fixed me a drink of whiskey and sugar called an old-fashioned, and she gave it to me before I went to sleep. It sure tasted good.

The other wonderful thing Virginia did was to tell me how to be happy. "Do you ever feel discouraged, Harry?" she asked me, and I told her no. I could see she was real disappointed, so I said, "What do you mean?" She said that everyone gets discouraged, just like the day before, when I wanted to finish filing some reports but the janitor turned out the lights. I was mad and had to take the bus home, since Virginia had already left with her car. She could tell I was mad at the janitor, and she told me that's what being discouraged was.

"Oh, sure," I said, and I could see that I made her happy.

"Well, Harry," she said, "you want to learn how to stop being discouraged?"

I said, "Of course." I'm simple-minded, not stupid.

"You gotta write down what you're discouraged about, Harry," she told me, "and then it will go away and be all better." I said, "Good!" and she told me what to write down. *I miss Mother and Dad and Auntie and for 32 years all I do is work. I'm very tired and I don't want to go on. I'm sorry. Harry.* That's what I wrote on the piece of paper, and Virginia took it and put it in a drawer.

"Now you'll see, Harry," she said to me. "You won't be discouraged anymore."

Oh boy, that made me happy. I still remember the night I wrote that down, and I remember when Virginia brought me my old-fashioned later on. It tasted funny, but it was still good.

Well, I tell you, something must have been wrong with that drink, because the next thing I know I'm lying on a table in the funeral home and I don't

*Two hours
after they buried me
I began to feel
very cramped,
so I began to try to get
out of the coffin.*


were going to finish the job in the morning. But I still had to work so hard that, right near the end, my glass eye fell out. I didn't waste any time looking for it underground, let me tell you. I'm simple-minded but I'm no fool.

When I finally got out, I was a mess. And would you believe it, as long as I've lived in our town, I still got mixed up. Instead of heading for the cemetery road, I stumbled towards the woods behind the cemetery. I was tired, too, let me tell you. So I slept a few hours, and when I woke up, oh boy, did I feel good! It was cold and dark and rainy and it was very windy, but I didn't mind. The air smelled so good. I knew how happy Virginia and Freddie would be to find out that I wasn't really dead, so I started out for the house. By this time I knew where I was, and it was only thirty minutes from where I live.

I just walked and walked, and pretty soon I was at the house. I was glad to be out of the rain, let me tell you. I got the key from under the stairs. That was another good thing Virginia taught me. I used to lose keys and then I couldn't get into the house, but she showed me where to hide an extra key. I knew I looked a mess with my black funeral suit soaked and my limp worse because of the rain and my empty eye socket all red, but what difference did that make? Virginia would still be happy. I walked up the stairs real quietly so the surprise would be better than ever.

I could hear Virginia and Freddie laughing in the bedroom, and I wondered why they were so happy. Maybe they had already found out I was alive. That would have spoiled my surprise. But they were laughing about something else, I guess. I slowly turned the doorknob to the bedroom, and they became real quiet. I don't know who they were expecting, but it wasn't me. When I opened the door wide and shouted, "I'm back!" they both screamed. It was a funny thing that on a cold and rainy night, they were both in bed without any clothes on. I guess they were holding onto each other because they missed me so much, but they ruined my surprise because they kept on screaming.

It's nice that my wife and my best friend are together now. Of course, they're not really together, because when I go to visit them, they're in separate wings of this place they call a sanitarium. They both have white hair—maybe they drank some of that funny tasting whiskey, too—and Virginia isn't pretty anymore. Also they don't talk, which is kind of silly. I tell Virginia to write it down if she is discouraged and she will feel better, but she never listens to me.

I miss having Virginia at home, and I miss Freddie too, but you know what I miss most of all? Oh boy, will this surprise you! I miss those old-fashioned. But I don't drink anymore. After what happened to me, I know you can't trust whiskey. It can go bad on you. 

have any clothes on. Can you believe it, they thought I was dead! I once saw on television where some man they thought was dead sat up in this funeral home and scared everyone. It was the same with me, except I couldn't sit up. I tried, but it was like I was paralyzed. I couldn't sit up and I couldn't even help the man and lady dress me for my funeral in my black suit. But boy, when I think about it now, was I lucky! If I lived in a city instead of a small town they would have cut me up first to see what I died of, and then I really would have been in trouble, but the coroner said it was okay to bury me right away because my note proved it was suicide. Wasn't that dumb of him?

Anyway, it was a very nice funeral. Small but nice. Besides Virginia and Freddie and the minister, my supervisor was there, and I could hear her crying even if I couldn't see her. Joe was there, too, even though he isn't a real friend, and so was Auntie's lawyer. I heard the minister say that life's burdens were over for me and I would find eternal peace, and I heard Virginia say to the minister before the funeral even started how awful it was for her having a husband of only four months take poison. Wasn't that dumb of her? She didn't even know the difference between poison and funny-tasting whiskey.

Anyway, after the service, they put the coffin in a hearse and drove to the cemetery. Oh, boy, I sure am glad I told Auntie's lawyer that I wanted to be buried! When I got burned in the car so many years ago, I knew I didn't ever again want anything to do with fire, and the lawyer told that to Virginia when she wanted to have me cremated. He told her that my wishes were to be respected, that's what he said, and of course Virginia agreed.

Well, when I felt that dirt coming down on top of the coffin, I said to myself, "You've got yourself into a fine mess, Harry." I know now what was happening. I wasn't taking any breaths that you could see, not deep breaths or anything like that. It was like those religious men in India who put themselves into a trance and can stay buried for a long time. I even saw on television where some man could stay in a box in the bottom of a swimming pool. Well, that's what I was doing in that coffin.

I don't know about those religious men, but let me tell you, two hours after they buried me I began to feel very cramped, so I began to try to get out of the coffin. Oh boy, was I glad when I was finally able to move! And you can't say old Harry wasn't born under a lucky star. My funeral was late in the afternoon, so they didn't pack in as much dirt as usual. I guess they

Confessions of a Freelance Fantasist

by Isidore Haiblum

A SURVIVAL GUIDE IN THE FORM OF A MEMOIR

PART TWO, IN WHICH OUR HERO LEARNS THAT YOU CAN'T TELL A BOOK BY ITS COVER—EVEN IF YOU'RE THE AUTHOR!

When you last saw me, I was sitting in a nifty Manhattan restaurant with a newly appointed Dell editor named Larry Shaw, about to enjoy my first editorial luncheon and breathlessly waiting for that magical offer: "Write me a slam-bang private-eye novel, Haiblum." But Shaw sprang a nasty surprise. He no longer handled mysteries, he said—only science fiction.

"Think you can come up with a science fiction novel?" he asked.

"No problem," I assured him instantly.

"Okay," Shaw said. "Write me some opening chapters."

I did. And Dell gave me a contract.

MY SF CREDO

I had few qualms about writing science fiction. I do not view my almost total lack of scientific knowledge as an obstacle; I had read enough in the genre to know that the folks who write about time machines, force fields, and matter transmitters never quite tell you how these items *work*. If so many esteemed authors could get away with their myriad gizmos, gadgets, do-dads, thingamajigs, and dinguses, why shouldn't I? I did not kid myself that I was writing hard-core science fiction; in my own mind it was all fantasy. Let the publishers dub it what they would.

MY SPECIAL WRITER'S GRANT

I wrote most of my first sf novel, *The Return*, on the roof of the five-

story tenement I lived in on East Ninety-Fourth Street between Second and Third Avenues. The dwelling—three rooms with a southern exposure—sporting a clean rooftop (my summer office), bohemian neighbors galore, and a spiffy garden out back. As it turned out, this structure was as important to my career as my first sale. I had come across it years before while working for Columbia University on a door-to-door, part-time statistically selected sex survey.

Haiblum (voice impersonal as a robot's): And how often do you engage in sexual intercourse, madam?

Madam: What kind of a creepy survey is this?

Haiblum: The usual kind. No names will be used, only statistics.

Madam: Oh, well . . . Three times a week.

Haiblum: With how many men?

Madam: Just one—my husband.

Haiblum: And madam, what is your monthly rent here?

Madam: Thirty-five sixty.

Haiblum: Good grief!

Madam: I beg your pardon?

Haiblum: Quick! Who is your landlord and how do I reach him?

And within three weeks I was ensconced in an adjoining house. Rent: \$41.25 a month. This generous writer's grant from my landlord enabled me, later, to accept Dell's advance for writing *The Return*, which, while not a pittance, wasn't a windfall either. The genre was not especially noted for laying out large sums in those days.

By the time I took my leave years later, conditions had changed. The string of houses on Ninety-Third and Ninety-Fourth Streets was half-empty and increasingly unsafe, with junkies shooting up in the hallways, intruders roaming the roof, and the whole block just waiting for the demolition crew to take over. As I lay in my bed at night, I often saw felons climbing the rear fire-escapes on their way up to the roof and other people's apartments. At first, I frantically dialed the police. The cops always responded a half-hour later and caught no one. Eventually I stopped calling them. I would lie in bed reading; a face would appear in my window; we would stare at each other as though part of the same conspiracy; and then the face would move on. After a while, having had enough, I packed my bags and moved on, too, my special writer's grant at an end.

MY BEASTLY COVER

I didn't dawdle with *The Return*, but knocked it off in three or four months. For my hero I invented a character named Cramer, who learns of a plot to take over the earth. But since he happens to be incarcerated in a loony bin, no one believes him. Cramer must break out—a trick no one has ever quite managed—and to



I do not view my lack of scientific knowledge as an obstacle.

make matters worse, when the fits are upon him, he becomes an uncontrollable maniac.

I handed in the manuscript to Shaw, who read it, liked it, and paid me the rest of my advance. I was in seventh heaven. After waiting a couple of months, I phoned Dell to see when my novel would be coming out. I was informed by a strange voice that Larry Shaw was no longer with Dell—and that the company had discontinued science fiction. So much for that. Seventh heaven didn't last long.

Three years went by. I had found an agent in the meantime, had written two more sf novels for other publishers, and had started work on a third when I heard that Dell, having had a change of heart, was resurrecting science fiction. Gail Wendroff had been named editor, but she did not tarry long, going off to marry my then-agent, Henry Morrison.

One day I received a phone call. A voice introduced itself as David Harris.

"I'm your new Dell editor," the voice told me brightly, "and we're finally getting around to bringing out *The Return*."

"I'm speechless."

"You won't be when you see the cover."

"It's good, eh?"

"Better see for yourself."

I journeyed down to Dell's headquarters at One Dag Hammarskjold Plaza, met David Harris, and was shown the cover. It depicted a robot's head with a single human eye and a small globe in its forehead. The background consisted of two penguins, a seal, some kind of large bird, a deer, and lots of huge, towering icecaps.

David and I both stared in admiration at this wonderful cover.

Unfortunately, my novel contained no robots, animals, or icecaps of any kind. It was set in a futuristic New York City and, in parts, in an insane asylum. The items depicted on my cover were obviously refugees from some other novel. So how did they get on mine?

David had a theory. In the interval between Gail's departure and his arrival, someone had commissioned a cover. This someone had neglected to read the book, and the artist, seeing a chance to save himself a few days work, had turned in a cover he'd already had lying around.



I often saw felons climbing the rear fire-escapes.

David called the artist, who hotly denied this. The artist claimed he *had* read my book, and felt that, despite their absence in the novel, seals, penguins, robots, and icecaps *belonged* on the cover.

David and I sat in his office and looked at each other.

"How about a new cover?" I suggested hopefully.

David sighed. "Dell is hardly going to bankrupt itself by agreeing to your outlandish demand," he told me.

"So what are you going to do?"

"Look on the bright side," he said. "Maybe this way we'll corner the animal-lovers market, too."

YET ANOTHER COVER

As the years gave way to one another, so did my editors at Dell. David was gone, his place taken by Fred Feldman. Fred bowed out, and was succeeded by Jim Frenkel. My fifth novel, *Interworld*, was about to go to press and Jim decided to reissue *The Return*. The same artist who had done a stunning job on *Interworld*'s cover was commissioned to do a new cover for *The Return*. Surely this time around, I thought . . .

The new cover showed a man on a motorcycle. So far, so good; Cramer did indeed ride a motorcycle. There were some buildings in the background, and something that was either water or grass up front. Not bad—although hardly calculated to tickle the fancy of the average sf fan. Maybe we would cash in on the Hell's Angels market.

I eagerly waited for *The Return* to appear on the stands. I waited and waited. I haunted the bookstores, searching the racks for copies. Finally I phoned Jim Frenkel at Dell, who explored the issue with his boss and got

back to me. The explanation for my nonappearance on the nation's paperback racks was simplicity itself: The entire print order of *The Return* had been shipped off to the Dell warehouse. It was listed along with eighteen other sf books on page six of the Dell order form. Anyone who got to page six and wished to buy the book needed only to send in his money. Dell, it seemed, was doing so well with its bestsellers that reissues were automatically left to fend for themselves.

I was about to cut my throat when Jim gave me some good news: After only six months on the stands, my novel *Interworld* had gone into a second printing. The book had been favorably reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review*, where critic Gerald Jonas said: "If you have ever wondered what *The Big Sleep* would sound like if Raymond Chandler were reincarnated as Roger Zelazny, this is your book." His encomium was to adorn *Interworld*'s front cover in the new edition.

Again I waited impatiently for the edition to materialize in the bookstores. No dice, as Raymond Chandler might have put it. My entire second printing, it turned out, had gone straight to the Dell warehouse, where it was keeping the reissue of *The Return* company.

Obviously, I was laboring under a curse; and it was working overtime.

AGENTS

Matters would have been far worse, however—deadly, in fact—had I not had a staunch agent by my side. And as I scan the preceding pages, I suddenly note a serious omission: I have somehow managed to avoid the topic of agents.

Besides dispensing sage advice



The background consisted of two penguins, a seal, and some kind of large bird.

about your manuscript, a good agent will know where to market it. He will not send your book to the U.S. Government Printing Office for publication, but rather to some publisher who specializes in what you write. He will know what the going rate is and not ask for a zillion bucks. By the same token, he will refrain from giving away your masterpieces for nickels and dimes. He will negotiate a contract that victimizes you as little as possible. And come tax time he is even deductible.

Before vanishing forever from his desk at Dell and from my life, Larry Shaw steered me to my first agent, Henry Morrison, who, in 1969, held down a small office in the East Fifties near Second Avenue. I did not get to meet him when I dropped off my manuscript, the old private-eye novel I'd written while still employed by the New York City Health Department, but I was summoned to his office a few weeks later.

Henry Morrison turned out to be a chubby fellow who was shaped somewhat along the lines of a pear. He had a small beard and his face wore a quizzical expression. My manuscript lay before him on his desk.

"I've read it," Morrison said.

"Well?" I sat back, prepared for the gush of compliments that would no doubt follow.

Morrison looked pained. "It reads like the pulps. Why did you write it?" he demanded.

I could have replied: Because Ross

MacDonald, the creator of private-eye Lew Archer, claims we *all* write out of our own compulsions. And when I was a little kid, I ran across this book by Dashiell Hammett, see...?

But I didn't, since it didn't occur to me. What I *did* say was: "For enjoyment." This was the wrong answer, but Henry took me on anyway, in the hope, no doubt, that someday soon I'd come up with something a bit more commercial—a sentiment which I shared.

I remained Henry's client for a full decade until he upped his fee to a hefty fifteen percent (most agents charged only ten). Clutching my wallet, I bowed out. During this period I saw Henry become one of the best agents in the business. My visits to his Greenwich Village office, where he finally settled, were punctuated by ringing phones, urgent messages from hovering aides, and lots of surefire advice guaranteed to make me a cash baron if I'd only listen. His client roster sported Robert Ludlum, as well as a phalanx of others who had hit the bestseller charts, regularly sold to the movies, and earned enough to pay alimony to droves of ex-wives.

Henry himself put in sweatshop hours that no union would have tolerated for its members. He read scores of books to keep on top of his market, spent the lion's share of his weekends perusing clients' manuscripts at his country residence, bargained ferociously when negotiating a contract, and always went after the big buck. Just watching him tired me out.

Henry turned out to be on target about my hard-boiled extravaganza. Larry Shaw was the only editor ever smitten by it. I never did sell it. And because I hated to waste material, parts of it finally found their way into my published science fiction, where, I trust, they now rest in peace.

Even agents of genius make mistakes, though. One day I discussed with Henry the possibility of doing short stories. Now, there is this about short stories: except for the very top markets, such as *Playboy* or *Penthouse*, they pay next to nothing. Many agents will not even handle them; it isn't worth their while.

"So what do you say, Henry?" I asked. "Should I do them or what?"

Henry looked at me gravely. "I'll tell you what I told Donald Westlake."

Westlake was the bestselling author whose novels seemed magically

to become movies the moment they left his typewriter. I could hardly wait to hear what would come next.

"If I catch you doing short stories," Henry told me, "I'll break your fingers."

I was delighted at these words of wisdom; I hadn't known my agent *cared* enough to break my fingers.

"The only reason to undertake a short story," Henry went on, "is if you have a tremendous affection for the form."

"That lets me out," I said cheerfully.

And Henry was absolutely right. The big money's in the novels. When's the last time you read a short story by Robert Ludlum or Harold Robbins? Besides, my ambition was, in due time, to move from fantasy to other types of fiction, all world-beaters.

That "due time" clause is the catch, of course—for, while I am waiting for "due time" to roll around, I am still writing fantasy; it is my bread and butter. And *not* to write short stories in this field is the kiss of death, since the fans first turn to the short story magazines and anthologies. It is there they become acquainted with an author's work before going on to read his novels.

But fair is fair, and I should add that, had Henry begged me on bended knee to write short stories, I would probably have found some way to avoid it. Truth is, I'm addicted to the longer form.

I WRITE ANOTHER BOOK

Henry knew that I could probably get through a novel because I had managed to write *The Return*, my first book, without having a nervous breakdown. He phoned Betty Ballantine, who was masterminding the science fiction line at Ballantine Books, and told her as much. On the strength of this peerless endorsement and a four-page outline, I was commissioned to write my second novel. I decided to call it *The Tsaddik of the Seven Wonders*. I didn't even stop to consider if anyone would know what a *tsaddik* was.

For years I had been carrying a torch for Yiddish. But while this had added greatly to my enjoyment of life and to my sense of identity, it had never filled my pockets with cash. With my second novel I hoped to change all that.

Had I known more about the sf/

fantasy field back in 1970, *The Tsaddik of the Seven Wonders* might never have been written. It was, first of all, a humorous fantasy. Up until this time, in the entire history of the genre, only a handful of writers had bothered to turn out humorous, novel-length fantasies. (Douglas Adams would change things a decade later with his sf satires.) There was a good reason for this. The kids who were the real backbone of the sf market mostly preferred their spaceships, time warps, and zap guns straight, without benefit of chuckles.

Second, my characters availed themselves of a slangy, idiomatic vocabulary that, as a rule, does not make the sf fan's heart beat with instant gratitude.

Third, half my heroes were Yiddish. One of the virtues of outer space is that it gets the average sf fan as far away as possible from his unfeeling parents, prying relatives, and noisy neighbors. Ethnic sf can hardly make that claim.

In writing *The Tsaddik*, I hoped to broaden the field. And I also wanted to make a buck. To do this, I decided to write about the things I knew best.

THE TSADDIK GOES PUBLIC

A cosmic leak has occurred, rupturing the space/time continuum. And if it isn't fixed, it's bye-bye, world. Unfortunately, the leak has gotten tangled up in Jewish history. Time travel has become the norm, and everything is topsy-turvy. What's to be done?

Thus, the problems posed by *The Tsaddik*.

The Tsaddik's heroes included Greenberg the homunculus, Irving Kitelman the panhandler, and Isaac ben Rubin, the *tsaddik* himself. *Tsaddik* means wise or virtuous man, and any stray bits of wisdom I had lying around I stuck into this book, where they were instantly transformed into gags. Because I had such a crush on Veronica Lake, I made her my heroine, Princess Wanda. I rounded out my cast with Courtney and Lund, two galactic case-workers whose job it was to save the world.

The book's job was to save me from having to work for a living.

I installed forty neat Yiddish words in the narrative and carried off the first sixty pages to Mrs. Ballantine. I had improved on the outline by ignoring it, but Mrs. Ballantine didn't

seem to mind. Aside from deleting a few of my Yiddish expressions, she published *The Tsaddik of the Seven Wonders* just as I wrote it, with no amendments, no alterations, and precious little fanfare.

The last spelled trouble.

My first book, *The Return*, was still on ice over at Dell. No one in the field had ever heard of me. In years to come, Ballantine Books would unleash an avalanche of publicity on behalf of its authors, but back in 1971 only a time machine could have saved me—and there wasn't one handy. At sf conventions, fans came over to ask, "The what of the Seven Wonders? Izzy who?"

THE RETURN OF THE TSADDIK

While *The Tsaddik* was being bought and published by the French—it even made the series *Masterpieces of Science Fiction*—translated into Hebrew by the Israelis, and even perused by a few Hollywood moguls, it was little more than a dim memory in U.S. bookstores by the close of the decade. The 1970s were gone, and so was my *Tsaddik*.



I had a staunch agent by my side.

I decided to go hardback.

Henry laughed. He was willing to bet me money that I was wasting my time. Paperbacks do *not* become hardbacks. I had it backwards.

Enter Pat LoBrutto.

The jaunty Doubleday sf editor was not even Jewish, and so could hardly be expected to have looked upon a *tsaddik* as his long-lost *landsman*. But Pat enjoys ethnic humor, and is partial toward good books. I gave him one of the few paperback copies still in existence, waited a suitable period of time, and called him.

"So nu?" I asked.

"I like it."

I waited for the "but." There was none.

"Does this mean," I asked, "that you're actually going to buy it?"

"Why not?"

In December, 1981, *The Tsaddik* appeared in its new hardback guise. There was even a glossary of Yiddish words in the back, and the *tsaddik* and Greenberg themselves adorned the cover. *The Tsaddik* was back in the world of the living.

THE TOUGH GUYS

Transfer to Yesterday was my third novel. Again, Betty Ballantine, this time on the basis of a short chat, agreed to buy one of my peculiar concoctions. In *Transfer* I hoped to combine science fiction with the *Black Mask* tough-guy school of writing, as if the world had actually been waiting for this combination.

Usually the hybrid genre novel does not attract wild applause. Detective-story buffs have been known to frown at time travelers popping up in the pages of their otherwise plausible whodunits. And what Western fan could complacently watch his hero trading shots with a Martian? But rules are made to be broken. The prospect of working in two genres at once had me grinning to myself.

I wrote my yarn using a pair of time tracks, one set in 1935, the other in a nightmare future where competing cults have gained ascendancy and now rule the American roost. My future hero told his tale in the first person. To help him along, I concocted a batch of idioms geared to a society gone beserk.

I had an easier time with my Depression-era private eye, Eddy Fleisher. All his slang was ready-made. For years I had been garnering tidbits from



What Western fan could complacently watch his hero trading shots with a Martian?

that decade, underlining passages in books from the 1930s and buying old slang dictionaries. Phrases like "It was a swell jam," "Don't be a dumb onion," "That's the bunk," "Keep your clam shut," and "That cuts no ice with me" filled whole notebooks in my desk drawer.

My future hero had not only to escape from a dragnet which was tightening around him, but somehow to return to the past and straighten out the misdirected course of history. Not a bad day's work if you could find it. The resulting book was without doubt science fiction, but the style was right out of *Black Mask*.

The public's reaction was mixed. The Mystery Writers of America took *Transfer* to their hearts, and I came within three votes of making the Edgar ballot.

That's the good part.

Of all my novels, *Transfer* was the only one to wait a full decade before being bought by a foreign publisher.

That's the lousy part.

From overseas I received bulletins complaining that while my book *appeared* to be in English, it was an English that no one could understand, let alone translate into a native tongue.

Obvious lessons (which I ignored in all my subsequent works): If your writing is *very* eccentric, only the funny-farm folks may like it. And there are fewer of them than other people.

Second, not-so-obvious lesson: Even so, you'd better write to please yourself. Where else can you hope to find such a concerned, informed, congenial reader?

ANOTHER TRANSFER

Eight years scooted by, and *Transfer* to *Yesterday* went out of print. Only the Ballantine computer seemed unaware of this fact. When a book goes out of print, royalty statements always stop, but every six months for the past eight years a royalty statement would turn up in my mailbox. I would read with some interest that *Transfer* had sold two copies, or that three copies had been returned. Where these magical figures came from is anyone's guess.

I brought the novel to Pat LoBruto at Doubleday, who agreed that my book deserved another crack at the world. He had only one reservation. The sections of *Transfer* set in 1935 contained hundreds of words and idioms which, though current in those days, seemed strange or arcane today. Pat asked me to find substitutes for fifteen of these, including words for "gun" such as "rod" or "gat," which he considered comical. Would I be willing to change them?

I felt I could somehow learn to live without "rod" or "gat."

To insure that *Transfer* attracted its proper share of attention, I sent six of my last paperback copies to noted

authors, who sent back short endorsements which would appear on the back cover. A specially prepared copy of *Transfer*, new words and blurbs in place, went into Pat's file cabinet to await the printer, months hence.

I first realized that something had gone seriously amiss while visiting the Strand bookshop in Greenwich Village. The Strand sells hundreds of review copies of new books at half price, and while going through a stack of these, I came across the just-published hard-back edition of *Transfer* to *Yesterday*—at least two months ahead of schedule.

I turned to the back cover. No blurbs were there, merely my photo, which grinned at me wryly. I turned to the text. My "rods" and "gats" were still in place. A printer's error made a decade ago in the paperback edition had been retained, and thus immortalized, on page three.

I paid a visit to Pat's office. "Guess what's at the Strand?" I said. "Would you believe *Transfer*?"

Pat calmly removed his pipe from between his teeth—for him, a gesture signalling stunned amazement. "It's out?"

"It's out."

"What do you know!"

"No blurbs. No changes. But a nice picture of the author. Not that I'm complaining, but that picture takes up the whole back cover."

"Don't go away," Pat said.

I sat tight till he returned.

"You know I had the flu for a week?" Pat asked. "Well, I did. And while I was gone someone changed the publication schedule, and *Transfer* was moved up a couple of months—only the printer didn't have a copy, and didn't know about the corrected version. So he borrowed the one we'd given to the jacket copywriter. See?"

I saw. "Think it'll hurt sales?" I asked.

Pat shrugged. "We'll sell mostly to libraries anyway. If your picture doesn't scare them away, nothing will."

My picture, happily, did not scare them away. And while I was still far from rich and famous, I did have the satisfaction of knowing that my sf-*Black Mask* amalgam now resided on library shelves as far-flung as Wisconsin, Texas, and Arizona (or so my friends wrote me). Next to inheriting boundless wealth, this was a very nice feeling indeed. 17

—Concluded next issue

Confessions of a Freelance Fantasist by Isidore Haiblum

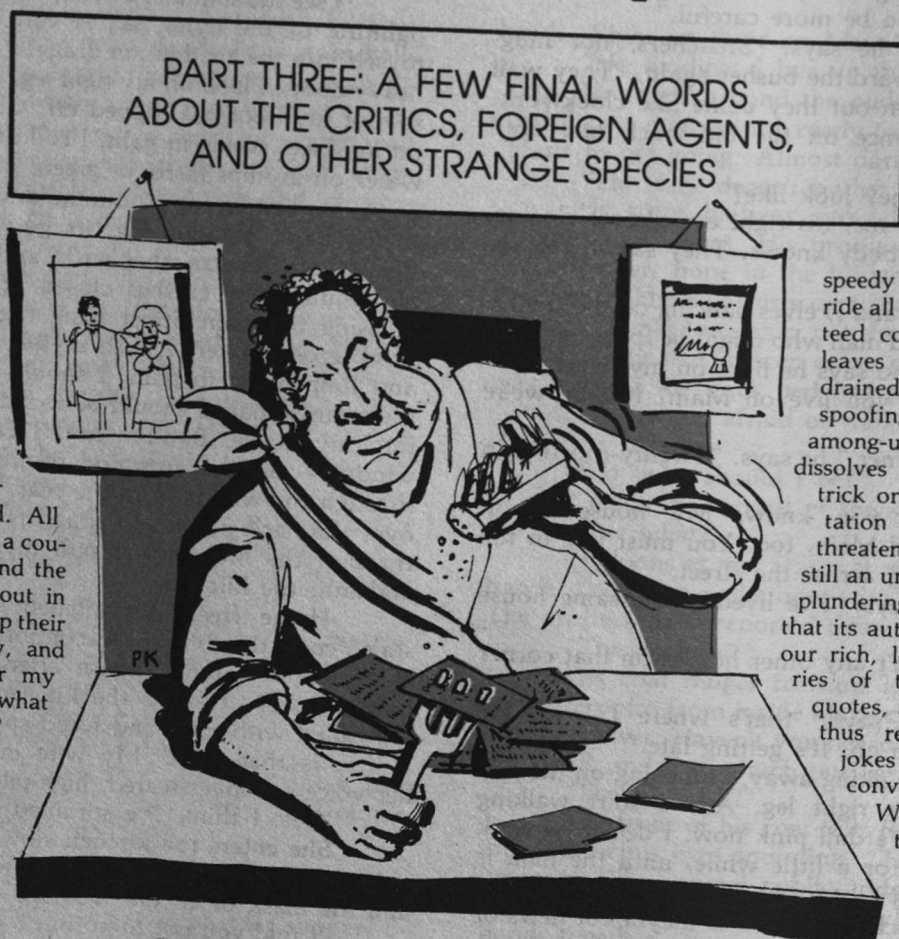
PART THREE: A FEW FINAL WORDS ABOUT THE CRITICS, FOREIGN AGENTS, AND OTHER STRANGE SPECIES

With the publication of my first three novels—*The Return*, *The Tsaddik of the Seven Wonders*, and *Transfer to Yesterday*—I felt sure that my career was firmly launched. All I had to do was write a couple of more books and the world would break out in applause, reviewers tip their hats as I strolled by, and bankers compete for my business. After all, what could go wrong now? Plenty.

THE WHAT ARE AMONG US?

My fourth novel, *The Wilk Are Among Us*, had a traditional start in life. It first appeared as a six-page outline. My agent, Henry Morrison, sent it off to the marketplace and Diane Cleaver at Doubleday picked it up.

In *The Wilk*, a mishap occurs in an extraterrestrial laboratory designed to study socially hostile species. Leonard, a galactic sociologist, is accidentally transmitted to a strange world along with a brace of Wilk, a Nill, a Hunter, and a peculiar warlike being who appears out of nowhere. All these creatures are now loose, using their respective superpowers to gain control of the planet. Leonard must find them before they do something really terrible to the natives. Unfortunately, he has his own problems. Stranded, he has been transformed, via "automatics"



Take both good and bad reviews with a grain of salt.

(my shorthand for inexplicable super-science), into a native himself. And he can't abide the sight of natives; they make him sick. Especially crowds of them. How will Leonard manage to survive and save this rotten world?

This "rotten world," incidentally, is Earth.

The Wilk was meant to kid the sf genre as well as what Mark Twain called "the damned human race." Not everyone, however, took kindly to such kidding. John Clute, writing in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, complained:

"Here and there in his new novel, *The Wilk Are Among Us*, Mr. Haiblum does play a kind of perfunctory lip service to the numerous sf conventions he judo-chops in passing with his

speedy grin, but it's a dizzy ride all the same, this guaranteed comic romp, one that leaves the reader a little drained. Though Haiblum's spoofing of the-aliens-are-among-us themes never quite dissolves into the confident trick on our rights of expectation that it constantly threatens to become, there's still an uncomfortable sense of plundering to the book, a sense that its author has looted us of our rich, loving, ready memories of the conventions he quotes, and uses the energies thus released to fuel the jokes he plays on those conventions."

Writers, of course, if they have any sense at all, will take both good and bad reviews with a grain of salt; a lot of jeers and applause merely reflect the critics' unreasonable prejudices and strange temperaments, not divine truth. But only in sf is a reviewer apt to complain that an author has "looted us of our rich, loving, ready memories."

The *Kirkus Review* found *The Wilk* a bit more up to snuff: "Five different sets of aliens and three seemingly unconnected plots cavort through this cheerful adventure. Ironical misanthropy and the often self-conscious rhythms of a stand-up comic are coupled with Mafia shootouts and a spy scene on the Orient Express. Haiblum keeps all the strands of his baroque structure from getting tangled, and when he turns the heat on in all his worlds simultaneously, the results are funny and suspenseful."

SHARON CARRIES ON

Diane Cleaver stayed at Doubleday just long enough to accept *The Wilk* (she is now an agent). Sharon Jarvis climbed aboard the editorial roller coaster and saw my book through the printers. Sharon, the most cheerful of my editors, was a former member of Mensa, the high-IQ society (which she abandoned out of boredom), and I have seen her plow through a hundred-page manuscript of mine in a matter of minutes and then review its salient points.

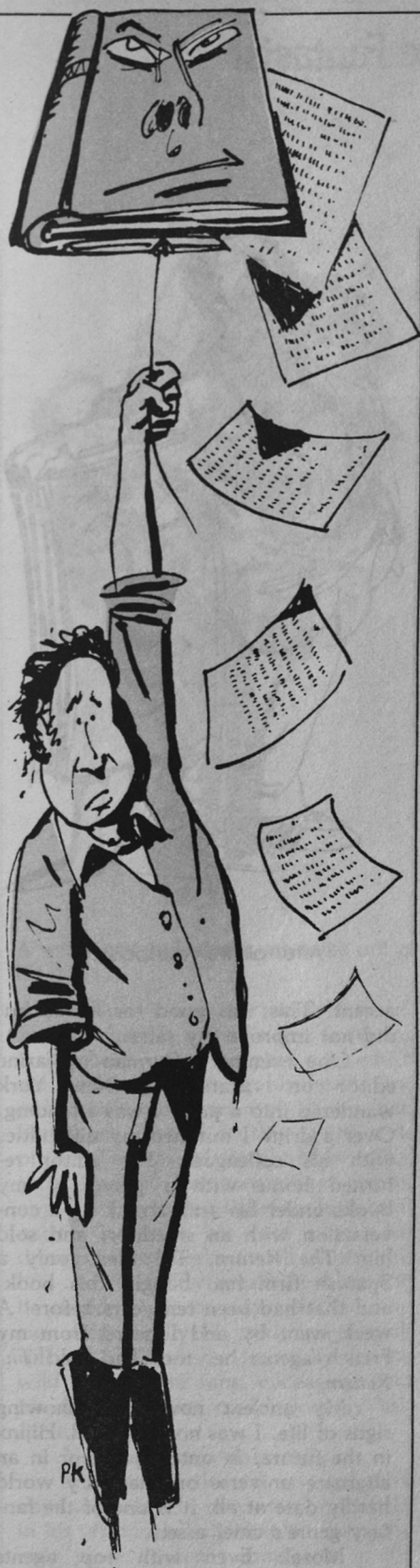
Now Sharon had an idea for my book. We had gotten a nice prepublication quote from Poul Anderson, and the Kirkus review had come in early. Sharon suggested I draw a small comic self-portrait (four years in the High School of Art and Design had taught me how to do that, if nothing else) and have Doubleday send it and the pair of quotes to libraries and reviewers. The plan actually paid off, brought in a huge library sale, and *The Wilk Are Among Us* became Doubleday's third highest seller in the sf line that year.

Bolstered by this success, I went on to write *Interworld*, my fifth novel, for Dell. An alternate-universe caper, the book allowed me to make jokes at the expense of private eyes, big business, urban rot, and spaced-out hippies, rather than conventional sf heroes—a wise move when wooing the sf crowd. The hero, Tom Dunder, one of Happy City's ace security men, has just landed in the soup: someone has broken into his burglar-proof vaults, flooded his robots, made off with a cache of Linzateum (whatever *that* is), and disappeared. To retrieve the stolen goods, Dunder must breach *Interworld*—a nightmarish trip that will send him hurtling through the fabric of the universe.

Besides my grouching private eye, I populated *Interworld* with Klox, a daffy super-robot; Dr. Sass, a muddle-headed scientist; and Gulach Grample, an avaricious entrepreneur, along with a host of other maladroits. The book was favorably compared to Raymond Chandler in the *New York Times Book Review* and prompted editor Jim Frenkel to ask for a sequel; it was to be called, reasonably enough, *Outerworld*.

OUTERWORLD

My opus was slated to share a volume with Ron Goulart's *Dr. Scofflaw*, number three in Dell's Binary Star



My tale ballooned into a full-sized novel.

series. Both were supposed to be long novellas, but my tale developed a mind of its own and, before I knew it, had ballooned into a full-sized novel. Realizing cuts would have to be made,

I designated some scenes for possible oblivion, left the final choice to my editor, and forgot about it.

Months went by. Then one day I received a phone call asking me to stop off at Dell.

It was past two-thirty when I sauntered into Jim Frenkel's fifth-floor office and got my first glimpse of the edited manuscript of *Outerworld*. "This has to be at the printer's fast," Jim told me. "Take it into an empty office and look it over."

"Any problem with the editing?" I asked.

"None at all. I gave it to Lou."

Lou was Jim's assistant.

"You couldn't do it yourself?"

"No time," Jim assured me.

"Things have been *really* hectic."

Jim's office was piled high with manuscripts. On the floor. On his desk. On the windowsill. His phone kept ringing. Maybe he had a point.

I carried *Outerworld* off to a vacant office and started turning pages. My pleasure at being reunited with my brainchild after all this time began to fade almost at once. None of my words had been altered, I saw, but whole lines and phrases were penciled out, especially in the book's first half. I left my chair to find Lou and ask for an explanation.

"You made a mistake," Lou told me, "but don't worry, I fixed it."

"What mistake?" I demanded.

"Those jokes. They don't belong in your book."

"Don't belong?"

"Look. I've read enough tough-guy novels to know what they're like. And they don't have jokes like that."

"YOU CUT MY JOKES?"

"Just the ones that don't belong."

I marched into Jim's office.

"Lou's cut half the jokes."

"Izzy," Jim said very earnestly, "I looked at that manuscript. It seems okay to me."

"Yeah, but did you read it?"

"No time. Things have been *really* hectic."

"Well, it's cut to bits. What do I do?"

"Anything you want." Jim looked at his watch. "You've got two hours."

I dashed out to save the day. I spent not two, but four hours poring over that manuscript. (When cuts are made, words and phrases which used to be paragraphs apart suddenly begin rubbing shoulders; embarrassing repetitions, plot holes aplenty, and pure

Confessions of a Freelance Fantasist

gibberish can often result.) After the first few pages, I read none of the excised gags. I had my hands full just checking both ends of the erasure, trying to make sure my narrative was still holding its own. This was a mistake. For while Lou had technically done a splendid and painstaking job of editing—quite beyond the call of duty—he had indeed knocked off what I considered to be my very best jokes, the ones that gave my yarn its special flavor. But despite my complaint to Jim, I had failed to fully appreciate the extent of the deletions. So I did not insist—as I should have—on a few more days to tinker with the novel and restore my favorite scenes, save some one-liners, and make my own cuts. Complete enlightenment came weeks later as I read through the galleys and found the tone strangely askew. Then I objected in earnest. But by then it was too late.

Obvious moral: If someone has to improve your book, make sure that someone is you.

HANDS ACROSS THE SEA

When foreign editors failed to snap up my books through customary channels—namely, my agent and his crew of world-spanning subagents—I personally wrote the overseas publishers and pointed out their oversight. I expected to be drawn and quartered. Instead, Penguin Books promptly bought one of my novels. Editor Paul Sidey wrote back: "As you have probably heard from your agent, the letter you wrote worked wonders."

Wonders is the name of the game, all right. Inspired by my British wonder, I went to work on the Germans. I had never had a sale in Germany before. This irked me. The French, Italians, Israelis, and Spaniards had all come through for me. The least the nice people who brought us World War II could do, I felt, was buy one of my books.

After a decade of neglect, I wrote some German publishers myself. This brought two letters from my agent's German rep. The first read: "I do not object to Haiblum going directly to the publishers, as this will teach him the futility of such efforts."

The second letter rescinded the first: "I would very much like to be in full control of all books submitted to German publishers."

In idle moments I would reread these letters aloud in a thick German



After all, it's your book.

accent. This was good for kicks, but did not improve my sales.

One evening a German magazine editor on vacation in New York wandered into a party I was attending. Over a drink I outlined my difficulties with his colleagues. The editor returned home with a parcel of my books under his arm, struck up a conversation with an sf editor, and sold him *The Return*. Till then, only a Spanish firm had bought this book, and that had been ten years before! A week went by and I heard from my French agent: he, too, had sold *The Return*.

My ancient novel was showing signs of life. I was not surprised. Hijinx in the future, in outer space, or in an alternate universe or imaginary world hardly date at all. It is one of the fantasy genre's chief assets.

Moral: Even with top agents working for you, it often pays to do some promotion on your own. After all, it's your book, isn't it?

NEW DIRECTIONS

Taking a break from science fiction, I now wrote, with my old chum Stuart Silver, *Faster Than a Speeding Bullet*, a book of trivia about the

golden age of radio. Mining the fields of trivia can be lots of fun, as Stuart and I discovered, but it is not a suitable occupation for a grownup. I went back to writing novels.

This memoir is ostensibly about the pratfalls that can trip up an unwary writer. However, no great mishaps occurred in the publication of my next book, *Nightmare Express*, an sf melodrama set in New York in the past, alternate present, and future. Because it was written in a more-or-less private-eye style, Fawcett, its publisher, had it marketed as a straight novel, thus reaching out for new non-genre readers.

Having a "novel" on my hands now prompted me to try for a real thriller. That *Nightmare*, despite its genre switch, had been snapped up by Mondadori in Italy a few months after its U.S. publication added to my determination; obviously I was on the right track. And writing thrillers had been my original intention years ago when I first got into the business. Being somewhat cautious, though, and in need of a speedy advance, I decided to hedge my bets and do a standard mystery rather than take two or three years on trying to write a more ambitious novel on spec.

This seemed like common sense. If you try to sell a major novel on the basis of a few opening chapters and an outline, you are needlessly bucking the odds, unless you're a big-name author. No riches will magically descend on you. The big advertising and promotion dollars will be pulled down by the other guy—the one who came with a finished product and sold it to the highest bidder. Your own opus will fall into a dreary slot already occupied by numerous other authors. This slot generates a minuscule advance, skimpy royalties, meager promotion—if any—and lots of aggravation. Should you actually produce a masterpiece from your outline and opening chapters, you'll have the devil's own time convincing your publisher to do something about it. Book companies will risk huge fortunes only on a handful of writers and cover their bets by turning out loads of books not meant to be bestsellers, but merely to bring in a minimal profit. All these books together can add up to a substantial sum—for the publishers.

I wrote my opening chapters and outline and got them to the right peo-

ple. An editor at Warner Books offered to buy my mystery and was promptly fired. (Not over me, thank God.) Other companies went out of business, still clutching my manuscript. Editors informed me that I had picked a poor time to switch genres. The book business was in a crisis, cutting back, retrenching, and going through connipations. The book business wasn't the only one.

I decided to do a couple of more sf novels, after all. It seemed the reasonable thing to do. Fortunately, I get a kick out of sf.

Doubleday's Pat LoBrutto bought an outline I'd worked up called *The Mutants Are Coming*, a tale about political shenanigans on Earth and a Moon-Base troubleshooter sent down to put matters right. With mutants as my target, I felt I was on safe ground. How many mutants were around to complain?

I asked Pat, "Do I do it funny or straight?"

Pat thought it over, "Izzy, it's got to be funny."

Shortly afterward, NAL's Sheila Gilbert invited me to try my hand at some science fiction for her outfit. Over lunch, I rattled off five plot lines I'd concocted especially for the occasion.

"What do you think?" I asked her.

"How about the same hero for all five? That could give us a series."

"We want that?"

"A series sells better."

Obviously we wanted that.

"Which plot comes first?" I asked.

"The one about the galactic empire and the New York reporter," Sheila suggested. "*The Identity Plunderers*."

I had one more question. "Do I do it funny or straight?"

Sheila thought it over. "Izzy, it's got to be straight."

I arranged for both books to come out in March 1984, thus attempting to please all my fans; both solemn and mirthful, in one fell swoop.

ON BEING A WRITER

The joys of being a fantasy writer are many. First of all, there is the check. Strange as it may seem, publishers will actually pay you money to sit home and daydream. While few readers will look to your books for guidance on foreign affairs or moral behavior, the ardent fantasy writer can touch on these matters, too. He can, in fact, do anything he wishes, as long as his



A writer can pull whole universes out of his hat.

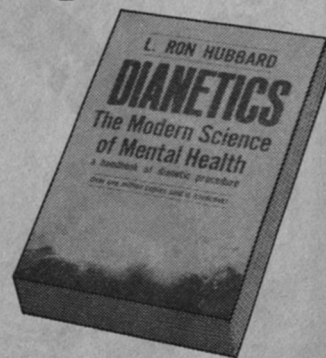
editor likes it and the public buys it. He can ridicule society's less endearing traits, heap praise on past eras which are especially close to his heart, and pull whole universes out of his hat. Better yet, he can do this in the style of Sir Thomas Mallory's *Mort d'Arthur*, Dashiell Hammett's *Sam Spade*, any other style that lights up his imagination, or even his own voice. No dreary office workers will clutter his life, and the coffee breaks he takes will be timed to his own moods and fancies. Periodically his masterpieces will roll off the presses, hopefully to the wild applause of fans, colleagues, and his mother. Who could possibly ask for more?

Here's the important thing:

A writer is tied to his desk five days a week. He may stray far afield in his off-hours, but while on duty, the only place he can rummage is in his own mind. He had better like it there, and dote on the mere act of writing, because that is how he is going to spend the lion's share of his time. If he does, then his time will be well spent. And writing will, in fact, become its own reward.

Although a great deal of money would be nice, too. **17**

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