

JACK VANCE: AN APPRECIATION

George R. R. Martin

There is only one Jack Vance.

I am sometimes asked which writers have most influenced my own work. That's a tricky question, since the writers who have the most profound impact on you are the ones you read when you are young, and hardly aware of whatever influences it was you were absorbing.

I will confess, however, that Jack Vance is one of only two writers that I have ever set out consciously to imitate (the other one was H.P. Lovecraft, for what it's worth). Along about the mid 70s, I was a young writer with a couple dozen short story sales under my belt, still struggling to improve my craft. I would pore over every book and magazine that I could get my hands on, and try to dissect the stories that impressed me, looking for techniques that I could incorporate into my own repertoire...and there was no one who impressed me as much as Vance. So one day I decided to try my hand at a Vance story, and wrote a novelette called "A Beast for Norn," introducing Haviland Tuf, whose ancestry owed more than a little to Vance's Magnus Ridolph. The story sold and Tuf went on to have a long and successful run, but the experiment convinced me that no one but Jack Vance could write like Jack Vance.

You could say that Jack Vance is the Fred Astaire of letters. Astaire brought such grace and style to his dancing that he made it seem almost easy, just as Vance does when he writes. Nothing could be less true. Vance has often been hailed, justifiably, as SF's preeminent stylist, and

it is certainly true that he has a wonderful gift for language, for words and names and colorful turns of phrase. His talents go well beyond that, however. For inventive plots, wry humor, knowing and ironic dialogue, and imaginative panache, he has no equal in or outside of our genre.

These days, more and more, the publishers seem determined to split fantasy and science fiction into two entirely separate categories, but that was certainly not the case when I was growing up. Science fiction was the more popular genre then, fantasy less so, but most of the major writers did both...and none more successfully than Jack Vance.

As an SF writer, he has given us the Gaeon Reach and the Oikumene and the Alastor Cluster, Emphyrio and the Faceless Man, the showboats of the Big Planet and the hoodwinks of the Blue World, such a myriad of unforgettable settings peopled by a cast of delightfully perverse and wonderfully named characters. In a field where all too many galactic empires still share a suspicious resemblance to the Roman Empire of Augustus or the British Empire of Queen Victoria, Jack Vance's worlds are true originals. The worlds he creates are sometimes bizarre, but always colorful, usually fascinating, and always rendered in gorgeous detail.

And they have *depth*. Jack Vance knows how to tell a story, and his tales move along at such a cracking good pace that it is easy to regard them as no more than fun reads, and overlook all the things going on beneath the surface.

Consider, for example, the sport of hussade, a popular pastime in the Alastor Cluster novels. Unlike quidditch or moopsball or some of the other made-up sports found in SF and fantasy, hussade actually convinces. It sounds as if it would fun to play and fun to watch. It makes sense as a sport. Go a little deeper, though, and you'll soon realize that this game reveals all sorts of interesting things about the culture it derives from. The ritual denuding of the *shierl*, for instance, which tells us something about the position of women in the Alastor Cluster, and the sexual mores of the people of Trullion. Or the fact that the game is played over a tank of water, on a planet whose early history included a bloody struggle with a race of aquatic aliens. Vance's game has roots as well as rules, and functions as a commentary on his society as well as plot device and a spectacle.

Perhaps more than any other SF writer past or present, Vance seems to understand that if man does indeed spread across ten thousand stars, ten thousand different societies will spring up, as different from each other as from the world of the reader. The exotic human cultures of the

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Gaeon Reach are ten times stranger and a hundred times more interesting than the alien cultures of many less imaginative SF writers, and when Vance goes beyond humanity and creates an actual alien...well, visit the *Planet of Adventure* with Adam Reith and make the acquaintance of the Pnume, the Dirdir, the Chasch, and the unfortunately named Wankh (if Jove can nod from time to time, so can Jack), and you'll see just how alien an alien can actually be.

Even when Vance chooses to write of well-worn ideas, he seems to work his peculiar alchemy on them, taking them to places previously undreamed of. The notion of alternate worlds, for instance, is a familiar SF trope, but no one has ever used it the way that Vance does in "Chateau d'If." Dozens of other SF writers have made use of genetic engineering as a plot device and hundreds of fantasists have given us variations on dragons, but only Vance could ever put the two together to create something like "The Dragon Masters." The effects that a multiple star system might have on human civilization were most famously explored by Isaac Asimov in his classic "Nightfall"—but in *Marune: Alastor 933* Vance gives us a planet and a society where every aspect of human life is governed by which sun is in the sky. Revenge stories are as old as the Count of Monte Cristo and its SF counterpart, Alfred Bester's classic *The Stars My Destination*, but Kirth Gersen goes Gully Foyle four better when he sets out after Attel Malagate (the Woe), Kokor Hekkus, Lens Larque, Viole Falushe, and Howard Alan Treesong...and yet Vance manages to ring a note on the futility of vengeance in the final sentence of the final book of his Demon Princes sequence.

His contributions to fantasy, while less numerous, have been even more profound. Vance's Lyonesse trilogy remains one of the best fantasy epics since Tolkien, and his Cugel the Clever surely deserves a place in the fantasy hall of fame alongside such worthies as Conan the Cimmerian, Aragorn son of Arathorn, Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser, and Elric of Melniboné. Get them all together in the same place and Cugel would doubtless attempt to cozen and swindle the others out of their swords, cloaks, and jewels (though somehow it would turn out badly for him in the end).

Even more memorable than Cugel himself is the world through which he moves, the Dying Earth that Vance first imagined in *The Dying Earth*, a collection of short stories first published in 1950 by the obscure paperback house Hillman. This is Earth at the end of its days when the sun hangs red and swollen in the sky, an Earth where ten

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thousand civilizations have risen and fallen, and sorcery and superstition have returned to the world even as science has waned. The setting owes perhaps a little to Clark Ashton Smith and his Zothique stories, but as usual Vance made it very much his own, and the Hillman collection includes some of his most gorgeous and evocative writing, along with a host of wonderful characters. Though I first read the book in high school, the characters still haunt me now even in my dotage...T'sain and T'sais...Guyal of Sferre in the Museum of Man...Liane the Wayfarer, oh, and Chun...Chun the Unavoidable, who is also Chun the Unforgettable...

(It was also in *The Dying Earth* that Vance first put forth the basics of a unique and original magical system. If that system now seems old and overly familiar to readers coming to the book for the first time, it is only because the creators of the original *Dungeons & Dragons* game appropriated it and used it as the foundation for magic in *D&D*.)

SF or fantasy, it makes no matter. Jack Vance is a master. The truth is, his gifts have little to do with genre, as he has proved with his forays into mystery, writing both as John Holbrook Vance and (from time to time) as Ellery Queen. He is one of the few writers who can boast of winning an Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America to place beside his Hugos and his Nebulas. He won for his novel *The Man in the Cage*, oddly enough not even his best mystery. That distinction has to go to *Bad Ronald*, a marvelously macabre and disturbing little tale that lingers in the memories of everyone who reads it, a mystery without a mystery that works equally well as a horror story. I have no doubt that Vance could also have won awards for westerns, gothics, thrillers, and nurse novels, if he had ever tried his hand at those genres.

I am grateful he did not, however. SF and fantasy would both be a good deal poorer if Vance had not chosen to grace us with his talents. He is our finest stylist and a master storyteller, and it is more than apt that the volume you hold in your hands is called a *treasury* rather than a compendium, collection, or retrospective.

Jack Vance is a treasure, and we will not soon see his like again.

—George R.R. Martin
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INTRODUCTION:

FRUIT FROM THE TREE OF LIFE

In a scrapbook Jack Vance kept as a young man, a tiny black and white picture, clipped from some old book or magazine, shows a kilted winged figure, eagle-headed, human-bodied, picking fruit from a stylized tree. Beneath it is the legend: *Winged Being, Plucking Fruit From The Tree Of Life*. The creature, wings spread, one leg set against the trunk to assist in its task, is an Assyro-Babylonian guardian figure, a genie, probably a *shedu* or a *lamassu*, possibly a less benign *utukku*, and the tree is probably sacred to Enlil, but such details hardly matter here. It's the mystery, the force, the ineffable power of the image that no doubt appealed to the younger Vance, the Romance of it, the Eternal Yes if you like. It's a fitting image for a book like this and the contents within.

John Holbrook Vance—Jack Vance as we know him—is not only one of the 20th century's truly distinctive voices in telling stories of romantic adventure (in the true meaning of the word Romance) and one of its major writers of fantasy and science fiction, but he is also that rare and precious thing—a writer's writer, perhaps more correctly a maker's maker, someone who has become a seminal influence on what so many others have gone on to accomplish. It's not for nothing that Harlan Ellison wrote "The Wine Has Been Left Open Too Long and the Memory Has Gone Flat" for editor Terry Carr in a deliberately Vancean style, or that Dan Simmons dedicated his final Hyperion novel to Vance