

# FASTER THAN THE SPEED OF BESTER:

*A Few Words of Introduction to One of the Most Fecund  
Writers the World has Ever Spawned*

by Harlan Ellison

Once upon a time, when the world had less rust on its pinions, when it sang the *Missa Solemnis* less off-key in the shower, when a good idea could beat both the tortoise *and* the hare to the tape, there lived in this enchanted land a creator of ornate and filigreed dreams whose talent was a Catherine Wheel showering wonders in every direction.

His name was Alfred Bester, and he died in 1987, and even if some of you parvenus are scratching your heads—on which that little squishy place, the fontanelle, has not yet congealed with puberty—asking yourselves, “Well, if this Bester dude was so awesome, like why haven’t I heard of him?”—you had better believe the world is a less sumptuous banquet because of his absence. You are worse off than you might have been, even if you don’t know it.

You had to love Alfred Bester.

Or, wait a minute, writing it in Besterese, y’hadda *luv* Alfie!

Some people think and speak and sometimes write in a left brain way; and some people think and speak and once in a while write in a right brain way; but Alfie was the only writer who ever existed and spoke and sure as hell thought and wrote in a WonkBrain way. It wasn’t left or right or centrist or doublethink or pig Latin, it was so Bizarre City, so dearly skip-logic, so all-encompassing of concepts and extrapolations and surmises and impossible mountain goat leaps from what-is to what-might-be, that it seemed he was almost as one with his character in this novel, the 13-year-old seductress Fee-5: he heard it all, on neurasthenic telepathic cross-lines (you could look up the term on page 20-something).

Alfie’s great aptitude was a mutant chameleon’s talent for learning other writers’ tricks—perhaps only partially unearthed or explicated—maybe just a cornice edge protruding from the muck or loam of style, perhaps just the whisper or nuance of that ecstatic note trembling midst the cacophony of hack verbiage—and yanking it out, dusting it off, hosing it clean; reifying those tricks; distilling them; turning them on their axes; standing them on their heads, and wildly reconstituting them in a dementedly brilliant newAlfie way. The caprices and conundra that Alfie got from writers he admired, like Charles Harness and Henry Kuttner and A. E. van Vogt and Robert Heinlein, were aided and abetted by the even stormier knavery he had picked up from Dumas and James Joyce and Laurence Sterne.

And, of course, for all of his daring and singularity and purely American literary cozenage ... he was never included in an annual O. Henry best-of-the-year, or *Best American Short Stories* volume. When the Burkes and Hares of modern belles-lettres stitch up the final borders of the last patch in their quidnunc quilt, nowhere will you find mention of *The Demolished Man* or *The Stars My Destination* or the hundred great short stories. And *that*. Is. Why. You. Ain’t. Heard. Of Alfred Bester. You dummy.

So I am here, today, right now, to tell you that Bester was an 8-lane turnpike interstate freeway running full-tilt-boogie North *and* South, at the same time.

Never his like before; never his equal since.

But hark: I pause in mid-essay, during the raw copy retype (yes, Virginia, I still work on a manual typewriter, my raven having moulted and ceased producing broad-nib quills), to share a few pages of juicy prose with that estimable editorial icon Howie Z., and he vouchsafes as follows: “Aren’t you being a bit unfair to the potential reader? Aren’t you presupposing a lack of familiarity with Bester’s work on the part of an audience not dumb, but merely untutored?”

Curse you, GrandSavant Z. You tweak me in my weakest place: my theantropic obsession for evenhandedness, that fastidiousness of regimen that simultaneously I despise and to which I pay obeisance. (“An artist trying to create a powerful atmosphere can’t be expected to embrace the banal method of tv documentaries, which always illustrate both sides of a situation—and leave you nowhere.” *David Denby*, 1979.)

So, okay, I’ll jam back into the closet of memory that incident two summers ago, when I was teaching a writers’ workshop in imaginative literature, and idly mentioned Bester as d’bomb, and this teen-aged student, nice kid, came all over cloudy and said, “Who?” and I was shocked that he didn’t know Alfie’s name and *oeuvre*, and I began to have this creeping (and creepy) epiphany, and I asked the class of twenty-five or so men and women of varying ages, “How many of you have never read Bester ... and how many don’t even know the name?” So okay, I’ll jam that creepy memory, that recalled moment of so many hands in the air. I’ll pretend Howie Z. inveighs against rank prejudice *a priori* in a world that slathers homage on *Pokemon*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and Britney Spears while *Little Nemo*, Stanley Ellin, and Jane Green recede at light-speed into the Terra Incognita of cultural amnesia where the only citizenship is that of the non-person.

So okay, you all know Bester intimately; you’ve all read and delighted in *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination*; and you know that the Science Fiction Writers of America, that noble and humane organization, finally got around to awarding Alfie their much-vaunted Grand Master Nebula award—the winning of which was conveyed to Alfie as he lay in a coma on his deathbed in a nursing home in Pennsylvania; and you know the short stories by heart, particularly “Fondly Fahrenheit,” which is one of the best short stories produced in this last half-century, though you won’t find it in any *Best American Short Stories* anthology ... aw, but there I go again, being cynical and unfair, sorry Howie. I’ll straighten up, and give y’all the benefit of the barest, that you *do* know Bester, and that is why you’re here, wasting your time with my blather, rather than getting on with it and reading *The Computer Connection*.

Which may not be the absolute best thing Alfie ever set down on paper—at least that’s the general consensus, having been reiterated chitteringly since it was first published in 1974-75. (Come with me, if you will, to page 114 of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, a 1993-95 variorum reference work, where we find the following: “... while full of incidental felicities, did not quite recapture the old drive in its ornate story of a group of immortals and an omniscient computer; perhaps it lacked a natural ‘Besterman’ as focus. The pace and complexity were still there, but somehow looking like self-parody.”)

But that’s like saying we ought to level and sub-divide Mt. Kilimanjaro because it ain’t as high as Everest.

Alfie wrote *Tiger! Tiger!* (which was the other title of *Stars*) in 1956. *The Demolished Man* in 1953. They were novae in comparison to every other bright star in the genre. They blew everyone

away. But Alfie wrote to amuse himself; he used to say it was for therapy. And when he felt right with the world, he packed it in, the writing, and he went off and did other things, such as working as a Senior Editor for the then-enormously popular *Holiday* magazine, or writing for television, or working on *Green Lantern* for DC Comics.

When he came back to the novel length—he'd kept on writing the occasional brilliant short story without any protracted lapse of endeavor—it was twenty years later. The story was serialized in *Analog* as "The Indian Giver" in '74, in England as *Extro*, and in hardcover in the U.S. by Berkley Putnam as *The Computer Connection*, 1975. And, no, it wasn't Everest, it was merely Annapurna, a measly 26,493 feet.

As I write this essay, we're about a month and a half shy of that arbitrary chronological goose-egg called The Millennium (and even *that's* commercial self-delusional bullshit, as we all know damned well that the 21st century doesn't truly begin till January 1st, 2001) and every moron media venue is inundating us with "Best of the Century" lists. Best athletes, best movies, best rectal suppositories; most significant men and women of the last hundred years, the hundred top entertainers of the 20th century, the top ten toys, the top fifty inventions, the best this and the best that.

Playing this "best" game is rankest hokey-pokey, a scam, a *mot injuste*, a waste of time, a debasement and demeanment of anything and everything good and worthwhile that has slipped out of fashion or is simply white noise to a generation that actually lays out money to watch Adam Sandler. Memory is as capricious as the fad frenzies of the Great Wad. Al Jolson, Glen Miller, Lightnin' Hopkins, Carl Perkins and Stevie Ray Vaughn could carve Garth Brooks, Ricky Martin, and the Backstreet Boys a collective set of new assholes if talent were the criterion, but the former are no-price with institutionally ignorant audiences who have been dynamited into believing that the latter rock and rule. So, no, *The Computer Connection* isn't *The Demolished Man*. It is only a terrific book, filled with ideas and "incidental felicities" that will make your mouth gape.

It is a wild ride, as deranged as a fruit-bat, a demented science fictional transmogrification of the chaotic and hilarious household of the Kaufman & Hart Broadway hit *You Can't Take It With You* (later a famous Capra-directed film). This novel is pure Screwball Comedy!

Bester wrote a locked room traditional mystery with *The Demolished Man*, and a straight action-adventure revenge rewrite of *The Count of Monte Cristo* with *The Stars My Destination*, but *this* goofy, deliriously tasty book you hold, this was Alfie's Hollywood sitcom *manque* tribute to all the hijinks he'd seen and dealt with and chuckled over and suffered while working in the TV and film business. Not the straight mainstream view he presented in his novel *Who He?* but a revived, gussied-up lampoon of the Ultimate Dysfunctional Family, with all the sibs and aunts and uncles writ huge as Immortals, not the least of whom are Jesus, H. G. Wells, Samuel Pepys and ...

Oh, hell, why go on like this!?!

*The Computer Connection* is an unsung treasure of Alfie's later years. It is a great book to read, a couple of evenings of delight, best imbibed while some elegant rinkytink music is playing in the background. So throw on a little Scott Joplin—I suggest the *Red Back Book* collection—or some of Ernesto Lecuona's piano music—try Thomas Tirino playing the *Rumba Rhapsody* and the 19th century Cuban Dances—and settle back. Kick off your shoes, kick off your mundane workaday cares, kick off your inhibitions, and let one of the most fecund writers of the century massage your

risibilities.

I assume you know Bester, because Howie Z. implores me to assume so; but if you don't, and if you miss this chance, I will seek you out, I will take you down, and I will—as the great philosopher Savonarola said—open a can of whup-ass on you. And did I, by the way, tell you that I knew Alfred Bester as a friend, that his Grand Master Nebula resides here in my home because there isn't an appropriate museum or archive setting for it, and that you are far worse off than you know because Alfie is gone? Oh ... I told you that, did I?

So go on and read the book, dummy, and stop gawping at me. I'm just the road-sign pointing into the town.

Bester is the road. And Bester is the destination.

I tore down the Continental Shelf off the Bogue Bank while the pogo made periscope hops trying to track me. Endless plains of salt flats like the steppes of Central Russia (music by Borodin here); mounds of salts where the new breed of prospector was sieving for rare earths; towers of venomous vapors on the eastern horizon where the pumping stations were sucking up more of the Atlantic and extracting deuterium for energy transfer. Most of the fossil fuels were gone; the sea level had been lowered by two feet; progress.

I was headed for Herb Wells' hideout. He's perfected a technique for reclaiming gold (which nobody wants these plastic days) and is schlepping ingots back into the past with a demented time-dingbat which is why the Group has nicknamed him H. G. Wells. Herb is making gifts of gold to characters like Van Gogh and Mozart, trying to keep them healthy, wealthy, and wise so they'll create more goodies for posterity. So far it's never worked. *No Son of Don Giovanni. Not even The Don Meets Dracula.*

Following the Thieves & Vagabonds road signs that Herb puts out for the Group, I went under a mound and tunneled through the salts, absorbing NaCl, MgCl<sub>2</sub>, MgSO<sub>4</sub>, calcium, potassium, bromides, and probably traces of Herb's gold which he'd grudge me. I came out at the bunker hatch. Locked, of course. I hammered on it while the pogo bounced and thrummed overhead and it was six, two, and even they'd get me before Herb heard me, but he did; he heard me.

"Quien dat? Quien dat?" he called in Black Spanglish.

"It's Guig," I hollered in XXth Century English.

That's the secret cant the Group uses. "I'm in a jam. Let me in."

The hatch swung down and I fell in. "Freeze it, Herb. The fuzz may have spotted me."

He slammed the hatch and froze the grommets. "What the hell have you been up to, Guig?"

"The usual. I killed another guy."

"The fuzz making a fuss about murder? Don't put me on."

"He was the governor of the Corridor."

"Oh. You shouldn't kill the importants, Guig. People don't understand."

"I know, but they're the only candidates worth killing."

"How many failures have you had so far?"

"I've lost count."

"And no success." Herb meditated. "Maybe we ought to sit down and discuss it. The first question should be, is it a problem of perplexity or complexity? I think—"

A pounding made the hatch vibrate.

"There's goody two-shoes," I said without joy. "Can you shoot me timesome in your dingbat, Herb?"

"But you always refused to shoot a trip." He gave me a mournful look. "You hurt my feelings."

"I've got to disappear for a few hours. If they don't find me here they won't bother you. I apologize about the dingbat, Herb, but I was always scared of that thing. The whole Group is."

"So am I. Come on."

I followed him into the Chamber of Horrors and sat down in the insane machine which looks