

INTRODUCTION

by Harry Harrison

Alfred Bester was one of the handful of writers who invented modern science fiction. Like so many others, he came out of the pulps. He had cut his teeth in the comics where he learned color, action, and motion: the POW! and ZAP! of the artists. He learned to write visually and evoke those feelings in the reader. He used these talents when he went on to write radio and television scripts.

But Bester grew up reading, and obviously greatly enjoying, science fiction. He read it while he was honing his appreciable writing skills with his commercial work. When the time came to show what he could really do, he, thankfully, turned to SF, and a master was born. “Adam and No Eve,” published in 1941, remains as strong now as the day it was written. There were other fine stories, but not many. Science fiction remained a part-time enthusiasm for Bester until the 1950s, when he wrote *The Demolished Man*, a first novel that was, and still is, one of the classics.

It is the story of Ben Reich, the richest capitalist in a capitalist future. He is also the most corrupt man in this terribly corrupt postwar New York City of the 24th century. (Bester was a New Yorker and that identity rings like a harsh bell behind every sentence.) This is also a world with mind-readers called Espers who monitor this criminally wicked city. With this constant mental surveillance, it has been seventy-five years since the last murder was committed. It is clear to Reich, who has mastered every man but one, succeeded in every endeavor but one, that he must commit murder—and get away with it. Logically, at least to Reich, he must kill his business archrival, who is winning in the battle for financial survival.

This is indeed quite a challenge—which Bester accepts with wonderful energy. As Reich’s plans develop and unfold, so does this

corrupt, exciting, dangerous, and disgusting city. The reader is instantly pushed into this new environment, hurtled along at top speed by the language, the color, the wild invention that never slows, never stops. The world comes alive with the people, machines, apparatus, emotions, and desires.

There is even an internal analog of the book within the book that could be used as a template of the novel. The Espers meet and we join minds with them. With the most visually creative typography since the early medieval calligraphic sentence-play, we get some sensation of what a mutual, literal, meeting of the minds might be like. A dozen different things happening at the same instant—all within microseconds of time.

This kind of novel had never happened before. Other writers have since used and built upon its structure: Blish, Zelazny, and Delany come to mind. The New Wave mined its assets, and the cyberpunks echo only dim whispers of *The Demolished Man's* rolling thunder. But Bester came first—and is still the master.

Some critics have compared this novel with the Jacobean revenge plays. But where the Jacobean set their stories in the world they knew, Bester had to invent a totally new world for his passionate play. The world grows with the story, never as background but constantly as foreground. The Espers peep into minds in a jocular Freudian manner, though not without a sardonic edge.

Most of all, Bester is in love with language.

Tension, apprehension, and dissension.

That phrase is essential to Reich's plan, while evoking those emotions in the reader as well. The author is unafraid. He not only takes linguistic risks but hurls himself into linguistic attacks. New words, grammar, and slang abound. An etymologist might stop and nod his head at a neologism like *slok*, noting its similarity to the Yiddish *schloch* (as bippy came from *pippich* or, in Britain, *schmutter*, a garment, from *schmata*, a rag).

The humor is always there, for Bester was a witty and funny man, but it is often undercut in this novel. A scene can be horrible—or is it funny? or both at the same time? One would have to be numb not to appreciate the many levels of humor in Reich's snapped response when told that the man he wants to see has gone back to Venus: "I must

go after him. Do I have time to catch the ten o'clock rocket? Call Idlewild.”

That Idlewild airport has since become Kennedy Airport is not important. Nor is the fact that Venusian plants are gardened on a Venus that is lusher than we know Venus to be. The story is set in New York City and Venus and Mars are just suburbs, like Flushing or Forest Hills. Are we supposed to believe that? Or is it a complex joke inside a conundrum? Rush on!

Nor was Bester a one-plot author. His collected stories are wonderful. And five years after *The Demolished Man*, he wrote a second novel, *The Stars My Destination*, which has all the strength and excitement of the first. These books are reflections of their author. To know Alfie was a great and personal pleasure. The last time I saw him we sat for an hour at a table on the ferry pontoon in Venice. It was a warm spring and we drank cool wine, rocking gently when the vaporetti went by. We talked and laughed and parted. He died before we could meet again.

Thank you, Alfie, thank you very, very much.

In the endless universe there is nothing new, nothing different. What may appear exceptional to the minute mind of man may be inevitable to the infinite Eye of God. This strange second in a life, that unusual event, those remarkable coincidences of environment, opportunity, and encounter ... all may be reproduced over and over on the planet of a sun whose galaxy revolves once in two hundred million years and has revolved nine times already.

There are and have been worlds and cultures without end, each nursing the proud illusion that it is unique in space and time. There have been men without number suffering from the same megalomania; men who imagined themselves unique, irreplaceable, irreproducible. There will be more ... more plus infinity. This is the story of such a time and such a man ...

THE DEMOLISHED MAN.