

BISHOP ESSAY
by
Paul Di Filippo

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Since his first short-story sale in 1970 ("Piñon Fall" in *Galaxy* magazine), Michael Bishop has revealed a questing spiritual intelligence uniquely concerned with moral conundrums. While his works are often full of both the widescreen spectacles associated with science fiction and the subtle frissons typical of more earthbound fantasy, his focus remains on the engagement of characters with ethical quandries any reader might encounter in his or her daily life. Whether to succor a dying relative at some personal expense; how to earn an honest living while being true to one's muse; how best to establish essential communication among strangers forced to rely on each other for survival: these issues and others equally vital form the core of Bishop's concerns. And his prescription for success most often involves not derring-do or superhuman efforts, but simply the maintenance of an honest, open heart and a charitable, brave soul. While only occasionally delving into explicitly religious themes, Bishop's personal Christian faith--wide enough to embrace references to Buddhism, Sufism and other creeds--shines through in every tale.

A talent capable of being decanted into many different molds, genre and otherwise, Bishop's skills and vision translate from one medium to another without diminishment or concealment. Never content merely to repeat his past triumphs, he has steadfastly ventured into new territory with every book. This refusal to succumb to market pressures that demand from the contemporary fantasist a never-ending stream of wordy sequels set in a cod-Tolkien universe has perhaps resulted in a lower profile among fantasy readers than he might otherwise have achieved. But to the connoisseur, Bishop's fantasy novels and shorter pieces--which constitute about a third of his output--are cherished as examples of the best that modern fantasy has produced, ranking with the work of such peers as Jonathan Carroll, Terry Bisson, James Morrow and Graham Joyce, authors with whom he shares a certain homegrown magical-realist touch.

Born in Lincoln, Nebraska, on November 11, 1945, to Maxine Matison Bishop and Lee Otis Bishop, the author experienced a peripetetic childhood due to his father's military service. (For the majority of her working life, Bishop's mother was a civilian

employee of the federal government.) After a stint in Japan, his parents divorced, and Bishop lived with his mother in Kansas and, later, Oklahoma. Maxine's subsequent marriage to Charles Willis during the mid-fifties left Bishop with a decision regarding his last name, and he chose to retain the one he was most familiar with. In 1962 he spent his senior year of high school abroad in Spain--a pivotal experience--under the supervision of his biological father, who had been stationed there. Upon return to the United States, Bishop found his parents now living in Georgia and took the opportunity afforded by this new residence to attend the University of Georgia, matriculating with his M.A. in 1968. Having enrolled in the ROTC program as an undergraduate, Bishop entered the USAF and spent his four years enlistment teaching at the Air Force Academy Preparatory School. In 1969 he married Jeri Ellis Whitaker. They have two children, Christopher James and Stephanie, and two grandchildren by the latter. Upon moving to Pine Mountain, Georgia, in the early 1970s, Bishop held a number of jobs before devoting his energies to full-time writing. Since 1996 he has been Writer-in-Residence at La Grange College, Georgia.

Bishop's first eight novels from 1975 to 1982 established him as one of the leading science fiction writers of his generation. With an emphasis on the anthropological sciences, such books as *A Funeral for the Eyes of Fire* and *Transfigurations* probed the psychological workings of both humans and aliens and the many ambivalent ways they interfaced. Bishop's three linked novels (the closest he's ever come to a prolonged series) about a near-future Atlanta--*A Little Knowledge*, *Catacomb Years* and *Under Heaven's Bridge*--revealed him to possess a flair for close-up socio-technological extrapolation, the *sine qua non* of science fiction writers. (As one small example, his nomination of high-tech rollerskates as a mode of urban transport exactly captured trends that later manifested outside his pages.)

However, a distinct fondness for surreal effects and absurdist conceits--seen most clearly in his many short stories to be discussed later--seemed to foreshadow a wider ambition extending outside SF's borders.

Thus the appearance in 1984 of a full-fledged Gothic horror novel from Bishop came as little surprise.

Who Made Stevie Crye? concerns one disturbing week in the life of Stevenson Crye, a young widow striving to support her two children, Ted and Marella, by freelance journalism. Bolstered by her friendship with a local doctor, Elsa Kensington, Stevie Crye seems on the verge of succeeding at her makeshift life in the wake of her husband's cancer-ridden demise. She has hopes for assembling her newspaper columns into a book, and her children are doing reasonably well without their father. True, Stevie's own unresolved issues with their dead Dad remain troubling. But for the most part, she meets life's daily demands capably and efficiently.

Then her typewriter, upon which she relies for her very bread-and-butter, breaks. This simple catastrophe opens up the door to a malignant world.

Looking to effect a cheap repair, Stevie brings her machine into the shop of one Seaton Benecke, a youngish man with an unattractive air of occult nerdy obsessiveness. Seaton's uncanny tampering with her typewriter indeed restores it to functionality, but with a twist. The machine is now sentient, its autonomous workings hosting some kind of evil spirit. Back home, this demon begins to channel Stevie's deepest fears and neuroses onto the typewritten page, forcing her to confront issues she had been trying to repress. When the continuing attentions of would-be warlock Seaton and his dire

monkey-familiar 'Crets are factored into the mix, Stevie finds her life unravelling. Eventually, the assistance of an African-American fortuneteller, Sister Celestial, manages to tip the scales in Stevie's favor, and she drives off both Seaton and her own fears, recovering to live out "the many, many happy days remaining to her in this life, all of which were of her own composition..."

This surface synopsis seems to render Bishop's book into a simple Stephen King-style thriller, albeit much better written, and if only matters of plot and the array of fairly standard tropes were considered, such would indeed be the case. But an added layer of metafictional complexity is added by the operations of the typewriter itself. The disturbing narratives the machine composes are slyly inserted into the main story itself without obvious bracketing, thus disconcerting the reader about the levels of reality involved. Soon, this unease and confusion extends to Stevie herself, who can no longer readily distinguish between dreams and waking. By the time Sister Celestial arrives with a script of events yet unborn which she has channeled into *her* typewriter--a script that makes explicit references to the very chapters headings we the readers are encountering--we are in a labyrinth where the role of creator and creation are hopelessly tangled. And the fact that the novel closes with the phrase "T*H*E E*N*D" set in the distinctive font used by Stevie's typewriter offers the possibility that *everything* we have read is the mocking output of the malign machine. In this interpretation, the question posed by the novel's title has a very obvious yet repellant answer: Stevie has been sucked into the universe of her former servant machine, a tormenting Ellisonian deity which now mocks her with an ironic fairytale conclusion.

Bishop's next full-length fantasy outing, 1988's *Unicorn Mountain*, also features a woman struggling on her own, one betrayed by her mate much in the manner Stevie discovered herself to have been. (The average husband does not come off very well in Bishop's cosmic scheme.) But the venue has changed, from the deep South to the mountains of Colorado. (As expressed in his fiction, Bishop's wary affection for the Georgia neighborhood where he has long been resident makes him one of the genre's more intriguing regionalists.)

Manager of the Topsy Q ranch she won in divorce proceedings, Libby Quarrels must nonetheless contend with frequent intrusions from her ex, Gary. The latest such visit serves to link her fate with one of Gary's cousins, a gay man dying of AIDS in Atlanta. Bo Gavin is soon brought from Atlanta to spend his last days on the Topsy Q, much to the initial annoyance of Libby's hired hand, Sam Coldpony, a Native-American who is having his own family problems with his estranged daughter, Paisley. The dynamics among the protagonists meander through a complicated map of disgust and affection, bravery and cowardice, remorse and affirmation.

Complicating and eventually organizing the whole human soap opera is the presence of living unicorns. Dubbed "kar'tajans" after a Sanskrit word meaning "lord of the desert," the unicorns prove to be crossing back and forth from a parallel world, a world whose lineaments are also apprehended through a hexed television at the ranch. The unicorns, however, are suffering from a disease remarkably similar to human AIDS, and only the intervention of Libby and her circle of concerned friends can save them.

Unicorn Mountain suffers in retrospect from the earnestness of its admittedly brave and venturesome topicality, and its somewhat politically correct assortment of characters. If, as Samuel Delany maintains, his own novel *Flight from Nevèryon* [attention editor: umlaut over y] was the first genre work to deal with AIDS, then Bishop

certainly was not far behind. But the novel's protracted arguments and discussions about gayness and disease now seem quaint and overly demure (although one aspect of Bishop's speculations--nationally televised advertisements for condoms--still remains fresh). Moreover, Bishop's fondness for the well-turned, clever phrase--a habit that serves him well in descriptive passages--betrays him here in the arena of dialogue. Much of the banter among Libby and her friends is overly arch, fey words that would never be actually spoken, especially during heated emotional moments. Consider Bo's awkward and offputting deathbed phone conversation with his mother, for instance.

The best thing about this overlong book are the unicorns. Their inviolable magic--"they suffer...not only to lift up their own kind but those of us lucky enough to witness their suffering"--remains an irreducible nugget of fantasy gold at the heart of this book.

With 1992's *Count Geiger Blues*, Bishop exhibited a return to top-notch form, producing his most assured novel-length fantasy to this date. This book is light on its feet and fast-paced, both funny and touching, embodying in captivating incidents and persons important questions about the yin-yang balance between high and low cultures.

The city of Salonika in the southern state of Oconee, bisected by the very mappable Chattahoochee River, is one of those enchanted never-neverlands that inexplicably touch our mortal realm, allowing the mundane to consort with the fantastic. Like John Crowley's *Blackberry Jambs* or James Blaylock's *California*, Salonika is a mix of the outrageous and the familiar. The metropolis boasts Gaudi-style architecture, but also conventional newspapers, opera houses, professional sports teams and a company that is one of the top producers of superhero comic books in the USA. It is this last firm which will set the dominant motif of this novel, for Bishop is intent on examining the archetypal fantasies of revenge, altruism, elitism and unnatural abilities that propel most caped avengers. And his choice of mortal-turned-reluctant-hero is the most unlikely one imaginable.

Xavier Thaxton is the fine-arts critic for the *Salonika Urbanite*. He disdains all pop culture as trash, filling his life only with the canonical works of Western art. His high-toned girlfriend, Bari Carlisle, is a fashion designer who consorts with celebrities galore. Only the presence of his nephew, Mick, whom Xavier is reluctantly hosting while Mick's parents are out of the country, strikes an odd note in his existence, for prickly Mick is a punkish teen who adores everything Xavier hates. Nonetheless, an uneasy equilibrium between man and boy allows Xavier to continue in his worn groove of estheticism. But Xavier's sedate, genteel life is about to be upset.

Bathing once by accident in a radioactive pool curses him with "Philistine Syndrome," whereby he is literally sickened unto death by exposure to Beethovens, Picassos and the rest of his adored *objets d'art*. Only subsequent intake of bad TV and schlock novels can restore his health. Manfully, Xavier makes his comically tragic adjustments to even this horror, learning much about himself and the distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow culture in the process.

But then, halfway through the book, a second bath in the fateful spring turns him into a full-fledged superhero. How will Xavier employ his new powers? Unfortunately, he can think of little to do other than convince greasy-spoon joints to offer haute cuisine. A roundup of a stadium full of criminals and the exposure of a murderer represent the apex of his career. But when a final selfless act of sacrifice triggers a quick decline of his powers and health, Xavier makes his ultimate peace with the two halves of his personality.

Bishop here maintains a sprightly tone that assures enjoyable reading. His language has been streamlined into short chapters consonant with his themes, and his cast of characters, while colored comic-book-bright, are fully fleshed as well. Like a cross between television's *Frasier* and the film *Mystery Men* (1999), this novel stands as an important predecessor to later comics-based novels by Michael Chabon and Tom De Haven. And in wringing significance from seemingly superficial pop-culture phenomena, it ranks with Stephen Dobyns's *The Wrestler's Cruel Study* (1993).

In his ultimate fantasy outing as of this writing, Bishop hits a home run. With echoes of Eudora Welty, John Steinbeck and William Faulkner, as well as the cinematic drolleries of the Coen Brothers, 1994's *Brittle Innings* is a leisurely paced summer idyll not bereft of suspense, infused with the alternating languorous and frenetic rhythms of baseball, the sport which informs its every sentence.

A promising highschool ballplayer in rural Oklahoma during the early years of World War II, seventeen-year-old Danny Boles is recruited by team-owner Jordan McKissic--Mister JayMac--for McKissic's Georgia farm team, the Highbridge Hellbenders. After making his way east, not without traumatic difficulties that literally render him speechless, Danny arrives in the town of Highbridge to plunge into a milieu unlike anything his sheltered life has previously prepared him for. In the McKissic lodging house (whose lines evoke a "fairy-tale castle"), Danny is introduced to an assorted passel of idiosyncratic players, wives, nieces, crew and townspeople. Surely the most dramatic figure is Jumbo Henry Clerval, an enormous ugly shambling grotesque who can wallop a baseball with a tremendous force that makes him the most valuable member of the Hellbenders.

Assigned to room with Henry, Danny quickly finds himself intrigued by the enigma of Jumbo. He discovers the strange man to be a pacifist loner possessed of a quick wit and a large if stilted vocabulary. Throughout the single season of ballplaying that the book spans, Danny and Henry become friends. Learning Henry's secret origin--the man is the one-and-only immortal monster created by Dr. Victor Frankenstein--Danny becomes complicit in his patchwork friend's quest to refine his artificial soul and survive with some nobility among those who disdain him.

Meanwhile, the lovingly detailed series of dusty games that culminates in a pennant battle, each contest individualized into a pithy Iliad, is laid out before us, with Danny's triumphs and failures shaping him into maturity. He falls in love with Phoebe Pharram, JayMac's niece; he encounters the prevalent racism of the era; he learns of the fate of his long-absent father; and he navigates the webwork of emotions among his team mates with some skill. But right upon the verge of individual success, Danny finds his future wrenched onto a cataclysmic track, one which embroils Jumbo Henry Clerval as well.

Bishop's sure hand amasses a wealth of period details here--without any dreaded infodumps--which succeed in recreating a vanished decade down to the stitching on the very baseballs. Narrated in the first-person by Danny, this book unflinchingly captures the young man's unique voice, a mix of naivete and hard-earned wisdom. The embedded memoirs of Jumbo Clerval offer an enthralling mini-epic of the monster's post-Shelley career. And a delicious ambiguity is maintained: is Clerval truly what he claims to be, or simply a deluded giant born of woman like everyone else, who has fabricated this interesting history to ennoble himself?

But even given the verity of Clerval's past, we need to ask if this volume is even strictly a fantasy. Or should it be adjudged among Bishop's SF excursions? After all, Shelley's inspirational novel is rightly revered as the grandmother of modern science fiction, by critics such as Brian Aldiss and others. It would seem that the inclusion of the titular monster here would make *Brittle Innings* automatically part of the SF canon. Yet just as Bishop's *The Secret Ascension* is commonly considered pure science fiction, despite its opening with the ghost of Philip K. Dick, since its whole *tone* is rigorously speculative, so too does the atmosphere and treatment in *Brittle Innings* determine its reception and placement in Bishop's oeuvre. Told as an extended flashback from Danny's 1991 perspective, the tale is drenched in a luminous nostalgia for what amounts to a Golden Age (despite the period's acknowledged defects), a "once upon a time" venue where mythic beings--not only Jumbo, but the other players as well--still walked the earth. This evocation of a legendary prelapsarian past is one of fantasy's prime functions, placing this novel squarely in the fantasy camp.

These four books, then, constitute a broad and heterogenous claim staked by Bishop and testifying to his mastery of the fantasy mode at novel length.

(Readers who sample Bishop's mystery novels will be rewarded, but not by any overtly unreal elements. However, the ventriloquist's dummy in *Would It Kill You to Smile?* is tangential to the long tradition of possessed puppets, and resonant parallels to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* [1900] inform *Muskrat Courage*.)

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Acknowledged as one of the genre's finest and most meticulous short-story writers, Bishop boasts six collections to date that function as treasure troves of both science fiction and fantasy. (A seventh lives up to its title, *Emphatically Not SF, Almost*, by hosting only mainstream tales.)

The first book, *Blooded on Arachne*, concentrates on the kind of baroque SF narratives that launched his career, such as "The White Otters of Childhood" and "Cathadonian Odyssey." But Bishop's debut piece, "Piñon Fall," generates a pleasant confusion as to the identity of its winged visitor to a desert town. Is the creature an ET, or perhaps a celestial angel or earth spirit of our globe? In any case, the transformative powers of the creature and its peers clearly exceed all natural laws. "On the Street of the Serpents," with its mix of autobiography and a kind of mental time travel, evokes the psychodramas of J. G. Ballard rather than the Chronic Argonaut of H. G. Wells. Finally, the Philip K. Dick homage, "Rogue Tomato," postulating a sentient tomato with the mass of a planet, clearly crosses the line from speculation to fabulation.

One Winter in Eden, where in a perceptive introduction Thomas Disch labels Bishop a "Southern Gothic" artist, features a greater proportion of fantasy. The title story concerns a long-suffering school teacher who just happens to be a dragon in disguise. Here we see for the first time at length Bishop's close observation of children and matters of pedagogy. The "grither" is a malevolent Seussian creature conjured unwisely in "Seasons of Belief," a story that might have flowed from the pen of Harlan Ellison or Robert Bloch. "Collaborating" shares a kinship with Robert Heinlein's *Orphans of the Sky* (1963) and Brian Aldiss's *Brothers of the Head* (1977), serving up a touching autobiography of a two-headed man. Even when Bishop is working in ostensibly mimetic fashion, as in "The Yukio Mishima Cultural Association of Kudzu Valley, Georgia" (and its sequel, "At the City Limits of Fate"), his innate quirky perception of existences torques

events and characters ninety degrees from consensus reality. Surely a story that imagines a hick-town book discussion group which fixates on the work of the titular Japanese right-wing novelist to the point of following their hero into mass suicide is not something John Updike, say, would conceive of. But the pivotal, invaluable item here is "The Quickening," which earned Bishop a Nebula Award. The world's inhabitants are shaken up by a mysterious deific power as in a snow globe, and relocated randomly around the planet. Civilization as we know it is effectively undone, and out of the bloody ruins a new sociocultural gestalt arises. In only thirty pages, this compressed saga does more than many a post-apocalyptic novel, and is worthy of a Borges or Barthelme.

Close Encounters with the Deity, with its running emphasis on theological mysteries, begins to reveal a discernible shift in manner and approach from previous volumes. Gone are the early quasi-space operas, and a decidedly more surreal and literary bent is evident. A story such as "A Spy in the Domain of Arnheim," set in a Kafkaesque cosmos that operates on the counterintuitive principles discerned in Magritte's paintings, or one such as "Storming the Bijou, Mon Amour," which plants its hapless protagonists in an absurdist world of Hollywood construction, would have been beyond the scope of the younger Bishop. "The Gospel According to Gamaliel Crucis," which postulates a new alien Messiah in the form of a giant mantis and which is on its surface akin to prior such interstellar excursions, exhibits a level of formalistic innovation lacking in earlier works. Even a relatively throwaway story such as "Scrimptalon's Test," in which the traditional "deal with the devil" is subverted by making the mortal bargainer a sentient machine, shows Bishop's desire to bust wide apart the confines of genre conventions. And the open-ended enigmas of "Alien Graffiti" hold more interest than neatly wrapped older stories.

Kafka re-emerges as an intermittent influence on the fully mature Bishop found in the stories collected in *At the City Limits of Fate*. The hectoring pedantic narrator of "000-00-0000" possesses that mad bureaucratic tone evoked so well by *The Trial* (1925). "Snapshots from the Butterfly Plague" crafts Hitchcockian unease from the unnatural behavior of butterflies. And the divine dystopia of "God's Hour," wherein God himself runs the top-ranked TV show in a brave new world, is unsurpassed for its portrait in only a few pages of a well-meaning hell devoid of free will. But Bishop has not lost his lighter touch, as exhibited in "In the Memory Room," where a dutiful embalmer takes direction from fussy ghosts. Nor does he neglect the miracles buried in the quotidian, as we can see in "Allegra's Hand," which tracks the sad life of a schoolchild suffering from a strange affliction.

Blue Kansas Sky--a collection of four novellas and a keen-witted introduction by James Morrow that places Bishop squarely in the tradition of "moral fiction" formulated by the novelist John Gardner--brings us only one outright fantasy, the title story. (The other three pieces are finely wrought hardcore science fiction, proving Bishop can still work well in the mode wherein he made his debut.) Set in the 1950s, this saga of the youth and maturation of one Sonny Peacock, under the tutelage of his roisterous uncle Rory and his widowed mother Jenniel, in the small town of Van Luna, Kansas, proves to be a kind of prairie *Great Expectations* (1861). Richly imagined and verisimilitudinous, thanks to Bishop's familiarity with the region, this story, like Mark Helprin's *Refiner's Fire* (1977), qualifies as fantasy mainly by its tall-tale, larger-than-life atmosphere, with Rory Peacock acting as a kind of Pecos Bill figure. (Although there is one twister-riding scene that crosses into pure magical realism.)

Bishop's newest collection, *Brighten to Incandescence*, is perhaps his most heterogenous to date, representing a nice spectrum of his talents. An accomplished pastiche of R. A. Lafferty ("Of Crystalline Labyrinths and the New Creation") consorts with two ghost stories almost M. R. Jamesian in nature ("A Tapestry of Little Murders" and "The Tigers of Hysteria Feed Only on Themselves"). Humor and satire are not absent, as witnessed by the talking-animal fable of "O Happy Day" and the spectacle of chihuahua-racing as a sport in "Chihuahua Flats." A demonic romance reminiscent of the work of Dan Simmons is presented in "Thirteen Lies About Hummingbirds." Shades of *Brittle Innings* recur in a literal manner, as the ghost of Mary Shelly makes an appearance in "The Unexpected Visit of a Reanimated Englishwoman." And an alternate life of Jesus is imagined in "Sequel on Skorprios."

Finally, in discussing his shorter works, it would be a shame not to mention Bishop's flair as a poet. His latest collection, *Time Pieces*, boasts one work, "In the Lilliputian Asylum," which surely merits recognition as a perfect embodiment of the fantastic within the poetic. Narrated by a resident of Lilliput forsaken by the salvific Gulliver, this long ballad is both evocative of a strange world and humanly affecting as well.

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Whether dealing with tormented children right in his own hometown, or archetypal movie-viewers trapped in a universe that has dwindled to a single silver screen; with single mothers trying to conquer their fears, or unicorns dying of the plague; with a man seeking love in all the wrong places, or a dying Savior on the cross, Michael Bishop exhibits an identical level of compassion and empathy, poured into handsomely wrought vessels of narrative.

In *Brittle Innings*, a dead ballplayer who has expired while giving his all in a game is eulogized thusly: "He wasn't no showboat. He had this easy stillness that spoke straight through everybody else's jive and moonshine." Such a capsule description applies admirably to both Michael Bishop the writer and his quietly magnificent fantasies.