A Burnt-Out Case?

Roger Zelazny

The blackboard and the sound projector and the dancing girls have not yet arrived, so I shall have to improvise. As I frequently do in matters such as this, I’ve made an outline and...I never follow them. It’s the same way with books. The only trouble I ever ran into with a book was when I tried to follow an outline. I learned later that the publisher did not really care about the outline. He told me after I stopped writing for them that they always got an outline as a matter of form, so that they had a gentlemanly way of rejecting a book if they didn’t like it. Rather than just saying that this was a dog of a book, they would pull out the outline, find some point at which an author departs from the outline, and say, “Well, old man, you really didn’t follow your outline, so I’ll have to return the book.”

I found a way of faking outlines, of course. I had it down to a real system. Then I stopped writing for that publisher, and no one ever asked me for an outline again. In case you’re curious, the system involved selecting one scene, and writing about ninety percent of the outline as a detailed synopsis of that scene, and the other ten percent just generalizing the rest of the book. Then I could sit down and write whatever I wanted, as long as I inserted that one scene in the book. It saved a lot of trouble.

I am a science fiction writer by definition⁠—at least, that’s what my books are called. I have no desire to disclaim this title. It’s a funny situation, because I don’t really know what science fiction is. Every now and again over the years, I’ve gotten ambitious and tried to work up a definition. Whenever I come up with something that half-way satisfies me, immediately I’ve sat down and tried to violate it, just because I like to feel that science fiction is pretty much a free area, and myself free to do pretty much what I like in it.

Science fiction has been good to me, and I’m happy to be writing science fiction. Over the years, I’ve gotten to speak at conventions such as this and other places on the subject, and I have, only this past September, discovered an ideal in the way of convention addresses, toward which I might hope to aspire one day.

It was a convention talk which gave rise to a great deal of speculation and exercise of the imagination⁠—a talk given by Philip K. Dick in the city of Metz, France, a city sacked in the year 451 by Attila the Hun, and about which I knew very little else until such a time as they held a science fiction festival there and invited three science fiction writers⁠—Harlan Ellison, Philip K. Dick, and yours truly. It came to pass at the convention that Philip K. Dick was the gentleman who was to give the address. It was a rather amazing address. I do not know what Philip K. Dick said at this talk. I was not present; I was off at a bookstore signing books. The audience, however, at the Civic Center, while Phil Dick was speaking, did not know what Phil Dick said either. So I do not feel slighted in this.

When I approached him on the matter later in the day, I discovered that Philip K. Dick did not know what he said, either.

I will delay for a moment, and tell you how I came to know Philip K. Dick. Some years ago, Phil Dick, who is a very hot writer when he is on top of things, had agreed to write twelve books in a year’s time⁠—a book a month. Apparently he delivered eleven of the books. It got to December, and the book was a thing called Deus Irae, for which he’d written an outline. I thought mine were pretty good when it came to faking the action and taking in the publisher completely, but this was a masterpiece. It was much longer than those I usually manage, but it said less even. It was basically a philosophical essay, quite lovely, and then there were fifty pages of copy. At that point, Phil Dick stopped. He was blocked.

There are some writers who, when they are blocked, have mental constipation that can go on for years. It was so with Phil Dick. Doubleday kept pestering him for the book, and he kept saying, “No, no, later, later.” Finally they asked him if he would allow someone else to complete the work and divide the money. He said, “All right. I’m not going to finish it.”

So they approached Ted White. Ted White decided he couldn’t do it, but he kept the manuscript anyway, just for a conversation piece. It was at his home in Brooklyn for some months, and I happened to be visiting. While we were there, he brought out the manuscript and showed it to me. I really liked it. One of the things about collaboration is that you should learn something from it. It should be fun, and it should be something you would not have thought to do on your own. I read it over and wrote to Phil, saying that I would like to try finishing this book. He said “Fine. I like your stuff. You like my stuff. Let’s do it.”

So I wrote a few sections and sent them off to him. He waited awhile. We didn’t look upon this project as anything to be completed in a hurry. I’d put it in a drawer and, a year or two later, Phil would remind me that we were doing a book, and I would write another section and send it back to him.

We moved from Baltimore to Santa Fe, New Mexico. About three years went by, I had sort of forgotten this book in a drawer. A cat had gotten in and done something on the manuscript. Phil finally sent me a frantic letter a week before I was to leave town, saying that twelve years had gone by and Doubleday was threatening to withhold royalties due him in order to recover the advance on that book if it was not in in six weeks. So I sat down and finished it that day.

(You talk about artistic values and such, but I’ve never seen any correlation in my own work between speed of composition and quality of output. It’s really a kind of laziness factor which makes me produce at the rate I do. I have written very quickly.)

Anyway, that’s how the book was done, and it was very enjoyable. Before I had undertaken this entire collaboration with Phil, I decided I would make it a complete learning project. I would learn to write like Phil Dick. So I sat down and read twenty of Phil’s books in succession. I wanted to feel them at the gut level, not just understand his reaction to ideas intellectually, but get so I could write in his style and also, hopefully, plot in his style. I felt that I achieved this; I believe that I can write exactly like Phil Dick if I want to.

But I chose, for my sections of the book, not to use that style. I chose a kind of meta-style, halfway between that and my own style, so my sections would be different enough from Phil’s sections so the book, would have a different tone to it.

As I was writing along like this over the years, I said to myself, “It’s a shame to be able to write just like Phil Dick⁠—even, for brief periods of time, think like Phil Dick⁠—and not to do it, at least just once.” So, in one scene I plotted it just the way I thought Phil would plot it. I wrote it in Phil’s style exactly, and then the other themes in that section I wrote in the other style. I sent the entire batch of manuscripts off to him, waited a while, and received a letter back, “Roger, that was very good material you sent along, but this one scene you’ve written is sheer genius.”

To return to Metz... This past September, Phil gave this talk which I’m holding up as a model before me for a moment invisible to all but my eyes⁠—or perhaps to those of Palmer Eldritch, if he be present.

I was in a book store nearby. Harlan had wanted to commit one of his favorite stunts, which was to compose a story in the window of a book store carrying his books. Unfortunately, when Attila had sacked Metz in the fifth century, he had apparently done something to book store fronts, because there were no book stores which had the sort of front windows, as American book stores have, for displaying authors in the act of composition. Harlan had to take his act to a local newspaper office, where people apparently took him for an employee. He said he was asked to notarize a document, or something like that. He was a little disappointed.

But he missed Phil’s talk. I missed Phil’s talk. I was sitting there signing books. Several hours after the time the talk was scheduled, people began drifting in from the hall where Phil had been speaking. A man came up to me with a book and said to me, “Monsieur Zelazny, you have written a book with Monsieur Dick. You know his mind. I have just come from his talk. Is it true that he wishes to found a new religion, with himself as Pope?”

I said, “He has never mentioned that ambition to me. I don’t know how these things come through in translation. He has a very peculiar sense of humor. It might not have carried through properly. But I don’t think he meant it to be taken literally.”

The fellow who was behind me said, “Non, I think you are wrong. I rode back to the hotel in a taxi, and Monsieur Dick gave me the power to remit sins and to kill fleas.”

I said, “I’m sure this was meant to be taken with a grain of salt. I wouldn’t be too concerned about it.”

A little later, another fellow came in and said, “Monsieur Zelazny, do you believe that there are many parallel time tracks and that we are on the wrong one?” I allowed that this was a common idea of some science fiction stories. I personally felt happy where I was, but I asked him where he had gotten this notion from that I subscribed to it.

He said, “Well, in the lecture he said that there are many parallel time tracks and we are on the wrong one, because of the fact that God and the Devil are playing a game of chess and every time one makes a move, it reprograms us to a different time track, and that whenever Phil Dick writes a book it switches us back to the proper track. Could you care to comment on this?”

I begged off. A little later, Phil came into the store to sign some books and sat down beside me at the table. When I had a free moment, I leaned over and said, “Phil, what the hell did you talk about this afternoon?”

Phil said, “I don’t know. It was the strangest thing. You know, I don’t speak French, so I was asked to write out my talk. I provided a copy of my talk and then the fellow translated it into French. I was to read a paragraph and then he was to read the translation, and so on. Right before I was to go on, they told me that the talk had to be cut by twenty minutes. So I went through crossing out paragraphs, and so did the translator, but we got mixed up along the way, and he crossed out all the wrong paragraphs. So I don’t know what I said.”

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Just the notion of that talk has always remained with me. I bear it before me at this moment because, whenever I am asked to give a talk anywhere, I tend to look back over my professional writing career and see whether there might be something new learned that I hadn’t thought of before from the activities of that sixteen-year period. I tend to feel rather like the Buddhist novitiate who went into the monastery knowing that the trees were only trees and the clouds were only clouds and the mountains were only mountains. Forty years later, when he was a full-fledged Buddhist monk, he knew that the trees were only trees, the clouds were only clouds, and the mountains were only mountains. But then he knew it wisely.

I don’t believe that I know very much more now than I knew sixteen years ago. I’m not even sure I know it wisely, but at least I seem to have rearranged the items a bit, so that I know it a little differently. So, attempting to extract whatever wisdom might be involved in this, I thought back to a few other times in my life when I examined what I’d been up to, and it occurred to me that I had come to a few small conclusions about what I was doing.

I remember that, when I began writing, my intention was to sit down for a couple of years and just do short stories, because the mistakes I made would be much briefer than if I just did novels, until I learned something about the trade. I would set myself different problems in each story so I would stand to benefit from learning from this. I did that. After about two years, I finally did a novel.

I asked myself, what are the real difficulties involved in writing science fiction? If any, what are the benefits? Not in terms of intellectual freedom or imagination being exercised, but purely from a work standpoint as a writer, what are the problems?

It struck me that⁠—and I hadn’t really considered it, which is strange, because my background is in literature⁠—that while you learn all this critical analysis while you’re going to school, it is not really a reversible process. You don’t put together a story in the manner in which you learn to take stories apart in school. It’s simply a blank piece of paper before you in the typewriter, and everything else goes out the window.

It occurred to me that the biggest problem I faced was that the distinction between a science fiction story and a general fiction story lay in the fact that, by virtue of its being set on another planet or in the future or on a parallel world, the real problem lay in the setting, the background, the fact that you had to provide more of it to show the reader where the hell all this is taking place and what’s going on. If you mention New York in the 1960s, that’s pretty much a shorthand for what a major urban center is. As I discovered later, when I taught a few writers’ workshops, the big error of beginning writers is to provide a couple of pages of copy right at the beginning describing all this background. By then, the reader would be hopelessly bored. The biggest thing I learned from this period is that all the background should be cut from the beginning, broken into small parcels, and distributed judiciously through the rest of the text. That did seem to be the hardest thing I had to learn.

The greatest freedom for me, strangely, was also a kind of trap. At the beginning, everyone said to me, “You should write what you know.” So naturally I wrote about gods and demons and supernatural and mythological creatures, because I was very familiar with them. I did come from a peculiar background where I did have a lot of information on mythology. I began using this material because it was there, and easily done for me, while I ran around frantically plugging up other holes in my background so that I could write other things eventually.

I never made a connection between something I had read in literature classes until several years had gone by, at which time I was already beginning to feel uncomfortable that about every science fiction convention I attended, they set up a special panel called “Science Fiction and Mythology” and put me on it. I realized: it may be possible that I am being categorized.

Northrop Frye, if I may steal his vocabulary for a moment, set up four modes of characterization, with four names which mean simple things: the mythic mode, the high mimetic, the low mimetic, and the ironic. The mythic includes characters who appear in scriptures, in mythological writing, in the Iliad, the Bible. They’re gods; they are creatures who are greater than Man and greater than their environment. Yet they do appear as characters in this form of writing, which admittedly is not being done too much these days.

Then there are the high mimetic characters, who are basically the figures in classical tragedy, who differ from other people by virtue of the fact that they are greater individuals: a Hamlet, or an Oedipus, or a King Lear. These figures, in falling, have to be figures that you can respect, and therefore know pity and fear when you see them fall.

They are the top two categories.

The low mimetic is the character who inhabits the realistic novel, the modern novel, the product of all the democratic revolutions, the character who’s just like everyone else,

And then there is the ironic mode. This is the character who is not just like everyone else. He’s not greater, he’s not a little bit greater, he’s not just like us; he’s less. He’s the Charlie Chaplin figure, he’s the character in Kafka, Ionesco, or Beckett, who is less than his fellow man. He’s an ironic figure, yet in some strange way, this whole thing goes around in a circle. There are echoes in him of the mythic mode character, by virtue of his being a butt.

It struck me that all of modern literature is the bottom two categories, and that it really fell upon science fiction alone⁠—and a few poets with their private mythologies⁠—to exploit the higher modes of characterization. Whether you approve or disapprove aesthetically, they are available in science fiction. One can create figures who are on a par with the gods of the mythic mode, or the tragic figures, whether one is writing a tragedy or not, of the high mimetic mode. One does this with aliens, mutants, robots, computers.

This is, for me, on the other side of the equation from the difficulties and constraints of providing all the extra background material. It balanced out. I managed to surmount the background problems to my satisfaction and to that of the editors, and I explored character, to some degree, by using these higher modes.

I suppose I should have let it go at that, and I did for a long while. I had learned something to form the substance for a talk for whatever convention I was going to at that time.

I did not think about it for a long while⁠—but at the same convention in France, I was talking to Phil Dick again. There’s an amazing phenomenon associated with both Phil Dick and Harlan Ellison (and they invited both of them; but then, they didn’t know any better). In the presence of either man, the interface between reality and fantasy begins to wear rather thin. When they are both present, surrealistic things do tend to begin happening.

There was a very strange party the same day that Phil Dick gave his memorable talk (which nobody remembers). We were all dragooned off to the City Hall. It was John Brunner’s birthday. John Brunner had popped up from Italy, where he was vacationing, and we had dinner with him. He was not really a guest of the convention, but just happening by, so he was not as constrained as the rest of us to be there on time, so it caused some delay in getting over there. Philippe Huff, the fellow in charge, was quite upset at the authors not showing up at this party being given. I was trying to get away. Harlan, I learned, was still sleeping back at the hotel, and they sent some strong-arm type to drag him over.

Anyway, we did get there on time. Philippe was standing outside like the White Rabbit, saying “You’re late! You’re late!” as everyone came back. The lady gave a nice little talk about being happy to have a science fiction convention in that city. Meanwhile, a folk band began playing wild, and John Brunner was asking me if I knew whose portrait was hanging on the wall. I said, “That was Montpelier, the first man to go up in a balloon; he’s from Metz”, while somebody else was asking me why they wouldn’t let Concorde land in the States. Then a bizarre folk dance began weaving through the room, and somehow Harlan got involved in it. (He had appeared.)

Then, in the distance, across this room, Phil Dick was standing there like Mephistopheles, gesturing to me. I began walking toward him. He kind of waved his cloak and Robert Sheckley was standing beside him. I didn’t know Sheckley had been there. I hadn’t seen Sheckley in about three years.

Phil Dick said, “Quick, Roger. It involves money.” I made my way over and he said, “I’ve got it all worked out, Roger. We’re going to make a bundle on this. It will be a three-way collaboration⁠—you, me, and Sheckley. You see, the world really consists of three time tracks. We each get one, work it out, and then we switch. We each write a third of the bock, following the others’ time tracks, and their interrelationships when things begin to break down. It’s all very careful...”

He stopped and looked up. “By George, there’s Harry Harrison. Harry! You want to make a bundle of money? Okay. Never mind. It’s going to be four time tracks.”

Then Phil, in a profound moment afterward, said, “Roger, a strange thing happened to me...” which is not really unusual, because strange things always happen to Phil. I nodded. “I have this book, A Scanner Darkly. I have these characters who have been on hard drugs for a long time, and they’re burnt out cases. I wanted to choose a scene which exemplified the extent of their mental deterioration. I had them attempting to figure out the functioning of the gear shift on a ten-speed bicycle.” (Phil always, chooses good examples for things.)

So he had written this up and indicated that they were wrong, because this is how the gear shift on a ten-speed bicycle really works. His editor called him: “Phil... A funny thing in this manuscript of yours. I happen to own a ten-speed bicycle. I went out and looked at the gear shift, and⁠—um...you’ve got it wrong yourself.”

Phil said, “My God, you know what that means? Roger, how do you know when you’re a burnt out case?”

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Perhaps I should not have taken that so to heart, but I did begin thinking about it. How do you know when you are a burnt out case?

This is interesting. It raises a great philosophical question for me: that is, who can you trust?

I began writing as a very naïve person. I trusted everyone⁠—editors, critics... I became wary about critics and reviewers after a time, though, when I noticed that when I began writing, they did not like my stuff a great deal; when I stopped writing the mythological sort of thing and shifted into other things, they said, “It’s a shame Zelazny’s abandoning all this fine mythological material he used to work with”; and when I did something else, they would hearken back and say “Zelazny’s retrogressing again back into his old ways.”

The only consistent review I got was when three different critics, independent of one another, came up with the same sentence, “This would be a good book if it hadn’t been written by Roger Zelazny.” I was never quite certain what that meant.

Then it occurred to me to take all the critical opinions and reviewers’ opinions, lump them together, and divide by the number. It came out to a sort of uniform consistency resembling lime jello⁠—a kind of pale sickly green in color. It seems that they follow a bell curve, with the favorable reviews on one end, the unfavorables on the other, and the neutral ones in the middle. They balanced one another out to such an extent that I couldn’t particularly trust any critic over any other. I could find a counterpart in the other direction for anybody.

So I stopped reading reviews and criticism. For awhile, I grew quite cynical and said that the only critical comments I cared to read were royalty statements, which I would never say now. I’m more guarded about these matters.

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So I said, “Well, at least one can trust one’s editors.” I don’t know whether anyone who specializes in these matters might notice, but in my book Lord of Light, nowhere in it will you find the word “which”, because an editor decided to scratch out “which” everywhere it occurred and substitute “that.” Which is all right: it doesn’t make anything incorrect. But I do know the difference. Doubleday, perhaps, has a style sheet which requires this sort of thing...that sort of thing. I let it go. This was my first hardcover sale. I had had three paperback books before, but now this was Doubleday⁠—a big house. I decided I really should go along with all the changes they had made.

But then they came to one scene in the book which was dear to my heart (I forget which one at the moment). They wanted to cut it entirely: “This scene does not serve any useful purpose in the book,” or something like that.

I was going to New York the following weekend, so I just took the manuscript with me. I went to Doubleday’s office and saw their senior editor, Larry Ashmead, and said, “whoever did this wants to cut this scene, and I rather like it. I’d like to keep it if it’s possible.”

“Sure. Just write stet,” and he signed his name beneath it. “That’s all there is to it. Don’t worry about it.”

“Aren’t copy editors important people?”

“No. Just some kid we hire out of college.”

“Oh...”

Actually, some years went by before I went through an entire book and wrote “stet” beneath every single thing that had been changed in it. That was one of the Amber books. I do it more and more frequently.

It led me to look for other people’s experiences with copy editors. I came across a couple of interesting ones, I which I will share with you.

One was that, in Churchill’s History of World War Two, a copy editor had written in the margin, “I have taken the liberty of recasting this unfortunate sentence because you ended it with a preposition.” Beneath which, Churchill had written, “Up with this I will not put.”

Raymond Chandler, in one of his mystery novels, got it back with a little transposition mark and the abbreviation for “split infinitive” off in the margin, beneath which Chandler had written, “When I split an infinitive it goddamn well stays split.”

This was interesting, but did not help me to find anyone who could tell me whether I had become a burnt out case. I was growing worried about this, because I had been talking with a writer I respected about another writer, who shall remain nameless (a big name writer whose books sell quite well) and we pretty much agreed that this fellow’s last few books had not been up to snuff. He said, “You know, his last few books were very flabby. They could have been cut quite severely and they probably would have been better books as a result. I think that what he really needs is a good editor. They’re afraid to tell him to do anything about it, because his books are going to sell well, whether this is done or not. They don’t want to lose him as a writer, so no one has guts enough to tell him what’s wrong with his stuff. He’s become a victim of the Great Writer Syndrome.”

At the time, it struck me as possibly true. But my experience with good editors is that they are very few and far between. I’ve met a few people I consider good editors. It is difficult. I can see the nameless writer’s position: probably he does not know who to trust.

I don’t know that there is an answer to this.

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I learned another thing only after several years of writing. To show how naïve I was, I did not know that other writers plotted their books. I didn’t know this until I was asked for a plot line, and I realized that I couldn’t do one.

Basically, my approach to writing a novel is to construct a character. Once I have a character, I try him out in several situations just to see how he reacts. Then I take two situations that strike me as interesting. I begin somewhere near one of them and write my way through, almost free-associating, to the second situation. In the course of this progress from the one to the other, secondary characters necessarily occur and a certain amount of the background is sketched in. By the time I have traveled from point A to point B, I have some of the secondary characters become major characters. I can see some direction in which to go, and I simply begin moving. Then there comes a point somewhere along the way where I see the entire book laid out before me.

If I had known this wasn’t the way you operated, I probably never would have started this way. But I am basically a subconscious plotter. I can feel when the story is present in my mind, and I don’t bother dredging it all out to the conscious level until I need it. The fact that it works for me has caused me to rely upon it.

I have done a few things the other way. I do know how to plot a story if I have to, but it’s hard work. Usually, if you do something at a mystery level, it’s better to work things out. In the stories in My Name Is Legion, I’ve used the conscious plotting device. But when I first heard from Gordy Dickson that he had an outline so that he knew what happened in each chapter before he sat down to write, I was amazed. Larry Niven told me, “Of course you have to have an outline. Or how are you going to know what you’re going to do? How are you going to know how the book ends?” I never know how my books end until I get there.

My only hope, as I see it, is the fact that I rely on my subconscious. I will continue to trust it. If it lets me down, I guess we’ll sink together. That’s the only person I trust at this point. If anyone has any suggestions, I’d be happy to hear them.

It seems to me that the only thing I’ve really learned over the years, outside of picking up speed for when I need it, is that writing seems to be more and more a process of learning what you can get away with. I still like to work with mythological characters. If I can get in an outrageous sequence every now and again, it does something for my amusement, if not my aesthetic sense. If there is just one story in the world, and a writer got to write only one story outline, I’m sure it would be ample for everyone’s one story, because I don’t believe any two writers can tell the same story the same way, even if they set out to do it. I’m comforted in that thought.

It’s like the story of Henry James’s Trilby. George du Maurier, Daphne’s uncle, was a noted story doctor. Many writers would call him in for consultation every now and again if they got into a problem. Quite often he would write a chapter for them to get them around some road block. One day he came up with a sterling idea for a novel. He thought who would be the ideal person to write it, and he took it to Henry James, who was a friend of his. “Henry, have I got a story for you. It’s about this girl, singularly undistinguished in all aspects of her existence, save for the fact that, under the influence of hypnosis, she could become a great opera singer.” James thought about it, and said, “It doesn’t really do anything for me. If you’re so convinced it’s a good idea, why don’t you write it yourself ?” Du Maurier said, “Yes, maybe I should.” So he sat down and wrote Trilby, which outsold the sum total of everything Henry James ever wrote⁠—I doubt whether anyone other than Lester Del Rey would argue about the respective merits of Henry James and George du Maurier but, nevertheless, du Maurier contributed a word to the language: “Svengali.”

It makes you wonder. There are certain stories that I don’t feel comfortable writing. I don’t know whether it’s a sign that a writer is not growing or doesn’t have a total world view, but there are some sorts of things which I enjoy writing more than others. I did enjoy handling mythological materials, back when I was doing it constantly. I will still hearken back to it. I do want to do other things⁠—of the hard science type, of pure fantasy of the non-mythological sort⁠—a great number of things I want to try.

Everyone has his own angle of vision. There are conscious writers, conscious plotters, unconscious plotters, fast writers who can hack out a story in a hurry without affecting the quality of the writing a great deal...

For instance, Dumas père was a noted fast writer. He could whip off a story in a great hurry, in a flamboyant creative act. Still, the stories were romantic fun, but classified as classics.

His son was just the opposite. Dumas fils was very slow, painstaking, a meticulous writer who massaged his words, let them talk to one another. At one point in his career, he had spent three months writing one paragraph. He hadn’t quite finished it. The book he was writing happened to be Camille. He was working on this paragraph one evening.

There was a knock on the door. It was his father, whom he hadn’t seen in a long while. There was a lady on each arm⁠—he was a flamboyant writer. His son invited him in, and went off to get him some refreshment. His father was pacing around the room, walked over to the writing desk, looked at the manuscript. After a while, he sat down and finished the paragraph. He waited a little longer; finished the whole chapter. A little longer, and he outlined the rest of the novel. His son hadn’t come back yet, so he went upstairs and made love to both women, came back downstairs just as his son returned, borrowed 2000 francs from him, and disappeared into the night.

There’s a moral to every story. My son has told me that he thinks he might like to be a writer⁠—when he grows up. I hope he’s not the slow, painstaking, meticulous sort. But if he is, I hope he keeps some money around the house.

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I came in as a novitiate here. Now I feel like an old monk. I know, after sixteen years of writing, that the trees are only trees and the clouds are only clouds and the mountains are only mountains. I also know that there are probably an infinite number of ways of regarding them all. I think that’s what writing is all about. I think that that’s what science fiction is all about. That’s one of the reasons I write it, and one of the reasons I love it.

I also see that the slide projector, the blackboard, and the dancing girls still have not arrived, but I’m about finished with my improvisation, and I thank you for your attention, and I particularly want to thank you for bringing me here, to all those involved in putting on this convention for all your kindness and courtesy and generosity you’ve shown. I want you to know that I’ve enjoyed talking with everyone I’ve talked with and I hope to talk with some more of you. Adieu.

Notes

Zelazny delivered this Guest of Honor speech during Easter at the Unicon 1978 convention in Melbourne, Australia; it was transcribed and edited by Bruce Gillespie from an audio recording. Zelazny refers within his speech to several undated events from his own experience. It was Berkley Books who rejected Doorways in the Sand in 1973 and used the excuse that Zelazny hadn’t followed the outline. Zelazny, Philip K. Dick, and Harlan Ellison appeared at the Metz International SF Festival, held September 19-25, 1977, in Metz, France. In early 1968 Zelazny took the partial Deus Irae manuscript from Ted White, and he finished the collaboration with Dick in the spring of 1975.

Northrop Frye was a Canadian literary critic and author whose interest in mythology influenced Zelazny’s thoughts about writing. Franz Kafka was an influential German author who wrote surrealistic works such as The Trial, “The Metamorphosis,” and The Judgement. Eugene Ionesco was a Romanian-born French Absurdist playwright whose works include The Bald Soprano and Rhinoceros. Nobel Prize-winning Irish writer Samuel Beckett wrote Absurd plays, including Waiting for Godot and Krapp’s Last Tape.

The reference to Montpelier is incorrect and may have been a transcription error from the first printing of this speech. Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier was a native of Metz, France, and was the first person to fly in an untethered hot air balloon in 1783. French brothers Joseph and Jacques-Étienne Montgolfier invented the hot air balloon. Mephistopheles was the devil who tempted Faust and bought his soul. Svengali was a musician in George du Maurier’s novel Trilby who trains Trilby’s voice and controls her stage singing hypnotically; the term also means a person who controls another, especially through a mesmerism. Alexandre Dumas père wrote The Count of Monte Cristo, The Three Musketeers, and The Man in the Iron Mask. His son, Alexandre Dumas fils, became a celebrated author and playwrite; Camille [La Dame aux camellias] is his tragic story of a young man who has an affair with a courtesan who later dies of tuberculosis.