Introduction

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Back in 1992, Del Rey published a collection of my short fiction entitled Crosstime Traffic (now available again, this time from Misenchanted Press). That volume gathered together pretty much all the worthwhile stories I’d written at the time I began assembling it—but I’d begun assembling it in 1990 or so, and I only really got the hang of writing short stories around 1986. Those nineteen stories were the vast majority of my published less-than-novel-length fiction at the time.

Since then, I’ve accumulated a much larger body of work—at least eighty more of my short stories and novelets had been published when I first decided it was time for another collection.

Obviously, there aren’t eighty stories in this volume; they wouldn’t fit, and frankly, some don’t deserve to be reprinted. Instead I’ve chosen twenty of my favorites, emphasizing science fiction—where I think I do my best short work—over fantasy, and deliberately excluding several categories.

You won’t find any really gruesome horror here. I write it, all right, and I’m very proud of some of it, but I don’t want to drive away readers who might otherwise enjoy this book by including stories like “Dead Babies” or “Stab.” Vampires have been arbitrarily banished as well, and most of the stories that I think might induce nightmares or queasy stomachs will have to wait for another volume. I did retain an occasional zombie or Lovecraftian beastie, a creepy alien or two, and at least one SF story that’s pretty disturbing, but I’ve kept the outright gore to a minimum.

You won’t find any stories from ongoing series here—no tales of Ethshar nor George Pinkerton adventures. I hope to someday collect those in their own unified collections.

Quite aside from Mr. Pinkerton and the Hegemony of Ethshar, you won’t find much fantasy adventure here, even though that’s my bread and butter at novel length. Oh, there are some unicorns, and the Holy Grail puts in an appearance, but if you’re looking for flashing swords and dragonfire, you’re in the wrong place. I have no solid reason for this particular bias; it just felt right.

So what will you find?

I write short fiction for fun; it doesn’t earn enough money to justify the time spent on it if it isn’t fun. In a way it’s the equivalent of doodles and sketches, where novels are finished paintings. Short fiction is where I try out ideas and techniques I may never use again. For me, as often as not short stories just sort of happen, and are then tossed out to the market. They’re part of the debris that accumulated in twenty years of writing for a living.

So I’ve picked through that debris to find the choicest bits of this and pieces of that. I’ve gathered traditional science fiction, the odd fantasy or two, and some stories I can’t classify. I’m including stories published in major markets, and stories published in obscure magazines or long-out-of-print anthologies, as well as one story never before published anywhere and another only previously published in Britain. I think they’re some of my best work, gathered here for your entertainment. They don’t really have much in common beyond the fact that I wrote them, and I like them.

I hope you’ll like them, too.