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The Genre Artist

JACK VANCE, DESCRIBED BY his peers as “a major genius” and “the greatest living writer of science fiction and fantasy,” has been hidden in plain sight for as long as he has been publishing—six decades and counting. Yes, he has won Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy awards and has been named a Grand Master by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, and he received an Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America, but such honors only help to camouflage him as just another accomplished genre writer. So do the covers of his books, which feature the usual spacecraft, monsters, and euphonious place names: Lyonesse, Alastor, Durdane. If you had never read Vance and were browsing a bookstore’s shelf, you might have no particular reason to choose one of his books instead of one next to it by A. E. van Vogt, say, or John Varley. And if you chose one of these alternatives, you would go on your way to the usual thrills with no idea that you had just missed out on encountering one of American literature’s most distinctive and undervalued voices.

That’s how Vance’s fans see it, anyway. Among them are authors who have gained the big paydays and the fame that Vance never enjoyed. Dan Simmons, the best-selling writer of horror and fantasy, described discovering Vance as “a revelation for me, like coming to Proust or Henry James. Suddenly you’re in the deep end of the pool. He gives you glimpses of entire worlds with just perfectly turned language. If he’d been born south of the border, he’d be up for a Nobel

Boxing Stories

If you read the sports section, James Fallows once observed, then nothing in the newspaper seems fresher to you when it's hot off the presses, and nothing goes stale as quickly. He's right. A day-old sports section is much staler than a day-old front page, and infinitely staler than a day-old comics page, which remains entirely fresh even if you read the next day's comics before you get to it. Who won or lost, who's two games out of first place in the division, who averaged 3.6 yards a carry . . . it all seems urgent the morning after it happens, and then suddenly and completely irrelevant a day or two after that.

If you read the sports section, you know this. But chances are that you're not familiar with the one exception to the rule. Boxing stories don't get stale. I'll explain why in a minute, but first we have to confront a hard truth: you don't know about this exception because you skip the boxing stories. Admit it. You skip them. Admit that you'd rather read about a sort-of-ebullient cleanup hitter's contract negotiations (short version: he's going to be making a lot of money for a long time) or the micro-minutiae of a basketball star's stunningly dull existence (ball, video games, money, call mom; repeat).

Not that there are so many boxing stories to skip. Boxing wedges its way into the margins of daily papers' sports sections only occasionally, usually for one of three reasons: 1) a big fight catches the attention of the general sports press, in recent years often because it featured either Mike Tyson, who managed to mock-convince one

MY DAUGHTER LING-LI, WHO is eight, has lately been menaced by ghosts. They begin gathering at bedtime, preparing to invade her dreams. Deep in the night, awakened by a particularly vivid nightmare after a string of lesser ones, she pads down the hall to my room and comes around to my side of the bed. “I’m having Bad Thoughts,” she says in the dark, her voice low. “Bring everything.” I am the resident expert on bad dreams, having had them all my life: half-seen, slavering beasts surging through doors that won’t lock and windows too small to fit the frame; a long walk down the corridors of hell with a baseball bat on my shoulder; the same unspeakably hideous movie on every channel and the TV won’t turn off and then, somehow, I’m in the movie. Technique is an antidote to fear, I’ve learned, so I taught Ling-li when she was very small that an ally can enter your dreams to bring you specialized equipment you can use to repel various menaces, and that eventually, as your powers as a dreamer grow, you can dispense with the ally’s intervention and train your sleeping mind to produce the equipment when you need it.

Over the years, she and I have assembled an arsenal for her that includes a net for catching monsters; a fire extinguisher, added during her fire-fearing period; a flying castle, and a winged horse to get there; and the Slippery Suit, to foil the bad guys who forever yearn to grab her and spirit her away to their extravagantly unhappy lairs. We’ve recently added a small, smooth stone you keep in your pocket.
The Elements of Providence

Sunset on an overcast late October evening, shortly before the year’s final lighting of WaterFire. The tide is up, surging in from Narragansett Bay, temporarily reversing the direction in which the city’s rivers flow. Fallen leaves drift upstream on the Providence River, which passes between manmade walls through the heart of the city. Where the waters divide, some of the leaves wander to the right into the canal-straight Moshassuck River, but most of them pass to the left into the larger Woonasquatucket River and on into the great circle of the river basin by Waterplace Park, in front of the Providence Place Mall.

Boat-borne volunteers, dressed all in black like Kabuki stagehands, have loaded logs and kindling into 100 braziers—steel-lattice containers shaped like three-foot-high martini glasses—that float, moored, in the three rivers. The reflected lights of the city, brightening in the deepening gloom, seem to rise up out of the depths to move just under the water’s surface. On a riverside walkway, a young man in a ball cap carries a stepladder from bridge to bridge, mounting it to light the candles in ornate chandeliers that hang from the spans’ undersides.

The recorded music begins with the chimes of a summoning bell, then droning strings and flute. More than half a mile of riverfront has been wired for sound, 60-plus speakers connected by UHF transmitters and receivers, time-delay circuits, and a couple of miles of heavy audio cable. The music, a contemplative mix that will range through-

Un Clown Biologique

When I was growing up in Chicago in the 1970s, a story persistently made the rounds in the usual way—it had happened to somebody twice removed from you, or somebody once removed from you had seen it happen—that a kid had cursed out Bozo the Clown on TV. It made sense to me. When you’re too young to put down childish things and too old to continue enjoying them on their own terms, your choices narrow: cultivate ironic detachment, take up precocious dope-smoking (did I mention that this was the ’70s?), or rail against fate. Cursing out a prominent clown in front of hundreds of thousands of witnesses would be an excellent example of option three.

The orange-fringe-coifed, blue-suited Bozo had a long-running live show on WGN, Channel 9, which prided itself on being Chicago’s family station and sought an audience of small children, old people, and those in between who would rather be one or the other. WGN’s programming included Cubs games in the afternoons, Sunday reruns of The Adventures of Robin Hood, and Bozo’s Circus at noon on weekdays. Bozo’s show meandered through rudimentary clown routines—“Well, if you forgot to put water in the bucket again, then there’s no reason I shouldn’t turn it upside down over my head like this!”—and an eleven-dollar cartoon (I see an animated Bozo on a scooter against a de Chirico backdrop, then my memory whites out) before arriving at a shattering climax in the form of the Grand Prize Game, in which contestants would stand behind a line on the floor.

Original publication: The American Scholar, Fall 2004.
The Two Jameses

I got to know Boxing James, who used to manage fighters and promote fights, because he called me at home one day out of the blue to discuss a book I’d written about boxing. Our conversation led to a several-times-daily email correspondence, which eventually expanded to include a number of other fight people and boxing aficionados. When he’s in town, we have dinner. Ascetic, musical, bookish, committed to the avant-garde credo that a true artist in any form revolutionizes the very language he employs to say whatever he has to say, Boxing James makes for an unlikely recovering gangster. But anybody who does business in the fight world has to be a gangster at least some of the time. He has also worked in music, loan sharking, and “the skin business,” as he calls pornography and prostitution. He says he’s done with all that now. As far as I can tell, he has become a post-lowlife bodhisattva. Remarried to his first wife and profoundly in debt, he eats one meal a day, spends rigorous hours at the piano (he played jazz before he became a manager of heavy metal bands), and has given up exploiting other people’s weakness for profit.

James tells a story about a promising heavyweight prospect, a young Dominican who seemed to have it all: he was physically gifted, well-schooled as a boxer, good-looking, personable, and fluent in English. James, who managed him, thought he might just have the next big thing on his hands—the first Hispanic heavyweight champion of the world. After the prospect won his professional debut, James took a
Three Landscapes, with Gamblers

Water-Gazers

I was idling at Pier 11 in Manhattan on a breezy weekend morning, waiting to take the Seahorse Express boat down to the racetrack at Monmouth Park on the Jersey shore. It was the day of the Haskell Stakes, a day of big races and bright July sunshine, and I was eager to get away from the routine of postcollegiate life: office work, bars, playing house with my girlfriend. Seagulls called in the narrow, pot-holed streets that surrounded the deserted pavilions of South Street Seaport. I had intended to give the racing form a thorough reading while I waited, but the play of sun on water distracted me.

That made me a water-gazer. In the first chapter of Moby-Dick, Ishmael marvels at the pull exerted by the sea on New Yorkers: "There now is your insular city of the Manhattoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs—commerce surrounds it with her surf. Right and left, the streets take you waterward. Its extreme down-town is the Battery, where the noble mole is washed by waves and cooled by breezes, which a few hours previous were out of sight of land. Look at the crowds of water-gazers there. . . . Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries. Some leaning against the spiles; some seated upon the pier heads"—as I was—"some looking over the bulwarks of ships from China; some high aloft in the rigging as if striving to get a still better seaward peep." They are all, Ishmael re-