

Confessions of an Over - Age Adolescent

or, you, too, can earn extra cash

practicing psychiatry in your spare time

through correspondence

This is INTERJECTION, despite the above, and it's being produced for the February, 1978 mailing of the Fantasy Amateur Press Association and interested others. It is entirely typed, written, produced, directed, Gestefaxed, mimeoed, collated, stapled, etc. by Jack L. Chalker, 5111 Liberty Heights Avenue, Baltimore, Maryland 21207 U.S.A.

PERSONAL NEWS NOTES. Well, not very long ago I announced that I was, if not the budding Robert Silverberg of the '70s at least the pretender to Terry Carr's throne by selling a book. Everybody looked at the big words and such and said, "Uh, huh, that was me," and even I had some tongue in cheek. And then I sat down and wrote a book called MIDNIGHT AT THE WELL OF SOULS, and it got published in mid-July last, and a funny thing happened.

It became the best selling book in the del Rey line except for stuff like STAR WARS.

Now, don't ask me why it did so; I would like to think it's because it was brilliant and inevitable and all that, but since the book has to date not gotten one fan or pro review that I know of I honestly can't say. The cover's nice but not tremendous, so I'm still not sure.

But, anyway, it kind of sold like hell, and all of a sudden I find myself something of a hot property. Folks calling & writing me asking for stories and whatnot, and offering all sorts of money on a few sentences of outline. The trouble is, when I make an appointment I'm never late, so, unlike Harlan, when I sign those damned contracts I feel a sort of obligation to finish when I say I do.

Thus this month sees THE WEB OF THE CHOZEN, about which more in a minute, and later on this year we'll be seeing THE IDENTITY MATRIX, DANCERS IN THE AFTERGLOW, and probably Part I of THE WARS OF THE WELL as well as stories in Analog & Asimov's.

And they are paying me \$20,000 to write a follow-up (I refused to do a sequel as such) to MIDNIGHT AT THE WELL OF SOULS which will be a two-volume epic.

I'm a little bit stunned. Writing right now is incredibly easy for me, and because all of the creative process in my method is done before I ever write a word, as long as I have books worked out it's only a matter of typing them -- and I have eleven other books currently worked out.

I'm kind of boggled at all this, and I'm not quite sure how to take it. It's gratifying, yes, but a little bewildering as well. It's caused

=====

me to re-evaluate the direction my life's been going in, and to see that I am in for massive changes in lifestyle at the age of 33.

Over a hundred thousand people are shelling out two bucks for my stuff. Now, that's Poul Anderson or Gordon Dickson or somebody like that, but I can not picture me in that situation, and with this kind of income. There is an awful lot of money in writing SF right now.

Other odd changes have included newspapers doing 3 columns on me & folks calling me from all over as a suddenly distinguished expert on SF and this and that.

Of course, fandom is not among this explosion. Dick Lupoff once mentioned to me that old line fans who make it are all automatically placed in two simultaneous categories by other fans: (1) fans who always thought they could make it in prodom are jealous as hell and do gratuitous sniping -- I've experienced some of this already, and (2) most fans will refuse to read anything you've written on the assumption that they know you and it can't be good. This is also known as the Oh, Another Lin Carter Syndrome. That's true, too. I'm even guilty of it. A number of good writers, most notably Marion Zimmer Bradley, suffered it for years. I mention that because of its bemusement qualities, and also because there are a few FAPA members who've undoubtedly undergone it.

I do seem so far to have been in one or another unique position. For one thing, I really haven't been writing all this time and piling up rejection slips. Except for fanzines and bibliographic stuff for Mirage and Arkham House, I didn't really write much of anything. So much for the frustrated writer syndrome. Additionally, I have sold every word of fiction I've ever written.

That's kind of stunning, at least to me.

It has brought up The Most Asked Question time and time again, from interviewers, editors, agents, and lots of fans (even Dick Geis): how come you didn't do it before, and how come you suddenly started like a house afire? It's a hard question to answer, if you're serious about your writing and serious about what you write, and I've thought about it and thought about it for some time. Not the reasons -- the best way to answer them. I finally wound up with a rather analytical autobiographical study which rambled, but, when tightened up, seemed like a sort of speech or something -- a perfect serious speech, except it's not the kind of thing you do as a speech. Yet, it answers it in the most blunt and truthful of ways, and, more importantly, it answers the Second Most Asked Question, the one asked by the few fans who read some of the material and then look up and say, "By not the remotest stretch of the imagination could I have guessed that you would write this kind of story, with these kind of characters, and with this kind of emotionalism. You didn't really write this, did you?"

Well, yes I did, and I finally got to thinking that FAPA, the kind of place where the "old pros" mostly of fandom and some of prodom, many of whom I've known for 20 of my 33 years (which is why it seems like I have been around fandom forever -- I started at 13), might be the proper place for this "talk" that won't be delivered. If it's worth

doing in public at all, it'll be directed at least partially to those people asking those questions. If not, it'll get the usual FAPA reaction -- being totally ignored -- and it won't have mattered while at the same time saving my membership again. So, here it is. Make of it what you will; if nothing else I can just hand it to somebody the next time they ask those questions.

+ + + + +

ON SUICIDE, THE SON OF SAM, AND WHERE WE GET
THOSE CRAZY IDEAS

On November 13, 1964, Philcon, that oldest and most venerable of SF conventions, opened with the usual bunch of people there, including an almost-20 Jack L. Chalker. They were better then; they were less stodgy, and had pretty damned good parties.

Well, almost the usual bunch of people. The wild man of Philcon hadn't shown as yet, but we all knew he'd make it. He'd said he'd be there as always, and that was good enough. But he wouldn't be coming, not that night, or the next, or ever again.

Late in the evening of November 11, 1964, Horace Beam Piper, the scion of two of the oldest families in Pennsylvania and a major science fiction author for over 15 years, finished dinner, took a couple of belts from the ever-present bottle of good whiskey, then went into that special room in his very nice, secluded home in northeastern Pennsylvania where he kept what was considered the best collection of antique weapons in America. He took down an old favorite, not too old as the centuries go but a historical, battle-scarred veteran that was in perfect working condition, and he loaded it, cocked it, placed the barrel in his mouth, and pulled the trigger.

I knew him, probably better than most. As an impressionable 17-year-old I'd stood in that very room, with a strong sense of history both for the collection and for the Beams and Pipers, and admired it. The man, however, you never really knew. He was a deliberate cartoon, a carefully tailored caricature as crafted as Little Fuzzy or Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen. He looked like a comedian made up to resemble an old-time movie villain, and he drank like a fish, sang great bawdy songs, and once had to be physically restrained from taking a rapier and running down Market Street shouting "Death to the Christian Infidels!"

When someone brought the news -- Sam Moskowitz, I believe it was -- we were all saddened, yet there was little surprise. His drinking masked personal agony, as it always does, and we knew it and sensed it although we never before discussed it. A messy divorce, the wife alienating the children, turning them away from him; a ruinous settlement that spelled possible doom for his beloved lifelong home. Intermittent ill health. It was sad, but not a shock.

Except that we were wrong.

The reason Horace Beam Piper took his own life was that he had sent a novel out that he considered to be about the best he could manage to write. It went into his schlocky literary agency, which still exists

=====

to snare the unwary, and, after a while -- quite a long while, months -- he'd heard nothing on it. He'd called the agent in charge of his account a number of times to no avail, and now he'd just gotten the message that it'd "been around" but "nothing yet".

How Beam must have thought about it! The very best he could do, and nobody was interested any more. The history and heritage weighed heavily on him -- he was always conscious of it -- and now, after 15 years of increasing success, he couldn't sell any more. He was no longer a writer, but an anachronism, a piece of past history and somebody else's heritage now. There was no alternative.

The most horrible fact was that the novel had not only sold, it had sold for more money than Beam had ever made off his writing in his whole life. The agent, an assistant, really, had simply been too busy to check and had begged off. It didn't matter to him anyway. Just one of the minor clients.

There are several kinds of writers; some will simply not understand why Beam acted the way he did, along with most readers and the general public. But there's a kind of writer who understands it, and I'm one, although I was over 30 when I finally truly comprehended the fullness of Beam's tragedy.

I had what might best be described as an uneven childhood. I was never an adolescent, going from kid to adult in one big leap. Reading at 3 probably had something to do with it, along with a mild introversion that stuck me hard to people I knew well but made making new ones painfully difficult. The family was poor, but I was spoiled anyway. Being very big and very fat didn't make for an engrossing social life, either. Fat people are the most universally discriminated against group in all humanity; people who are fat because of physical imbalances not correctable without causing side effects that are pretty bad are the worst of all, since society calls them "ugly" "obese" and looks down on them as deliberately running down body and rotting out their minds with a "curable" ailment. Girls -- even fat girls -- look down on fat men, and they're generally bullied and cruelly abused. Society is particularly cruel to the overweight (the only discrimination I can think of that comes close is the one against wearing glasses -- ever notice what the plain girl in the ads does to turn into a beauty queen?). They don't get promoted. They get job rejections. They get social rejections. To be that way in a poor, extremely rough neighborhood is particularly nasty. I have a permanent limp from where a bullet took a chunk of nerve and ligament out of my leg; I have several stab wounds, and I've experienced more concussions than you can count. That's the penalty for being less than physically appealing and at the same time rather obviously a hell of a lot smarter than anybody you know.

You build defenses. You build a character that becomes everyone else's impression of you. Now, it might not come from obesity, but it might come from a trillion other causes. For whatever reason, you develop several characteristics as I did so that, short or tall, fat or thin, ugly or not, there are identifiable characteristics common to all who grow up in this insular manner.

INTERJECTION 2/78

=====

Thus was, at least, the personality -- no, that's not right -- the persona of Jack L. Chalker formed. Brash, loudmouthed, opinionated (or is he? He's always the opposite of whoever's arguing), egomaniacal, and emotionally so stable that it's doubtful if he needs anybody.

The parallel with obesity or any other physical problem is acute -- people always judge other people by their outward appearance, so your persona becomes you to everyone else.

But there you are, locked inside, finally unable to come out even if you want to, simply because you have no alternative. This fictitious person that's you is the only thing you've got.

Beam Piper dressed like a movie villain, told bawdy jokes, drank and leered a lot. I don't know what factors caused his persona to form, but it was locked in. Like mine is. Like yours, maybe.

When this is linked to introversion it develops into social alienation. You become the act, but you also lose your ability to relate to other people as human beings. You see yourself as something apart from them, a different kind of creature than they. A friendly alien, if you will, who likes people, and wants desperately to be one, but can not -- and to whom other people at first do not and then, because of the persona, can not, react to themselves. You are reduced to your self-created cypher.

But only externally. Internally, there's still a real emotional human being somewhere, and that human being knows what is happening to him, why it is happening to him, and yet can not do anything about it. Psychiatric help? You try it, but just the very act of going to an analyst automatically disqualifies you for various jobs and places you in another alienation pigeonhole. Worse, if you discover that the analysts you do try in desperation are generally more in need of help than you, or are more interested in developing themselves as crutches so that there can be an indeterminate uninterrupted series of 50-dollar hours, then you tend to turn away from that avenue.

You are sinking, and, as you sink, time makes you older. Hair recedes, teeth give problems, and you are going toward death forseeing only an endless series of presents, no past you can happily recall, no future. You see yourself a decade from now, older, less hair and teeth, in the throes of middle-age, and still alone, alienated, and otherwise the same.

You are an emotional time bomb. The question is never whether you will go off, but how.

It's always through not the weakest link, but the first available one.

A currently prominent SF fan was once a student of mine. He had lots of problems. He was short and fat and half-blind; not only did he have no sexual outlets, his social outlets were limited by a freezing veneer -- his persona -- which made any close friendships impossible. At home he had a domineering mother who rolled over a weak father; he had a fairly attractive sister whom the parents doted on, lavished everything on while he was always told he was nothing, a little lump,

a zilch better never born, this constantly from mother and aided by sibling rivalry. Outside, he was the cool, unemotional, intellectual type. Inside, he was a volcano. One night his mother got on a tirade and picked up a butcher knife, coming at him. He ran from the house, totally wrecked, and I put him up for the night and arranged for him to get some money and on a plane to distant relatives. Recently a former classmate of his who's a Mirage Press customer wrote me and asked what ever became of this fellow. I told him that he was now making a living on his own and very active in the Gay Rights movement. "Oh, thank God!" the former classmate exclaimed. "I was dead sure he was going to become a rapist."

Outlets. Given an alternative -- and the classmate had surely pegged the other one -- he'd taken the course least harmful to him and to society, and everyone is the better for it. Everyone understands it, why he is as he is, why he turned out as he did.

But suppose there was no way he could have turned homosexual -- or suppose he hadn't found relief there?

I cannot conceive of being homosexual, even though I understand it. It's just not in me. Oh, sure, I can write a lesbian relationship such as THE IDENTITY MATRIX or WELL OF SOULS, but that's easy -- I just assume that a lesbian sees women the way I do, add the capacity for multiple orgasm, and you got it. But I could no more write of a male-to-male relationship than I could about rape. I had that problem in THE IDENTITY MATRIX, you know. Writing for me is much like method acting -- I have to get my mind into the part. One part called for the first-person female protagonist to face rape. I couldn't write it. Rape is the one crime that no male can comprehend from the female viewpoint. Terror, however, I can comprehend, and that's the way the scene was written. And, no, the rape's foiled. Some women who read the book in manuscript marvelled at how I could possibly write such an effective female-point-of-view scene as that. It was easy -- I wrote the universal human emotions, and avoided those I could not directly comprehend.

Which, of course, brings us back to the question -- suppose that outlet ~~was~~ not available to that man?

Ever notice what everybody always says when the newsmen interview the neighbors of the guy they just picked up as the axe-murderer of eleven little children? "Gee, he was always such a nice, quiet kind of guy."

Last year New York was terrorized by a series of bizarre killings done by a guy called The Son of Sam. He'd pick out young couples at random and blast away. He tried for the woman only, but sometimes got the man as well. When they finally caught David Berkowitz, a postal employee described by neighbors and co-workers as a nice, quiet sort of guy, he readily admitted it, although he said he got his orders from an evil spirit that spoke to him through his neighbor's dog. Of course it did. David Berkowitz was raised too strictly and normally to possibly commit those crimes unless other irresistable agencies were involved. HE knew that. So it had to be this spirit....

=====

Why, oh why, would such a nice young man do this? And why those nice couples? Those girls who always went out with everyone but him, who did in cars what they'd never do to him. He couldn't communicate with them. Never had. So he walked through New York streets, watching people do what he wanted to do, act like he wanted to act -- have normal relationships. He had no other outlets. And he was such a nice, quiet guy....

When I was in my mid-twenties a friend of mine introduced me to this girl. She was beautiful. A fashion model. The kind of woman you see up there on TV all the time. She'd been through a bad marriage with a guy that was Mr. Handsome but nasty, brutal, and sadistic as hell. She distrusted anybody who looked good. She stuck to home, and mother, and "safe" men. She was also, for all her beauty (and wealth -- her family had grown damned rich after her sister married a millionaire) extremely uneducated. Her vocabulary was lower-class Philadelphia Italian, and she was acutely conscious of it. She was impressed by people with a lot of education and brains; she was doubly impressed when they came from poor beginnings and spent their adolescence working at every kind of odd job every spare hour to get enough money to keep at it.

But she was also becoming an alcoholic, unable to trust anybody or anything in society, unwilling to risk going out into the outside world on her own again -- and thanks to her in-law's money, she didn't have to. We had a six-year affair. It was emotionally wrenching to me, since I knew in the end she'd never leave her cocoon and while I was the person she liked the most she also got sexual gratification from a local fireman who looked like the Marlboro Man. It finally tore me apart, particularly since she was always announcing her engagement to this guy or talking about marrying him while at the same time playing on my emotions like a yo-yo. She was all I had, but finally they really did get engaged, and she made it plain that she wanted two husbands -- one official, the other when he was working night shift or day shift. It blew the hell out of me to end it, for she was all I had.

On top of that, my teeth were hurting. I have a chronic fear of dentists, but finally the front one broke off. I had to seek help, and did -- and the dentist did a thorough examination but didn't pull the offenders. Instead, I was shipped off to a specialist.

I had a disease, akin to cancer, inside the roof of my mouth and it was microns from the lymphatic system that dumps head waste to the kidneys. Once there, it would have collapsed the kidneys in a matter of days or weeks at best, and been all over the body. They operated -- not once, but time and time again. They had to remove part of the upper jaw to get to it, and rebuild the inside with synthetics. No one knew. Not the local fans, old friends, people at work, not even my parents. I have only recently mentioned it to anybody. I don't know whether or not this isn't another one of those alienation things. A girl I was making friends with got me cornered with some people I knew well and they pressed me and I told them. She reacted like I had contagious hydrophobia; I have never seen her again.

So, there I was -- a disease that could still kill me, if not in weeks, then in months, and it might be five years before we knew if we'd gotten it all just in the nick of time. Alone, nobody to talk

to, nobody around any more -- my few really close friends had all moved to far-away places -- and just coming off an emotionally shattering affair.

Two weeks after the second operation, my partner in Mirage Press, the man who did the typesetting and whose family put up the money, went bananas from his own private demons and was institutionalized. He still is. He's wonderfully normal while institutionalized; one step outside and he's a vegetable. And there I was with all those bills and commitments and responsibilities and no money, no typesetting, nothing.

In a six-month period I had undergone an emotional wrench, been told that I had a 50-50 chance of dying slow and nasty, and lost the heart of my business.

About the only thing left was my teaching, because that was how I made my living (still do, as of now). I love teaching. I teach in an inner-city ghetto school known for its high-risk student body and generally bad mortality rate. A month after the rest of my life collapsed, I was struck on the head by person or persons unknown with a cast-iron receptacle. My head required 19 stitches. The principal didn't even send a card, but, while I lay bleeding and waiting for the ambulance, he told me, "Chalker -- you better damn well not let this get into the newspapers or it's your career." Real heart.

For the first and I think only time in my life I was at a point where the bomb had to explode. I considered suicide, but I have too strong an ego for it. I considered indirect suicide -- that is, murdering all those I felt deserved it until somebody got me. More my style, but it might hurt, physically and emotionally, too many innocent people -- and I was determined that, all things considered, I would not be responsible for causing others such pain.

I sat down at my nice, baby blue IBM Selectric II that belonged to the barely surviving Mirage Press and started to type. A JUNGLE OF STARS, it said, A Novel by Jack L. Chalker. It wasn't whole-cloth. I'd played around with the JUNGLE theme since I was in high school. It was kind of a game. I'd even written a little part of it in a 1963 fanzine. Old friends would bat it around with me and it'd be fun, an intellectual exercise. Now I wrote. The words were there, and they flowed -- it was easy; I knew the whole story by heart anyway.

Ten days later I had 247 pages of manuscript. I sent it to Wollheim, who said he liked it but it wasn't his formula. "Don't worry, though -- this one'll sell," he told me. "Try Judy-Lynn. She likes this type." So off it went to Ballantine, to that domineering little lady I'd known for 15 years and who had thrown me out of "pro only" parties 3 straight worldcons. She hesitated to read it, kept putting it off. "Oh God, another fan novel!" she said over and over to herself (this is from the horse's mouth). She didn't want to read it, and didn't want to reject it because she'd known me so long and Lester and I went back even farther -- and she'd have to see me at cons. Finally she had to read it. Wollheim was right. She liked it, and called me to say that I had sold a book.

I was stunned and gratified at the same time. The money was so good that it paid the medical bills. I turned and tried to salvage what I could from Mirage Press. FEGHOOT got typeset manually by me, and out. It was a big success. Less of a success but just as important to the Press's continuity was the publication of BARSOOM, Dick Lupoff's book. This, and the fact that the fall had brought me 5 really nice classes, lessened the pressure. Judy-Lynn pressed for more, even a short piece for STELLAR. I didn't have anything, I thought. I don't think short. But I did have a story that I'd knocked out in college for a Creative Writing course. So I hauled it out, sent it in, and "No Hiding Place" netted me \$650 and a place in her next anthology.

Still, it was the end of June before I started seriously thinking of a new novel. I had this idea, yes -- a place built by a long-dead race that would be composed of small biospheres, like tiny planets, each with its own dominant lifeform and supporting ecosystem. I mentioned it to Ben Yalow and complained that my math was lousy, that I couldn't decide how big each octagonal biosphere would be and until I knew that and how many there were I couldn't go any further with it. "Could it be hexagons?" he asked. I said, "Sure, why not?" He pulled down Avalon Hill's BATTLE OF THE BULGE game. We counted. 1560 hexagons on the playing surface -- a nice number, too, with the sixes abundant. Five minutes with a pocket calculator and a decision on the planet's size and we had 355 km. per side, 614.4 km across. The poles were dark. But what to do there?

After Westercon 1976 I went up to Washington state, alone, just to get away to the mountains. I discovered a tremendously isolated spot reached only by daily boat up a 55-mile long glacial lake. Stehekin, it was called. I went. No radios, TVs, telephones, nothing. Isolated in a cabin, me, the lake, the mountains. Couldn't get out if I wanted to. And, suddenly, after hiking out to the Pass and seeing again the incredible sight of alpine zones, where one type of life just stops and other starts, I saw what the "hex" borders had to be like. It all just rushed in, including a strange little character called Nathan Brazil. By the time I got back home, I had it all. I started typing on July 24, and I proofed the manuscript at the huckster table at MidAmericon and sent it off the day after I got back to Judy-Lynn. She bought it four days later, published it the following July, and it became the leading seller in the line. I was made.

But it wasn't a business, it was an outlet. I had to write. In April I wrote THE IDENTITY MATRIX, an extremely bitter and cynical look at the ultimate in mind control devices. Every emotion I had came into play there, and I knew it was strong and controversial. This one Judy-Lynn wouldn't like (but, fortunately, Dave Hartwell would). But how to keep in Judy-Lynn's good graces? So, the day after I finished MATRIX, I started a book that was designed just to keep Judy-Lynn happy (she's been paranoid since Joe Haldeman walked to St. Martin's). In nineteen days I wrote what I consider an entertaining but not important book, which I called WORLDS OF MIST AND SHADOW, a line from the book. She decided it was THE WEB OF THE CHOZEN, a terrible pun. It's getting a McQuarrie cover and major promotion, which makes me nervous. It's not that much of a book.

Now I couldn't stop. A short piece in the JUNGLE universe, "Forty

Days and Nights in the Wilderness," off to ANALOG, and back comes a check. An emotionally up-and-down trip west in '77 left me in a mood about as depressed as my worse, and out came DANCERS IN THE AFTERGLOW, my most brutally pessimistic and serious book on politics and social brutality. So much for October '78. An offer to do a Well World sequel. I detest sequels -- they're always worse than the original. So I thought about it, came up with a new novel set on different parts of the Well World with different characters, also serious, brutal, and incredibly complex. Back came big bucks and a two-volume set starting late '78 or early '79. I can't write them fast enough for the editors, and I can't stop writing.

And I wonder. Nothing else has changed. Only the writing. Only the messages that seem to strike some responsive chords. A story on suicide aboard a ferryboat based on a real person and a real ferryboat. Another \$410 from Asimov's. Incredible....

My agent is a young and attractive young woman who wants to be a millionaire on 10%. She has no assistants, and handles her clients directly, always accessible.

I wonder what will happen if the bubble should burst? Five years? Ten? Fifteen? Who knows?

Outlets....

On November 11, 1964 Horace Beam Piper took a gun out of his collection, loaded it, put the barrel in his mouth, and pulled the trigger.

Only a handful of people really cared, and a lot less than that understood why....

...Jack L. Chalker

A P.S. of sorts.... After four attempts to kill me this year, one of which put me in the hospital, and a political cover-up on the assailants by some local educational bigwigs which allowed the students involved to be free to try again, I have resigned from teaching, turning my back on 12 years of trying and some accomplishment. Luckily, with over \$35,000 in contracts already, I'm able to do so. So, it's gone all the way.... At this point, I'm now a professional writer for a living rather than a hobby, and we'll see how it goes. Money is certainly no problem and production isn't either, my worst enemy is my own penchant for disorganization which can cause future problems with the IRS. Well, others have done it, why not I?

Best til next time,
JACK L. CHALKER