

# REFLECTIONS

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## A FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERY

I want to tell you about a hallucinatory experience involving a science fiction/fantasy magazine that I had on a New York City subway platform, at one or two in the morning on a Saturday night in late October, back in the distant past—in the year 1950, in fact. I was fifteen years old.

The magazine was called *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*. It was published between 1939 and 1953, and at the beginning it was devoted to reprinting classic fantasies from the old-time pulp magazine *Argosy*—stories by A. Merritt, Ralph Milne Farley, Homer Eon Flint, and other once-great names. In 1943 it changed policy and concentrated instead on reprinting book-length works of fantasy or sometimes science fiction, mainly by British writers. I began reading it in 1949 and quickly collected a file of back issues. It was in *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*—“FFM” is what we called it—that I first read such books as G.K. Chesterton’s “The Man Who Was Thursday,” Cutcliffe Hyne’s “The Lost Continent,” H.G. Wells’ “The Island of Dr. Moreau,” John Taine’s “The Iron Star,” M.P. Shiel’s “The Purple Cloud,” and many another glorious tale.

One thing you need to know about FFM, in order to properly appreciate the story that follows, is that it was a supremely ugly magazine. Its format was the classic pulp one: that is, 7 x 10, printed in squinchy type on cheap off-white paper, with ragged untrimmed edges that shed little bits all over you. The name of the magazine was announced in huge red letters against the background of an exploding yellow starburst, and the cover paintings invariably showed some barely clad young lady in the grip of a ferocious monster or a rapacious robot. (Sometimes they were a trifle more sedate: the February 1950 cover, for H. Rider Haggard’s Egyptian novel *Morning Star*, showed a nearly topless woman, yes, but her expression was serene, her bead necklace sat beautifully on her almost bare bosom, and instead of a monster there was only a pair of huge staring eyes in the background. It was a cover that played havoc with my barely teenaged libido, let me tell you.)

FFM looked garish and pulpy, but once you got past the gaudy covers you were introduced into the quiet world of British fantasy—tales of hidden kingdoms and lost races of Africa and Asia, told over port or sherry at the club, London fog outside, the clatter of hooves as cabs went by. The magazine came out six times a year and eagerly did I pounce on each issue, back there in the remote days of the presidency of Harry S. Truman.

Now, about that hallucination—

I had been at a party that October night in a leafy suburban part of the Borough of Queens. I lived at the parental home in Brooklyn then, and since New York City is a very big place, I was faced afterward with a long, dreary subway ride in the early hours of the morning. I would hesitate to ride the subways at that hour now, but this was 1950, which by comparison with the present was an innocent age. (1950 is as far from the current year as 1885 was then. In 1885 Grover Cleveland was president, the telephone was a startling new invention, the airplane and the automobile didn’t yet exist.) I have little notion of what goes on at parties of teenagers nowadays, but in 1950 there were no drugs for us, no smoking of anything legal or otherwise, no furtive sex. Everyone at the party was about fifteen, and the most sophisticated of us could be equated, I suppose, to today’s eleven-year-olds. Perhaps, if we located our

host's parents' liquor supply, a few of us would dare to have a nip or two of Johnny Walker or Jack Daniels, but that was about as wild as it got. We danced, we chatted, we flirted in our innocent way. And somewhere past midnight we headed for home—by subway, of course, since we were much too young to drive.

So there I was, by myself, late at night, on a subway platform far from home, sleepy and possibly even a little tipsy. There was a magazine kiosk on the platform, closed at that hour, and I wandered over to peer through the dingy glass window at the magazines on display. And there was the next issue of Famous Fantastic Mysteries. At least, that was the name on the magazine's cover; but it appeared that good old ugly FFM had been utterly transformed, that it had undergone a metamorphosis as complete as the one that turns nasty speckled caterpillars into splendid radiant butterflies.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I didn't believe it. I was convinced that I was having a waking dream.

The hazily visible magazine in the window was an elegant little thing, about two thirds the size of the FFM I knew so well. Its whole aspect was subdued in tone, almost delicate. The red lettering of the title, the blazing yellow starburst panel—both were gone. The magazine now proclaimed its name in slender lowercase lettering. The shaggy edges were gone too. The screaming reds and purples and greens of the usual FFM cover had given way to subtle tones of gray and blue. The cover painting still showed an attractive woman, but she wore an evening gown now instead of the usual shreds and tatters, and no menacing monster was in sight.

So what? you ask. The magazine has had a makeover, that's all. It happens all the time.

Well, yes. But remember that the hour is late, I'm a teenager who has had an illicit drink or two, and there had been no warning in the previous issue of FFM that a big change of format was coming. And, as a very serious young fan of the genre, I am deeply involved in the whole business of science fiction and fantasy magazines—their physical appearance, their editorial policies, every aspect of them. Those things mattered to me then in a way that is hard for the non-fan to comprehend. Staring intently through the kiosk window, I began to wonder whether I was imagining the whole thing. I have always been a rational person—rational to a fault, some would say. I had trouble accepting the notion that I had dipped into some sort of hallucination.

And then, a few seconds later, my train arrived, and homeward I went, nearly alone in the car, going over and over the image of that transformed magazine in my mind. I grew ever more worried. Had I really seen it? It seemed less probable every minute.

In those days new magazines were delivered to the newsstands two or three times a week in big bundles. I bought mine at a stand on the corner of Flatbush Avenue and Church Street in Brooklyn, next door to my high school. I used to see the bulky package sitting by the newsstand door when I arrived for class, and at the end of the school day I would stop in to check on whatever might be of interest to me in it. There were a dozen or so science fiction pulps then, all of them forgotten now, rough-edged magazines with colorful names: Startling Stories, Thrilling Wonder Stories, Planet Stories, Marvel Science Stories, Super Science Stories, and so forth. I bought them all—eagerly, passionately. According to my most recent issue of FFM, which I pulled from the shelf first thing the next morning, the next number was due on the stands on October 27. That was five days in the future, for this was Sunday, October 22. Another bit of support for the hallucination theory: how could that kiosk possibly have been displaying the magazine a week ahead of publication date?

I spent an uncomfortable week thinking about the format of Famous Fantastic Mysteries. I suspect I even lost sleep over it. There was no one I could talk to about

my thoughts—my schoolmates would merely be mystified by the extent of my concern, and I could just imagine what my father, a super-rational certified public accountant, would have said if I told him that his son was wondering whether he had been having hallucinations over a silly magazine while coming home much too late from a faraway party.

I would have been spared all that uncertainty, all my intense adolescent confusion, if I had been able to see the latest issue of *Fantasy-Times*, the six-page mimeographed newspaper of the science fiction world that came out a couple of times a month. I was a subscriber, of course. The second October issue—a special Extra—led off with the bold headline:

FFM NOW DIGEST SIZE  
112 PAGES—TRIMMED EDGES

The whole story was inside. “The next issue of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* will be in a new format. It will be digest size, 8 1/2 x 6 1/4, contain 112 pages, will have all edges trimmed, and be printed on good-quality semi-slick, book paper. . . . The magazine is now more adult in appearance and has a ‘literary’ look about it.”

Which would have spared me all those troubled thoughts about whether I had lost my mind on a subway station in Queens, if only I had seen it in time. The problem was that the dateline for the story in *Fantasy-Times* was October 20, the night before the party. The issue itself, according to the postmark on my copy, wasn’t mailed until midweek. I got it, most likely, on Saturday, October 28—and by then the Friday newsstand package had arrived, the new issue of FFM had gone on display, and I had seized it with eager, trembling hands. It was, of course, the elegant, made-over magazine I had seen in the subway kiosk on the previous Saturday night.

So I had been neither tipsy nor the victim of hallucinatory fantasies! The magazine I had seen was real—and further confirmation followed when I finally got the new issue of *Fantasy-Times*. The only thing that remained unexplained, and it always will, was why the subway kiosk had been able to put it on display a week before the official publication date.

Indeed, the beautiful new format lasted four whole issues. (A letter from me, complimenting the editor on the changeover and signed “Bob” Silverberg, was printed in the third of them, dated May 1951.) Then someone in the business office must have noticed that the expensive new design had not resulted in any increase in sales, and in the summer of 1951, FFM reverted to the old pulp format, though it did, at least, keep the handsome new lettering of the magazine’s name on the cover.

And why, you surely are asking, could any of this have been so important to me?

Because the incident had briefly caused me to doubt my own sanity, no trivial thing; but also because in that far-off age I was enmeshed in the world of science fiction magazines with terrible intensity, not only a reader of them but a student of their publishing history, their various editors, their changes of format and policy. Just as a baseball scholar can tell you Ty Cobb’s batting average for 1912 or the number of home runs that Babe Ruth hit in 1921, I could hold forth on demand about *Astounding Stories of Super Science*’s evolution in 1931 into plain *Astounding Stories* and in 1938 into *Astounding Science Fiction*, and so on and so on almost literally ad infinitum. That degree of emotional involvement with science fiction publishing when I was fifteen translated itself, just a few years later, into the wildly prolific writing career that saw me filling the magazines of the day with dozens of my stories, and onward as a writer for the next fifty years. There are hardly any science fiction magazines of the old sort left now, though dozens of a very different sort have sprouted on the Internet and at the hands of desktop publishers. Does anyone today care as much about those magazines as I did back in 1950? I’d like to think so. But I wonder.