

REFLECTIONS

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REREADING L. RON HUBBARD

L. Ron Hubbard was famous—some would say notorious—as the founding figure of Dianetics, a method of psychotherapy that evolved into what is now called Scientology. But long before he ventured into Dianetics he was a science fiction writer, and a very good one, one of the mainstays of John W. Campbell's top-of-the-field magazine *Astounding Science Fiction* and its fantasy companion, *Unknown*. It's a long time since I've read any of Hubbard's fiction, and recently I thought I'd take a look at what may be the best of it, the fantasy novella "Fear."

Campbell, who had been a major science fiction writer himself, was twenty-eight years old and had been editing *Astounding* for about a year when he hatched the idea, in the fall of 1938, of doing a companion magazine that would run fantasy—fantasy of a special kind, lighter and more sophisticated than what the pulp magazines of the day were publishing. "The material is to be fantasy," he told a friend, "plus a little weird, supernatural and horror of the psychological type. No sex, no sadism, no beauteous and necessarily nude maidens sacrificed to obscene gods."

The new magazine, which ultimately would appear under the title of *Unknown* and, later, *Unknown Worlds*, was destined to revolutionize the entire concept of fantasy fiction. In its short but dazzling life of thirty-nine issues—wartime paper shortages would snuff it out in 1943—it would bring into the world such future classics as Robert A. Heinlein's "Magic, Inc.," L. Sprague de Camp's "Lest Darkness Fall," the Harold Shea novels of de Camp and Fletcher Pratt, and Fritz Leiber's "Conjure Wife," all of them a new and refreshing kind of fantasy fiction that depended for its effect on the careful, logical development of flamboyantly imaginative ideas. What Campbell intended to do, and did, was to turn his stable of first-rate science fiction writers loose to deal with the wilder reaches of fantasy in a sober, rational, science-fictional way. That group of science fiction writers included L. Ron Hubbard, who became one of the magazine's most productive contributors, and one of its most important. Hubbard's work for *Unknown* ranged from rollicking tales of Arabian Nights adventure to stories of nightmarish psychological suspense—and most notably the terrifying novella, "Fear," with which Hubbard astonished *Unknown*'s readers in 1940, and which has maintained a place in print ever since. I read it long ago; and, rereading it now, I found that it stands up very well, eighty years since its first publication.

Finding material for the new magazine was a challenge for Campbell. The only magazine publishing any sort of fantasy then was *Weird Tales*, founded in 1923, which had given readers the great stories of such writers as H.P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, and C.L. Moore. But its fiction inclined toward somber tales of supernatural menace, full of dark shadows, clanking chains, sinister rustlings in the underbrush. What Campbell had in mind was something more playful, fiction that toyed with the material of fantasy in a more exuberant, light-hearted way. As he put it years later in the introduction to an anthology of stories from the magazine, previous fantasy magazines had concentrated primarily on "gloom and terror," and though horror had its place, "horror injected with a sharp and poisoned needle is just as effective as when applied with the blunt-instrument technique of the so-called Gothic horror tale."

He explained to any number of writers what he wanted for *Unknown*, a special

kind of fantasy in which the logical implications of some fantastic premise would be explored with the kind of rigorous precision that he required for science fiction, however wacky and whimsical the result. One of the first to respond was L. Ron Hubbard, a regular contributor to *Astounding*, with a short novel called "The Ultimate Adventure" that ran in Campbell's second issue.

The Campbell-Hubbard relationship had not begun promisingly. Hubbard was a prolific writer for the action pulps, regularly featured in such magazines as *Thrilling Adventures*, *Detective Fiction Weekly*, *Western Action Stories*, and *Mystery Stories*. But he had never so much as dabbled in science fiction. Years later he would say of it that he was "quite ignorant of the field and regarded it, in fact, a bit diffidently." But in 1937, when *Astounding* was under the editorship of F. Orlin Tremaine, Tremaine was growing uneasy about circulation trends, and was bothered, Hubbard later said, because the magazine was mainly publishing stories about "machines and machinery."

When Tremaine became executive editor of the pulp-magazine chain that included *Astounding* and brought Campbell aboard as the science fiction magazine's new editor, he told Campbell fairly bluntly to add a couple of veteran pulp writers to his roster who would bring more storytelling verve and more human interest to the fiction *Astounding* ran. One of them was L. Ron Hubbard.

Campbell had no interest in the Western stories and tales of Yukon adventure that were Hubbard's specialty, and he reacted sourly to Tremaine's order. But he had no choice but to buy Hubbard's stories, and they proved immediately popular. Hubbard became not only a regular contributor but a close friend.

As *Unknown* began to get under way, Campbell picked Hubbard to do stories with an *Arabian Nights* flavor—ones that told of the adventures of ordinary men unexpectedly thrust by magic into a striking world of exotic color, where sorcery was real and evil spirits lurked in palace corridors. Hubbard wrote several of those for *Unknown*, of which the best known is the novel *Slaves of Sleep*.

They would not, however, all be lighthearted tales of wizards and djinns. Once he had turned in *Slaves of Sleep*, Campbell wrote him, "Please start now on your next Arabian Nights yarn. What'll it be about? I'd like to get it in about four weeks." But Hubbard was busy with a very different kind of story for *Unknown*, "Death's Deputy," a dark, grim tale of a haunted fighter pilot who went unharmed while bringing catastrophe to everyone about him. And then, a few months later, came *Fear*.

When he announced it Campbell said that "*Fear* would set cold lizard feet acrawl on your spine and make voices gibber in your ear." Reading it again now, I agree. He was not exaggerating. Stephen King, writing many years later, would say of it, "This is a classic tale of creeping, surreal menace and horror . . . This is one of the really, really good ones." And Ray Bradbury, who was just twenty years old when *Fear* was published, said of it that it "deeply influenced me" and was a "landmark novel in my life."

Hubbard had high ambitions for *Fear* when he set about planning the story in the early days of 1940. "If I handle it properly," he said in a letter to a friend, "it will be something Dostoyevsky might have done." Perhaps because he was aiming so high, he had uncharacteristic difficulty getting down to work on it. On January 18, 1940, he wrote, "I have been so upset about a story for the past few days that I have not written, not wanting to touch the mill. However, I finally got the plot of it licked and am doing research upon it. The story will be named 'Phantasmagoria' and the theme is, 'What happened to Dwight Brown on the day he cannot remember.'" Over the next ten days he outlined the story but still could not get into the right mood for it. "It is a pretty dolorous story and so I suppose I had better tell it very calmly and factually, without striving to dwell on mood."

It did not, he decided finally, have to be gruesome in tone from the beginning.

Better, he thought, to have it open quietly, in “a sleepy college town with spring and elms and yawning students,” and, writing in a “nice, delicate style,” gradually lead the reader toward the nightmares that would unfold. On January 29 he wrote the opening pages. The title, “Phantasmagoria,” became “Fear.” Protagonist Dwight Brown became Jim Lowry. Two days later he reported that he was moving along nicely, with 3,800 words written that day. On February 1 he noted, “If I am lucky, it will be under the deadline Tuesday night,” and a week later he wrote, “Johnny [nobody else called Campbell ‘Johnny’!] bought the last half but I must do a little rewrite on the first half.” It had taken him not much more than seven days, once the wheels had begun to turn, to produce one of the masterpieces of horrifying fantasy. Campbell ran it in the July 1940 issue. It has been reprinted in book form many times.

The story begins crisply—Hubbard, the consummate pro, knew all that there was to know about storytelling—and within a few lines Professor James Lowry and a friend are talking, quite calmly, about “primitive sacrifice and demons and devils.” A moment later the theme is picked up, without explanation, by mysterious whispering voices. But the tone remains low-key for a while—until Lowry begins to discover that four hours of that afternoon have dropped out of his memory. And then things darken—and darken—and darken—as Hubbard builds toward the crushing revelation of what Lowry was doing in those four hours. It’s beautifully handled, a master class in the art of the dark fantasy narrative.

Reader response was immediately and emphatically positive. One letter published in the October issue said of it, “Lord, what beautiful writing! The conception, the hellish picture of those nightmare regions, the realism; all were combined to make as vivid a picture of sheer horror as ever crawled in a maniac’s brain. It was a strange—and, I assure you, unpretty—mixture of fascination and disgust. I felt sick after finishing it. But I’m going to read it again.”

And the critical reception has been consistently enthusiastic. Anthony Boucher, reviewing it in 1957, called it “a pioneering masterpiece of the modern psychological school of suspense and terror.” Stephen King had a similar opinion a generation later: “L. Ron Hubbard’s *Fear* is one of the few books in the chiller genre which actually merits employment of the overworked adjective ‘classic.’” In 1990 the editor and anthologist David Hartwell spoke of it as among “the foundations of the contemporary horror genre” and described it as “a work of deep psychological insight and moral complexity that helped to transform horror literature from an antiquarian or metaphysical form into a contemporary and urban form with the gritty details of everyday realism.” And so it has gone ever since. But the last word on *Fear*, perhaps, is the very first paragraph that Hubbard attached to the story on its initial appearance in the July 1940 *Unknown*:

“It is not a very nice story, nor should it be read alone at midnight—for it is true that any man might have the following happen to him. Even you, today, might lose four hours from your life and follow, then, in the course of James Lowry.”

Hubbard was past his peak as a writer by the time he started Dianetics in 1950, and there is nothing very distinctive about his later fantasy and science fiction. But in *Fear* he gave us a terrifying masterpiece of fantasy fiction.