

MAGAZINE
SECONDS

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HARLAN ELLISON



HARLAN ELLISON is the supreme lord of Inner Space, where the universe of the mind collides with physical reality. Harlan is an anti-entropic force that, like art, imitates life — and like art, his writing is subject to many interpretations, all of them correct!

Inner Space is the domain of Science Fiction, which was once an exploitative genre in which worn-out themes played out against improbable backgrounds representing the dreams of a nascent scientific culture. A few Sci Fi writers — Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke — struggled to inject plausibility into their work, but most were unable to transcend the parameters established by the hacks of Sci Fi's golden age. The good guys rode rockets and battled aliens and won, assuring the reader that humans and not bug-like creatures would rule the galaxy. By the 1960s, Science Fiction had become Cold War jingoism and sensationalism. Harlan Ellison changed all that.

**“Art, like life, has only one overriding message,
and that message is ‘pay attention.’”**

SECONDS: *Tell us about your typewriter.*

ELLISON: I use Olympias exclusively. Olympias were the best typewriter made in the last forty years. In fact, when Robert Bloch died he willed me two of his.

SECONDS: *You have a good typewriter repairman?*

ELLISON: Yes I do. He can still repair them but they stopped making good cotton typewriter ribbons

years ago and they were producing these nylon ones that wouldn't put up a dark image. I like a dark-looking manuscript, so I found a guy in Long Island who would make the ribbons. He said, "But I haven't got the metal spools. If you find me the spools, I'd be glad to make them for you." So I spent six months going to antique stores and garage sales and managed to amass a hundred of these spools and sent them to him. I got fifty typewriter ribbons and anytime I need them, I send more spools to this guy."

SECONDS: *You're a William Friedkin fan —*

ELLISON: I worked with Billy and we had a very strange experience. At one time, he took an option on one of my best stories, "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs." I went to Paris when he was married to Jeanne Moreau and he intended to do the film with her. The first night I was in Paris, I got arrested by the French secret police for the attempted assassination of the president of Poland. The next night, Friedkin and Jeanne Moreau were invited to launch this elegant restaurant in Versailles. So I'm sitting at a table with Jeanne and Billy and we start talking. So I say to him, "I think *Sorcerer* is the best film you've ever made. It's better than *The Exorcist* and *The French Connection*." Billy said, "Ah, it was a piece of shit! Didn't make a dime." I was appalled and said, "What do you mean it's a piece of shit?" He told me it bankrupted him and I got very upset. Here I am arguing with the director telling him how good his film is, and he's

telling me how bad it is. Friedkin is a very opinionating, hard-nosed kind of guy and the two of us sat there arguing nose-to-nose. I didn't think we were very loud but after this had been going on for awhile, I looked up and we cleared the goddamned restaurant! It kind of soured our relationship and he never made the movie. I like Billy Friedkin a lot; he's an enormously talented director. When

he's on his game — and not being a prima donna — he's one of the best producers this country's ever produced.

SECONDS: *What distinguishing characteristic makes a film good?*

ELLISON: Innovation.

Anything that takes me someplace I've never been before or shows me a new way of thinking. High-order talent is in very rare supply. When they're allowed to do what they do, you wind up with something like *Citizen Kane*. But anybody can do Pauly Shore in *Jury Duty*. This is stuff you see and say. "You have to be moronic to laugh at this stuff."

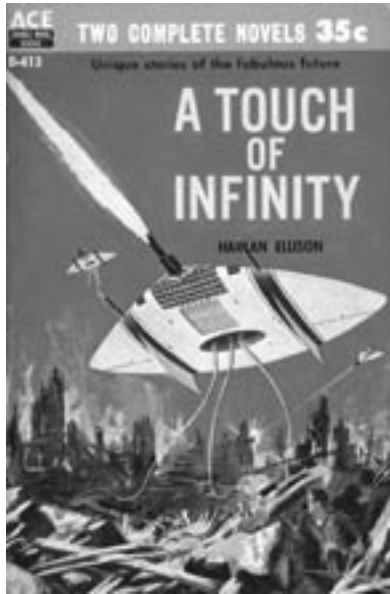
SECONDS: *Maybe the*

entire form is corrupt.

ELLISON: I don't think any art form can be inherently bad.

SECONDS: *What was your involvement with Valley Of The Dolls?*

ELLISON: My involvement with it was very strange. I'd just won the Writers Guild award for Most Outstanding Teleplay for "Demon With A Glass Hand" on *The Outer Limits*. I got offered a job by this producer David Weisbert, and it gave me my big break into features. We had a meeting at Twentieth Century Fox and he gave me this huge typewritten manuscript called *Valley Of The Dolls* by Jacqueline Susan. He said, "Take it home and read it and if you think you could do the screenplay, we'll talk." Because it was my first feature film offer, it would've been awful for me to say no. I took it home and it was that awful! It was semi-literate in my estimation. My youthful hubris dictated I take the job anyway because I could turn this sow's ear into a silk purse. I signed up



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to do it but what I didn't know was that Jacqueline Susan's husband was a New York entrepreneur who figured out a way to turn the book into a best-seller. Their contract with Twentieth was based on the number of books sold, if it got to the best-seller list, they were to get another \$200,000. If it became #1, another \$500,000. For every week it stayed on, they were getting more and more money. While I was busy writing, Twentieth was spending more and more money. They got antsy and took me off the project and put on two women who were known for writing what they called "women's pictures." They got knocked off the product and another woman was brought in. I never got further than writing the treatment.

SECONDS: *Were you involved with Heavy Metal?*

ELLISON: Not really.

When they were in the earliest stages, the publisher wanted to use a story of mine called "How's The Nightlife On Cissaleda?" He wanted it to be one of the sections of the movie. He entered into early negotiations with me to purchase the rights, and at that point they brought in Ivan Reitman. Apparently, when he comes in on a project, anything done previously goes right out the window. He wants to have his own way, which is one of the wonderful things directors do. He just rejected my story out of hand, I was paid a small kill fee of a couple grand and that was that. But by that time, they'd been announcing the movie was going to be made and would have adaptations of works by Mobius, Corben, and Harlan Ellison. That's how my name came to be associated with it.

SECONDS: *What became of the I, Robot project?*

ELLISON: The introduction to that book is a historical record of why the project never got made. It's an illustrated screenplay with some marvelous paintings by Mark Zug. Isaac Asimov loved that screenplay.

SECONDS: *Did you guys get along?*

ELLISON: We were the closest of friends for

thirty-five years.

SECONDS: *He could call you a Science Fiction writer —*

ELLISON: He could, but he never did. Isaac knew the difference between being a Science Fiction writer and a writer who happened to write some Science Fiction. I reject the phrase because it's not accurate. I've won a

lot of awards in that field but I've also won awards in the Horror and Fantasy fields. "Science Fiction writer" is an anomalous false, a thoughtless way of describing somebody. I may have used the phrase in my earlier days but in the last twenty-five years I have tried to get the words taken off my work. I'll do a book like *Spider Kiss*, which is a Rock novel, and I find it in the Science Fiction shelf.

SECONDS: *Would "Speculative Fiction" describe a fusion of your interests?*

ELLISON: That was Robert Heinlein's phrase. All fiction is speculative. I reject all genre labels because if you try to identify things, you begin to exclude a lot. The people whose work is borderline get thrown into the wrong place. My idols as a writer were never Asimov or Heinlein or Arthur C. Clarke, they were Jorge Luis Borges, Edgar Allan Poe, and Franz Kafka.

SECONDS: *How about Nelson Algren?*

ELLISON: Algren was an early admiration of mine. *Chicago: City On The Make* was always my favorite. In fact, I was told he praised me in an interview *The Paris Review* did with him. I hear these things belatedly when it's too late to thank the person. A few years ago, a disciple of Ayn Rand came up to me and said, "You know, Ayn was a very big fan of your work." This just blew me away. I can never get so jaded that I'm not amazed when someone who excels in their field validates my existence by saying, "Yes, I like what you do." When I discovered Robin Williams was a big fan of mine, it just knocked me out.



“When I started hearing that Rock & Roll was the ‘street poetry of the masses’ or that it was going to change the culture, I said, “Here’s more bullshit.”

SECONDS: *Peter Nichols wrote that you portray the real world through a lens of fantasy.*

ELLISON: He’s paraphrasing what I’ve said about my own work. In a television interview in England, the interview was saying my work didn’t seem to be Science Fiction, and I leapt out of my chair to kiss him. I said what I write is Hyperactive Magic Realism. I take the received world and I reflect it back through the lens of fantasy, turned slightly so you get a different portrait.

SECONDS: *What effect do you wish to have upon your reader?*

ELLISON: Art, like life, has only one overriding message, and that message is “pay attention.” That is the summation of my feeling about the value of art, whether it’s ballet, painting, or Etch-A-Sketch.

SECONDS: *Is art like life, an anti-entropic force?*

ELLISON: I think art is anti-entropy. That’s a very good observation. It’s a little loftier than I would come up with on my own. You’ve got to understand, you’re talking to a guy who got kicked out of college.

SECONDS: *For insulting your creative writing teacher?*

ELLISON: That was one of the things. I also got arrested for shoplifting an Oscar Peterson album. This was at The Ohio State University. I was broke and working my way through college. I didn’t have money and I had to have the album. I got busted and I had a real low grade point average. Out of possible 4.0, I had a .086. As far as I know, I had the lowest grade point average in the history of Ohio State.

In truth, everything I know I’ve learned from doing it, observing it, or reading it. There’s very little formal training. I started writing professionally in 1955 but I think only now I’m beginning to learn to write.

SECONDS: *In 1955, you had something published in Infinity —*

ELLISON: Right. That wasn’t the first thing I had published but it was my first short story. The amusing thing is that James Blish, who was a great writer and a dear friend of mine, said that story, “Glowworm,” is the single worst story that had ever been published in a Science Fiction magazine. I always laugh at that. I went back a few years ago and re-read it and it’s not all that bad. It’s a piece of junk but it shows the kid had some real talent.

SECONDS: *What did you learn about writing in the Army?*

ELLISON: I didn’t learn anything except how to write under the worst possible conditions. I wrote my first novel in basic training, and we’re talking Ranger basic training. I was at Fort Benning in Georgia and we’d get up at four in the morning and do a twenty-mile forced march with a full pack and then static line jumps all day. Everybody would come back to the barracks, eat dinner, and then collapse and fall asleep. I had a board secreted in the barracks and a typewriter in my locker. I’d put the board against my la, sit on the john, and work on my novel, *Web Of The City*, in basic training under those conditions. It was just me sitting at a toilet at midnight, knowing I’d have to be up in four hours to go through another grueling day. I didn’t like the Army. I didn’t go voluntarily, I was drafted in 1957.

SECONDS: *Didn’t Web Of The City come out of your experience with gangs?*

ELLISON: That’s exactly what it came out of.

SECONDS: *Discuss hanging out with them.*

ELLISON: That’s in a book called *Memos From Purgatory*. It’s the complete story of how I ran with this kid gang in Brooklyn for ten weeks under an assumed name and then



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how I subsequently wound up going to jail for twenty-four hours in New York at The Tombs.

SECONDS: *You wrote Spider Kiss in 1961, before Rock Culture really got cookin' —*

ELLISON: Colonel Tom Parker took an option on the book once, so everyone seems to think it's a novel about Elvis Presley but it isn't — it's Jerry Lee Lewis. I wrote that when Rock & Roll was just getting started.

SECONDS: *Were you a fan of Rock & Roll?*

ELLISON: Oh yeah, I could listen to Jerry Lee for hours. Roy Orbison — all the guys who did heavy R&B.

SECONDS: *Then the music began to change.*

ELLISON: When I started hearing that Rock & Roll was the “street poetry of the masses” or that it was going to change the culture, I said, “Here's more bullshit.” Rock & Roll is just music. That's all it is. It's not revolution, it's just fucking going to a club and dancing. The Moody Blues are not the national anthem. You don't go to war because Smashing Pumpkins have a big hit.

SECONDS: *How about the drug scene that was attendant to Rock?*

ELLISON: When I hit the road at thirteen, I rode the rails with hobos. I was always hanging around with Jazz musicians and saw a lot of drugs and alcohol. Most of the writers I knew in those days were alcoholics or had already died of a pickled liver. I never drank and I never used drugs. I'm not the person to ask about that stuff. I don't know and I don't want to sound

as if I know. All I know is that to produce work, I have to have my wits about me. My

mind is enough of a jumble as is. Fucking myself with artificial stimulants is never going to do me any good. I guess I learned that early on seeing people who'd been drinking too much. In those days, marijuana was fairly common. Also, peyote was legal. I never got any great cosmic messages myself.

SECONDS: *Did you try this stuff?*

ELLISON: I tried peyote once in New York and got sick to my stomach for three days.

SECONDS: *How about pot?*

ELLISON: It's possible that somewhere at some time somebody stuck a joint in my mouth and I may have taken a puff, but I don't remember. I never used acid, I never

used heroin, cocaine — none of those things. As far liquor, the most I've had was years ago at a party when somebody got pissed off at me for not drinking and they gave me an inch of beer at the bottom of a glass. I drank it to be a good guy and I got looped, absolutely drunk out of my mind on one inch of stale Budweiser.

SECONDS: *What about the legal status of drugs?*

ELLISON: I'm not in a position to talk about it. This is probably a cynical thing to say but I think people left to their own devices will behave badly.

SECONDS: *As the counterculture developed, your writing seemed to adapt to it. I'm sure people in 1968 would have described I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream as psychedelic.*

ELLISON: I'm sure they would but I was in my complete right mind when I wrote it. When someone says, “That's psychedelic,” I say,

“No, that's just the way I think.” My mind is constantly filled with odd images and



“Some of my stuff inspired other people who might not have risked it. It gave them the imprimatur to go ahead.”

manifestations of “What if?” — “What if?” is a game I play all the time.

SECONDS: *Perhaps the counterculture influence got into your work by osmosis.*

ELLISON: We’re talking around 1965 when I did *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream* and *A Boy And His Dog*. We were coming out of a period in this country of real repression — the 1950s. They deify it now in movies but it was a restrictive era. Throughout those years, there was this puritanical, hypocritical sentiment, the only offset of which was *Playboy* magazine, which was considered incredibly obscene. The same was true in the field of Fantasy and Speculative Fiction. The stories never talked about any of the things

going on in the real world like labor relations or race relations or sexism or any of the things that were happening at the time. A lot of us got tired and started a new kind of writing. In fact, it was called the “New Wave.” It was not a new wave of one school, it was just a lot of individual writers, each of them doing their own thing their own

way. Somebody else was breaking through and being able to do it — Samuel Delany, Norman Spinrad, Roger Zelazny, and even some of my stuff — inspired other people who might not have risked it. It gave them the imprimatur to go ahead.

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