

## EAT OR BE EATEN

I love all sorts of science fiction, enjoy much fantasy, and can put up with some horror. There is, however, one theme that cuts across all genres that I have never been able to stomach. It's a theme that has been popular in the movies, on TV, and even in mainstream novels. It's one that I've been coy about mentioning until now on the theory that persistent writers will view my squeamishness as a challenge. Still, as they say, if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. It's time to own up that from aliens to post apocalyptic starvation to zombies, the concept best guaranteed to make me lose my appetite is the idea of feasting on intelligent life.

One of my first exposures to this gruesome theme was, *It! The Terror from Beyond Space*, a 1958 low-budget movie that I saw during a weekly Saturday afternoon film forum in my elementary school gymnasium. In grimy black-and-white, a hungry ET stalks a hapless human crew throughout their spaceship.\* Sound familiar? Hollywood has certainly dined out on that plotline on more than one occasion. But once was enough for me. I've managed to avoid *The Thing* in its many movie incarnations along with *Night of the Bloodbeast*, *Alien*, *Critters*, and all other films focused on ravenous aliens making meals out of human beings. *Aliens* was released not long after my husband and I started dating and he was bitterly disappointed to discover that he couldn't take this science fiction editor to see it. He got his revenge by watching *Alien 3* on the VCR just as I was going into labor with our first child. No matter how much I enjoyed Damon Knight's "To Serve Man," I have always been annoyed by the idea that first contact will amount to little more than a picnic for aliens—with us as the main course.

It's not just aliens planning their next menu that humans have to watch out for. In high school, I could not bring myself to read the blockbuster bestseller, *Alive*, much as I sympathized with the survivors of a horrific Andean plane crash. Stories about the unfortunate Donner party never were much of a temptation, either. "Timothy," a ballad of trapped coal miners, is not one of my favorite songs and Shakespeare loses me with *Titus Andronicus*. Humans munching on humans after the bombs fall are a staple of disaster fiction. Learning that there was an obligatory scene of implied cannibalism in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* did not move the book to the top of the stack on my nightstand.

Not all instances of cannibalism ruin my supper. Leigh Kennedy's "Belling Martha" (*Asimov's*, May 1983) is a subtle examination of what it takes to survive the end of the world. *Silence of the Lambs* is one of my favorite novels, and, while it forever affected my view of communion, I had no problem with the Martian ritual in *Stranger in a Strange Land*. As Betsy Mitchell, long time SF editor and former managing editor of *Analog*, said while working on Donald Kingsbury's *Courtship Rite*, "I don't mind cannibalism as long as it's done tastefully."\*\**Courtship Rite* is a novel about humans who have developed a society based on cannibalism in order to survive on an inhospitable planet. The book was serialized in *Analog* in 1982 and was a finalist for the 1983 Hugo Award. Despite its remarkable qualities, I have to admit I was very nearly put off by the novel's casual mention of baby pâté.

And zombies. Don't get me started. I don't actually mind zombies that hew to the original Vodou religion. Lucius Shepard's *Green Eyes* and Jonathan Lethem's "The Happy Man" (*Asimov's*, February 1991) owe much to that tradition. The protagonists of

these memorable tales may be reanimated corpses, but at least they don't eat people. Alas, the works of George A. Romero et al. have pretty much trounced the understated approach to fiction about the dead. The stories that permeate my submissions system are far more influenced by *The Walking Dead* than the *Loa*.

And it cuts both ways. I find stories in which humans eat intelligent aliens equally unappealing. As a child, I was tormented by Jack Vance's vision of "The Dragon Masters." While they aren't on the *carte du jour*, these formerly intelligent and belligerent aliens have become draft animals. It would only require a small step to move from beast of burden to the breakfast table. Unpublished stories that come my way have featured aliens sautéed, grilled, stewed, and fried, but I saved you from them. They are usually meant to be comical, but here my sense of humor fails. I admit it can be fun, though, when the tables are turned by the would-be prey and the hunter becomes the hunted—as in Neal Asher's "Softly Spoke the Gabbleduck" (*Asimov's*, August 2005) and Mike Resnick's "Hunting the Snark" (*Asimov's*, December 1999).

These creatures aren't hunted for dinner, they're hunted for trophies, much like self-aware elephants are currently slaughtered for their tusks. The thematic material is relevant and well worth exploring. Despite my reservations, I'm happy to stay in the kitchen looking for those delicious tales that break all my rules and leave me hungry for more.

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\*My thanks to author Tim Sullivan for the link to the movie's original trailer at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WncV1eIOZRU>. The film answers the philosophical question, "What is the usual reason an intelligent creature kills?" with the profound, "It's hungry?" One is left wondering why the alien and what's left of the crew couldn't have reached détente over a nice steak dinner.

\*\*Editor Stanley Schmidt made a similar comment at a Midwestcon when asked about an upcoming issue of *Analog*. "I told them about *Courtship Rite* and added, 'Cannibalism is an integral part of the story, but it's handled very tastefully.' They almost threw me into the pool." And well they should have.