

THE SECRET SHARER

I have always been intrigued by science fiction stories about characters who share one body, and, perhaps, one mind. This fascination may have arisen from reading Hal Clement's signature novel, *Needle*, at my father's suggestion. I was enthralled by the young boy and the four-pound symbiotic life form dwelling within his body who hunt down the parasitic interstellar villain that has seized control of another human being. Of course, my interest in stories about people with a shared conscious could also have been piqued by Robert Heinlein's ribald novel, *I Will Fear No Evil*, which I sneaked away from my dad and devoured before he could attempt to declare it off limits.

Heinlein's story, about an old man whose brain is transplanted into the brain-dead body of a young woman only to discover that the body has somehow retained her conscious mind, was published in 1970. It is in some ways similar to the myriad tales of telepathy that were so popular during the Cold War. In those stories, the characters could share intimate details, but they had their own bodies to return to in the morning. In Heinlein's novel, the characters must coexist in the same terrain. Critics panned *I Will Fear No Evil*, but to my unfettered teenage mind the idea was kind of awesome.

While aliens and reanimated bodies weren't really available to mystery and other mainstream authors, these writers accomplished similar special effects by creating characters who suffered from dissociative identity disorders. Stories about characters that don't know they are the murderer can be traced back to Robert Louis Stephenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. These tales became even more common after the publication of Flora Rheta Schreiber's novel *Sybil* in 1973. Characters suffering from DID were generally unaware of their multiple personalities, however, and, unless they were part of a comedy routine,

the separate identities rarely engaged in a dialog.

Science fiction does have its share of stories about characters with buried second personalities who are following their own agendas. In SF, though, the explanation for the buried personality isn't a psychological one. The willing suspension of disbelief serves us well here. We are able to accept, at least till the story's end, that the assassin actually has been implanted or that ancient immortal entities really are calling our shots.

What these stories share with their mainstream counterparts is that the body is never in the possession of more than one personality at the same time. The characters do not carry on an interior dialog with each other. As with the original Sybils of ancient Greece, or Professor Trelawney in Hermione Granger and Harry Potter's divination class, the primary personality disappears when the submerged entity takes over.

An *Asimov's* story that does feature entwined characters is Robert Silverberg's 1987 Nebula finalist, "The Secret Sharer." This tale shares the title with and is a tribute to Joseph Conrad's 1910 novella. Both stories feature inexperienced captains who don't let on to their crew about a stowaway. Conrad's story has an excellent title. The stowaway secretly shares space in the captain's quarters, and clearly shares the major secret of his presence with the captain. Bob takes the title metaphor a couple of steps further. His stowaway is the matrix of a young woman's mind. She isn't just sharing physical space with the captain, she's sharing space within his psyche. If there are no barriers to thought, how can the main character fail to share his deepest secrets with this disembodied passenger?

With the stowaway in his mind, the protagonist is able to find a level of courage he's never known before. We realize that even when she leaves, the young captain will have been forever

changed by this journey. Bob's story is subtle and insightful. I wouldn't compare it to the Heinlein novel, but a story about two human minds commingling is probably more closely related to that book than to Hal Clement's adventure tale.

Direct descendants of the Hunter in *Needle* would have to be the Trill—symbiont aliens featured on various episodes of Star Trek. The Trill are a small slug-like species that can exist within the body of a humanoid alien. The long-lived slug passes the memories of previous hosts along to its companion. I always felt that these characters failed to live up to their full potential. The depth of knowledge that should have been handed from one generation to the other just didn't seem to be there.

An *Asimov's* story that treats this subject well is Benjamin Rosenbaum's 2004 Nebula award finalist "Embracing-the-New." Here, tiny parasites called "Ghen-nungs" hang onto the outside of their host's body. These creatures can be inherited, giving their hosts the vivid memories of their ancestors, and new parasites can be accumulated. A dialog doesn't ac-

tually occur because the Ghennung's thoughts are integrated into the other being's consciousness, but the host is diminished when a connection is lost.

Will McIntosh's Hugo award winning story "Bridesicle," which appeared in the January 2009 issue of *Asimov's*, is another story that plays with the concept of multiple minds sharing one body. In this bittersweet tale, people can carry uploads of the dead. Will does a lovely job exploring the pluses and minuses of this strange situation. He is expanding the story into a novel, and I look forward to reading the book when it appears.

It would be fun to put some of these different sorts of stories about the secret sharer together in an anthology. Keeping the murderer's identity hidden might be tricky in a book like this, because the reader would be on the lookout for that submerged personality. Still, I think the idea of two entities peering through a single pair of eyes would stay vibrant from story to story because there are so many different ways to approach that mysterious hitchhiker of the mind.