

EARTH IS THE STRANGEST PLANET

One morning some fifty-five years ago I came into the office of John W. Campbell, Jr., the already legendary editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*, greatest of all SF magazines, and there, leaning against the wall behind his desk, was a new painting that cover artist Ed Emshwiller had just brought in.

“What do you think of it, Bob?” John asked. In his Socratic way he was always asking the visitors to his office for their opinions about this or that—even his newest and youngest regular contributor, which is what I was.

The painting puzzled me. At first glance it looked like a cheerful rural scene somewhere in New England or Kansas: a boy walking down a rutted dirt road with a fishing rod over his shoulder, a cow thrusting its head through a barbed-wire fence to slurp up some flowers by the roadside, a couple of birds standing in the path. At second glance I saw that it wasn't Kansas. The “cow” had a face like that of no cow ever seen on Earth, the “birds” looked more like little dinosaurs, and there were two crescent moons visible in the pleasant blue sky. I smiled. And then I took a third glance. There was a pelican sitting on one of the fence posts. “That isn't Earth,” I said. “So what's that pelican doing there?”

“Well, don't you think pelicans are just as weird-looking as any extraterrestrial critter is likely to be?” said Campbell.

That painting is on the June 1958 issue of *Astounding*, probably pretty hard to find now. But the incident stayed in my mind, and, about twenty years later when I was editing anthologies, I did one called *Earth is the Strangest Planet*, with stories in it by Brian Aldiss, Harry Harrison, R.A. Lafferty, Avram Davidson, and assorted others, with this introductory statement of theme:

It is not hard to find wonders in science fiction, but mostly they are found in stories set in remote galaxies or in the vast reaches of the future. . . . But there are more real wonders in a puddle of muddy water than in a million imaginary galaxies, and the book you now hold in your hand is intended to demonstrate that. . . . Our inexhaustible, always surprising home world [is] the planet that gave the universe the stegosaurus, the kangaroo, the Venus flytrap, the pelican, the turtle, the lobster, and a billion other miracles, not the least of them the human imagination.

Science fiction writers have given us not only a legion of strange animals and landscapes, but also a panoply of bizarre cultures at least as odd, in their way, as the pelican and the stegosaurus are in theirs. But, as John Campbell pointed out to me that day long ago, sometimes the real world is every bit as strange as anything ever dreamed up by SF writers.

A few years ago, for example, I came across a novel called *Broken April*, by Ismael Kadare, which centers on the custom of blood feuds as practiced to this day among the clansmen of Albania's mountainous northern highlands. Kadare is one of the great novelists of our time, though it is his misfortune to write in Albanian, perhaps the most obscure European language. His work reaches us because he has a gifted translator in Paris who turns it into French, from which it can be translated—with considerable accuracy, apparently—into English. I've read half a dozen of his novels, one of which, *The Palace of Dreams*, qualifies as

science fiction, or at least fantasy. (It is about bureaucrats in an empire much like that of the Ottomans whose task it is to sort and classify the dreams of all the citizens in the hope that they will find Master Dreams that provide clues to the destiny of the realm.)

In *Broken April*, the unlucky protagonist, Gjorg, becomes trapped in the traditional Albanian cycle of family feuds when his older brother is murdered. Gjorg, as the oldest surviving male of his family, has no choice but to seek out his brother's killer and shoot him—after which, he knows, he will be tracked and killed in turn by an avenger from the other man's family. This bleak and harrowing novel makes frequent reference to the *Kanun*, the Albanian code of customary law, which regulates not only the rules of feuds but just about every other aspect of life in the Albanian highlands. Gjorg must follow the *Kanun* at every step.

I thought for a time that the *Kanun* was fictional, an ingenious bit of background material invented by Ismael Kadare to provide the underpinning for his remarkable book. But not long ago I discovered that it really exists, and in fact has been translated into English and published by the Gjonlekaj Publishing Company of New York. I have a copy on my desk right now, a big red book called *Kanuni I Leke Dukagjinit*, "The Code of Leke Dukagjini."

It could easily be the code of laws of some extraterrestrial civilization. Albanians are human beings, of course—I have met a few, and I can attest to that—and their homeland is right in the middle of Europe, with Greece on one side and Montenegro, Kosovo, and Macedonia, three pieces of the former Yugoslavia, on the other, but their *Kanun*, conceived by the tribal leader Leke Dukagjini in the fifteenth century and compiled much later in written form by the Franciscan monk Shtjefen Gjecov, is a book of twelve sections with 1,262 clauses that offers us a picture of a most unusual way of life that most of us can only

regard as alien. It is of a level of strangeness that the most inventive of science fiction writers would be hard pressed to match.

Consider the rules of plundering, by which is meant mainly the stealing of sheep. "Plundering is avenged by plundering," we are told. "Plundering is not settled otherwise than by plundering in return or by guns. . . . For an act of plunder committed in the mountains the owner must have his livestock restored, but receives no other compensation. For an act of plunder committed in a sheepfold, the owner must have his livestock restored and a fine of five hundred *gros*h for the honor of the sheepfold." To which many other conditions are appended. "If the plunderer is supported by the village and the Banner, the person whose livestock has been plundered has the right to plunder the livestock of anyone in that village or Banner, in order to recover his honor and to be compensated for his own livestock. . . . The bellwether of the flock may not be taken as plunder. If the bell worn by the bellwether is taken as plunder, this act dishonors the entire flock and the sheepfold. The plunderer must pay a fine of five hundred *gros*h and may not take a single head of livestock." Et cetera, et cetera.

As for murder: "A murderer is a person who kills someone with his own hands. As soon as a murderer has killed someone, he must inform the family of the victim, in order that there should be no confusion regarding his identity. . . . The murderer, if he is able to do so himself, turns the victim over on his back. If he can, well and good; if not, he must tell the first person he meets to turn the victim over on his back and place his weapon near his head. . . . The murderer may not dare to take the victim's weapon. If he commits such a dishonorable act, he incurs two blood-feuds. . . . The murderer may move around at night, but at the first light of day he must conceal himself."

The *Kanun* goes on to specify the elaborate rules under which a twenty-four-

hour truce between the villages of the victim and the murderer is arranged so that the victim can be buried; the murderer is expected to attend the funeral and accompany the body to the cemetery and also to go to the wake, and he is protected during that time, though “if the murderer does not go to the funeral and the wake after the truce has been given, it is not considered dishonorable for the family of the victim to withdraw the truce, since the murderer has added insult to injury.”

And then the feud begins: “Blood is Paid for with Blood,” declares Chapter CXXVI of the tenth section of the *Kanun*. We are told that under the old *Kanun* only the murderer himself incurs the blood-feud, but the later *Kanun*—and this decree is the core of Kadare’s novel—“extends the blood-feud to all males in the family of the murderer, even an infant in the cradle.” Cousins, nephews—everyone is at risk as the feud unfolds, each side claiming a life in vengeance for the last life taken, though ultimately reconciliation can be achieved through the intervention of the parish priest or by the tribal chiefs. If such reconciliation is achieved, “the ‘meal of the blood’ occurs when the mediators of reconciliation of blood, together with some relatives, comrades, and friends of ‘the owner of the blood’ go to the house of the murderer to reconcile the blood and eat a meal to observe that reconciliation,” after which the “owner of the blood” carves a cross on the door of the murderer’s house, and—the final touch—“It is a law that the tool—the adze—with which the cross is made must be thrown over the roof of the murderer’s house.”

The *Kanun* in its current edition is a book of 269 large pages, with Albanian and English text on facing pages. It covers not only feuding and sheep-rustling but all other sources of conflict in tribal Albania. Chapter LVII of Section Four, for instance, proclaims that “land boundaries are not movable.” Boundary markers must be “large, towering rocks thrust into the earth and exposed above it.” A

special ceremony solemnizes the establishment of a boundary line, and it thereby is fixed for all time. “In the view of the *Kanun*, the bones of the dead and the boundary stone are equal. To move a boundary is like moving the bones of the dead.” Once the final oath has been sworn, the clan elder places his hand on the boundary stone and declares, “If anyone moves this stone, may he be burdened with it in the next life.” But there are consequences in this life, too: “He will be punished with dishonor and will also bear the cost of the damage that he caused by creating this discord. If a murder results from the mischief relating to the moved boundary, the person who caused the mischief must be fined one hundred sheep and one ox, and is executed by the village.”

It’s a fascinating document. I could quote from it all day: the regulations concerning trade, the sanctity of guests (you must avenge the murderer of your guest as though he were a member of your own family!), damage done by pigs, the laws of marriage and inheritance, and on and on and on. Any SF writer looking for ready-made rules for some alien culture could easily plunder it—without fear of incurring a feud—and find all the strange laws and customs anyone would need. But the *Kanun* is no alien artifact. It’s a set of rules governing a very real community living in a tough, merciless environment right here on our planet, and, though obedience to it was severely punished by Albania’s former Communist government, its use has been revived in the hill country in post-Soviet times, and there are people who live by it in this very century. Science fiction is, yes, a literature of imaginary wonders and marvels, and more power to it; but Earth itself, our far from prosaic native planet, serves up plenty of real ones of its own. ○

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