

REFLECTIONS

ONE-HIT WONDERS

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The history of science fiction is marked by the presence of writers who gave us one story of such great impact that it totally overshadowed the rest of their work and turned them into one-story authors. Certain classic examples come immediately to mind: Daniel Keyes and “Flowers for Algernon,” Jerome Bixby and “It’s a *Good Life*,” Judith Merrill and “That Only a Mother,” T.L. Sherred and “E for Effort,” Wilmar Shiras and “In Hiding,” Tom Godwin and “The Cold Equations.” Then there are the writers who visit our field only long enough to contribute just a single unforgettable story and then never write a second one: A.J. Deutsch, for instance, who wrote “A Subway Named Moebius,” T.R. Fehrenbach, author of “Remember the Alamo,” or Malcolm Edwards, whose lone story was the splendid “After-Image.” Even Cordwainer Smith was a one-hit wonder from 1950, when his astonishing debut story “Scanners Live in Vain,” was published, until the appearance of his second story, “The Game of Rat and Dragon,” in 1955. Among novelists, the same phenomenon exists: Walter M. Miller’s only novel was *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, George R. Stewart’s was *Earth Abides*, Bernard Wolfe wrote only *Limbo*; David Lindsay is known just for *A Voyage to Arcturus*, Daniel Galouye for *Dark Universe*, Ward Moore for *Bring the Jubilee*.

Wyman Guin (1915–1989) was another of those remarkable one-story stars, and, in fact, radically transformed science fiction with the one story by which he is remembered. Writing science fiction was a pastime, not a profession, for him—he earned his living first as a pharmacology technician, then as advertising director for Lakeside Laboratories, a Milwaukee pharmaceutical company—and his entire output consisted of one novel and eight short stories, of which only one, “Beyond Bedlam,” attracted serious notice. But what a story that was!

Guin had had one story published prior to “Bedlam”—“Trigger Tide,” which appeared in the October 1950 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction* under the pseudonym of “Norman Menasco,” and which finished in last place in that issue’s reader popularity poll. But by the time it appeared, Guin was already at work on the story that would establish his place in the annals of the field—writing it not for *Astounding*, but for its shiny new competitor, *Galaxy Science Fiction*, under the editorship of the brilliant, irascible H.L. Gold.

Gold’s magazine, just a few months old in 1950, was the first serious challenger to the long-time dominance of *Astounding*, edited by John W. Campbell, Jr. and the undisputed leader in the science fiction field since the mid-1930s. Soliciting material from Campbell’s top writers, offering them a significantly higher word rate, and prodding them to write with a freedom and abandon that the often dogmatic Campbell would not countenance, Gold established the leadership of his magazine from its very first issue, dated October 1950, which featured a three-part serial by Clifford D. Simak and backed it up with major stories by Theodore Sturgeon, Fritz Leiber, and the newcomer Richard Matheson. Succeeding issues maintained that level of quality with material by Isaac Asimov, James H. Schmitz, Anthony Boucher, Ray Bradbury (the first version of what would become *Fahrenheit 451*), C.M. Kornbluth, and many another top-level writer.

While *Galaxy* was getting under way Wyman Guin was at work on “Beyond Bedlam,” doing draft after draft for the fiercely demanding Gold. We know that because Gold tells us, in his editorial in the August 1951 issue in which the story appeared,

that "Bedlam" was "the result of two drafts before submission and two end-to-end rewrites afterward. A total of better than 80,000 words was thus needed to produce 20,000 words that satisfied Guin's literary conscience and mine."

It was Guin's background in the pharmaceutical industry, Gold says, that provided the starting point for the story. Aware of the rising incidence of schizophrenia in post-war America, Guin fastened on the idea of a society in which a majority of the citizens were schizophrenic. What, then? How would the nonschizophrenic minority cope?

Gold's editorial sets forth not only Guin's creative process but also the method of story construction that Gold had proposed to many of his other authors, and which had already begun to define the *Galaxy* mode of narrative:

Push your idea to a speculative extreme. Make the unusual the norm for your society, and then see how things would play out.

The easy way, the old way, would have been to write a melodramatic horror story: a handful of "normal" people surrounded by an army of psychotics and desperately fighting for survival, or, conversely, a dedicated band of normals organizing to overturn the schizophrenic-dominated world. But what Gold wanted, at least in the early years of his editorial career, was stories that went beyond the easy plot choices. What if schizophrenia were the norm, a universal condition, sustained and supported by medication designed to make everyone, for the greater good of society, remain permanently in a schizophrenic state? What would justify the existence of such a society? And, with a rationale for it firmly established, what would be its "system of ethics, education, morals, laws, etiquette, interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships," all to be developed in a manner "consistent with its psychological basis."

In other words, invent a parallel society, one that made perfect sense on its own terms, that bore little or no resemblance to the one we live in. To explore such societies, to examine the psychological and interpersonal intricacies that would evolve in them, was the goal that Gold set for his authors. It resulted in a kind of story qualitatively different from those on which John W. Campbell had built his towering editorial reputation. Campbell had been responsible for the development of a pack of new writers who shaped modern science fiction—Heinlein, Asimov, Sturgeon, Sprague de Camp, L. Ron Hubbard, A.E. van Vogt—but he was primarily interested in the future of technology, in the means by which man would explore and conquer the Universe, in the mechanisms that would create the worlds to come. Psychological insights and the play of human emotions meant little to him, and, in fact, he may actually have regarded them as distracting story elements. Gold wanted his writers to depict the interior life of those worlds to come, digging deep into the psyches of their characters, and, in the main, he succeeded in getting them to do it—and they were mostly the same writers, Sturgeon, Leiber, Simak, Asimov, Alfred Bester, James Blish, "William Tenn," and Robert A. Heinlein, who had helped Campbell build his magazine, plus such newcomers as Philip K. Dick, Damon Knight, Edgar Pangborn, and Robert Sheckley.

Guin's "Beyond Bedlam" is full of rough edges, as a novella by a novice writer might be expected to be. Its opening pages are loaded with exposition as Guin struggles to establish the assumptions on which his schizophrenic society is based and the pharmacological principles that make it work. My guess is that Gold toiled mightily through draft after draft to help Guin slip all this material into the story and ultimately accepted the fact that this was the best his writer could do with the technical resources at his command. But once everything is finally set up the tale unfolds with a weird, inexorable power that no one who has read it can forget, with Guin's imagined world of benign psychosis taking on a sort of bizarre plausibility that, for the moment, makes it seem more real than the one that we ourselves inhabit.

That was the beginning, and, essentially, the end of Wyman Guin's career in science fiction: one masterpiece, out of the blue, that permanently inscribed itself in the

history of the field. Like Philip José Farmer's equally revolutionary "The Lovers" of a couple of years later, it showed science fiction writers a way to handle emotional richness and depth in an extrapolative story, opening creative possibilities that had simply not existed in the relatively limited sphere of magazine science fiction before.

Guin's other stories, all but one of which are collected in a now obscure 1967 paperback called *Living Way Out* (which, I see, carries laudatory blurbs from H.L. Gold, Isaac Asimov, and Robert Silverberg), were, by and large, minor stuff. I have many times sung the praises of the 1964 novelette "A Man of the Renaissance," which handles the Leonardo-da-Vinci-as-superman theme with a poise and a confidence far beyond anything that was at Guin's command at the time of writing "Beyond Bedlam," but I seem to have been the only one to notice the story, and up 'til now I am the only one to have included it in a science fiction anthology (several times, in fact). And his one novel, *The Standing Joy*, attracted almost no attention when it appeared in 1969, a year when major novels were appearing by the bushel all around us, so that an unheralded book by a little-known writer was likely to sink without a trace, which is what happened to *The Standing Joy*.

But "Beyond Bedlam" remains, the one story by which Wyman Guin will be remembered. As a story in its own right it is compelling and powerful even sixty-plus years later. And as the harbinger of a revolution that brought us a new way that science fiction stories could be written, it changed the field forever.