

Visions of Paradise #150



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Artwork

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Out of the Depths

Twelve Greatest Living Science Fiction Writers

This is a risky list to make, since it is invariably influenced by personal preference, although I have tried as much as possible to avoid that. My criteria for selection on the list are (1) overall high level of writing; (2) several true masterworks; (3) importance to the sf field; and (4) longevity. Anybody who disagrees is free to send me the name of their own great living writer whom you feel that I overlooked.

The authors are listed in roughly chronological order, **not** in order of preference:

1. **Frederik Pohl** is probably the senior living writer of science fiction, a major figure during two different eras. In the 1950s he co-authored a series of major satirical sf novels with Cyril M. Kornbluth, titles such as **The Space Merchants** and **Gladiator-at-Law**. After spending a decade as editor of **Galaxy** and **Worlds of IF**, he returned to full-time writing with such important works as “The Gold at the Starbow’s End” and the *Heechee* series, notably **Gateway**.
2. The publication of **The Martian Chronicles** alone make **Ray Bradbury** a worthy addition to this list, although other titles such as **Fahrenheit 451**, **Something Wicked This Way Comes** and collections **The Illustrated Man** and **The Golden Apples of the Sun** contained wonderful pieces of science fiction which emphasized ambiance and characterization rather than science and technology.
3. Has there ever been a finer master of sense of wonder and creativity than the wonderful **Jack Vance**? I cannot recall any sf more fun to read than the *Demon Prince* or *Dying Earth* series. But Vance can be serious as well in novels such as **The Languages of Pao** or **The Grey Prince** and in short fiction “The Last Castle” and “The Moon Moths.”
4. Whenever I am looking for a good, solid read which combines future speculation, outstanding storytelling, and an emphasis on historical development, I seek out either Poul Anderson or **Robert Silverberg**. Any of “Nightwings” or **Dying Inside**, **The Book of Skulls** or “Born With the Dead” could have been the capstones of entire careers, but they were merely a few of the many gems written by perhaps the finest single living sf writer.
5. **Brian W. Aldiss** is a chameleon, able to flit between core science fiction and purely literary fiction, often incorporating elements of both in the same stories. The *Hothouse* series was superb far-future speculation, and such works as the *Helliconia* series and **Graybeard** rank among the pantheon of the best sf of the past half-century.
6. **Ursula K Le Guin** is probably the most renowned writer on this list, and deservedly so. Her seminal works such as **The Left Hand of Darkness** and **The Dispossessed** are reason enough for her great reputation, but other works such as her *Earthsea* novels and *Hainish* series (the latter including the above-mentioned novels) are also outstanding works by a truly great writer.

7. If there is one writer whose absence in recent decades saddens me, it is the wondrous **Samuel R. Delany**, whose fiction excites as much as it infuriates, since they often require multiple readings to fully understand everything which is taking place in them. He created the foundation for cyberpunk fifteen years before it became popular in the 1980s. Works such as **Babel-17**, **Nova**, **Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand**, “The Star-Pit,” “Empire Star,” and “We, In Some Strange Power’s Employ, Move in a Rigorous Line” were truly the mark of a genius (a word which I do not throw around loosely).

8. **Gene Wolfe** is in some ways the descendent of Jack Vance, since Vance’s *Dying Earth* series certainly influenced Wolfe’s *New Sun / Long Sun / Short Sun* series, although the latter are more in-depth explorations of a far-future milieu rather than the former’s fast-paced romps. Like Delany, Wolfe’s fiction often demands multiple readings, whether in his detailed series mentioned above, or shorter works such as **The Wizard Knight** or short fiction “The Fifth Head of Cerberus” and “The Death of Doctor Island.”

9. Another great writer missing-in-action the past two decades is **Michael Bishop** who combines serious literary analysis with a strong sense of humor. Consider his *Catacomb Years* stories or his series of novellas about a modern woman’s affair with a primitive human in racially-charged Georgia (**Ancient of Days**) or his sequel to **Frankenstein** in which the monster becomes a minor league first baseman (**Brittle Innings**).

10. One prime aspects of great science fiction is the ability to think creatively and write serious stories based on fantastic premises. **John Varley** possesses that talent, as well as being an outstanding storyteller. His seminal short fiction such as “The Persistence of Vision,” “Blue Champagne” and “The Pusher” continue to astound, and his novels such as **Titan** and **Steel Beach** are both entertaining and rich with thought-provoking ideas.

11. One of science fiction’s major aspects is creating and exploring distant worlds and alien races, the specialty of **C.J. Cherryh** who is also a master storyteller in works such as **Downbelow Station**, **The Faded Sun** and the *Chanur* and *Foreigner* series. Any reader with an interest in culture-building should find Cherry’s aliens truly wondrous reading.

12. A relative child of less than 60 years old compared to the other writers on this list, **Kim Stanley Robinson** combines the best elements of literary merits, detailed future history, thought-provoking ideas and storytelling. Novels such as **The Wild Shore**, the *Mars* series and **The Years of Salt and Rice** would each be a highlight in another author’s career. If any writer can equal Silverberg in my personal pantheon, it is Robinson.

Obviously, with a list of only twelve writers, a lot of important living writers had to be excluded from it. When I posted this list at my sf blog, it created a minor firestorm as people attacked me for not including their personal favorite writer. One person even accused me of not having read any sf in the past 20 years (Obviously they had never seen my blog previously). Some of the writers I considered but who fell short of the list for various reasons included Greg Benford, Orson Scott Card, Harlan Ellison, Joe Haldeman, George R.R. Martin, Lucius Shepard, Anne McCaffrey, Jack McDevitt, Stephen Baxter, Alastair Reynolds (the latter three for lack of

longevity), Larry Niven, Michael Swanwick, Kate Wilhelm, and Connie Willis.

Ironically, I wrote an article entitled “Who Influenced Science Fiction?” for the fanzine **Thrust** in 1984 wherein I selected 10 important writers and editors. When I decided to expand that list, it quickly grew to 100+ names and became my book **Who Shaped Science Fiction?** I do not anticipate expanding this list of 12 out of fear it would require a book to do the entire sf field justice, but you never know.



The Passing Scene

Jan 27-30, 2010: Thursday was one of those days which I will really miss after I retire. As soon as school ended, I was sitting in my classroom grading papers when three girls from last year’s 8th period Honors Algebra 2 class—one of my very favorite classes ever, as well as one of the best—came to visit me. I chatted with Wei, Lo and Liu for nearly 2 hours. They visit me regularly, coming for tutoring, advice and guidance or just to chat, and I will be sad not having them for AP Calculus next year. It was their class which reacted the most emotionally when they learned about my retirement.

That same evening was the Indian Culture Club “movie night,” but since I had so many papers to grade, I sat across the hallway in the cafeteria grading. It was just as well, since the movie had no English subtitles. Shah sat with me for nearly two hours working on AP Statistics, along with Pooja, who is in Jean’s regular Calculus but wants to take the AP Calculus test in May, so she is working with me on it. Overall, it was a very nice day, even though I did not get home until nearly 9:30pm.

Friday night we went to the Chinese buffet with Alan & Denise, so I ate more food than I should have eaten, but it was definitely enjoyable. Saturday we visited Mark & Kate and saw their new kittens Kali and Rocky for the first time, then we went to another Chinese buffet with them. Fortunately, the selection at the second buffet is so extensive that I hardly repeated any items from the night before, which is unusual for area buffets which mostly offer the same food.

February 1-6, 2010: A busy week. Monday night was *Eighth Grade Parents’ Night*, so I was at

school until 8:15pm advising parents of next year's incoming freshmen. I can't believe how many Asian parents urged me to continue teaching for another 4 years until their child graduates! Obviously I was flattered. (

Tuesday was *Target Teach* grading for the 2nd marking period, so I got home about 7:30pm. Because I spent my weekend grading papers, these two late nights put me far behind in inputting my final grades onto the computer. I tried to work on them after school both days, but the Math Lab was inundated with students who followed me to the computer with questions. Guo sat with me by the computer doing Calculus Monday afternoon, and Tuesday Wei was desperately for help on mathematical induction for her Honors Precalculus test the next day. Soon Lo came as well, so I abandoned my grades to help them. Wednesday afternoon they both returned to discuss next year's schedules with me.

A busy weekend. I have an AP Calculus test and an Honors Algebra 2 midterm to grade (although half of the latter was multiple choice which I already did on the scantron), plus an AP Statistics test to write. I also have not finished the January issue of **VoP** for posting at efanazines.com, plus I need to finish **Ride the Lightning** (my mailing comments zine for FAPA) so I can copy it before the 2/16 mailing.

Andy is in Phoenix for a Reliv Convention this weekend. Jean drove him to the airport at 4:00am Thursday (then took a day off to sleep), and he is returning Sunday evening. Hopefully his flight will not be pushed back due to today's storm, since we do not want to be driving home from Newark late the night before school.

I seem to have gained some weight this school year, up to 180 pounds (which is about 5 pounds above my usual weight). I anticipate getting a lot more exercise when I retire, including going to the YMCA three times per week (instead of the once a week now), plus having more time for walking. But I don't want to wait that long before starting to get into better shape. I rarely use the abs machine in my office, which I should, and maybe I should cut back a bit on my eating.

In addition to numerous reasons to be thankful (family, health, job), I have several reasons to be cheerful as well:

- After several decades of reading, I am still passionate about books, primarily but not exclusively fiction, especially science fiction and historical fiction. I cannot picture myself going more than 24 hours without reading;
- I also love writing, both fiction and nonfiction, and I hope to do that quite extensively after I retire;
- I really enjoy spending time with my students. A typical day at school consists of my students arriving shortly after I do at 6:45am, then I spend nearly 2 hours with them before I start teaching. I spend my free 7th period tutoring again, and finally another hour or so after school with students. I deliberately do not think about my life after retirement when I will no longer spend a large portion of my time with students;
- I have always been a big fan of rock and roll, especially progressive rock, but I also like a lot of good core rock and roll, and even the occasional hard rock band;

- Although I have been out of school since the mid-1970s, I still enjoy learning new things. In recent years I have spent time learning to play guitar, studying elementary Chinese, and learning to sketch. All of those activities are on my post-retirement list as well.

Snow, snow, snow... The first February snowstorm left 12"-24" on the swath from Washington D.C. through Atlantic City. Mark & Kate usually get less snow than we do, but this time they got the full 12" while we only had 2" total.

The second one left us with 14" of snow and closed school for two days. Andy had his weekly Reliv meeting at Embassy Suites the night it began snowing, so he stayed at the hotel since employees can have an overnight room either for bad weather or back-to-back shifts. He returned home the next afternoon in the midst of the storm, but only took an hour, which was pretty good.

Feb 13-16: We had our monthly get-together with Marilyn & Frank on the night before Valentine's Day, so the restaurants were fairly crowded. I tried to make a reservation at *Café Metro*, but they were totally booked, so we went to *Case de Pasta* which does not take reservations, so we went a bit earlier and beat most of the crowd. Their food was fairly good, although not superb.

Weekends often seem to fly by without my accomplishing anything, and this four-day President's Day weekend was no exception. Saturday morning I worked on the FAPA mailing until late morning when Jean and I changed the water filter in the basement, then I made pea soup in the crockpot.

In the afternoon we went to Shop-Rite, then for a 30-minute walk. I read for awhile before dinner, after which I phoned Fei Fei to wish her happy New Year, then I did more reading.

I still had a lot to do Monday. I finished preparing the FAPA mailing, made granola, vacuumed, bought Jean's belated Valentine fruit basket (because the store where I wanted to buy her a fruit basket was so crowded Saturday, we could not even find a parking place), as well as go to the YMCA. At least that left much of Tuesday free for me to—finally!—work on some writing.

Feb 17-19: When I returned to school my classroom was short of 3 desks which I needed for my 4th period Honors Algebra 2 class. I sent my three most reliable students to the Math Lab to take the test since I knew none of them would cheat. I told the vice-principal about it, but he claimed he had no desks for me, so I told Tony, the most dependable custodian, and he immediately found the desks. The Board of Ed is seriously considering saving money next year by firing all the custodial staff and replacing them with a cleaning service. That would be disastrous for the school since the custodians do so much more than merely clean the buildings.

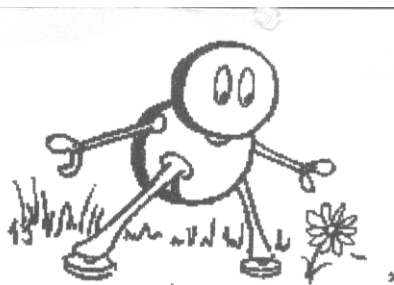
Friday was a long, busy day at school, but a very enjoyable one. Immediately after school, my three faithful juniors Wei, Lo and Liu chatted with me for nearly two hours. Part of the conversation included how they hope to stay in touch next year I can still advise and tutor them.

Then Jean and I went with most of the math department to our belated Chinese New Year dinner, which was delayed a week due to last week's snowstorm. Deanna Kwan selected the menu, and it was delicious stuff that you do not usually see at Chinese buffets. It reminded me of all the times I went to dinner with Fei Fei when she was at Princeton.

That evening was the *Indian Culture Club* dance, which went very well. Padma left work early so she could visit me at the dance, and she and I chatted for over an hour. Although we chat on IM frequently, we rarely see each other.

Feb 25-26: Our second major snowstorm this month was the worst one we have had in several years, 2 feet of snow from Wednesday night through Friday night. School was closed both days, which was a problem since we now have used 4 snow days, although the school calendar only allotted 3 of them. That means we will probably lose a day of Spring Break in April.

The co-presidents of the *Asian American Club* have definitely decided that the club will sell 2 types of tee shirts, one with an Asian motif and one with my picture on it! Simon assured me that both AAC and *Indian Culture Club* kids will all buy the shirts, as will my students not in either club. When I asked one AAC officer who never had me, why would anybody possibly buy it, her reply was, "Because you're a legend!" While this is somewhat embarrassing, it is obviously flattering. I wonder how the other teachers will react if Simon's plan of all the students wearing the shirts to school the same day actually takes place?



Wondrous Stories

There are pros and cons in reading a 788 page collection such as the twenty-fifth annual collection of **The Year's Best Science Fiction** (containing stories published in 2007). The pros are primarily twofold: (1) that is a hell of a lot of pages, so there is room for some outstanding novellas and novelettes published in that year; (2) editor Gardner Dozois is primarily a fan of *science fiction*, as opposed to fantasy, slipstream, magic realism, and all the other sub-genres which nip around the edges of sf. Since my own taste is primarily sf as well, I prefer his annual volume (and Hartwell & Cramer's) rather than those which combine f&sf, horror, and fringe genres.

There are two primary cons in such a huge volume: (1) A reader should not consider it a “best of the year” volume while reading it, since an editor’s views will definitely diverge from the reader’s views, and having the expectations that each story is a “best” story can easily lead to some enjoyable stories being dismissed as too “minor” to deserve inclusion in the volume. The more important con though is (2) that sf is not so much a “genre” as an umbrella for various types of speculative fiction: space opera, worldbuilding (both physical worlds and cultures), future history, cyberpunk, steampunk, alternate history (which it shares with historical fiction and might be a separate category itself, but there is enough connection between AH and SF to mention it here), secret history (ditto), hard science, and probably several others I’ve forgotten momentarily. Since I prefer certain sub-genres to others, it is unlikely I would like every story in the book.

The volume opens with David Moles’ “Finsterra,” the story of poachers trying to kill endangered alien species which are so huge they serve as worlds themselves. The protagonist is an engineer in the employ of one of the poachers, a totally despicable person engaged in a basically evil activity, but she serves him without qualms or self-doubts. Perhaps I have a moral blind spot, but it kind of puts a damper on the story when the only moral people in it are treated as the enemy. Fortunately, the story is enjoyable reading and all works out well in the end,

John Barnes’ badly-titled “An Ocean is a Snowflake, Four Billion Miles Away” tells of two documentary film-makers who are stranded far from rescue on a distant world during a natural disaster. Léoa is a despicable person who first tries to undercut Thorby’s efforts for her own advantage, but who is later injured seriously in the disaster and rather than abandon her, which he could easily have done, Thorby struggles to save her life in addition to rescuing himself. A good human-interest story combined with a believable adventure.

“The Sky is Large and the Earth is Small,” by Chris Roberson (and what is it with these mock-poetic titles?) is set in his alternate history *Celestial Empire* in which China is the dominant power in the world. The story tells of an astronomer who has spent much of his life imprisoned by the emperor after having been tortured for information which he has never revealed about the military weaknesses of the Mexica Empire which has been at war with the Middle Kingdom. The story’s primary concern is the conversations between the prisoner and a bureaucrat writing a report on the feasibility of invading Mexico, a struggle of wits between a desperate interrogator (who needs to complete his report at the risk of his own future) and a seemingly senile old-timer. Goods stuff. I like Roberson’s short fiction about the *Celestial Empire* much more than the novel **The Dragon’s Nine Sons** which was less thoughtful and more adventure.

Robert Silverberg’s “Against the Current” tells of a man who suddenly finds himself slipping backwards in time, slowly at first, but increasingly faster. At first thought this might seem intriguing—think of all the knowledge of the future such a person might employ—but things are rarely so simple, and Silverberg is too smart to fall into such a trap. First the man’s money is useless since all American currency has been changed in recent decades. Then his credit card’s expiration date is unbelievable. This was an intriguing story, more evidence that even in his semi-retirement Silverberg is still one of our finest writers.

I do not normally enjoy either military sf or adventure thrillers seeped in high tech, but Neal Asher is one of the few writers in those genres whose stories I find both readable and interesting. When an amoral fortune hunter nearly kills a xeno-archaeologist to steal the ancient artifact he has uncovered (which might have the capability of reviving a long-vanished alien race), it starts a series of events involving the xeno-archaeologist tracking her down both for revenge and to recover his artifact. There are no moral characters in this story (which is one reason why I prefer Alastair Reynolds to most other writers in the high-tech sub-genre of the space opera sub-genre, since he never forgets that the story is primarily about the people in it), but the plot is fast-moving and always interesting. I suspect that some other readers would really like this story a lot if I enjoyed it as much as I did.

I was immediately suspicious of “The Great Wall,” by Justin Stanchfield because of its premise: an immense wall is found on Titan, presumably an alien artifact, reminding me of Alastair Reynold’s fine novella “Great Wall on Mars.” But the story drew me in quickly: its setting is a ship containing government protectors whose job is keeping everybody away from the wall while governments on Earth argue over who has jurisdiction over it. The ship follows another ship presumably containing fortune hunters onto the surface of Titan right near the wall itself, where they encounter a mystery so stunning and so absorbing that I was totally hooked. This is one of my favorite types of sf story, a future mystery seeped in wondrousness, but involving real people who are more than placeholders. While the story’s ending did little to clear up the mystery of the wall, I was still pleased with its outcome.

Stephen Baxter’s “Last Contact” is a quintessentially_British story about a cozy end_of_the_world, in which the main character is primarily concerned with having time to care for her garden before the end comes, as compared to a similar American story which would probably descend into hysteria and violence. The story was fascinating for its glimpse of British attitudes moreso than for any other reason, sfnal or otherwise, but I definitely enjoyed it.

Alastair Reynolds is known for his very high-tech far futures in which civilization has progressed fairly directly from its current technological level for several millennia. In “The Sledge-Maker’s Daughter,” he proves that he has more weapons in his writing arsenal than just that one, writing a tale about a rural future in which civilization is struggling to survive following some type of total technological meltdown. The story has a fantasy ambiance about it (which itself is stunning for a Reynolds story), but it does a fine job of exploring how the remnants of that lost technology might still affect the new civilization.

Kage Baker is a fine writer whom I have been wanting to read more stories by for some time, but sadly she will not be writing any more since she died recently. This is more incentive to go back and read some of her other critically-acclaimed fiction from the past decade. “Hellfire at Twilight” is a Company story about a researcher seeking some forged papers from early 19th century England, where he encounters a weird cult which decides to use him as the centerpiece of one of its ceremonies. This is not the best of her stories that I have read, but enjoyable, as all her fiction that I have read is.

Three of the stories struck me as the finest in the volume. First was Vandina Singh’s very strong

“Of Love and Other Monsters,” a novella about a boy Arun who has no memories prior to his being rescued from a fire by a shopkeeper in India, who then raises him as her own son. The boy has the unnatural ability to enter people’s minds and somehow “meld” them with the minds of other people. Another person Rahul Moghe with the same ability stalks Arun for much of the story, successfully kidnapping him at one point. The story’s twin concerns are Arun’s search for his own origins, and why Rahul is so desperate to win him over to his own purposes. Both as a character development and a mystery this story is very successful and bodes well for Singh as a major science fiction writer.

I reviewed Gregory Benford’s “Dark Heaven” previously, but I’ll repeat here that it impressed me in several ways. The story is a noir mystery featuring a hard-boiled Louisiana detective named McKenna investigating a series of drownings which have all the earmarks of homicide, including mysterious marks on the arms of the victims. The fact that two such drownings occur within a few days of each other push the deaths past coincidence into probable murders. But there is so little evidence that McKenna seems to be spinning his wheels futilely as his superiors wait impatiently for him to turn his attention to other crimes awaiting resolution.

In the background of “Dark Heaven” are a race of aliens who have come to Earth and established a basehead on an island near the murders, totally isolated by federal agents who pretty much bully anybody who dares to come near them, including local police investigating crimes. At first, the aliens seem to be mostly background, the sfinal ingredient in the story but, knowing Benford’s fiction, I knew that would not last for long.

For my taste, the finest story in this book, and one of the best of the entire past decade, was Ted Chiang’s “The Merchant and the Alchemist’s Gate.” Chiang is probably my favorite (and presumably a lot of other sf readers’ favorite as well) current writer of short fiction. This story tells of a “gate of years” which enables a person to step 20 years into the past or future and visit themselves temporarily in that alternate time. Several people do so, and their stories are always fascinating, but Chiang is not merely a storyteller. This story is also a morality tale about how one’s actions influence not only other people, but also oneself. This is one of Chiang’s finest stories (the others being “Story of Your Life” and “Hell is the Absence of God,” in my opinion) and well-deserved all the awards it won. If you have not read it yet, either find this volume or the recently-published **The Very Best of Fantasy & Science Fiction**.

As usual, I recommend the 25th volume of **The Year’s Best Science Fiction** very highly.

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I never read **Analog** faithfully as I did **Galaxy Magazine** and **Worlds of IF** in the 1960s and 1970s, but when I did read it I invariably looked for stories by Gordon R. Dickson, Harry Harrison, Christopher Anvil and James H. Schmitz (not to mention Poul Anderson who seemed to be omnipresent in all the prozines of that era). With the exception of Dickson though, none of these authors were among the large group whose books I also bought, whether novels or collections of short fiction.

Recently, thanks to Baen Books’ keeping many of the classic sf writers in print, I have made up

for those omissions by buying collections by Murray Leinster, Andre Norton, Christopher Anvil and James H. Schmitz, all of which have proven to be as good as I hoped they would be. Perhaps the best two so far though have been Murray Leinster's **Med Ship**, containing his complete stories about the med service (reviewed here in **VoP** #142) and James H. Schmitz' **Eternal Frontier**.

Schmitz is not a giant of the sf field, and none of the stories in the book deserve award nominations, but every one of them is both enjoyable reading and generally thoughtful reading. A typical Schmitz story puts a narrator in the midst of a sfnal scenario and watches him deal with a problem. The stories are not routine adventures in which everything is resolved by blood-and-guts, but rather the stories are similar to those by Murray Leinster and James White who prefer cerebral stories rather than physical ones. Schmitz' characters tend to think their way through a problem, in some cases realizing the problem is unresolvable and watching things slowly deteriorate around them. Several stories are genuinely moving ("The Summer Guests") or chilling ("These Are the Arts"), and there is a strong mystery component to many of them, including a section of stories which are flat-out mysteries, a few of without any sf element.

Schmitz obviously wants his readers to think about the scenarios he has created, succeeding best in two stories about forcing the evolution of superior humans, "Spacemaster" (whose tyrannical rulers of Earth gradually show more humanity as the story progresses) and "Clean Slate" (in which the narrator must deal with colleagues using amoral means to achieve their ends).

If you enjoyed the prozines of the 1950s through 1970s, James H. Schmitz is definitely worth your attention, and **Eternal Frontier** is definitely good reading. I hope to buy more of Schmitz' collections in the near future.

On the Lighter Side

Jokes by Lloyd Penney

A woman brought a very limp duck in to a veterinary surgeon. As she lay her pet on the table, the vet pulled out his stethoscope and listened to the bird's chest. After a moment or two, the vet shook his head sadly and said, "I'm so sorry, your duck has passed away."

The distressed owner wailed, "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am sure. The duck is dead," he replied.

"How can you be so sure," she protested. "I mean, you haven't done any testing on him or anything. He might just be in a coma or something."

The vet rolled his eyes, turned around and left the room, and returned a few moments later with a black labrador retriever. As the duck's owner looked on in amazement, the dog stood on his hind

legs, put his front paws on the examination table, and sniffed the duck from top to bottom. He then looked at the vet with sad eyes and shook his head.

The vet patted the dog and took it out, and returned a few moments later with a cat. The cat jumped up on the table and also sniffed delicately at the bird from head to foot. The cat sat back on it's haunches, shook its head, meowed softly, and strolled out of the room.

The vet looked at the woman and said, "I'm sorry, but as I said, this is most definitely, 100 percent certifiably, a dead duck." Then the vet turned to his computer terminal, hit a few keys and produced a bill, which he handed to the woman. The duck's owner, still in shock, took the bill.

"\$150!", she cried, "\$150 just to tell me my duck is dead!!"

The vet shrugged. "I'm sorry. If you'd taken my word for it, the bill would have been \$20, but with the lab report and the cat scan, it's now \$150.00."

*

The madam of a brothel has a problem, so she goes to a local priest. "I have two talking female parrots," she tells him. "All they can say is 'Hi, we're prostitutes. Do you want to have some fun?'"

"That's awful," the priest agrees, "but I have a solution to your problem. I have two male parrots whom I've taught to pray and read the Bible. If we put your parrots with mine, I believe yours will stop saying that awful phrase and will instead learn to recite the word of God."

The next day, the madam brings her parrots to the priest's house and puts them in with the male parrots, who are holding rosary beads and praying in their cage.

"Hi, we're prostitutes." say the females. "Do you want to have some fun?"

One male parrot looks at the other and squawks, "Close the Bible, Frank! Our prayers are answered!"

*

Two older men were sitting on a porch sipping lemonade one hot summer afternoon. The old hound dog at their feet starts to clean himself in that place where dogs tend to lick. The one old man says to the other. "Yes sir, I sure wish I could do that."

The other man virtually turns to him and answer, "You could you know, but I think you should probably at least pet him first."

*

An old man lived alone in the country. He wanted to dig his potato garden but it was very hard work as the ground was hard. His only son Fred, who used to help him, was in prison. The old

man wrote a letter to his son and described his predicament.

Dear Fred,

I am feeling pretty bad because it looks like I won't be able to plant my potato garden this year. I'm just getting too old to be digging up a garden plot. If you were here, all my troubles would be over. I know you would dig the plot for me.

Love,

Dad

A few days later he received a letter from his son.

Dear Dad,

For heaven's sake, don't dig up that garden! That's where I buried the BODIES!

Love,

Fred

At 4am the next morning, FBI agents and local police arrived and dug up the entire area without finding any bodies. They apologized to the old man and left. That same day the old man received another letter from his son.

Dear Dad,

Go ahead and plant the potatoes now. That's the best I could do under the circumstances.

Love,

Fred

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An extremely modest man was in the hospital for a series of tests, the last of which had left his bodily systems extremely upset. Upon making several false alarm trips to the bathroom, he decided the latest episode was another and stayed put. He suddenly filled his bed with diarrhea and was embarrassed beyond his ability to remain rational.

In a complete loss of composure he jumped out of bed, gathered up the bed sheets, and threw them out the hospital window.

A drunk was walking by the hospital when the sheets landed on him. He started yelling, cursing, and swinging his arms violently trying to get the unknown things off, and ended up with the soiled sheets in a tangled pile at his feet.

As the drunk stood there, unsteady on his feet, staring down at the sheets, a hospital security guard, (barely containing his laughter), and who had watched the whole incident, walked up and asked, "What the heck is going on here?"

The drunk, still staring down replied: "I think I just beat the shit out of a ghost."