



Deathbird Stories

Harlan Ellison

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What can we say that hasn't already been said about Harlan Ellison? That his fierce intelligence, excoriating wit and pit-bull tenacity and fearlessness make him one of science fiction's most controversial personalities? That, in a field often smothered in non-viable dreams of wonder, his hyperactive inventions rage, gnaw, slice, pummel and twist through to the bloody red meat of a story? That because--or in spite--of all this, he's considered one of the genre's finest writers, with a pile of awards to his name? To some, Ellison may be an acquired taste; to others, he is their meat and potatoes.

With *Deathbird Stories*, it is our pleasure to bring back one of Ellison's most applauded works, a long out-of-print collection of 19 tales originally published between 1960 and 1974: gritty, nails-to-the-flesh stories that take as their theme the strange new gods of our day: the gods of freeway and cash flow and new-car showrooms, of slot machines and city streets and public pain.

The Hugo-winning "The Deathbird" retells the Genesis story from a diabolical perspective, as Nathan Stack is brought up from his crypt at the Earth's core for a final showdown with God. In "Adrift Just Off the Islets of Langerhans: Latitude 38°54' N, Longitude 77°00'13" W" (another Hugo winner), Lawrence Talbot plans an odyssey through the interior of his own body ... to search for the exact location of his soul. When "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes" dies feeding the slot machine in Vegas, her soul enters into it. Now all she wants is Kostner, and all he can think of is her three blue eyes, staring from the Jackpot bars.

Let Harlan Ellison be your guide to these grim new gods, at whose altars we worship daily, whether we know it or not.

Deathbird Stories Details

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Download and Read Free Online Deathbird Stories Harlan Ellison

From Reader Review Deathbird Stories for online ebook

Kimberly says

3.5 stars

DEATHBIRD STORIES, by Harlan Ellison is a collection of some of his varied short stories. I do love Ellison's literary style and writing in general; however, as in most story collections, some of the themes of the individual stories "worked" for me much more so than others. In general, I found that I preferred his horror and supernatural-style stories over those that reached into the fantasy and (to a lesser extent) the science fiction areas.

The writing is brilliant all throughout, in my opinion. Each of these stories is so widely ranged that there really is something for everyone in this collection. Certainly a book worthwhile to add to my shelves, just for the ones I enjoyed the most.

Two of my personal favorites--that were actually quite different from each other--were:

--"Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes": a supernatural story involving a casino gambler, and a very "discerning" slot machine. This one simply hit me emotionally, and the ending packed a lasting punch.

Perhaps my absolute favorite in the book was:

--"Basilisk": Outwardly, this is a story about a war veteran who is ironically condemned by others for wanting to live. I found the "inner" meaning much more potent and powerful as a social commentary of sorts. Often, those that condemn the loudest have never been in the face of a war themselves. It's so easy to blame others when you know nothing about what they have gone through . . .

Recommended to those who love reading various themes and genres.

I won this book in a Goodread's Giveaway. Thank you!

Althea Ann says

This collection, originally published in 1975, has recently been re-released by Open Road Media. Many thanks to them for the opportunity to read. As always, my opinion is solely my own.

"Introduction: Oblations at Alien Altars"

*"The Whimper of Whipped Dogs" (Inspired by the Kitty Genovese murder.)

This story is the crappiest, most offensive indictment of city life - specifically New York City life - that I've ever encountered.

Apparently, Ellison (like others at the time) took the murder of Kitty Genovese as a symbol of all that was wrong with urban living. The problem is, that Ellison not only swallowed a misleading newspaper headline wholesale, he also strongly contributed to the erroneous myth that cities are festering cesspits of crime full of maliciously apathetic neighbors.

Kitty Genovese was murdered by a serial killer and rapist, in a horrific and violent crime. Later, it was reported that 38 witnesses 'did nothing.' That's not true. In reality, there were only two eyewitnesses to the crime. Multiple people called the police (who were terribly slow to respond). Kitty died in the arms of a neighbor who had come out to help. Other 'witnesses' were actually people who had heard noise, but assumed it was just a drunken quarrel outside a nearby bar. There was exactly one witness who knew something really bad was happening and did nothing. Yes, there are some reprehensible people out there. However, Ellison intentionally went on a campaign to spread the myth that dozens of people did nothing while watching a young woman killed. Not only did he write this story, but he wrote articles about the factual case: "in articles published in 1970 and 1971 in the Los Angeles Free Press and in Rolling Stone, and in 1988 in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (June 1988), later reprinted in his book Harlan Ellison's Watching." He referred to the witnesses as "thirty-six motherfuckers" and stated that they "stood by and watched" Genovese "get knifed to death right in front of them, and wouldn't make a move" and that "thirty-eight people watched" Genovese "get knifed to death in a New York street".

Why did Ellison have this agenda to spread a rumor that city dwellers are morally deficient? I don't know. But the intention of this story is to create a graphic image of the crime scene that, while fictional, is designed to substitute for what happened to Kitty Genovese in the readers' mind.

The protagonist is an innocent young white girl (and yes, race 'matters' in this story), a recent Bennington graduate, who moves to the city to make it as a dance choreographer. She becomes one of the witnesses to a brutal murder in her courtyard. She sees all her neighbors in their windows, all looking down on the violence as if it's a show put on for their benefit.

She begins a relationship with a neighbor, who turns out to be brutally abusive and cruel. The city begins to 'eat her up,' and she begins to be aware of a demonic influence in her apartment complex. She can either be a victim of this evil power, or become a part of it.

In a final scene, she encounters a burglar in her apartment who attacks her in a scene that mirrors the attack that she witnessed earlier. The way it's written falls into every stereotype of the animalistic black brute savaging a white woman... there's some real racial paranoia here.

First thing I've read in a while that made me actively angry.

**** "Along the Scenic Route"

Wonderful send-up of the absurd connection we make between cars and masculinity. This takes it one step further than the state of the highways in Bradbury's 'Fahrenheit 451.' Road rage is taken to an extreme here, in a future where demolition duels on the highway are legal and licensed. The gender stereotypes are a bit cringe-worthy, but they work - are even essential - in the context of the satire.

**** "On the Downhill Side"

In a mystical New Orleans (strangely compatible with Anne Rice's visions of the city), two ghosts seek a kind of redemption. A beautiful supernatural fantasy of love and sacrifice.

**** "O Ye of Little Faith"

A man and the woman he's been having an affair with go down to Tijuana to procure an abortion. The story is an impressively-done character portrait of a commitment-phobic, not-very-likable but yet somehow sympathetic man, and his partner is also portrayed fairly and believably. Then, of course (this being an SF collection) a bit of magic enters the picture, thanks to a Mexican fortuneteller - and the story becomes a metaphorical tale of all who have lost faith not only in gods but in themselves and in everything around them. A life without anything to believe in, is a life without hope, Ellison concludes.

The story is told with a repetitive cadence that's a bit unusual, but works very well.

Is the protagonist being called 'Niven' a reference to Larry Niven? I can't help but wonder...

Ah-ha! Yes! "Ellison had written short stories to order earlier, notably "O Ye of Little Faith" at the 1965

Westercon in Long Beach, California, to three words — "serape", "polyp", and "minotaur" — provided at an

auction by the winning bidder, Larry Niven, whose last name is that of the story's protagonist.)"

*** "Neon"

There's a definite 1970's acid-trip feeling to this one.

A man is released from the hospital after a serious procedure, but he's not quite the same. His marriage and his life fall apart - and now he's wondering if he's going insane, as well. He's hearing voices - but does it have something to do with his bionic implants? (Or could it be ALIENS?)

In contrast to the first story in the book, I very much liked the dirty-old-New York setting here.

*** "Basilisk"

At first, I was slightly put off by some of the luridly poetic language of this story, but as it went on, it grew on me.

Clearly a response to the Vietnam War, this story is pretty much an all-around indictment of war, the treatment of prisoners of war, the treatment of returning veterans, the behavior of those veterans... but it also deals with each aspect with a surprising amount of compassion and understanding. A worthwhile, thoughtful piece of war fiction, with a fantasy aspect that works both on face value and as metaphor.

*** "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes"

A horror tale involving a haunted slot machine - and a well-crafted story about the false hopes of gambling, and the bleak desperation of those who are drawn to it.

** "Corpse"

A disaffected assistant professor living in a deteriorating New York City gives us a stream-of-consciousness monologue which details his falling-apart career, his lack of real personal connections - and his bizarre obsession with automobiles.

This shares a theme with the first story in the collection: new gods or powers arising from the gestalt of the society that we have created.

*** "Shattered Like a Glass Goblin"

Surreal horror... A young man is discharged from the army, and upon his return, finds that his fiancée has taken up residence in a communal household of drugged-out hippies, and seems strangely unwilling to leave. Not ready to give up on her, the boyfriend moves in... and discovers that the house is a stranger place than he'd guessed.

*** "Delusion for a Dragon Slayer"

After death, an unassuming 'Walter Mitty'-type has the chance - and only one chance - to grasp all his lifelong dreams and live as a hero in an epic fantasy-type scenario. But is he actually capable of heroism? We like to think that the 'ordinary' man might be full of unrealized potential for greatness. But isn't it equally likely that he is full of the potential for evil?

** "The Face of Helene Bournouw"

A beautiful model has devastating power over every man she encounters - and she uses that power devastatingly. But there's a twist to this femme fatale story.

And... I didn't like that twist. It was creepy, but it also eliminated even the non-multi-faceted agency that a femme fatale usually has.

*** "Bleeding Stones"

If gargoyles ever came to life, putting them onto churches might turn out to have been an absolutely terrible idea. This gleefully tasteless scene feels like it was written by a headbanging teenager with an aim to shock -

but I couldn't help enjoying it.

*** "At the Mouse Circus"

If this made any sense at all, I missed it. It's a bizarre acid-trip; a series of hallucinatory images. However, I didn't dislike it...

** "The Place with No Name"

A violent junkie pimp on the run from the law finds himself unexpectedly and magically transported into the body of an obsessed explorer in a fantastic Heart-of-Darkness-style scenario. The object of his driven quest turns out to be a bizarre scenario involving Prometheus and Jesus, with a sci-fi twist.

I found the disparate elements here to be too random; the way they were bound together didn't end up feeling meaningful.

*** "Paingod"

Musing on the idea that without pain, there can be no pleasure, Ellison gives his readers The Paingod - who, in actuality, seems more like a civil servant, dispensing pain and suffering to the denizens of countless worlds.

** "Ernest and the Machine God"

Another femme-fatale story. Our protagonist has always been able to manipulate men - and everyone around her - to do her bidding. She takes it pretty much for granted. But now, she's on the lam. When she's forced to go to a car mechanic in a one-horse town in the middle of nowhere, she unexpectedly meets a man who may be just as powerful as she is.

What happens then, however, just made me go "huh? why?" I didn't see the motivation...

*** "Rock God"

No, not THAT kind of Rock God. No guitars here.

From a sacrificial ritual in ancient history, Ellison traces his deity through the world's legends of sacred stones, up to the present world of corporations and skyscrapers.

*** "Adrift Just Off the Islets of Langerhans: Latitude 38° 54' N, Longitude 77° 00' 13" W"

A suicidal but immortal werewolf... a secretive Information Agency... a high-tech scientific facility... A Fantastic Voyage-style journey... And a large heaping dollop of self-referential metaphysics. Interesting, but possibly just a bit too much for one story.

**** "The Deathbird"

This, the title story, shares a lot of themes with many of the other stories in this collection. It mixes science fiction with mythology and surrealism, weaves together disparate elements and symbols into a 'trippy' whole. However, I feel that it's a lot more successful than some of the other selections here.

250,000 years in the future, Nathan Stark is woken by aliens into a far-post-apocalyptic future, when he learns that there is some truth to the myths and legends of human religion - but 'God' has always been insane and 'Satan' is actually a caretaker, trapped by the strictures of his assigned role. The final fate of the Earth will rest on Stark's decisions.

It's not just a fate-of-the-Earth story, though... woven through the tale is an exploration of the meaning of compassion, and the meaning of love. A strong ending to the book.

Μιχ?λης Μανωλι?ς says

Περ?ληψη: Ξεπερασμ?να ?ργα απ? ?ναν απ? τους πλ?ον ν?ρκισσους συγγραφε?ς που ?χω διαβ?σει.

Δεν π?γε καλ?.

Δεν φτα?ει ο Ellison, εγ? φτα?ω, που ξ?ρω ?τι ?χω μια αλλεργ?α με τα φουσκωμ?να εγ?.

Πρ?τ' απ' ?λα, πριν φτ?σει κανε?ς στην πρ?τη λ?ξη του πρ?του διηγ?ματος, προηγο?νται ε?κοσι σελ?δες απ?: αφι?ρωση, βιογραφ?α απ? το επ?σημο site φ?λων του Ellison π?χτρα στα βραβε?α στις διακρ?σεις και τις μεγ?λες συνεργασ?ες, μια ακ?μα πιο σ?ντομη βιογραφ?α απ? τον ?διο τον συγγραφ?α, «παρθ?ματα και τσιτ?τα» του Ellison, ευχαριστ?ες, πρ?λογος απ? τον ?διο, ?να γρ?μμα του Σω προς τον Τολστ?ι, τρεις ρ?σεις του Βολτα?ρου, του Οβ?διου και του Χ?ινλα?ν, «Δυο λ?για για τον Χρ?νο» ξαν? του Ellison, ?που μας εξηγε? π?σο γαμ?τη ε?ναι αυτ? η συλλογ? και π?ς θα την ?βγαζαν επετειακ? στα 25 της χρ?νια, αλλ? τελικ? το ?καναν στα 31 και μισ? και π?σο μεγ?λη αμνηχαν?α νι?θει (χα! εδ? γ?λασα!) που το βιβλ?ο αυτ? συμπεριελ?φθη στα καλ?τερα βιβλ?α Ε.Φ. της δεκαετ?ας και τον ?καναν S.F. Grand Master. Δηλαδ?, ?λεος.

Και σαν να μην ?φταναν ?λα αυτ? για φτι?ξουν ?να φοβερ? και τρομερ? hype, σαν να μην αρκο?σαν για να στε?λουν τις προσδοκ?ες στα ουρ?νια, υπ?ρχει σ' αυτ?ς τις ε?κοσι σελ?δες το χειρ?τερο ?λων: Μια δ?λωση του ?διου του Ellison ?που με τη γνωστ? του μετριοφροσ?νη μ?ς προειδοποιε? για το εξ?ς:

«Προτε?νω στον αναγ?στη να μη διαβ?σει μεμι?ς αυτ? το βιβλ?ο. Η συγκινησιακ? φ?ρτιση των διηγημ?των που εμπερι?χονται εδ?, αν προσλ?φθε? χωρ?ς δι?λειμμα, μπορε? να προκαλ?σει μεγ?λη αναστ?τωση. Η προειδοπο?ηση αυτ? δεν ε?ναι υπερβολ?. Αντιθ?τως, παρ?χεται με κ?θε ειλικρ?νεια. ΠΡΟΧΩΡΗΣΤΕ ΜΕ ΔΙΚΗ ΣΑΣ ΕΥΘΥΝΗ.»

?πα, Χ?ρλαν! ?να-?να για να σε προλαβα?νω.

?λφον, φυσικ? και δεν θα το διαβ?σω με τη μ?α. Ε?ναι συλλογ? διηγημ?των –προφαν?ς και δεν πετ?γομαι απ? τη μια ιδ?α στην ?λλη με μηδ?ν δι?λειμμα. Επ?σης, μην ανησυχε?ς, ελ?χιστοι συγγραφε?ς μπορο?ν να με αρπ?ξουν ?τσι που να μην αφ?νω το βιβλ?ο τους απ? τα χ?ρια μου. Β?τον, σανμπολ?μεγ?ληιδ?α μου φα?νεται ?τι ?χεις για το γρ?ψιμ? σου. Ακ?μα και αν δεν το ?ξερα (που το ?ξερα, γι' αυτ? επαναλαμβάνω ?τι φτα?ω εγ? και ?χι εσ?) θα μου ε?χε γ?νει παραπ?νω απ? σαφ?ς σ' αυτ?ς τις ε?κοσι σελ?δες, αλλ? και π?λι, δεν ξεκιν?με καλ?.

Και γ?μμον, η προειδοπο?ησ? σου ε?ναι τουλ?χιστον υπερφ?αλη και αγεν?ς. Δεν μπορε?ς να απευθ?νεσαι ?τσι σε ?να μεγ?λο αναγνωστικ? κοιν?. Δεν ξ?ρεις τι ?χω διαβ?σει, δεν ξ?ρεις τι ?νθρωπος ε?μαι. Δεν ξ?ρεις π?ς και π?σο καλ? διαχειρ?ζομαι τη «συγκινησιακ? φ?ρτιση» και, το κυρι?τερο, δεν ξ?ρεις π?τε το διαβ?ζω αυτ?. Δεν ξ?ρεις π?σα σπουδα?α ?ργα ?χουν γραφτε? απ? τ?τε που γρ?φεις αυτ? την προειδοπο?ηση - μνημε?ο φιλαυτ?ας. Και τ?λος, για μια φορ? με κεφαλα?α κι εγ?, ακολουθ?ντας το παρ?δειγμ? σου, ΣΙΧΑΙΝΟΜΑΙ ΝΑ ΜΕ ΠΑΤΡΟΝΑΡΟΥΝ ΛΕΣ ΚΑΙ ΕΙΜΑΙ ΚΑΝΕΝΑ ΠΑΙΔΑΚΙ ΠΟΥ ΘΑ ΔΙΑΒΑΣΕΙ ΓΙΑ ΠΡΩΤΗ ΦΟΡΑ «ΜΕΓΑΛΗ» ΛΟΓΟΤΕΧΝΙΑ ΚΑΙ ΘΑ ΤΟΥ ΕΡΘΕΙ ΝΤΟΥΒΡΟΥΤΖΑΣ.

Και για ?σους δεν το κατ?λαβαν, δεν ξεκ?νησα το δι?βασμα με την καλ?τερη δι?θεση. Μ?λιστα, ?πως κ?νω π?ντα σε αν?λογες περιπτ?σεις υπερβολικ?ν προσδοκι?ν, ?ψαξα και βρ?κα το μικρ?τερο καλ?θι που μπορο?σα να κρατ?σω. ?μως, ειλικριν?, ?μουν ανοιχτ?ς. Αν τα διηγ?ματα μου ?ρεσαν, θα μπορο?σα να ξεχ?σω τις πρ?τες ε?κοσι σελ?δες της εισαγωγ?ς, τουλ?χιστον μ?χρι να τελει?σω το βιβλ?ο και να σκεφτ? κ?τι σαν «φοβερ?ς συγγραφ?ας, αλλ? ?χει καβαλ?σει το καλ?μι».

?μως, δυστυχ?ς για τα λεφτ? και τον χρ?νο μου και καθ?λου για τον Ellison, ?γινε ακριβ?ς το

αντ'θετο. Δεν π'γε καθ'λου καλ'. Για την ακρ'βεια εγκατ'λειψα 'χοντας διαβ'σει 280 σελ'δες, και χωρ'ς να 'χω βρει ο'τε μια ιστορ'α που να μου αρ'σει. Δεν πρ'κειται να αναλ'σω το γιατ'. Απλ', ο Ellison κι εγ' δεν ταιρι'ζουμε.

Ξ'ρω π'σο γραμμ'νες 'χει ο συγγραφ'ας γν'μες σαν τη δικ' μου, εκε', αν'μεσα στις δ'φνες του, και βλ'πω τις εξαιρετικ'ς κριτικ'ς και βαθμολογ'ες. Θα αρκεστ', λοιπ'ν, να γρ'ψω περιληπτικ' τα γνωστ' για την κατηγορ'α «Μεγ'λα 'ργα Που Δεν Ε'ναι Πια»:

Χ'ρλαν, σ' ευχαριστ' ειλικριν' για την τερ'στια συμβολ' σου στη λογοτεχν'α και ειδικ' στο αγαπημ'νο μου ε'δος της Ε.Φ. 'νοιξες δρ'μους, π'τησαν π'νω σου οι επ'μενοι, 'κανες πρ'γματα που 'ταν σχεδ'ν αδ'νατα να φαν'νονται τετριμμ'να. Ε'σαι 'νας απ' τους γ'γαντες που μας π'ραν στους 'μους τους.

'μως μ'χρι εκε', Χ'ρλαν. 'πως μια φορ' κι 'ναν καιρ' γν'ρισες τον Ισα'κ Ασ'μωφ, στ'θηκες μπροστ' του και του ε'πες με παρρησ'α «Ε'σαι 'να τ'ποτα!», 'τσι σου λ'ει κι αυτ'ς ο ταπειν'ς αναγν'στης: «Ε'σαι ξεπερασμ'νος». Χωρ'ς καν θαυμαστικ'.

Mary JL says

Harlan Ellison is a passionate writer with a unique style. I've have read many of his story stories, including these in this book.

Like most of Ellison's work, these stories are aiming for an emotional effect. Ellison has a great deal of anger in some stories, also he has very little optimism.

I often think of this child's poem when I read Ellison: "There once was a girl And she had a curl Right in the middle of her forehead And when she was good, she was very, very good And when she was bad she was horrid" For me the last two lines are exactly how I feel about his work. When he hits, it's dead on--but when he misses, for me, it is a complete miss.

I seldom feel "so so" about his stories; I like them or I hate them.

But, Ellison is a unique and widespread influence in science fiction; you owe it to yourself to read at least one collection of his short stories.

Marvin says

Harlan Ellison is one of my favorite short story writers but his output can be inconsistent. Deathbird Stories is easily his finest collection. These works are unflinchingly cynical and brutally honest about the human condition yet it is apparent that the writer hopes that mankind will rise and find something about it that is noble. If there is one repeating theme it is that man must create gods for itself even though those gods always fail us. Ellison's warning that these stories should not be read in one sitting is good advice. Even one a night may be pushing it. But stories like "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs" , "Paingod" and "The Deathbird" will haunt you for a very long time.

Jamie says

When I was in high school, this book was banned from our library. So naturally I made a pilgrimage to the public library, checked it out, read it, and basically this is the book that made me want to be a writer. Because it was the first time I realized books had the power to make parents lose their shit.

I later bought Harlan's first typewriter, a 1938 Remington Noiseless Portable forged in the fires of Mt Doom.

Thanks, Harlan. Give my love to Susan.

else fine says

I somehow discovered this book when I was a kid. As dark and violent as it was, I found it weirdly hopeful. Finally, I thought, an adult who won't fucking lie to you, someone who will just say yes, everything sucks and people are screwed up and the only thing you can do in the face of all this misery is *fight*, even though you'll probably fail. Fight, and remember that everyone else is in pain, and never lose your outrage or your compassion. Not to pile more melodrama onto this paragraph, but it probably saved my life.

Twenty years later, I still found it strange, lovely, and compelling. It appears to be out of print, which is a shame. A whole generation is missing out on this great american master of weird fiction.

Patti says

I think I might be in a minority on this book. It has had many good reviews on many venues and was a bookclub pick by one of our more adventurous members.

While this may not be my cup of tea - there are a couple of things specifically that bothered me about the book.

1. Many of the stories are firmly set in their era - the book was published in 1975 and you can tell by all of his branded references. Maybe this would be cool if you were reading it in 1975 and you could relate to the brands and trends, but reading it in 2007 and having lived through the brands and trends of 1975 if felt tired and cliché. "White wine" or "chardonnay" could easily have been substituted for "Almaden"; "gin & tonic" could have been substituted to "Tanqueray & tonic" - and thus kept the stories in present or even future time. In 1975 my mom was drinking Almaden (though I'm not sure you can even buy it now) and I was drinking Tanqueray & tonic (or T&T as we called it) - but I sure don't hear it ordered in bars today - at least not like in the 70's - the T&T was to the 70's what the Cosmopolitan was to the turn of the millennium. Firmly set in it's time.

The first story in particular was set in the New York City of the 1970's - dirty, dangerous, filled with paranoia and neuroses. It is not the fresh and exciting New York of today. The city has clearly cast off it's slimy mantle of danger and become *the* place to be. If not for the branding that occurs in the story, we could have read it to be a New York of the future - something that it still can be, rather than something it was so long ago - the story was tired.

2. I understand the theme was about gods and death but for the most part, I could not suspend my disbelief for long enough to buy into the premise for most of the stories - that is, for those I read, because I must confess, that after getting a bit more than halfway through the book, I stopped reading it. There are so many other books I want to read! Some of the characters drew me in and I began to care for them but then they just died and entered one of many eternal abysses - because, really, the stories were what happened after one becomes less than human - either by death or by submission to the ruling evil. I just don't buy it.

David says

This collection of short stories started out with a bang, and ended with a whimper. They shouldn't have front-loaded the best stories.

John Bruni says

I've read a few of these stories before, but never like this. No, every story in this book is meant to be read this way, not just a story here and there over the years. Read 'em all back to back, start to finish. (He warns you not to do that in the intro, but he's just goading you to do it.) It's a different, powerful experience. I think that SF has two phases: Before Harlan Ellison and After Harlan Ellison. He's a visceral guy. He doesn't do gentle, folks. He screams his straight-from-the-guts stories in your face.

Everyone's read "The Deathbird." You can't fool around with SF and not read it. It's obviously the best in the book. But here are a few of my favorites that I hadn't read before:

- "Along the Scenic Route": Wow. That's some Death Race 2000 stuff right there. I love the idiot slang terms that kids in the future use, and I love how it turns out to be a futuristic western in the end.

- "Neon": Quite the accidental love story. To say more would be to ruin it.

- "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes": That's a haunting story about a, er, well. Read it.

- "Paingod": What happens when the God of Pain takes an interest in humanity? In a human sculptor in particular? It's not what you'd think would happen. I'm almost certain Warren Ellis has read that one, and Paingod got stuck to his brain stem.

- "Ernest and the Machine God": A very manipulative woman in a precarious situation accidentally drives off a cliff and finds herself in a strange town with a very unusual mechanic. The ending is pretty horrifying, but I kind of wonder what happens with Ernest next.

This is a great collection. If you haven't read it, you need to get to it immediately.

Joel Abel says

for me this books represents one of those rare moments in life where you can point to a single instant and say, "that moment changed me".

i was around thirteen years old, and, as a lot of young teenagers, really struggling with Christianity, social expectations, parental smothering, etc. and so on. lets just say the box was feeling particularly small and i was feeling the squeeze.

enter a fateful trip to the local flea market/second hand emporium.

imagine a flea market booth so full of worthless items that it looks like you and a few of your best friends and a few of your friends friends decided, on graduation day, to cram all of your college furniture into a single tomb and seal it off forever. the smell and rough economic worth of this tomb puts you in the neighborhood of this sad stall. of course, to me, it looked like a treasure chest.

now imagine a box of books under a rotting futon. lurid westerns mixed in with lurid romance novels, their colors as bright and superficial as the red paint on a whorehouse. imagine buried deep in the box, almost at the bottom, a book so out of place it might as well be as from another world. its cover a stark, black and white watercolor of a mournful bird draping its wings around a dying sun. imagine school, parents, family, flea markets and all the rest disappearing as you read the first page of something that is so utterly unlike anything you have ever known that you dont notice you have broken into a sweat, that one page has turned into twenty, and suddenly your legs are tired and your neck hurts because you havent moved a single inch in 15 minutes.

imagine that when you look up, your world is no longer the same.

that was my introduction to death bird stories.

Stephen says

6.0 stars. Another superb collection of short stories by the greatest short story writer of all time. While all of the stories in this collection are excellent, I would mention "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs" as one that particularly affected me when I read it. HIGHEST POSSIBLE RECOMMENDATION!!

Winner: British Science Fiction Award for Best Collection (1979)

Nominee: World Fantasy Award for Best Collection (1976)

Nominee: Locus Award for Best Collection (1976)

Voted to the Locus List of All Time Best Collections (6th)

Simon says

I didn't know quite what to expect from this volume, especially after reading the author's caveat at the beginning:

It is suggested that the reader not attempt to read this book at one sitting. The emotional content of these stories, taken without break, may be extremely upsetting. This note is intended most sincerely, and not as

hyperbole.

Not that this is an issue for me, I never read books in one sitting. But after finishing these stories I can see what the author means and agree that it is not (at least entirely) hyperbole. Most of these stories are pretty bleak, full of deeply unlikable characters showing humanity's worst side.

This is a themed collection, containing many stories previously printed in earlier collections (I skipped "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes" and "Delusion for a Dragon Slayer" that I had already read in *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*). The stories all seem to feature death, belief and gods. They also resist categorisation but include elements of SF, fantasy and horror.

While some stories seemed to lack subtlety and felt heavy-handed ("The Face of Helene Bournouw" and "Paingod") others were the other extreme and too opaque ("Neon" and "At the Mouse Circus"). However, there were some real gems. Powerful emotional stories that will stay with you ("The Whimper of Whipped Dogs" and "Basilisk") and engaging stories with striking imagery ("Ernest and the Machine God", "Rock God" and "Adrift Just Off the Islets of Langerhans").

Ellison doesn't seem to do bland or *just so* stories. He strives for the full emotional effect each time and some might find it too harsh or upsetting but at least you will react and remember them.

Michael Burnam-Fink says

This collection is apparently Ellison at the height of his powers, an extended New Wave Scifi riff on the themes of gods and sacrifice. New gods of cities, of highways, of neon lights and computers. Old gods, bloody monsters buried in the earth or the psyche appearing and exacting a heavy toll from modern people.

If there's a word to describe these stories, it's excessive. The language is trippy and overwrought. When Ellison tempers the excess with humor, as he does in "Along the Scenic Route", a story of roadrage dueling in up-gunned sedans with hoverjets and laser cannons, it's quite good. When he just vents his spleen, it's fairly miserable, as in "Bleeding Stones", where gargoyles come to life and murder everyone in New York city, starting with an assembly of Christians.

Ellison leans too heavily on the gambit of the psycho-symbolic journey, where the protagonist leaves mundane reality and enters a liminal zone of fantasy, where he encounters a series of set-pieces and images that usually depict the his pathetic nature before an actively hostile cosmos. It's the very antithesis of showing, not telling.

I'm really divided on this collection. There are a few stand out stories, but overall effect is a kind of pretentious misanthropy. This is of course, Ellison's stock in trade, so what do you expect. It's well done, but is it worth doing?

Ben Loory says

i remember when this came in the mail from the science fiction book club when i was twelve. it was like having someone tear out my stomach.

