

Introduction to The Beasts of Love
by Lisa Tuttle

By rights, this book, or some close approximation of it, should have been published in 1986.

It was around that time that a strange ray from outer space, or electro-magnetic pulses from the earth's core, or a quantum shift in the space-time continuum or some damned thing opened a rift in the editorial perception of reality. For a brief span, the well-known fact that short story collections don't sell shunted into the mirror-world, causing editors around the globe to scramble to sign up deeply uncommercial *sui generis* short story writers, among them Howard Waldrop (*Howard Who?* Doubleday) and myself (*A Nest of Nightmares*, Sphere Books)—but not the third leg of the famous Texican Triangle.

Tuttle, Utley and Waldrop—we all made our first professional appearance in 1972, and almost immediately started collaborating.¹ Along with a few others, we founded the Turkey City Writers Workshop (and Neo-Pro Rodeo). We wrote almost exclusively in the short form yet managed to garner a surprisingly high level of attention—and praise—for our work, and our last initials all fell towards the end of the alphabet. If we'd been at high school together, we'd have been in the same home-room. Yes, that's us at the back of the class—I'm reading a novel hidden inside an algebra textbook, Waldrop is shooting spit-balls, and Utley is the one drawing cartoon dinosaurs making sarcastic comments about the other students.

Throughout the 1970s, Steven Utley was, to quote *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, “a figure of edgy salience in the field, “ and by 1986 he'd had some seventy short stories published—considerably more, I'm sure, than either me or Howard, the best of which could have filled a couple of volumes, at least. But by 1980, Steven Utley had pretty much given up writing. After years of suffering from clinical depression (undiagnosed and untreated) and other health problems, he found life too much of a struggle to cope with the additional hassles attendant upon a career as a short story writer; if it was to be just a hobby, guitar-playing, record collecting and cartooning were more rewarding.

¹ For more details, see Waldrop, Howard, *Custer's Last Jump and other collaborations* (Golden Gryphon Press, 2003) or Ellison, Harlan, “Exorcising Texas: An Introduction” (1976)

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I don't know if Steven ever really gave up writing entirely—I'm always suspicious about such cold-turkey claims; even Rimbaud, according to his latest biographer, continued writing non-fiction long after he'd turned his back on poetry—but I don't know. I left Texas towards the end of 1980, and didn't have much contact with Steven for many years afterwards.

But I think it's safe to say that whatever else he may have done to earn a living, Steven has never taken up gun-running or been even remotely involved in the slave-trade; and also that this story has a happy ending...at least, if you agree that writing is a good thing to do.

Yes, Steven Utley is back on the publishing scene again, and with a vengeance, thanks to advances in modern pharmacology and a variety of positive life-changes, possibly including the effect of living in Tennessee rather than Texas.²

And maybe it's just as well that *The Beasts of Love* wasn't published in 1986. It would be long out of print by now, anyway, and it would have lacked two of the strongest, most moving stories in the current collection, both written in the 1990s: "The Country Doctor" and "Once More, With Feeling."

This is, in fact, the second Utley collection. The first, *Ghost Seas* (Ticonderoga Press, 1997) was a sampler of some of his best work to date, taking in most of the recognized genres, including SF, detective, horror, and western stories. It was a lovely book, and all praise to the Western-Australia-based small press willing to take a chance on a hard-to-classify writer who was neither very young nor very famous nor at all Australian. However, there was a certain valedictory, elegiac air to the book, from the moody cover to the description to the often down-beat tone of many of the stories, which didn't encourage me to think that Steven's career might, finally, be re-launching in a big way.

But what did I know?

It was.

Even here in the remote part of the Scottish Highlands where I now live, so far from London, farther still from the American scene, where copies of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* or any other pulp magazine are rarely seen, I gradually became aware that Steven Utley was writing again—a lot—his name making the cover of SF magazines, his stories included in "Best of the Year"

² "More than one person has asked me why, if doing so makes me feel like a python trying to swallow an elephant, I bother to read Proust. My answer: Well, somebody here in Tennessee has to."—from a recent e-mail.

Steven Utley

anthologies—a second flowering. And I know that Steven has another couple (or more) collections planned—his long-awaited *Silurian Tales*, and another collection of time-travel stories, which is why, in this entire collection, only one story has dinosaurs in it. Just one. In an Utley collection?

But never mind; there are other pleasures. Many.

I admit, I had my doubts, looking at the reprint credits for the first time. Although I was absolutely blown away by both “The Country Doctor” and “Once More, With Feeling,” I wondered if the older stories would have held up with the passage of time. I’d thought they were great back in the ‘70s, but I was hardly an impartial reader. After all, we’re talking about short stories which first appeared as filler in *Perry Rhodan*, or some long-forgotten men’s magazine...

Yes, even those, as I found on re-reading. “Ants” is a polished, elegant fable which packs the punch of a classic tale by H.G. Wells or John Wyndham, while “Pan-Galactic Swingers” made me laugh out loud. “The Mouse Ran Up the Clock”, “Die Rache”, “Ember-Eyes”—all as good as or even better than I remembered.

Going through his old files, reading some of the stories for the first time in nearly thirty years, Steven wrote to me, “The thing that keeps you going when you are a struggling young writer—besides, I mean, the rent’s being due and the cupboard’s being bare—is the belief, or at least the hope, that you are this far away from being brilliant...When you are a struggling middle-aged writer, you realize that you are this much farther away from being brilliant than you once imagined.”

Oh, not that far, Steven. Not really all that far.

*Lisa Tuttle
Torinturk, Scotland
18 May 2004*