

# ON FANTASY

by Fritz Leiber

*Fritz recalls his lifelong dalliance with the game of chess, and "how it was marked (and marred?) by a father-rivalry..."*



THE CALL for this column finds me in the midst of the most interesting and illuminating piece of writing, full of self-insights, that I've done in some time: the long introduction to Bantam's "Illustrated Fritz Leiber," a collection of nine of my stories, for which I've suggested the title **Strange Wonders**. The introduction takes the form of a candid autobiography or autobiographic scan in which the major topics of the stories (cats, sex, comradeship, the Shakesperean stage, the occult, science, etc.) serve as springboards for surveying those areas of my own life, which in turn reflect light back on the whys of the stories.

So it strikes me as fitting and topical to give you a section of this work in progress.

But which section? Well, just this morning the news has come that Karpov has defeated Korchnoi and retained his title as the world's chess champion. Chess has long been a game dear to writers of fantasy, sword and sorcery, and even science fiction (I'm thinking of Henry Kuttner's novel, **The Fairy Chessmen**, and and shorts like Bierce's "Moxon's Master.") The chess pieces rival the Jungian archetypes, the signs of the zodiac, and the tarots for their symbolic weight and wide allusiveness. While one hardly need mention its wargaming stature. I've myself

written at least four chess stories and novelettes, of which "Midnight by the Morphy Watch" appears in this new collection.

The following section of my autobiography takes up in December 1922. I'm in sixth grade. I'm living with two aunts, my father's sisters Dora and Marie (and the former's husband, Ed Essenpreis) at 4353 1/2 North Ashland Avenue, Chicago, and attending the nearby Ravenswood public school. As usual my father Fritz and mother Bronnie are touring their Shakesperean Repertory Company. While they're playing Denver, I and my aunt Marie take train and join them for the Christmas vacation.

I'D JUST turned twelve. This visit to my parents on the road was especially memorable because during it I was taught how to play chess by Alexandre Andre, an actor with a commanding brow and steely gaze and Slavic mien; I think he played Caesar sometimes. Later I noted the minor similarity of his name to that of Alexander Alekhine, soon to become one of the world's more eccentric (but they're most of them that) chess champions. Such was my introduction to the maddening game that has since taken up a good slice of my spare time during several periods of my life (during others I've fore-sworn it).

There was a fly in that ointment, though. My father picked up the game by watching me learn it, and beat me in our first encounter. I was reduced to tears, literally. My father was terribly good at picking things up that way, and a tireless competitor. I've mentioned golf. He went out for his introductory game with a couple of actors in his company who played it, and shot his first nine holes in under fifty even though he held the club cross-handed, just as he'd batted in baseball. Oddly he never got much better than that at golf although he played for years and eventually adopted the conventional grip. At golf, and at tennis too, he hit the ball just like he hammered a nail.

Would you believe it? when I first began writing stories and submitting them to magazines, my father immediately started doing the same thing? He actually ground out three or four, I think, and he showed a couple of them to me. One of them was that "The Adventures of a Penny" story that I imagine every budding author **thinks** of writing, and maybe one in fifty of them actually writes (the adventures of a penny, a two-dollar bill, a wig, a ring, a sword, a gun, a flag, a car, a space probe -- I recall a fellow alcoholic showing me a story he'd just knocked out about the adventures of a beer can)

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and that maybe sells once in ten million times.

The other story was a bull fight told from the viewpoint of the bull. He'd just been in Mexico doing a picture, and been taken to his first (and last) bullfight, and was disgusted by how the fight was rigged, the way he saw it, for the matador to win. This story had considerable pathos and indignation and strong feeling about it, but not much of a plot.

I'M NOT SURE my father actually submitted any of his stories; I don't recall him showing me any rejection slips, but I shudder to think how I'd have felt if one of his stories had really sold, because then it was two or three years before the first of my own stories got accepted!

But speaking of stories, one of the reasons I'm writing this introduction is to show how the stories in this collection got written, when and how their themes became part of my life, what triggered them off, and other connections and synchronicities that seem interesting.

The stories in this book were selected because the editor liked them best, but they also happen to represent most of my chief interests in life, the things that have fascinated me persistently and made me study them.

"Midnight by the Morphy Watch" is a story about wild talents and chess and San Francisco, my present home, and a strange historical object that actually existed and may still exist: a gold watch with its dial circled by the symbols for chess pieces instead of the usual hour numerals.

I've already told you how I learned chess and how it was marked (and marred?) by a father-rivalry, as has been suggested was the case with the ultimately psychotic Paul Morphy, "the pride and sorrow of American chess," who was astounding the world with his precocious genius back in the 1850s, the decade when my maternal grandfather was getting a toehold in America.

My interest in chess and my ability to play it with any small degree of mastery developed very slowly, as has been true of all my approaches to most if not all of my big interests in life. I played it a little during the rest of grammar school and a little more in Lake View High School, where I joined the Chess

Club, but I wasn't until I got to the University of Chicago (fifty to sixty blocks deep in the early abhorred south side!) and met the players in its Reynolds Club that I got really hooked and read up some on the fascinating story of the game and began to dream romantically of becoming a chess master (and a great mathematician, I told myself for a year or so).

I should explain here that my 4353 1/2 environment continued to enfold or at least loom about me; through my four years of college I was still for a while with Dora and Ed. We'd all just moved to a very similar apartment 24 blocks north of the old one but still close to Ashland, on Wallen Avenue, a short street named for my uncle-in-law the real-estate entrepreneur and enthusiast for Nature and for German culture, at whose office a short distance away Marie now worked.

FOR MY FIRST year at the U. of C. I lived at home on Wallen and commuted to college, though it meant traveling almost from one end of Chicago's El system to the other twice a day, which took almost three hours in all. On chilly winter mornings I'd see the stars while waiting on the Loyola El platform, not knowing how much they'd some day mean to me -- another very slowly developing interest. But I can't grudge the time spent on those long El rides at dawn and dusk. They introduced and wedded me to Chicago's lonely and dismal world of roofs and some 15 years later gave me "Smoke Ghost," my first strong supernatural story.

That daily elevated trek at the third story level of the city's gray roof-world only went on for my freshman year and an odd month or two of the next. Thereafter I domiciled in one of the men's dormitories, Hitchcock Hall, at first by my lonely self in a rather narrow north-wall room that looked out on the Gothic-styled grey Indiana limestone of the Anatomy Building with a griffon crawling down the roof's steep angle as if about to launch into space (he, merged with other gray beasts from the gatetops and roofpeaks and from under the eaves all around, became years later the original of the one in my novel *Conjure Wife*), but during my junior and senior years in the adjacent larger northwest room which I shared with one Charles L. Hopkins, who became my lifelong friend and eventually sold a story to *New Yorker*, "Jesus on a Flagpole." During this

period I quite often journeyed up to the north side for Sunday dinner and perhaps a movie with Marie, and of course that's where I was bedded down when I had that month or so of low fever, that last aftermath of the 1918 'flu, in my junior year at U. of C.

JUST AFTER I moved into Hitchcock and while playing chess at the University's Reynolds Club below the limestone-toothed spirelets and crenelated towerlets of Mitchell Tower in the quadrangle a block east, I made my first friendship based on similar tastes and interests, life patterns and temperments, a friendship that's endured throughout my life. I'm sure that during the first 20 or so moves of our first game together Franklin MacKnight and I sensed we were kindred spirits; we both hated obvious moves, liked to find "mysterious" ones and surprise each other with complications. Later, away from the chess board, we began to explore the areas of kinship. We both liked supernatural horror stories and were attracted by all manner of strange weird happenings -- the sort of taste catered to, rather crudely, by Hearst's *American Weekly*; ours had a wider range and involved greater subtleties -- those were the biggest things. A love of and search for the weird, fantastic, and mysterious. (By contrast, my friendship with Charles Hopkins, begun a bit later, lacked this one element, though in other ways as deep or deeper.) Mac and I both were majoring in psychology, but we were attracted to all the sciences and read science fiction and fantasy. We were both solitaires, unaggressive, sensitive, socially unpracticed, yet willing to talk honestly when the barriers were down. "Mac" was a great devotee of literal truth, I soon found out. It was all a revelation to me.

Yet all this came from a game of chess.

And Mac a little later on led to other things: to my reading the supernatural horror stories of H. P. Lovecraft, who gave an enduring set to my life ways and to my writing ambitions. And Mac introduced me to his hometown Louisville, Kentucky friend, Harry Fischer, who both invented and became the Gray Mouser. (I tell more about those things in my essays, "Terror, Mystery, Wonder" in *World Fantasy Awards: Volume Two* and "Fafhrd and Me" in *The Second Book of Fritz Leiber*.)

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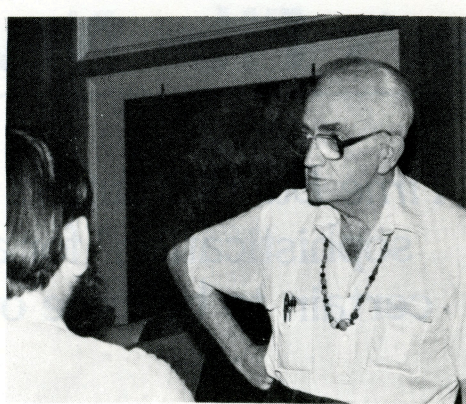
All that too from a game of chess.

But I mustn't stretch this point too far, build too high and mysterious a silver pinnacle for chess in the dark lonely world, pile all of this on too thickly.

Mac and I got deeper into chess, played on a Reynolds Club team or two; then about the time I got married I gave the game up, figuring it was too dangerous, that it could steal away too much time, especially from a writer. Gave up seriously tournament, match, and team chess, that is. And as for the other kind, "skittles," playing for fun, I never cared for that much. Chess seemed to me too important a game to be trifled with.

Then about twenty years after that, after an alcoholic midlife crisis, I took up serious chess again, reading up on it and studying it some more, self training regularly, and playing in three or four tournaments a year. I figured I was too old and my writing drives too deeply established to be much endangered by it. Also I deserved some sort of reward, I thought, for giving up booze. I kept this up for about five years, enough to achieve Expert rating (above an A player, below a master) and wrote the novel-ette, "The Sixty Four Square Madhouse" about the first tournament in which a computer programmed for chess played on an equal basis with the world's leading international masters.

Then I gave up chess again, or it gave me up, when I began to drink again, and struggle against drinking, and then quit again and drink again, in an on and off pattern.



**A**FTER the death of my wife and after what I guess you could call an alcoholic old age crisis, I played in one last tournament in San Francisco, a rather slapdash, happy-go-lucky, unimportant, unrated contest promoted by a restaurant man who was inspired by the goddess Caissa, or else nutty about chess, depending on how you feel about such things. And that experience led me to write "Midnight by the Morphy Watch." Rasputin and the Czarina in that story were real people, real contestants in the tournament, and I invented those private nicknames for them before I conceived the story. But I never did happen on that wonderful antique store and its eccentric proprietor, alas.

As for the actual tournament in Paoli's Corner House restaurant on Commercial Street, I didn't win it. Rasputin did, just ahead of the Czarina.

I guess you can see from this backgrounding I've been doing of the Morphy watch story how it necessitated jumping around in time, fitting in autobiographical bits when they seemed helpful. Some of those different Fritz Leibers (Fritz Leiber, Juniors, until my father died in 1949) seemed quite familiar to me, others rather strange, but all of them were working together in a sense, gathering material for stories yet unwritten and undreamed of.