
ROBERT BLOCH

THE OPENER OF THE WAY

JERRY POURNELLE

Most of you, when you see Robert Bloch as Toastmaster, think the obvious. "That's a really funny, witty guy!" It's true, too. Moreover, Robert Bloch is a great author, a Big Name Fan, a charter member of First Fandom, and thus entitled to associate with van Vogt, Tucker, and Jack Chalker. When you watch Bloch in action, you're standing before a venerable presence. What, though, is Robert A. Bloch *really* like?

There are things man was not meant to know. What goes on inside Robert Bloch's head emphatically comes under that category. The Surgeon General has determined that such speculations can be hazardous to one's sanity. Still, it isn't often one gets a chance to Tell All; and I know many of Bloch's innermost secrets.

If there were any justice, I'd know even more.

It was 1962: the third Chicago Worldcon, held in the Pick Congress Hotel. I'd just finished graduate work in psychology, and needed a topic no one else had published. Light dawned. In collaboration with Chairman Earl Kemp and the Boeing Company, I hatched a wicked scheme: we would find out the Real Truth about fandom. I showed up in Chicago with 500



photo by Jay Kay Klein

copies of a psychological profile test to be administered to the Convention members.

I didn't know Bloch, but Kemp had collected Bloch's maddest writings into *The Eighth Stage of Fandom*. Kemp promised to see that Bloch filled out the test. As we silped our nuclear fizz in the Insurgent manner (this was a *long* time ago) we speculated on the probable results. Would Bloch be off scale in all dimensions, or only in some of them? Would we succeed in describing Lovecraft's favorite protégé and thus materialize Cthulhu to deal with Worldcon fandom as it so richly deserved? The anticipation was wonderful.

The rest is rumor. I'm told that Bloch insisted on a dozen test forms. All I know is that I got forms from people who weren't listed as Con members, all written in the same hand with the same pen. I had forms from Tarelton Fiske, E. K. Jarvis, Wilson Kane, John Sheldon, Will Folke, Lefty Feep, and one signed in blood with an indecipherable scrawl. When they were scored, I determined there was almost no overlap among them. They couldn't *possibly* have been from one person--at least not from one *sane* person. Anyone who could exhibit all those traits simultaneously would be almost certain to commit mayhem . . .

There wasn't one from Robert Bloch. A great opportunity was lost forever. It's probably just as well.

Robert Bloch was indeed H. P. Lovecraft's favorite protégé. Bloch learned a lot from the relationship. Lovecraft used to spend so much time answering his mail that he starved to death. Bloch burns 95% of his mail unread; the rest he answers by post card. He has a strict rule: before answering a letter, turn out a screen play or a novel.

His house perches high in the Hollywood hills, in a location almost impossible to find without a map, and totally impossible to find if Bob gives you directions. Visitors without appointments are seldom seen again. Visitors with appointments are seldom seen again either.

Still, it's possible to exaggerate. For instance, it's a foul canard to report that Bennet Cerf once said that Bloch had the heart of a small boy, which he keeps in a jar on his desk.

Bloch said it himself. It's true, too. Just the other night Ellie Bloch confessed that they have *many* jars of hearts. The human ones aren't so bad. It's those others.

Robert Bloch has more credits than I have room for. He's one of the few writers ever to be twice Guest of Honor at a World Science Fiction Convention: once in 1948, somewhat before my time, and again in Toronto in 1973. Many of us are old enough to remember the Toronto convention.

Bloch won a real live Hugo in 1959 for "That Hell-bound Train." He's a past President of Mystery Writers of America, and, although he doesn't know it yet, a prospective President of Science Fiction Writers of America. He was guest of honor at the first World Fantasy Convention, the first Mystery Convention (Bouchercon), the first Mystery Writer's Convention in France, and the first Cinecon in Australia. Wise of these conventions. One likes to have certain things over and done with, rather than dreading them for years.

Bloch adapted 39 of his stories for a syndicated radio series, *Stay Tuned for Terror*, in 1945. This was the real origin of the Baby Boom. Since 1960 he has written for films and television, and we know what happened to *them*.

Award committees never catch on, though. They keep encouraging him. Not only has he got his Hugo. He's also got a Mystery Writers of America Poe Special Scroll (for *Psycho*); a Screen Writer's Award for Special Achievement (also *Psycho*); an Inkpot from the San Diego Comic-con; the E. E. Evans Memorial

Award; the Evans-Freehafer Award for Service to Science Fantasy (1974); a World Science Fantasy Convention Lifetime Achievement Award (1975); and a whole slew of others, including one that sounds just wonderful: Le Prix du Boucher de Cristal, Reims Festival du Roman et Film Policier, 1979.

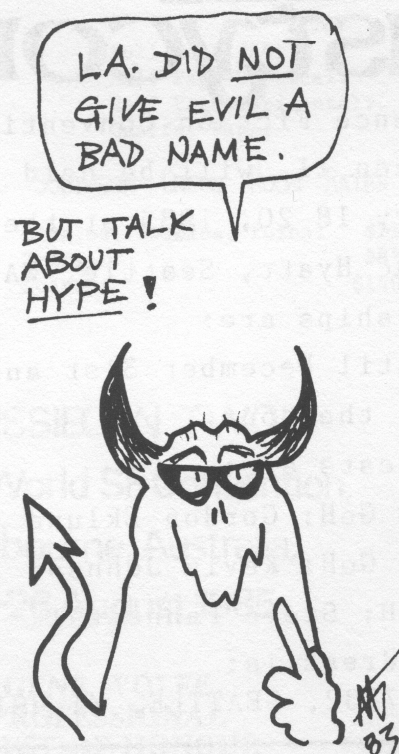
Bloch has written about 400 books and short stories and articles and films. These bear such pedestrian titles as *Bogy Men*, *Such Stuff As Screams Are Made Of*, *American Gothic*, *Out of the Mouths of Graves*, *There Is A Serpent in Eden*, *Mysteries of the Worm*, and *Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper*.

You can tell where his mind dwells.

Indeed. And know this: Bloch collaborates, often right out in public. He's worked with Bradbury. He's also a hopeless masochist. He's done a collaboration with Harlan Ellison.

More to the point, he has actually collaborated with Edgar Allen Poe. Bloch *claims* that he was given an unfinished manuscript discovered among Poe's effects. The fact is, though, that *no one* can tell where Poe left off and Bloch began; given Bloch's great age

continued



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(he's known to be almost as old as Tucker), much more plausible scenarios suggest themselves.

One wonders. Bloch has always had a mania for writing about Jack the Ripper. His newest book, *Night of the Ripper*, from Doubleday, should be in the huckster room right now. Get one and get it autographed. The blood stains will only make the book more valuable. But back to the point: given Bloch's collaboration with Poe, is it any wonder that Bloch *knows who the Ripper was*? Fair warning to any young ladies attending the Convention.

So. A picture of the man emerges. But how does one get that way? Alas, the problem is too much even for the greatest abnormal psychologist alive.

We know this. Robert Bloch spent six years in Methodist Sunday Schools. He still has his gold stars for attendance pasted into his world-famous stamp collection. (I have been unable to verify that he has one of the school instructors chained in the basement. Lord knows there's *something* chained in the basement, but . . .)

He grew up in a deprived household. There were no comic books. There was no TV. There couldn't be comic books and TV. They didn't even have radio during the first Cleveland administration. Out of kindness to the neighbors (and a special restraining injunction from the local Justice of the Peace), Bloch wasn't allowed to go outside the house after sundown. Since he was physiologically unable to go outside when the sun was out, there was nothing for it. Bloch spent his boyhood reading O. Henry, Edgar Allen Poe, De Maupassant, and the *Necronomicon*.

By 1934 he was contributing to *Weird Tales*. Eventually he broke into *Reader's Digest*. After that there were no bounds to his depravity.

At least, there wouldn't have been; but fortunately for all of us, at the last possible moment, he married Ellie.

This lady has performed miracles.

If you ever doubt the power of love, observe: the author of *The Living Demons*, *The Skull of the Marquis de Sade*, *The House of the Hatchet*, *Blood Runs Cold*, *The King of Terrors*, yea, even the author of *Psycho*, has been turned into a charming and pleasant man, a witty and urbane dinner companion, and one of the best friends anyone could have.

Of course we do worry a bit during Full Moon.

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