



The Last Defender of Camelot

Roger Zelazny

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This paperback original is a new collection of short stories by Roger Zelazny (1937-1995), a science fiction writer every young reader should know. Even old fans will find surprises in this collection. For instance, how many devotees have read *Passion Play*, Zelazny's first published work, and how many are familiar with *He Who Shapes*, the foundation of his classic novel *The Dream Master*?

Contents

Passion Play

Horseman!

The Stainless Steel Leech

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Comes Now the Power

Auto-Da-Fe'

Damnation alley

For a Breath I Tarry

The Engine at Heartspring's Center

The Game of Blood and Dust

No Award

Is There a Demon Lover in the House?

The Last Defender of Camelot

Stand Pat, Ruby Stone

Halfjack

The Last Defender of Camelot Details

Date : Published October 1st 1988 by Avon Books (first published December 1980)

ISBN : 9780380703166

Author : Roger Zelazny

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From Reader Review The Last Defender of Camelot for online ebook

Jesse says

I really enjoyed this anthology. This collection includes both science fiction and fantasy stories. Zelazny gives a brief introduction to each short story and there are some great ones including The Stainless Steel Leech, The Engine at Heartspring's Center, Is There a Demon Lover in the House? and The Game Of Blood and Dust among others.

My favorite story is the novelette For A Breath I Tarry. It's set in a future after the extinction of human beings where after contemplating the differences between Man and Machine one of the sentient machines decides he wants to actually become a man. This is an incredible story with a great ending and could make an equally good CGI film.

The novelette Damnation Alley features an ex biker who must go on a cross country ride through radioactive post apocalypse America to deliver a plague cure from California to Boston. Zelazny mentions that he had written this after reading Hunter S. Thompson's Hell's Angels. He also mentions it was later adapted into a book which was adapted into a film. This is one of the best action adventure stories I've read in awhile.

Another of the novelettes featured that I find interesting He Who Shapes about a future where the protagonist, Charles Render, a neuroparticipant therapist has the ability to go into people's consciousness using a machine. It reminded me of Christopher Nolan's Inception. Of course this story was written in the 1960s, 30 years before the film was made.

The short story the collection is named after The Last Defender of Camelot is about Lancelot who has lived for 200 years after the fall of Camelot. After helping to awaken a half mad Merlin he must stop the wizard to save the world. This is a really entertaining story and the reason I picked up this collection in the first place.

In the short A Thing of Terrible Beauty an alien parasite has a conversation with his human host as the world is about to be destroyed. The man walks over to his record collection pulls out Miles Davis' Sketches of Spain, starts to play the song Saeta and says "I've always maintained that it is music for the last hour of Earth. If Gabriel doesn't show up, this will do."

Yune says

I've got the book club edition of the 1980 collection, which holds a different set of stories than the 2002 collection with the same title introduced by Robert Silverberg, which some brilliant person grouped as being different editions of the same book. Argh.

Zelazny's stories are wonderful for their zest and dryness, I think, and much of that can also be found in the introductions he wrote for each story. I haven't read the novelizations of any of these, and Zelany writes that he preferred the original stories anyway; he also crowns one of them as his favorite novelette. (And I really appreciate the inclusion of such longer works.)

He may be the writer of the most cheerful post-apocalyptic fiction I've read.

Janelle says

As my first foray into Zelazny, I was pleasantly surprised and by the middle of the book had fallen in love. He Who Shapes was excellent and Damnation Alley gripped me the entire time. The Last Defender of Camelot was an interesting twist on Arthurian legend set in modern times and avoided the cliché and tedium of past tales. There was creativity and originality abundant and I thoroughly enjoyed the book.

Randy says

One of the best collections of short sci fi I've read to date. In fact, the best. Period.

Each of the stories is memorable in its own right. From the life-seeking quest of the robots in "For a Breath I Tarry" to the vampires (both biological and not-so-biological) in "Stainless Steel Leech" (a story replete with references both to Asimov and Harry Harrison's "Stainless Steel Rat"). Not to mention the anti-hero Hell Tanner's epic cross country nightmare in "Damnation Alley". Even the minor stories gave you something to think about. I haven't read a whole lot else from Zelazny, but this book impressed the shit out of me.

Amber says

Great cover, but this is not one of the better Zelazny short fiction collections in my opinion. I say this with a lot of respect for his writing. He pulls you in with atmosphere and intriguing concepts and fascinating references right away, and his prose is always good and easy to read, it's the endings and payoffs of many of the stories that left me (personally) unsatisfied. There's much to do about something that often comes to nothing in the end (a common problem with short fiction).

I'm not sure that would be true for other people, so take my two stars with a grain of subjective salt.

That said, I'd still recommend reading the following stories in this collection, which individually I would assign 3-4 stars: THE STAINLESS STEEL LEECH, COMES NOW THE POWER, FOR A BREATH I TARRY, NO AWARD, and THE LAST DEFENDER OF CAMELOT.

Douglas says

Everyone should read Zelazny's short stories. Amber is just a silly adventure story compared to his short work. There are three or four collections.

I record this here because my copy disintegrated.

?????? ??????????? (Grim) says

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Chris says

This was originally published on The Scrying Orb.

Written in the 60s and 70s, wreathed in a halo of cigarette smoke, amidst the fallout of an assured nuclear war, this collection of stories embodies an era. An era where a man could make a living writing dozens of short stories a year — filling plentiful sci-fi/fantasy magazines to the point where he needed pen names to allow multiple stories in the same issue.

Roger Zelazny's stories follow a peculiar cosmology. Humanity is almost always extinct, or else we're on our way to being so. Typically there are now robots or some kind of AI machines trying to emulate, understand, or ritualize the acts of the long dead humans. Even so far as racing stock cars or turning into vampire bots. Take away the radioactivity and craters, and everything else about the post apocalyptic wasteland he evisions matches up with modern sci-fi writers post-climate change future. No nuclear warheads necessary like they were in the 60s.

Many of the stories are very short, though there are three longer novellas in the middle. The first and longest one, *He Who Shapes*, is unfortunately a super weak sci-fi noir tale. It's the only story where the casual misogyny of the time and genre was really distasteful (to me). The second novella, the tale of former ex-con biker literally named 'Hell' as he tries to drive a rocket-launcher armed, spinning blade equipped armored car across a post apocalyptic US from the nation of California to the country of Boston, is so completely silly and ridiculous it somehow turns out compelling. The last, *For a Breath I Tarry*, a story of sentient machines trying to recover the memory of man in a frozen over future earth is by far the best. Unlike most modern writers, Zelazny can write a story that is quite clearly allegory or metaphor in a straightforward manner that embraces its own internal story consistency without feeling the need to wink or gesture at the reader to point out how clever and/or deep he is being.

Zelazny's prose is better than most genre writers, and indeed he has a little intro at the start of the book where he says an integral piece of him becoming a good writer was to stop insulting the reader's intelligence. The sparse prose that often references classical verse becomes jarring and kind of hilarious/fun when a very silly sci fi trope suddenly bounds on to the page. It's fascinating how the original sci-fi grandmasters all cite their inspiration as the literary greats — when I see modern genre writers list their influences, it's typically just past genre writers.

???? ??????? says

[illegible]

[illegible]

A nice compilation of short stories by this trailblazer in the fields of science fiction and fantasy. Some of them might be better labeled "novella", as they were much longer than your typical short story. One of my favorites was the post-apocalyptic tale "Damnation Alley". But there wasn't a single story in here that I didn't like.

I'll probably upgrade this to a 4 later on. I'm just slightly put off by the silliness in some of the stories, like the talking dog in He Who Shapes, though of course a lot of it in the stories in general is deliberate humour.

The preoccupation with metal that occurs in many of the stories was a common preoccupation with the SF of that period, so the collection is also interesting from the POV of a period piece.

Robb says

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Finished now - "For a Breath I Tarry" is likely a 4 or 5, there are a couple other 4s, but the number of sub-par

stories makes this book rated a 3.

Nikki says

Roger Zelazny's *The Last Defender of Camelot* is a collection that, according to the back cover, 'spans the full spectrum of Zelazny's remarkable career'. I enjoyed all of them, more or less: 'He Who Shapes' was interesting, and I loved 'For a Breath I Tarry'. I could almost like Launcelot, in 'The Last Defender of Camelot', and I did rather like Morgana. It's an interesting version of Merlin.

He is, at least, very good at the short story as a form, which is more than I can say for a lot of the writers I've seen attempting it. He makes the form his own, and gives it a twist in the right places. All the stories here are satisfying, whether long or short.

Jayaprakash Satyamurthy says

Zelazny had such a heady, lyrical style. It's really on best display in his short fiction, I think. I've read a bunch of his novels but never focused on his short fiction before so I decided to read this collection to decide if I should invest in the comprehensive 6-volume edition of his short fiction released by NESFA. Conclusion: I must. Another potentially bankrupt-making book-buying project. Just what the doctor ordered.

Dan Beliveau says

A great book of short stories. My favorites were "For a Breath I Tarry", "The Last Defender of Camelot" and "Is There a Demon Lover in the House?". The version of "Damnation Alley" was not much different, I didn't think that the book - just shorter. Overall, a good read.

Jerry says

These are short stories from 1962 to 1979. Zelazny "put this one together out of materials drawn from the beginning, middle and recent sections of the eighteen-year period I have been writing."

His "favorite novelette" is also my favorite of the collection, "For a Breath I Tarry", the story of super powerful artificial intelligences maintaining the Earth for a mankind they barely understand.

The collection also includes two novelettes that he later expanded into novels, "Damnation Alley" (which also became a movie) and "He Who Shapes", which became the novel *The Dream Master*. In both cases he writes that he prefers the shorter version. It has been too long since I've read *Damnation Alley* to compare them, and *Dream Master* is still on my to-read shelf.

These are mostly somewhat dreamy stories about futures where robots continue in the mental footsteps of mankind, or flawed knights making dangerous last stands, and even one that appears to be a combination of the two.

Nobody had ever asked him to do anything important before, and he hoped that nobody ever would again.

Hallie says

I read this because I haven't read any Zelazny yet and wanted to get a sense of his style. I think I'm interested enough to pick up a novel at some point, although I don't know what. Overall, this was a fun collection of stories, most of which I liked or at least liked the premise. A couple of the novellas were way too long for this collection ("He Who Shapes", god) and there was weirdly a lot of stuff about cars?

Particular ones I liked:

- "Passion Play": Robots in a post-human future re-enact racecar crashes as a religious experience.
 - "Damnation Alley": Biker/gang member literally named "Hell" has to basically Fury Road his way across a nuclear wasteland dystopian America to bring medicine to a plague-ridden Boston. Best protagonist in the collection.
 - "For A Breath I Tarry": More post-human future with robots, but this time they become humans in an interesting Temptation of Eve competition between AIs. Tied with Damnation Alley as my favorite story overall.
 - "The Game of Blood and Dust": Two cosmic beings play a chess analogue where they go through the course of human history making slight adjustments to see whether civilization ends in apocalypse or prosperity. Very tight and well-played!
 - "Stand Pat, Ruby Stone": Bug aliens have weird mating rituals. Wasn't crazy about the story on a plot level, but cool worldbuilding.
 - "Halfjack": Cyborg has relationships with human woman but connects most fully with his ship. Again, another very tight story that doesn't overplay its premise or go too long.
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Alex says

This anthology seems to go against type. Generally the openers and closers are the heavy hitters. Here, the brutal stories seem to be packed in the middle. So don't get discouraged. The collection is worth making it through.

FOR A BREATH I TARRY is such an intense apocalyptic vision. It manages to take the concept involving robots at the end of the world acting as surrogates for Adam & Eve to an emotional level I've never seen accomplished. I don't know why anyone has attempted this theme since. I don't see how it can get better than this.

DAMNATION ALLEY was like Bester but better. Zelazny manages to make our protagonist Hell Tanner, who is a terrible person, sympathetic. However, considering the ending, the next time I read this I will likely picture Hell as Jayne in his cunning hat.

AUTO-DA-FE is gorgeous and I fell in love with it in Harlan Ellison's anthology Dangerous Visions. If you strip out the speculative element, this is a gorgeous Hemmingway-esque bullfighting story. Including the speculative element creates some very interesting commentary on the automobile culture.

THE STAINLESS STEEL LEECH is so intensely weird - vampiric robot at the end of the world whose only friend is the last vampire. But it works.

HORSEMAN, A THING OF TERRIBLE BEAUTY, and COMES NOW THE POWER all have great fast powerful stings.

Bev says

The Last Defender of Camelot by Roger Zelazny is a collection of some of his best short stories and novellas. Please note that the edition I have read is the original collection put together by Zelazny himself in 1980 and NOT the later edition which has a mix of some stories found here plus various others. It is my understanding that the newer edition, while having an added bonus of including an introduction by Robert Silverburg--another luminary in the science fiction world, unfortunately removes all of the commentary by Zelazny himself as well as removing some of the finer pieces. This is a definite loss to the reader--Zelazny comments are quite delightful and "He Who Shapes" (one of the mysteriously excised) is a marvelous story.

I don't read all that much science fiction any more. Once upon a time that was all I read. I went through a phase where Asimov, Bradbury, Silverburg, Clarke, Zelazny and others were all I read. Anyone who knows me well, knows that I'm a book-a-holic. I buy books like there won't be any more tomorrow and constantly have about 500-1000 sitting around in TBR piles. The Last Defender of Camelot was leftover from my SF book-buying-binge days. When Adam over at Roof Beam Reader decided to host a TBR Reading Challenge, I decided to put this on on the list. After all, it had been sitting on my TBR shelves for over twenty years, it was about time I got around to it.

And good thing I did, too. Zelazny still has the power to enchant me even though I am now thoroughly back in mystery-loving mode. There is no one in the science fiction world (that I've read) who can write with such power and poetry about some of the most unsettling topics. This collection includes the aforementioned "He Who Shapes" which is a story about a neuroparticipant therapist--a man who can join in with his patient's dreams and use them to shape and conquer their fears and problems. It tells what happens when a therapist becomes a little too involved in the dream..... Also included is "The Stainless Steel Leech" a science fiction version of the vampire story. My favorites though are "Damnation Alley" (a novella I read last summer and reviewed [HERE](#)), the title story and "Is There a Demon Lover in the House?"

"The Last Defender of Camelot" wonders what might happen if Lancelot, Merlin and Morgan LeFay all survived through enchantment until the 20th Century. Who would be working for good? What final battles might occur? And "Is There a Demon Lover in the House?" does a little time traveling trick of its own. With a little gothic horror thrown in--producing delicious shivers as the story comes to a close.

This was a delightful trip back into science fiction for me. I have no idea why I didn't read it when I bought it, but I'm glad to have done so now. Zelazny was a marvelous writer who apparently (according to his notes) could whip out stories right and left with brilliant detail and shockingly perfect endings. Terrific collection. Four and a half stars.

Craig says

Zelazny was one of the best science fiction and fantasy writers of the twentieth century, and some of his best short fiction is included here. My three favorites are "For a Breath I Tarry," the title story, and the original novella-length version of "Damnation Alley," which has my favorite last line of any story ever. Zelazny was a great one!
