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Joe R. Christopher

*(emeritus) Tarleton State University, Stephenville, TX*Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

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Anthony Boucher's Greatest Horror Story

Abstract

Show how Anthony Boucher's short story "Review Copy," part horror and part fantasy, draws on mythology associated with both black and white blood magic.

Additional Keywords

Boucher, Anthony. "Review Copy"; Boucher, Anthony. "They Bite"

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ANTHONY BOUCHER'S GREATEST HORROR STORY

JOE R. CHRISTOPHER

IN *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and the Supernatural*, T.E.D. Klein describes Anthony Boucher's short story "They Bite" as "one of the most terrifying and often-reprinted stories in horror literature" (48). Again, he describes this story as

a savage horror tale about a family of shrunken, desert-dwelling cannibals called the Carkers, who have survived two attempts by the U.S. army to exterminate them. Now mere "lean dry things" resembling mummified children, they are usually glimpsed "out of the corner of your eye," but their bite can snap through bone. This widely anthologized story remains one of the most terrifying ever written—and, like the Carkers themselves, it is the single work of Boucher's guaranteed to survive. (49)

I print Klein's statements to establish the position I disagree with. Klein has a major reputation in the field of horror literature, of course: editor of the one-time *Rod Serling's "Twilight Zone" Magazine*, author of a novel, a book of novellas, and other works in the field, he certainly has the credentials to support his judgment.

But I am not disagreeing with him personally. *Non disputandis de gustibus*. What I am saying is that, according to my taste, Boucher's "Review Copy" is his greatest dark fantasy—his greatest horror story, in the casual way that term is currently used. In this essay, I do not intend to attack Klein's judgment. "They Bite" was published by John W. Campbell, Jr., in *Unknown Worlds*, and it has been reprinted in seven anthologies (Nevins 306, with a more recent appearance in Kaye). It obviously is an effective story, and Klein's commercial judgment of it is not to be denied. But it does not seem, to me, to be a perfect fiction. Its main flaw is structural; it takes a long exposition of the Carkers in a bar—the Desert Hot Spot—to set up the conclusion, and the young man who tells the protagonist about them is identified by the bartender as a stranger there himself (47)—no doubt the bartender means a relative stranger. But the young man's presence and knowledge is never explained, and he is dropped after appearing in the protagonist's dream that night. However, the latter part of the story—a murder plot and the Carker plot—is very well

handled, especially the nightmarish struggle to get a Carker's bite loosened from the protagonist's hand (51). And certainly the choice of the name *Carkers*—probably intended to echo *carcase*—is subliminally effective.

While admitting "They Bite's" virtues as a story, I still think "Review Copy" is the greater fiction. Since I complained of the exposition scene in "They Bite," let me begin with the structure of "Review Copy." It is divided into nine scenes, via the usual method of skipped spaces between them. The first (eighteen paragraphs long) establishes the conflict, as a frustrated author has turned to a black magician in order to seek revenge upon a reviewer. I might add that this situation may seem, to some, to be a minor affair for the basis of a story; perhaps the topic of the wartime spy in "They Bite" seems more important. But I would argue that supernatural stories have often turned on ancient manuscripts or ancient books; "Review Copy" is simply a modern version of a traditional motif.

The setting of the first scene is New York City, indicated by direct reference (142). The general time period—about the story's date of publication in 1949—is established by the mention of the journalistic columns of Bennett Cerf and Harvey Breit (143). The next seven scenes are in San Francisco and Berkeley, before the final one in New York again. Thus the two scenes with the magician frame the action across the continent.

The second scene is set in the outer office of the bookpage editor of the *San Francisco Times*. It is a long scene (of thirty-five paragraphs), and it is expository in the sense that it introduces two significant characters—Mark Mallow, the reviewer of detective fiction and other Gothic works, whose clever review of a book on magic upset the author of the first scene, and a young clergyman—referred to just as The Reverend—who reviews the religious books for the newspaper. They are brought together with the newly arrived volume *The Blood is the Life*, which contains the author's blood mixed with its ink. Despite the use of a Greek translation of the author's name, Mallow recognizes it as being by Jerome Blackland, whose earlier book he had panned.

Again there are references which tie this scene to its time period. Mallow is said to be in constant correspondence with "Starrett and Queen and Sandoe" (146); anyone knowledgeable about earlier detective-fiction criticism will recognize Vincent Starrett, Ellery Queen, and James Sandoe. The fantasy (and science-fiction) readers of the magazine might well not recognized the name of Sandoe, but Starrett, besides his Chicago-area newspaper column about books, had written stories for *Weird Tales*, and Queen was well known to the general public in the context of mystery novels and radio plays. (And, besides that, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* was published by the same company that was putting *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.)

Another reference is not so timely: this is when Mallow says that Blackland's first book was "an amazing opus half-novel, half-autobiography, that made William Seabook and Montague Summers look like skeptics" (147). Both of these writers were dead by the story's publication, but I suspect this reference was made for other reasons than temporal—it establishes Mallow as well-read in the occult field and, by implication, as unbelieving in it.

One criticism that might be leveled at this story is that it seems to be self-indulgent on Boucher's part. That is, that Boucher was at one time a mystery reviewer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, winning an Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America for his criticism. He corresponded with Queen, Sandoe, and Starrett—indeed, since Boucher's death his exchange of letters with Starrett has been published (Boucher and Starrett), and his letters with Queen—that is, the cousins Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee—are collected in the Lilly Library of Indiana University. He was knowledgeable about the historical occult, as he would prove as editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*—and it is worth noting that this story first appeared in the first issue of that journal. Boucher, as Mallow proves to be in the fifth scene, was a gourmet cook. Boucher, like Mallow, lived in the Berkley area. Boucher, like Mallow, could be profane—although Mallow's use seems more pervasive, ("I'll be damned," 147; "What the devil," 148; etc.). According to Boucher's widow, Phyllis White, Boucher used profanity "unhesitatingly whenever he felt that it was the mot juste" (White). All this is true, and other parallels exist, but Mallow is not Boucher: Mallow is not married, Mallow enjoys writing only negative reviews, Mallow is seemingly anti-religious (147). On the last point: Boucher was a devout, intelligent Catholic.

Also, the story first appeared under Boucher's alternate pseudonym of H.H. Holmes, so for this story's early, fantasy-buying readers any association with Boucher as, then, reviewer of mysteries for *The New York Times Book Review* (cf. Nevins xi) would not be obvious. No connection was made in the issue between one of the two editors (Boucher) and one of the contributing authors (Holmes). Of course, a few fantasy enthusiasts might remember a few science fiction stories by H.H. Holmes about six years earlier in *Astounding Science-Fiction* and so have some context for this contributor. Some of the audience would also have read the two mystery novels by H.H. Holmes of 1940 and 1942. A minority, active in fandom, and a number involved in the publishing world would know the duo-identity of Boucher and Holmes.

To return to the structure: the third scene (of four paragraphs), set on the Bridge train from San Francisco to Berkeley, begins the pattern of short scenes, alternating between Mallow and The Reverend. This one follows Mallow as he is reading during the commuter trip.

The fourth scene (of six paragraphs) has as its focal character The Reverend, as he realizes that the supernatural is involved with Blackland's book

that Mallow has taken home. There is one reference in this scene which I have not been able to trace. Just before The Reverend phones to try to find Mallow, that story says that "There was no one in Dr. Halstead's office" (149); this implies that the clergyman has gone to Dr. Halstead's office and from there phones back to the bookpage editor's office to ask the secretary for Mallow's address. But who was Halstead and why was The Reverend there? (I might add that the magazine publication of the story is the same as the book version I have been following; the allusion no doubt was a part of the era, but it is now lost—at least to me. Phyllis White also was unable to identify it.)

The fifth scene (of seven paragraphs) describes Mark Mallow at home, making and eating his dinner, settling down to read, and finding *The Blood Is the Death* beside his chair, rather than the Georges Simenon mystery he had expected.

The sixth scene (of five paragraphs) describes The Reverend's approach to Mallow's home in "the Berkeley hills" (150, qtd. from the fifth scene). The time overlaps with the seventh scene (of three paragraphs), set inside Mallow's house—that is, the explosion in the last paragraph of the sixth scene is the same as the explosion in the last paragraph of the seventh. Thus, these scenes of alternating focal characters reach their simultaneity here.

The eighth scene (of five paragraphs) continues the alternation, with The Reverend entering Mallow's home. One final structural element ties the scene to the final one. This scene ends with this statement about The Reverend: "He knew only that he could pray for Mark Mallow's soul—and probably for that of a man named Blackland" (152). The final scene ends with this about the magician: "He too said prayers, of his sort, for the souls of Blackland and Mallow" (152).

This structural analysis may have been overly elaborate: after all, many popular writers structure their works well. But it was inspired by the contrast to "They Bite," so it may be useful in my argument. The essential points are the frame in New York; the establishing scene in the *San Francisco Times* office; the short alternating scenes thereafter—deliberately short to intensify the excitement; and the double turning point in the sixth and seventh scenes, followed by the resolution (in a way to be discussed later) in the eighth.

Perhaps some shorter comments can round out this defense of "Review Copy." Style may be considered next. One matter of diction seems an oddity in this story: only Jerome Blackland and Mark Mallow are fully named, and Blackland does not have his name mentioned in the first scene, just being called "the customer." Boucher uses the book-review secretary, Miss Wentz—she does have her last name given—to label her boss The Great Man, in caps (144), and the religious-book reviewer The Reverend, likewise in caps (145). Through this use of her point of view, Boucher keeps from cluttering his story with

individuals who need to have their own traits and histories developed—although Boucher does develop The Reverend beyond a flat or type character. But the effect is to put the emphasis on the two antagonists.

Likewise, the man whom I have been calling the magician is given a type identification. In the first scene he is called “[t]he man who kept his face in the shadows” (142), without caps. Most of the other times in that scene he is referred to simply as “the man,” as contrasted to “the customer” (142-3), but a fuller expression is used twice: “the man in the shadows” (142) and “[t]he man in shadow” (143). In the final scene, he attends Blackland’s funeral and is called “[t]he man who usually kept his face in the shadow” (152). Again, this keeps the need for characterization within limits for a short story, but the shadows also function as a simple, obvious, but (I believe) effective symbol.

Two consecutive sentences may be quoted from the turning point of the story: this is when Mark Mallow, who has been trying to read a mystery but keeps finding Blackland’s second book beside his chair, throws it into his open fire. (This fire was prepared for in the opening scene.) The sentences are these, each without internal punctuation:

The book found the flames and the flames found the blood and the blood found the death that is the life and the life that is death. The shadow went from infra-visibility to blinding sight and it was one with flames and blood and book and the one thing that was shadow and flames and blood and book leapt. (151)

The first of these sentences has a three-step anadiplosis with the final element an antimetabole. The second is not so easy to classify, but obviously terms *shadow*, *flames*, *blood*, and *book* appear twice, in the same order, the first time spread out between two clauses and the second time in a polysyndeton in the third clause. This movement to elaborate rhetorical figures at the turning point of the story certainly demonstrates some skill in writing.

The characterization may also be considered briefly. Mallow’s personality was discussed above, in the comparison to Boucher, so it may be omitted here. The most interesting of the other characters is the magician. As was said, his lack of a name keeps him from having to have a family background and a Bildungsroman to be traced; but there is some complexity even so.

In the opening scene, in his discussion with Blackland, he suggests several other things Blackland could do to get his revenge, each of which Blackland rejects. Then Blackland accuses the magician of trying to talk him out of using magic; the magician says, “Nonsense” (142), but he thinks that, nevertheless,

it was true. He knew that he had powers and that he could make good money from their use. But he knew too how unpredictable they were, and he always experienced this momentary desire to talk the customer out of it. (142-43)

This seems odd in a magician, particularly one who seems to be using black magic: he has a flame burning in a pentangle (142); he speaks of “compel[ling] the Ab” (142); he has Blackland inside the pentangle as he makes an incision in Blackland’s wrist, so the blood will drip on a “container of thick black stuff” (143)—presumably the basis for the black ink of the book; and he “tosse[s] a handful of powder into the flame and beg[ins] to chant” at the end of the scene (143).

Besides this impulse to talk his customer out of using magic, the magician’s thoughts also show him to be psychologically astute—in modern terms—which increase his complexity when combined with his practice of magic. When Blackland says he cannot cross the Hudson River, the magician thinks, “Compulsion neurosis [...] form of agoraphobia” (142). When Blackland blames one out-of-town review for the failure of his book, the magician thinks that

[h]is customer was crazy as a bed-bug. But what did that matter to him, whose customers always were as mad as they were profitable? (143)

Besides the psychological complexity, this last thought does another thing: it makes the magician part of an American pattern. Anyone who has heard some salesman privately belittle the customers off of whom he lives will recognize the financial attitude the magician here expresses.

But this is modified by the final scene, when the magician is said to have “the decency to attend Jerome Blackland’s funeral” (152). The passage continues:

He always did this for his clients. It was a sort of professional ethics.

A purist of professional ethics might suggest he should have warned Blackland of the dangers inherent in bestowing the vital virtues of one’s blood to animate printer’s ink. But why? Half the time the charms worked imperfectly if at all; and you do not wantonly frighten away customers. (152)

In other words, the magician has some “decency” and some “professional ethics,” but only a limited amount; it sounds very much like the nineteenth-century business world—and often like the twentieth and twenty-first: *caveat emptor*.

And, of course, this adds complexity to the magician. He is not wholly evil, as a popularly pictured black magician might be; but nevertheless he is never good enough really to put the customer above his own interests—really to love his neighbor as himself. And he manages this by rationalization, at least in part: he looks down on his customers, concluding they “always were [...] mad” (143).

It would be possible to discuss the character of the Reverend in the same sort of detail, showing the complexity of a young man who, while suspecting Mallow was damned—that is his mental response to one of Mallow's oaths, “I'll be damned” (147)—nevertheless goes to Mallow's home in an attempt to save him—at least physically—from the magicked review copy of Blackland's second book. But I would rather use him as a means of discussing the white magic in the story—for Boucher makes the white magic very Christian, and the Reverend thus is an appropriate means for its expression. (Perhaps one reason Klein praised “They Bite” and did not mention “Review Copy” is that the former is almost entirely oriented toward evil—and thus is more typical of the horror stories of the present day.)

At any rate, there are two episodes of white magic in the story. The first is set up by a series of small episodes in which the ink of Blackland's review copy rubs off on the fingers of those males who touch it—black on the bookpage editor (145), black on The Reverend (146), but red on Mark Mallow (147-48). Later, The Reverend takes down his Bible:

It had happened so quickly it could scarcely be believed.

The smudge on his thumb had been black. In the instant that it touched the Bible it turned blood-red, exactly like the stain on Mark Mallow's hand. Then there was a minute hissing noise and an instant of intense heat.

There was no smudge at all on his thumb now. (149)

It should be noted that The Reverend is not Catholic, for the possibility of marriage exists for him (145). (He is probably Episcopalian, or perhaps Lutheran, since he is said to be still in his diaconate [145]; but for a Low-Church Episcopalian, the Bible would have the same authority that it does for the more conservative Protestants, so the denomination does not truly matter.) What I am suggesting is that, while Catholics also affirm the holiness of the Bible, this sounds like a piece of Protestant white magic. Whether or not Boucher planned it that way, and he probably did, it balances the Catholic white magic to follow.

While The Reverend is hurrying to Mallow's home, he does pause one time. Later, he thinks of the Roman Catholic office of the Exorcist as

shamefacedly he let his fingers steal into his pocket and touch the bottle nestling there—the tiny bottle which he had filled with holy water as he passed a Roman church. (151)

This becomes significant in the eighth scene, the resolution of the story. The Reverend enters Mallow's house:

He saw the body of Mark Mallow and he saw the blood of Mark Mallow and another.

The Reverend knew what to do. He opened the phial of holy water and started to pour it on the blood. Instead, the blood ran toward him, but he did not flinch. He stood his ground and watched as the water and the blood commingled and were one, and that one was the water. (151-52)

This is the white-magic cause of Blackland's death, of course.

Now what can a reader say about this use of Christian magic? The first thing most secular readers are likely to say is that they do not believe it: Bibles do not have magical power, and holy water acts just like regular water. These readers—who are probably readers too of *The Skeptical Inquirer*—need to be reminded that the story is a fantasy. Neither do they believe in black magic, in which blood is mixed with ink and acts malevolently across the continent.

So they must take the story symbolically if they take it at all as a meaningful story. What they have read is a depiction of the ancient battle of good and evil. This is not merely a Christian thesis; the Zoroastrians, of course, were near dualists: good vs. evil, light vs. darkness, Ahura Mazda vs. Ahriman. Human history is filled with stories of saints and sages and rabbis, on the one hand, and villains—Hitlers and Jack-the-Rippers, say—on the other. In this story, The Reverend is in opposition to the magician, and Mallow is in opposition to Jerome Blackland—at least formally. But more thematically, The Reverend is balanced against Blackland, charity against revenge. Blackland wants to kill; The Reverend wants to save a fellow human being—a neighbor, in Christian terminology.

But Boucher adds another moral touch to the story. The Reverend

found it [hard] to understand why he had been permitted to arrive only *after* the . . . happening. He guessed that in some way the small petty comfortable evils of Mark Mallow had made him vulnerable to a larger evil. (152)

This too is an ancient message; but, as Dr. Johnson said, people do not need so much to be taught new things—at least, in the moral realm—as to be reminded of old ones. Human nature has not changed.

This then is why I think “Review Copy” is Anthony Boucher’s greatest horror story—or Dark Fantasy, or, in older terms, Gothic fiction. It is well plotted and structured; it is very well written; it has some interesting characterization; it has an ancient theme with appropriate symbolism; and it has a thoughtful final hook to leave the reader wondering and thus remembering the story: just what sort of prayers could the magician—the somewhat ambivalent but basically worker of black magic—what sort of prayers could he say “for the souls of Blackland and Mallow”?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOE R. CHRISTOPHER is Professor *emeritus* of English at Tarleton State University, Stephenville TX. He has published two books (one in collaboration) on C.S. Lewis, published one chapbook of Tolkienian verse, and been an assistant editor of *Truths Breathed Through Silver: The Inklings' Moral and Mythopoeic Legacy* (ed. Jonathan B. Himes, Cambridge Scholars, 2008). Besides other editorial work, he has published essays on Lewis, Tolkien, Charles Williams, Dorothy L. Sayers, and some related authors, as well as such popular writers as Anthony Boucher, Ellery Queen, John Dickson Carr, Poul Anderson, Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, and Gene Wolfe, and such standard authors as the Pearl Poet, Shakespeare, Coleridge, Hawthorne, Tennyson, and John Heath-Stubbs. He has published well over 150 poems. He has had one play—a farce about a vampire—produced at his university. His book of poems about poetry—listed as *Ars Poetica* on Amazon.com, but in full *The Variety of Poetic Genres: Ars Poetica*—was published by Mellen Poetry Press in 2012.

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