

EASTERN STANDARD TRIBE

CORY DOCTOROW



Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom

A Place So Foreign and Eight More

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing Science Fiction (with Karl Schroeder)

Essential Blogging (with Rael Dornfest, J. Scott Johnson, Shelley Powers, Benjamin Trott, and Merit G. Trott)

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A Tom Doherty Associates Book
New York

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For my parents

For my family

*For everyone who helped me up and for everyone I let down. You know who you are. Sincerest thanks
and most heartfelt apologies.*

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I once had a Tai Chi instructor who explained the difference between Chinese and Western medicine thus: “Western medicine is based on corpses, things that you discover by cutting up dead bodies and pulling them apart. Chinese medicine is based on living flesh, things observed from vital, moving humans.”

The explanation, like all good propaganda, is stirring and stilted, and not particularly accurate, and gummy as the hook from a top-40 song, sticky in your mind in the sleep-deprived noontime when the world takes on a hallucinatory hyperreal clarity. Like now as I sit here in my underwear on the roof of a sanatorium in the backwoods off Route 128, far enough from the perpetual construction of Boston that it’s merely a cloud of dust like a herd of distant buffalo charging the plains. Like now as I sit here with a pencil up my nose, thinking about homebrew lobotomies and wouldn’t it be nice if I gave myself one.

Deep breath.

The difference between Chinese medicine and Western medicine is the dissection versus the observation of the thing in motion. The difference between reading a story and studying a story is the difference between living the story and killing the story and looking at its guts.

School! We sat in English class and we dissected the stories that I’d escaped into, laid open their abdomens and tagged their organs, covered their genitals with polite, sterile drapes, recorded dutiful notes en masse that told us what the story was about, but never what the story *was*. Stories are propaganda, virii that slide past your critical immune system and insert themselves directly into your emotions. Kill them and cut them open and they’re as naked as a nightclub in daylight.

The theme. The first step in dissecting a story is euthanizing it: “What is the theme of this story?”

Let me kill my story before I start it, so that I can dissect it and understand it. The theme of this story is: “Would you rather be smart or happy?”

This is a work of propaganda. It’s a story about choosing smarts over happiness. Except if I give the pencil a push: then it’s a story about choosing happiness over smarts. It’s a morality play, and the first character is about to take the stage. He’s a foil for the theme, so he’s drawn in simple lines. Here he is:

Art Berry was born to argue.

There are born assassins. Bred to kill, raised on cunning and speed, they are the stuff of legend, remorseless and unstoppable. There are born ballerinas, confectionery girls whose parents subject them to rigors every bit as intense as the tripwire and poison on which the assassins are reared. There are children born to practice medicine or law; children born to serve their nations and die heroically in the noble tradition of their forebears; children born to tread the boards or shred the turf or leave smoking rubber on the racetrack.

Art's earliest memory: a dream. He is stuck in the waiting room of one of the innumerable doctors who attended him in his infancy. He is perhaps three, and his attention span is already as robust as it will ever be, and in his dream—which is fast becoming a nightmare—he is bored silly.

The only adornment in the waiting room is an empty cylinder that once held toy blocks. Its label colorfully illustrates the blocks, which look like they'd be a hell of a lot of fun, if someone hadn't lost them all.

Near the cylinder is a trio of older children, infinitely fascinating. They confer briefly, then do *something* to the cylinder, and it unravels, extruding into the third dimension, turning into a stack of blocks.

Aha! thinks Art, on waking. This is another piece of the secret knowledge that older people possess, the strange magic that is used to operate cars and elevators and shoelaces.

Art waits patiently over the next year for a grown-up to show him how the blocks-from-pictures trick works, but none ever does. Many other mysteries are revealed, each one more disappointingly mundane than the last: even flying a plane seemed easy enough when the nice steward let him ride up in the cockpit for a while en route to New York—Art's awe at the complexity of adult knowledge fell away. By the age of five, he was stuck in a sort of perpetual terrible twos, fearlessly shouting “no” at the world's every rule, arguing the morals and reason behind them until the frustrated adults whom he was picking on gave up and swatted him or told him that that was just how it was.

In the Easter of his sixth year, an itchy-suited and hard-shoed visit to church with his Gran turned into a raging holy war that had the parishioners and the clergy arguing with him in teams and relays.

It started innocently enough: “Why does God care if we take off our hats, Gran?” But the nosy ladies in the nearby pews couldn't bear to simply listen in, and the argument spread like ripples on a pond, out as far as the pulpit, where the priest decided to squash the whole line of inquiry with some half-remembered philosophical word games from Descartes in which the objective truth of reality is used to prove the beneficence of God and vice versa, and culminates with “I think therefore I am.” Father Ferlenghetti even managed to work it into the thread of the sermon, but before he could go on, Art's shrill little voice answered from within the congregation.

Amazingly, the six-year-old had managed to assimilate all of Descartes's fairly tricky riddles in as long as it took to describe them, and then went on to use those same arguments to prove the necessary cruelty of God, followed by the necessary nonexistence of the Supreme Being, and Gran tried to take him home then, but the priest—who'd watched Jesuits play intellectual table tennis and recognized a natural when he saw one—called him to the pulpit, whence Art took on the entire congregation, singly and in bunches, as they assailed his reasoning and he built it back up, laying rhetorical traps that they blundered into with all the cunning of a cabbage. Father Ferlenghetti laughed and clarified the points when they were stuttered out by some marble-mouthed rhetorical amateur from the audience, then sat back and marveled as Art did his thing. Not much was getting done vis-à-vis sermonizing and there was still the Communion to be administered but God knew it had been a

vis sermonizing, and there was still the Communion to be administered, but God knew it had been a long time since the congregation was engaged so thoroughly with coming to grips with God and what their faith meant.

Afterwards, when Art was returned to his scandalized, thin-lipped Gran, Father Ferlenghetti made a point of warmly embracing her and telling her that Art was welcome at his pulpit any time, and suggested a future in the seminary. Gran was amazed, and blushed under her Sunday powder, and the clawed hand on his shoulder became a caress.

The theme of this story is choosing smarts over happiness, or maybe happiness over smarts. Art's a good guy. He's smart as hell. That's his schtick. If he were a cartoon character, he'd be the pain-in-the-ass poindexter who is all the time dispelling the mysteries that fascinate his buddies. It's not easy being Art's friend.

Which is, of course, how Art ("not his real name") ended up sitting forty-five stories over the woodsy Massachusetts countryside, hot August wind ruffling his hair and blowing up the legs of his boxers, pencil in his nose, euthanizing his story preparatory to dissecting it. In order to preserve the narrative integrity, Art ("not his real name") may take some liberties with the truth. This is autobiographical fiction, after all, not an autobiography.

Call me Art ("not my real name"). I am an agent-provocateur in the Eastern Standard Tribe, though I've spent most of my life in GMT-8 and at various latitudes of Zulu, which means that my poor pineal gland has all but forgotten how to do its job without that I drown it in melatonin precursors and treat it to multi-hour nine-kilolumen sessions in the glare of my travel lantern.

The tribes are taking over the world. You can track our progress by the rise of minor traffic accidents. The sleep-deprived are terrible, terrible drivers. Daylight savings time is a widowmaker: stay off the roads on Leap Forward day!

Here is the second character in the morality play. She's the love interest. Was. We broke up, just before I got sent to the sanatorium. Our circadians weren't compatible.

April 3, 2012 was the day that Art nearly killed the first and only woman he ever really loved. It was her fault.

Art's car was running low on lard after a week in the Benelux countries, where the residents were all high-net-worth cholesterol-conscious codgers who guarded their arteries from the depredations of the frytrap as jealously as they squirreled their money away from the taxman. He was, therefore, thrilled and delighted to be back on British soil, Greenwich +0, where grease ran like water and his runabout could be kept easily and cheaply fuelled and the vodka could run down his gullet instead of into his tank.

He was in the Kensington High Street on a sleepy Sunday morning, GMT0300h—2200h back in EDT—and the GPS was showing insufficient data-points to even gauge traffic between his geoloc and the Camden High where he kept his rooms. When the GPS can't find enough peers on the relay network to color its maps with traffic data, you know you've hit a sweet spot in the city's uber-circadian, a moment of grace where the roads are very nearly exclusively yours.

So he whistled a jaunty tune and swilled his coffium, a fad that had just made it to the UK, thanks to the loosening of rules governing the disposal of heavy water in the EU. The java just wouldn't cool off, remaining hot enough to guarantee optimal caffeine osmosis right down to the last drop.

If he was jittery, it was no more so than was customary for ESTalists at GMT+0, and he was driving safely and with due caution. If the woman had looked out before stepping off the kerb and into the anemically thin road, if she hadn't been wearing stylish black in the pitchy dark of the curve before the Royal Garden Hotel, if she hadn't stepped *right in front of his runabout*, he would have merely swerved and sworn and given her a bit of a fright.

But she didn't, she was, she did, and he kicked the brake as hard as he could, twisted the wheel likewise, and still clipped her hipside and sent her ass-over-teakettle before the runabout did its own barrel roll, making three complete revolutions across the Kensington High before lodging in the Royal Garden Hotel's shrubs. Art was covered in scorching, molten coffium, screaming and clawing at his eyes, upside down, when the porters from the Royal Garden opened his runabout's upside-down door and undid his safety harness and pulled him out from behind the rapidly flacciding airbag. They plunged his face into the ornamental birdbath, which had a skin of ice that shattered on his nose and jangled against his jawbone as the icy water cooled the coffium and stopped the terrible, terrible burning.

He ended up on his knees, sputtering and blowing and shivering, and cleared his eyes in time to see the woman he'd hit being carried out of the middle of the road on a human travois made of the porters' linked arms of red wool and gold brocade.

"Assholes!" she was hollering. "I could have a goddamn spinal injury! You're not supposed to move me!"

"Look, miss," one porter said, a young chap with the kind of fantastic dentition that only an insecure teabag would ever pay for, teeth so white and flawless they strobed in the sodium streetlamps. "Look. We can leave you in the middle of the road, right, and not move you, like we're supposed to. But if we do that, chances are you're going to get run over before the paramedics get here, and then you certainly *will* have a spinal injury, and a crushed skull besides, like as not. Do you follow me?"

"You!" she said, pointing a long and accusing finger at Art. "You! Don't you watch where you're going, you fool! You could have killed me!"

Art shook water off his face and blew a mist from his dripping moustache. "Sorry," he said, weakly. She had an American accent, Californian maybe, a litigious stridency that tightened his

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