



# IMAGINARY WORLDS

The Art of Fantasy

Lin Carter

*Excerpts quoting Jack Vance*

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(...) We think of modern-day Sword & Sorcery to a coherent growth from the sort of thing founded by Howard, Smith, Moore, Ball, and Kuttner in their salad days. That it can be a development beyond the original school is obvious in the work of the superior practitioners of the craft: **Jack Vance** is more subtle, adroit, and aplombful than even Smith, and Moorcock's doomed villain-hero, Elric, a more dramatically different type of character that even Miss Moore's "gal Conan." (I like to think that my mingling of science fiction and swashbuckling fantasy in the Thongor stories is innovative to a degree: flying airboats and lightning weapons in primal Lemuria are, at least, things neither Howard nor Kuttner thought of.) (...)

(...) In 1968, deciding that it was about time the handful of active Sword & Sorcery writers organized a mini-guild all their own, L. Sprague de Camp, John Jakes, and myself got together and announced the formation of The Swordsmen and Sorcerers' Guild of America, Ltd., called "**S.A.G.A.**" for short. That original three-man nucleus was swiftly widened to include Fritz Leiber, Andre Norton, **Jack Vance**, Michael Moorcock, and Poul Anderson.

Unlike most other writers' organizations, S.A.G.A. is strictly forbidden by its constitution, the Sacred Articulatorum, to engage in any activity whatsoever of an official nature, including (paradoxically) the drawing-up of constitutions. No meetings, bulletins, conventions, assemblies, publications, banquets, awards, blacklists, campaigns, crusades, ballots, elections, officers, and like that. The SAGAmen pay no dues, fees, expenses, charges, titles, or weregild. About the only thing the Sacred Articulatorum permit the eight members to do is get together in the bar at science fiction conventions and hoist a couple in honor of Absent Friends. We also bestow titles and honorifics on each other at every conceivable occasion, usually for no particular reason at all. De Camp, for instance, is Supreme Sadist of the Reptile Men of Yag, Moorcock is Veiled Thaumaturge of the Mauve Barbarians of Ningg, Jakes is Hereditary Guardian of the Sacred Ruby-Studded Elephant Goad to the Court of Ubbo the Unmerciful, and the present writer enjoys the prerogatives of Exalted Grand Booleywag, to say nothing of the honor of Purple Druid of the

Slithering Horde of the Slime Pits of Zugthakya. The recent publication of the two-volume anthology of all-new and original Sword & Sorcery yarns by the SAGAmens, *Flashing Swords!* from Dell Books, is highly unofficial, by the way.

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(...) Both **Jack Vance** and Poul Anderson are better known for their skillful and highly professional contributions to modern science fiction; both qualify for membership in S.A.G.A. on the basis of two books in the heroic fantasy genre. Vance is a native Californian, born in San Francisco, raised on a ranch in the center of the state, and for many years now a resident of Oakland. He studied physics, mining engineering, and journalism, but turned about 1940 to the writing of fiction. It was Sam Merwin, I believe, who was the first editor to recognize his talents. Merwin, then editor of a now-defunct science fiction magazine called *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, has recorded that he read and rejected "fascinating but, alas, unpublishable pseudo-Cabellian fantasies" by Vance, starting about 1941. Later he had the honor of purchasing Vance's first commercial sale, a story called "The World Thinker," which he printed in the Summer 1945 issue. Vance quickly became one of the foremost modern sf writers, with such brilliant novels and novellas as *The Languages of Pao*, *Big Planet*, *The Dragon Masters*, and *The Last Castle* to his credit.

Those early "pseudo-Cabell" fantasies did not go to waste, however. In 1950 a small and short-lived paperback firm called Hillman Books earned our undying gratitude by publishing them in book form. This slim little book of early **Vance**, *The Dying Earth*, became almost overnight a minor classic in the genre, and it remains in print from Lancer Books to this day.

Vance is a simply amazing writer. He writes with a great sense of style, with polish, sparkle, and wit. The surface of his polychrome prose glitters with exotic, fascinating names, and with an incredible wealth of ideas and concepts, which he tosses off in careless profusion. He is a "writers' writer," with all the respect and admiration of his colleagues and fellow-craftsmen that the term implies. A sequel called *The Eyes of the Overworld* was published many years later by Ace, and it demonstrated that he could still pull off the miracle of style so ably displayed in the early book.

Vance is nearly alone among modern-day fantasy writers in his intense preoccupation with matters of pure style. "Style," in the present context, does not refer to the characteristic trademarks which most reasonably competent professionals leave on each Imaginary Worlds Lin Carter - Page, but to an old-fashioned craftsmanship in the use of language. This sort of thing requires a fine ear for tone and coloring in prose, and for the intrinsic cadence of the English sentence. The art of pure language regarded as an end in itself is generally considered to have died out with the collapse of the 1920s. In those days, connoisseurs lingered over a well-burnished Imaginary Worlds Lin Carter - Page of Cabell or Arthur Machen or Edgar Saltus with sensitive appreciation, savoring the bouquet of a book or essay as they might the fragrance of a rare vintage wine. This brief era of "belles-lettres" was eclipsed by the stolid rise to prominence of Hemingway and Chandler and gentlemen of similar kidney, exponents of a new fashion for clipped, terse, unadorned monotone that was to replace this leisurely elegance of style. But the belletrists enjoyed their transient heyday, considering style a valid concern for prose artists, equal in importance to plot or content, and perhaps transcending these.

**Vance** remains one of the last belletrists in captivity, and his popularity may be explained by his wise refusal to subordinate content to surface: in his work neither prose nor plot are dominant—they coexist and are mutually interdependent. I suspect that he learned quite a bit from Cabell, as Merwin sensed: both writers view their characters with wry detachment, at one remove, you might say; both strive for the "mot juste", writing with suave elegance. **Vance** has, in fact, considerably more in common with Cabell than with Howard. The grim, humorless urgency typical of Howard is lacking in **Vance's** sorcerous fables, in which sanguinary coloring is replaced by cool pastel tints. In his dispassionate handling of character, his irony and sardonic understatement, his lapidary surface and delicate precision of phrase, he hearkens back ultimately to a pre-pulp source among the masters of elegant prose. He is a delicious writer, one to be savored, and he belongs to an almost extinct breed. H. L. Mencken affectionately, but accurately, once called Cabell a "lingering survival of the ancien regime: a scarlet dragon-fly imbedded in opaque amber." The term is a bit baroque, but it could be applied to **Jack Vance**.

Like **Vance**, Poul Anderson is better known for his science fiction, although his heart clearly belongs to his first love, heroic fantasy. In fact, Anderson's first published book was a grim, beautiful Sword & Sorcery novel called *The Broken Sword*, whose roots are more firmly traceable to

the traditions of the Scandinavian novel called *The Broken Sword*, whose roots are more firmly traceable to the traditions of the Scandinavian sagas, strictly speaking, than to the Howardian brand of swashbuckling. Anderson comes by his fondness for the Norse myths and Icelandic sagas quite naturally, being of Danish extraction. He was born in Pennsylvania in 1926 and now lives with his wife and teenaged daughter in Orinda, California. Anderson began selling to John Campbell while still an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota, and he has been writing science fiction ever since, his only other ventures into the realm of swordplay and ensorcellment being a "neo-Carolingian" novel called *Three Hearts and Three Lions* and the not-yet-published *Hrolf Kraki's Saga*. His fondness for the Howardian heroica is well known, however, for he is a frequent contributor to the *Sword & Sorcery* fanzine *Amra*, and is a member of the Hyborian Legion, as the informal and enormous Conan fan-club is known.

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Imaginary Worlds Lin Carter - Page 193 :

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(..) In creating an imaginary world with words, the author is thrust into the role of Adam. Everything must be named—kings, gods, and men, as well as kingdoms, cities, rivers, oceans, mountains, forests, deserts, islands, and all of the birds and beasts who inhabit this world. Adam had it easy—all he had to name were the beasts!

And the kind of names they are, their weight and color and taste and music, are of enormous importance, too. I admit to being a fanatic on this topic; I have always been hypersensitive to the ring and shape and savor of made-up names. Some people have a superlative ear for it—Dunsany is the Old Master in this department, and **Jack Vance** a modern genius of the art. Others are less competent, some lacking the skill altogether; these unfortunate writers either have no ear at all for the sound of neocognomina, or they fail to prepare themselves in advance by carefully working out a list of fifty or sixty invented names to have on hand when the need arises—a system I would recommend to all new workers in the art of fantasy. (...)

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Imaginary Worlds Lin Carter - Page 201:

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(...) Stonehenge ... taste the word on your tongue; roll it around in your mouth; listen to it . . . Stonehenge. The word has a slow, stately

grandeur to it. The syllables are ponderous, weighty as the great stones themselves.

Now imagine it called "Piccadilly".

It simply doesn't fit, does it? The true name has a ponderous and mysterious grandeur to it—it is right there, in the slow, heavy roll of the evenly accented syllables. But "Piccadilly" is a brisk, almost humorous word; it sounds trivial, jingly. You simply cannot substitute it for the real name.

For the real name, Stonehenge, is the Proper Name, and somehow we recognize it as such when we hear it.

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#### Imaginary Worlds Lin Carter - Pages 201-202 :

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(...)Leigh Brackett, when she avoids the Celtic glossaries, can coin beautifully. In *The Secret of Sinharat*, such names as Berild, Narrabhar, and Delgaun are fluid and lovely. Clark Ashton Smith is a master at this, coining names at once odd and beautiful: Malygris the Magician, Satampra Zeiros, Phaniol, Tirouv Ompallios, Maal Dweb, Ralibar Vooz in "The Seven Geases," Tsathoggua, Mmatmuor, and Sodosma.

And Dunsany, of course, the master of them all. Remember the heroes of the City of Victories?—"Wel-leran, Soorenard, Mommolek, Rollory, Akanax and young Iraine." Or Thangobrind the Jeweller, or Lorendiac in "The Fortress Unvanquishable," or Lirazel and Alveric and Ziroonderel, the witch who dwelt among the thunders in *The King of Elfland's Daughter*. Or the warriors in that fine tale "Carcassone," who dwelt in days "when Camorak reigned at Am, and the world was fairer . . . Gadriol the Leal, and Nom, and Athoric of the Sleety Sword, Heriel the Wild, Yarold, and Thanga of Esk."

And Vance, the current reigning master, can turn off some beautifully polished names when he has a mind to. There is "Dorwe Coreme" in *The Eyes of the Over-world*, and "Claude Glystra" in *Big Planet*, and "Pharesm the Sorcerer."

In my own stories, I try to match the savor to the sound and the sense: "Thongor," has grim weight to it, solidity, and the ring of clashing steel. The character is obviously a fighting-man; you can sense that from the

sound of the name alone. "Sharajsha" suggests, at least to my ear, a mysterious and vaguely Oriental magician—which is exactly what the character is. The name has weight and importance: it is impressive. Elsewhere, in my newly-launched series of stories laid in the legendary isles of Antillia, needing a name for a wealthy and fabulous metropolis, I coined "Palmyrium." The name was derived from an extinct nation of the Near East called Palmyra, whose queen, Zenobia, was crushed by the Roman Emperor Aurelian—but that is irrelevant. The name of the capital of an empire should sound like what it is, and to my ear something in the very sound of "Palmyrium" echoed the music of the imperial.

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Imaginary Worlds Lin Carter - Pages 214-215 :

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(...) how does magic work? A detailed literature can be found in our larger libraries on the theory, philosophy, and practice of ceremonial and talismanic magic as believed in and employed throughout the Middle Ages. But that is not quite sufficient for the purposes of fiction: a magician should not be omnipotent in a story, for the possession of absolute power makes him an unbeatable adversary or, if the magician is the protagonist, a hero who cannot possibly get into any tough spot that he cannot easily escape from with a snap of the fingers and a quick "Abracadabra" (or "Shazam"). This, obviously, would rob any story of the important quality of suspense, and can be fatal to sustaining reader interest: who cares what happens to a hero who can't be beaten?

Fantasy writers have usually dealt with this problem by inventing a new system of magic all their own, one with built-in flaws or limitations. The problem is identical with that faced by the writers of the comic strip "Superman": a hero who is invulnerable and super-strong needs some kind of Achilles' heel, hence the invention of kryptonite, an imaginary mineral that robs the cloaked crime-fighter of his powers.

**Jack Vance**, in his brilliant and highly-inventive "Dying Earth" stories, devised an original science of magic consisting of vocalized spells of terrific power. In his story "Turjan of Miir," Vance explains the system thusly, indicating the built-in limitation: "These were volumes compiled by many wizards of the past, untidy folios collected by the Sage, leather-bound librams setting forth the syllables of a hundred powerful spells, so cogent that Turjan's brain could know but four at a time." The italics are my own, but you get the idea. A hundred such spells are known, Vance



explains, but the average human brain, upon which they must be impressed by a terrific act of will, can only hold a few at a time.

A bit later in the same story, Turjan prepares to set forth on a journey. Any magician who ventures forth from the safe precincts of his tower or palace exposes himself to the myriad perils of this strange future world; Turjan attempts to select only those spells he anticipates he may need:

*He robed himself with a short blue cape, tucked a blade into his belt, fitted the amulet holding Laccodel's Rune to his wrist. Then he sat down and from a journal chose the spells he would take with him. What dangers he might meet he could not know, so he selected three spells of general application: The Excellent Prismatic Spray, Phandaal's Mantle of Stealth, and the Spell of the Slow Hour.*

The limitations of this magical system are obvious. Either the magician will encounter perils for which he is unprepared, or he will exhaust his magical armament (since each spell can be used only once), which will make him helpless in the face of further hazards. You will observe that Vance has admirably thought through the implications of the invulnerable magician problem.

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