



## **Conflict in Fiction**

By

Michael McCollum



Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be a character in one of your favorite movies or novels? They live exciting, thrill-filled lives much more interesting than your own humdrum existence, right? Wouldn't it be fun to actually live their adventure? Let us see just how much fun it would truly be. As an example, let's say that the universe of *Star Wars* really exists and that you are Luke Skywalker.

After spending 18 boring years living on Tatooine with your aunt and uncle, a junk dealer comes by and sells you some used farm machinery. Your uncle entrusts you to get the machinery ready for use and after dinner, you find that your new purchases are missing, a loss for which you will be blamed. While you are out looking for your lost property, a group of white-suited Nazis comes along looking for the same farm machinery. They end up killing the aunt and uncle who you love dearly. In desperation, you fall in with a crazy old man who immediately takes you to a dive on the wrong side of the tracks, where you fall in with a criminal and his big hairy friend. The criminal makes you an accessory to murder just before taking you along on one of his illegal smuggling trips. When you arrive at your destination, you find that the Nazis have murdered a billion or more people when they blew up the planet Alderaan (no slow, messy concentration camps for these guys). Before you can do anything about it, the Nazis capture you and it is only a matter of time before they put you to death, too. After all, you are just a juvenile delinquent farm boy from a bad family.

With your heart in your throat every second, you manage to escape the Nazis, only to discover that they have chased you back to the rebel's moon base and are about to blow up the moon with all of your friends on it. You engage in a deadly struggle in which you can be killed any second, undoubtedly soiling your underwear at least once in the midst of battle. Many good men around you are vaporized, and only through the luckiest of shots are you able to blow up the Nazis' ship seconds before they vaporize your only surviving friends. Afterwards, you are given a medal in front of an approving crowd and you live happily ever after ...

Well, not exactly. Later, you are almost eaten by this big glacier beast, are nearly killed while attempting to repel an attack by Imperial walkers, crash land in a swamp, get the wits scared out of you when you have to go into a snake filled cave, discover your friends are being tortured by the surviving Nazis, stupidly fall into a trap when you go to save them, get your hand chopped off during a fight with your own father, and have your

best friend frozen in carbonite. Later, the girl who you love turns out to be your sister, and the fun and games have one more movie to go!

The truth is that few of us could stand the tension, the fear, and the outright terror that would accompany life as an action hero. Most of us would suffer a nervous breakdown before we even got to Chapter 12. The people in fiction, like people everywhere, come in a variety of sizes, shapes, colors, sexes, and sexual orientations. What they have in common is simple: They all have big troubles and they are forever in conflict. Not a one of them lives a normal, dull, everyday life. Not that they don't want to. In fact, a boring existence is what they long for more than anything else in the universe.

So why is there so much conflict in fiction? Simple. Conflict is what fiction is about. Without it, there is no story. There might be a nice vignette, an arty description of a scene somewhere in the universe or in history, a lecture on some morally uplifting subject, or a how-to tome on some subject of practical importance. But there isn't any story. Fiction is about conflict and only conflict! The very definition of *adventure* is "someone else having a hard time far away!"

At its most basic, a fictional story is a clash between opposing forces. On the one side, you have the *Protagonist*, the person for whose viewpoint the reader is supposed to feel sympathy. On the other side, you have the *Antagonist*, the person for whom the reader is supposed to feel antipathy. A protagonist is almost always a person, or at least a thing that acts like a person (in *The Wobbler*, an excellent science fiction short story from the 1940s, the protagonist is a mobile marine mine). An antagonist is that against which the protagonist struggles. It can be another person, an idea, a society, a foreign nation, a force of nature, or an inner weakness within the protagonist.

*Protagonist* and *antagonist* are much better descriptions for the two viewpoints in a work of fiction than *hero* and *villain*. These words are too emotion charged to convey a wide enough meaning. Heroes are, by definition, good; and villains, evil. A protagonist does not have to be good (although he does have to be sympathetic), and an antagonist does not have to be bad.

A great many people have enjoyed Frank Herbert's science fiction classic *Dune*. Personally, I have always hated *Dune*. I first read an excerpt in *Analog* Magazine when it was published in the early 1960s. I remember my distaste vividly. In approximately 1980, I decided to read the novel, figuring that a professional science fiction writer ought to read the classics in the field. Besides, I told myself, I was probably just in a bad mood when I originally read the *Analog* excerpts. My reaction to the novel was precisely the same. I hated it.

One of my problems with *Dune* is Baron Harkonnen, the villain. He is an obese man with a bad complexion who does evil things to people for no other reason than that is his function. After all, he's the villain! Personally, I prefer stories in which the villain is motivated to do the things he does. In fact, the villain believes himself to be the hero of the piece! It is the conflict between diametrically opposed viewpoints that produce the best conflict and the most convincing stories. That is why it is better to think in terms of protagonists and antagonists. Antagonists merely hold an opposing view to that for which the reader is supposed to feel sympathy. Except for that, they have every right to be fully constructed human beings, too.

There are many levels of conflict in fiction, often in the same story. The simplest way to establish conflict is through physical action. Obviously, if someone is trying to kill you, there is some kind of conflict going on. For many stories, this is all the conflict that is required. If your protagonist is in a foxhole being pinned down by machine gun fire, then we do not have to see into the heart of the machine gunner to recognize the conflict going on. Two soldiers are locked in a deadly game of trying to kill each other, and the reasons behind their mutual antipathy are not very important. Wars are often started for the most esoteric of reasons; but the actual fighting is simplicity itself. “Do unto others before they have a chance to do unto you,” is all the motivation a soldier needs.

There is a name for a story where the Good Guys fight it out with the Bad Guys at forty paces. Westerns of this type became known as “horse opera,” and often the term is used generically to describe any kind of shoot ‘em up story. In science fiction, such plots are referred to as “space opera,” which is merely horse opera with spaceships.

*Star Wars* is space opera. On a personal level, it is a fight between the protagonists (Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and Princess Leia) and the Antagonist (Darth Vader). On a slightly higher level, it is a fight between the two flavors of Jedi Knights (Obiwan Kenobi for the good side of “the Force” and again, Darth Vader for the dark side). On the highest level, of course, the story has the oldest plot of all. It is the fight between good and evil.

But how does one tell protagonists from antagonists? There are a variety of mechanisms that signal the author’s intent, some obvious and others almost subliminal. First, the protagonists are usually represented by the main viewpoint characters. We mainly receive the story from these people. In the case of the first *Star Wars* movie, the main viewpoint character is Luke Skywalker. He is the one we mostly follow around and the character we begin to identify with most quickly. Save for the opening scenes where Princess Leia’s transport is captured, the story mostly follows Luke around.

Then, of course, the protagonists are the ones who aren’t going around committing despicable acts. We get a suspicion that Darth Vader is not a nice person when he picks up the transport captain and crushes his windpipe with one hand about two minutes into the movie. When he orders the destruction of Princess Leia’s home world of Alderaan, we really begin to dislike him. Not that we ever had any doubts about the villain of the piece. Darth Vader’s black costume with its Nazi-like helmet, its mask, and his heavy breathing on the sound track are all clues as to whom it is we are supposed to hate.

Still, in the fight between the Empire and the Rebellion, we have little inherent reason to root for one side or the other. None of them are, after all, Americans (or British, French, Japanese, Germans, Russians, Australians, or whatever your particular nationality happens to be). The fight between the two sides ought to be a bit like an American watching a cricket match between Liverpool and Glasgow. Frankly, we do not understand the rules, let alone care which side actually wins the damn thing.

So, in addition to Darth Vader’s rather boorish manners, his forbidding costume, and the Princess’s cute hairy earmuffs, how are we to know whom to root for? In *Star Wars* the primary clue as to the identity of the good guys comes from The Force – as in “May the Force Be with You!” The Force represents all that is good in the universe and

is something that right thinking people everywhere must respect, while The Dark Side is there to seduce sinners into damnation. The Force is to *Star Wars* what Heaven and Hell are to Christian theology. Indeed, the basic story is merely a rehash of the fight between God and Satan, or any of the thousands of similar morality tales that human beings have invented over the centuries.

(As an aside, my wife knew some people who actually believed in The Force. I did not have the heart to tell them that it was simply a plot device for separating the Good Guys from the Bad Guys.)

If I have given you the impression that I did not like *Star Wars* during the foregoing discussion, nothing could be farther from the truth. I enjoyed it immensely. I liked all three movies, although I think they turned Han Solo into a bit of an idiot during *Return of the Jedi*. As an example of fictional conflict, *Star Wars* is about as simple as it is possible to get. And for that reason, had it not been a blockbuster motion picture, the book *Star Wars* would have never seen the light of day. That particular plot was old hat in the thirties and no editor in his right mind would have published it. (The novel *Star Wars* is what is called a novelization, a book written from a screenplay. The screenplay is the work of George Lucas. The book was written by another author, someone I know, who is contractually obligated to deny the whole thing.)

While action is the easiest way to set up conflict in a story, it is not necessarily the best way. Truly good fiction relies on conflict at many different levels, especially within the characters themselves. That is why more people study *Hamlet* and the other plays of Shakespeare than they do the *Conan* books. Whereas the Prince of Denmark is filled with inner doubts and angst, you don't find much introspection in the early *Conan* books. Conan's basic philosophy is that there are few problems that cannot be improved by a few good whacks with a sword. If only Hamlet had felt the same way, he would not have had to die in the end. Of course, then there wouldn't have been any play.

The rule for writers of fiction is that you need to place your characters and readers on the horns of a dilemma and never let them off. This means placing your characters in a situation where there can be no compromise, no letting down of the guard, no live and let live. No matter how much the characters want to avoid a fight, events and circumstances must eventually force them to face that which they dare not face. If your character is a passenger on the *Titanic*, then he must be shaking in his boots as he manfully stands away from the lifeboats to let the women and children board first. If your character is a nurse working in a leper colony, then her worst fear must be that she will catch the disease and be disfigured. If a man escapes a burning building, then he must be deathly afraid of fire as he rushes back inside to rescue his wife and children. Characters who overcome their most basic fears to do that which is right are the ones that make the strongest stories. That is because the conflict takes place at several different levels. And when presenting your characters with a problem, you must leave them no easy way out.

The best short story I have written is *The Shroud*, which is also my only foray into religious science fiction. *The Shroud* is about The Shroud of Turin, which many have believed over the years to be the burial cloth of Jesus Christ. *The Shroud* is a good example of how a writer establishes conflict on many different levels in order to engage the reader in an emotionally satisfying (or possibly taxing) experience. I have placed *The*

*Shroud* at the end of this article. If you have not yet read it, you may wish to do so before you read any further. Reading the story first will give you a much better appreciation of the techniques of conflict discussed below. *Be warned: Christians with deeply held religious beliefs may find the story disturbing. The reasons why this is so will be made clear in the discussion of the various levels of conflict that follows.*

The main character of *The Shroud* is John Frakes, a scientist who is the son of a fire breathing fundamentalist preacher. Frakes is an agnostic. He hurt his religious father deeply when he chose science over theology. His father never forgave him and the younger Frakes deeply regrets having hurt the older man, so much so that he is suffering considerable inner turmoil as he returns to Turin to report the results of his scientific examination of The Shroud.

That Frakes is conflicted is evident almost immediately in the story. That is possible because he is the main viewpoint character in the story. We the readers are able to read his thoughts (and only his). Essentially, Frakes is each one of us. We see the world through his eyes, we think his thoughts, and we feel his pain. We do not *understand* his pain, but we know that it is there.

Into this conflicted situation, we bring the First Primate of the Guardians of The Shroud. This is a holy man of a non-denominational order that does good works. The First Primate is a sympathetic character. He wants desperately to prove that The Shroud is indeed the burial cloth of Jesus Christ, but he is also worldly enough to know that the validation must be done by a non-believer. Frakes likes the First Primate, but is also conflicted in his presence. Throughout their discussion, we feel Frakes' lack of ease in the primate's presence. We still do not know why he is uneasy, but it is made very clear that he has an awful secret.

Therefore, we have tension working on two levels in *The Shroud*. There is John Frakes' inner tension caused by his guilt over his father and his reluctance to disappoint the First Primate, who reminds him of his father. There is a third level of tension, one that gives *The Shroud* much of its power. For while setting up a conundrum for Frakes and the First Primate, the story also sets up one for the reader.

If you are a Christian, you have been taught certain things about The Savior and you believe them deeply. While I present you with the history of the Shroud of Turin, I work every one of my writer's tricks to convince you that it is the genuine article. This is the reason for the long retelling of the story of Robert De Clari, Princess Clotilde, and Secondo Pia and for the reverent tone used whenever The Shroud is mentioned. By presenting you this information in a positive and reverential manner, I am hopefully convincing your subconscious that The Shroud is truly the burial cloth of the Son of God.

Then, when I have you all sympathetic for the characters and believing that The Shroud is genuine, I spring my trap. I present the characters and you, the reader, with a fact that you cannot assimilate. I tell you that scientific evidence reveals that He Who Lay in the Shroud suffered from delusions of grandeur. If you are a Christian, the following train of thought probably went through your brain in a split second:

*"The Shroud was Christ's burial cloth. The occupant of The Shroud suffered from delusions of grandeur. Therefore, Christ suffered from delusions of grandeur. Therefore, Christianity is a fraud! But wait a minute. My parents told me that Christianity was The Word of God! ... TILT, TILT, TILT!"*

Obviously, if the occupant of The Shroud was mentally defective, then it could not possibly be the burial cloth of Jesus Christ. The only problem with that conclusion, of course, is that I have spent 5000 words convincing you subliminally that it *is* Christ's shroud. In other words, I have presented you with a logical puzzle for which there is no acceptable answer. I have placed you, the reader, onto the horns of a dilemma and given you no way down. And for that reason, *The Shroud* is an emotionally powerful short story.

Now the above scenario assumes that you are a Christian. If you are an atheist, an agnostic, a Moslem, Jew, or Hindu, you probably cannot see what all of the excitement is about. Since you do not believe in Christianity in the first place, the discovery that the occupant of The Shroud was mentally defective does not threaten your worldview at all. You are probably thinking, "*Serves them right for all those missionaries they've inflicted on the rest of us!*"

This is why you do not see much religious fiction published, especially in science fiction. Stories that support any given religious belief are only effective with the adherents of that religion. The adherents of other religions mostly yawn.

And, as illustrated by *The Shroud*, those stories about religion that do get published are mostly anti-religion. The reason for this is simple. As I noted at the beginning of this article, fiction requires conflict and it is much easier to develop conflict in stories that are *anti* something rather than *pro*.

Because the reading audience consists of people with a wide variety of religious beliefs, the conflict in religious fiction tends to be based on generalized human emotions rather than on specific points of dogma. (For a classic case of the dangers of religious science fiction, consider *Star Trek V*, where they found an alien pretending to be God. In the original script, William Shatner had them actually finding God. Had they gone through with it, the movie would have been an even bigger disaster at the box office than it actually was. The story is that the working title of *Star Trek VI* was *Star Trek, the Apology!*)

So, if you want to write a powerful piece of fiction, you must carefully define your conflicts. They must take place on more than one level and they must be sharp. Set up your premise and drive straight for your target, neither flinching nor veering along the way. If you have done your job properly, you'll leave goose bumps on the flesh of everyone who reads your story. If you take the easy way out, all you have written is a collection of eminently forgettable words.

The choice is entirely up to you.

Appendix 1: The Shroud

John Frakes was jolted awake by the screech of tires on wet asphalt as the twenty-year-old airplane touched down at *Aeroporto di Torino*. He groaned and straightened up in his seat. The catnap on the forty-minute flight from Rome had been his first rest in thirty hours. Ever since the final lab results had been verified, his sleep had been marred by the same recurring nightmare. He would barely doze off when the stern face of his father scowled forth from his deep subconscious, tugging him forcefully back to reality.

The Reverend Lester Frakes had been a fire breathing Episcopalian minister while he lived. Even five years after the old man's death, Frakes still occasionally woke in the middle of the night covered with nervous sweat, his hands shaking in a fit of filial guilt. His father had never really forgiven him for changing his major from Religious Studies to Chemistry during his junior year of college.

"I've raised me a damned atheist, have I?" the Reverend Frakes had screamed at him that fateful Christmas Eve when he had broken the news.

"No, sir, an agnostic."

"I will pray for you, lad," Lester Frakes had said, casting his eyes heavenward. "Perhaps the Lord will someday tear this veil of foolishness from your eyes so that you may see the path of righteousness once more."

Even then, Frakes had had to smile inwardly as his father slipped easily into the old fire-and-brimstone sermon mode. As they had done so many times before, the words washed over him as though from a scalding sea, their sting intended to bend his will to that of the old man.

Only that time he had refused to bend, and in the end, it had killed the Reverend Frakes as surely as a knife.

"*What would say now, Father, if you knew what I know?*"

He knew the answer even as he asked the question. Lester Frakes had always chosen a single sermon on those infrequent occasions afterward when his son had come to hear him preach.

"Never let your mind overpower your faith, my flock! Without faith we are little better than the poor guinea pigs these would-be-prophets slice open in furtherance of their evil experiments . . ."

"You may unbuckle your seat belt, *Signore*."

Frakes looked up with a start. The pretty, black haired, black-eyed stewardess who had welcomed him aboard in Rome was standing over him. He looked around, surprised to see the last of the passengers crowding towards the exit at the front of the plane.

"Sorry," he said, reaching for the buckle. "I guess I was daydreaming."

"Are you well?"

"Uh, *Mi sento molto bene, grazie*. Just a little tired is all."

"You speak *Italiano* well for an American, *Signore*. Perhaps this is not your first visit?"

"I was here last summer for two months. I picked up a few useful phrases then."

"Well, have a nice stay this time."

Frakes levered himself out of his seat, pulling his briefcase with its precious cargo from under the seat in front of him, thankful for the chance to stretch his legs after so many hours in the air.

Sardinian Customs was almost peaceful after the organized chaos he had encountered at Rome City State. There were none of the hundreds of soldiers and *Carabinieri* that the Rome city fathers seemed to think necessary. Of course, the Sardinians had no need to guard against agents of the Peoples' Republic of Naples at the moment, either.

Within half an hour, he was out of the airport and headed north in a cab towards the gray smudge on the horizon that was Torino.

"You are in Sardinia on business, yes?" the taxi driver asked over his shoulder as he weaved nonchalantly between an oncoming Fiat and a cryogen tanker stopped half on/half off the road.

"Yes," Frakes said, staring blankly at the glistening wetness of the highway. The static crackle of the windshield rain repulsors and the low-throated hum of the turbine made him want to go back to sleep.

"*Ingegnere* . . . engineer?"

Frakes shook his head. "*Scenziato*."

"Ah, here to visit our mills for making of the plastics?"

"No, to visit the Cathedral."

"You come to see the Sacred Shroud?"

Frakes nodded.

"Signore, this is your lucky day! Mi brother, he is tourist guide. He would be most content to guide you personally. Perhaps, if you wish, he will arrange a most private tour for you, Signore. The cost will be not great. No more than a million New Lira. He will speak with the Guardians and perhaps you will even be allowed to touch the Relic."

In spite of the sandpaper on the insides of his eyelids, John Frakes had to smile. "The payment will be in advance of course; and to you, not your brother."

The driver's brown eyes looked expressively at him in the rearview mirror as his whole body underwent a huge shrug. "It is the way things are done in Sardinia these days, Signore."

"You wouldn't disappear with the money the moment I handed it over, would you?"

"Signore, you wound me!"

"What would you say if I told you the Shroud hasn't been on public display more than fifty times in the last eight hundred years?"

The taxi driver grinned, seemingly unbothered for having been caught red handed. "I see I am in the presence of one knowledgeable about such things."

Frakes laughed. "You might say that. I've spent the better part of the last two years studying the Shroud. I know far more than I ever wanted to." Frakes felt a pang of guilt as he realized the statement held far more truth than he had intended.

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The Shroud of Turin is a piece of linen dating back to the First Century, AD. Physically, it is quite large, measuring 4.3 meters long by 1.4 meters wide. However, it is not the mere fact of the age of the material that causes the Shroud to be venerated so.

For on the surface of the Shroud, clearly visible to the naked eye, there is miraculously imprinted the image of a man. Actually there are two images, one frontal, one dorsal; each nearly joined to the other at the head, as though the cloth had been folded lengthwise over a corpse and then removed before the process of decay set in.

The two images are so detailed that it is possible to know a great deal about the man who once lay in the shroud. He stood 172 centimeters tall in life, was possessed of a handsome face, a beard, and long flowing locks. He lies naked in death with his legs extended to their full length beneath him. His arms are crossed left over right, obviously tied together to combat the effects of *rigor mortis*.

More intriguing than his physical appearance is the manner of his death.

On the surface of the Shroud, there are a number of bloodstains arranged in a meaningful pattern. Near the hands are marks of wounds that could only have come from having spikes driven through each wrist. Similar marks show up on the feet, as though they were pinioned together with a single large nail. Clearly, the original owner of the shroud was a victim of the cross.

A series of marks on the dorsal image indicate that He of the Shroud had been severely flogged by two men before being nailed to the cross. A large bloodstain at the abdomen shows that he was pierced through the right side by a short spear, probably as a *coup de gras* administered after death. And most suggestive of all are the small spots of blood in the region of the head, the pattern of which suggests a Crown of Thorns worn like a cap and tied under the chin for maximum torment,

Tradition has it that the Shroud is the burial cloth of Jesus Christ, given to Simon Peter for safe keeping following the Resurrection. As to the subject of what became of the burial garment in the years that followed, the Gospels are unfortunately silent.

The first independent historical reference to Christ's burial shroud comes from Saint Nino in the Third Century. Then, in the year 570, an anonymous pilgrim from Piacenza reported that it was being kept in a convent in a cave by the River Jordan. And again, during the Seventh Century, a French bishop named Arculf told a tale of having seen the Shroud in Jerusalem.

For six hundred years, there were no further reliable reports of the sacred cloth until 1204, when Robert de Clari, a chronicler of the Fourth Crusade, reported its presence in Constantinople. After the Crusaders plundered that great city, however, "no one, neither Greek or Frenchman, ever knew what became of it . . ."

The Shroud surfaced again in 1356 in Lirey, France. Then on December 4, 1532, the Shroud was involved in a fire in the sacristy of the Sainte Chapelle of Chambéry. Its silver casket overheated and drops of molten metal fell on the folded linen, burning a series of deep black scars into its surface, luckily leaving most of the image unharmed.

In 1578, it was moved from Chambéry to Turin on orders of the Duke of Savoy. And in Turin it rested for the next five hundred years.

For most of its history after 1356, the Shroud was believed to be a fake or a clever painting done by some unknown Michelangelo for the greater glory of God. Only in the nineteenth — and later the twentieth — centuries, with the invention of ever better photographic methods, did the true nature of the Shroud become clear. Quite simply, the Shroud was exactly what it appeared to be, the burial cloth of a First Century martyr. Even a cursory study of the image's anatomical detail showed that no medieval artist, no matter how much a genius, could possibly have been so precise.

As ever more powerful scientific tools were brought to bear on the Shroud's "authenticity", the question of whether or not it was truly Christ's image on the linen became ever more important. As in the case of most questions of religion, opinions were varied . . . and heated!

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The Cathedral of Saint John, the Baptist, showed few indications that it had witnessed nearly a thousand years of turbulent history. Its great double doors stood agape, as if welcoming one and all to enter and take refuge within the dimly lit interior. Here and there across the Cathedral's stately face were the pockmarks of machine gun fire, some dating back to the Second World War. Other, smaller caliber pockmarks were less than thirty years old, stark evidence of the Breakup that accompanied the Second Reformation.

John Frakes wearily climbed the flight of steps to the cathedral's entrance, and crossed the threshold into the stately interior, glad to be out of the wet drizzle that fell from a gray sky. As he did so, he was acutely conscious of the warm glow that washed over him both inside and out. The outer warmth came from the cathedral's efficient central heating system, installed by the Guardians when they carved the Shroud's resting place from solid rock beneath the foundation during the Time of Troubles. The inner warmth came from the knowledge that untold generations of men had trod this floor before him. Agnostic or not, Frakes couldn't help feeling a certain reverence whenever he thought of the lives so intimately entwined with this building and its Sacred Treasure.

There had been Secondo Pia, the first man to photograph the Shroud. It had been he in 1898 who had first clearly seen The Face in the Shroud as it appeared so starkly in one of his old-fashioned glass negatives. Later the photographer had described that instant as an intensely personal religious experience.

Then there had been Filippo Lambert and Guglielmo Pussod, who risked their lives rescuing the Shroud's silver casket from the flames at Chambéry. And later, Princess Clotilde of Italy, who knelt on rough stone floors and laboriously attached the backing cloth that protects the Shroud stitch by stitch, refusing all help until the job was finished.

Frakes was suddenly conscious of standing inside the Cathedral with chills running up his spine. He flinched visibly as he remembered where he was and what he must do in the next few minutes.

His reverie was further interrupted by the hollow clatter of leather soles on the stone floor. A man dressed in a business tunic and neck collar came into view from between two of the giant pillars and made straight for him. Frakes shivered a little and waited for the other to reach him.

"Doctor Frakes?" the Reverend asked as he reached the waiting scientist and extended his hand.

"Yes," Frakes said, taking the hand. The other's grip was firm, but not bone crushing.

"The First Primate regrets he will be delayed a few minutes. I am his assistant, Giuseppe Calle. He has asked me to entertain you until he can arrive."

"You speak English very well, Signore Calle. No trace of an accent at all."

Calle smiled. "Don't let my name fool you, Doctor. I'm from Cleveland."

"What happened to Bartol?"

The Guardian lifted his hands. "He is on a religious retreat in the mountains."

"Sorry to have missed him. He was indispensable to me last summer."

"Ah, yes. The Great Inquiry. I have been meaning to ask you. What were all those immense tanks the news people kept taking photographs of?"

"Helium. Your Primate refused to break the seal on the Shroud's casket until we had flooded the whole underground vault with helium. I worked for nearly a week in breathing gear. You may have seen me in the newsfaxes. I was the one who looked like a drunken spaceman home on leave."

"Ah yes, I remember," Calle said, nodding. "Have you been shown around our Great Cathedral?"

"I was given a very extensive tour while I was here earlier this year."

"Then you are familiar with our Order's history and works?"

"Only what I read in the fax, I'm afraid. My work, you know."

"Yes, we all have our work. You explore the natural universe while I do the same for the spiritual. Perhaps we two are more alike than you know. May I give you the nickel lecture while we wait?"

"By all means."

"A bit of background first, then. You know, of course, that our Order is not associated with any formally established religion. We make no claims of new insights into the nature of God, or of a private channel direct to His ears. We were founded in 2009 by a man named Bartolo Vasquez, a simple layman whose sole purpose was to protect the Holy Shroud from the exploitation so common in those days. We are an ecumenical organization. We care not if one of our members is Methodist, or Catholic, or Anglican, or Coptic. We ask only that he be a good Christian and to believe in the Shroud as the burial cloth of the Savior.

"Beyond that, we ask him to go forth and do good works."

Frakes nodded. "'I'm familiar with your medical center in Denver. A really marvelous place."

"And then there are our missions to feed the poor and starving of the world," Calle continued. "Last year we spent over ten billion decadollars on our public charities. But then what is money for if we can't help others with it?"

"Your order has grown mightily in the last couple of decades," Frakes agreed.

"Do you know why?" Calle asked.

"Because of the Shroud."

"Yes, of course. Unlike the various established Christian religions, our order has absolute physical proof that our Savior died for our sins. The others have their faith, a faith, which we share, I might add. But we have absolute proof! Is it any wonder that we attract so many supplicants each year?"

"Only the good Doctor doesn't think our proof is genuine, Calle. Do you, Doctor?" The new voice echoed through the sitting room that Calle had directed Frakes to as they talked. Frakes turned to face the source of the sound.

Standing behind them was the First Primate of the Guardians of the Shroud of Turin — next to the Pope, the most powerful man in all of Christendom.

The First Primate was a tall, wizened man whose strongly lined face still managed to convey the feeling of complete inner peace. At the moment his features were contorted by a wry grin.

"'Absolutely no proof that the Shroud is that of Jesus Christ.' Wasn't that what you told me at our first meeting, Doctor Frakes?"

"I fear I am being quoted out of context, Primate. What I said was that absolute proof is not possible. We know that the Shroud is a burial cloth, but it was my opinion last summer that the identity of the man in the image could never be proven with utter certainty."

"Does your curious phrasing of that answer mean that you have changed your mind and absolute proof is now possible?" Calle asked, excitement creeping into his voice.

"Well, I . . ."

The Primate held up his hand. "Just a moment, Doctor. Perhaps we should get one thing clear. Do you know why I granted your request last year and allowed you to scan the Shroud with your miraculous machine?"

"Frankly, Excellency, I truly don't. I was both surprised and pleased when I received your letter."

The First Primate nodded. "I understand you were turned down by quite a number of others."

"Yes, Excellency. You must understand that I am not a religious man. My father was a man of the cloth and hoped I would follow in his footsteps. I am afraid that it was not to be. Instead, I have spent my professional career working on the genetic structure of human blood and how it has or has not changed with the centuries.

"The basic problem in my field, of course, is getting samples of ancient human blood to perform tests on. Unfortunately, the only part of our bodies that remains after death are the bones. Theoretically, we could run a chromosome map on them, but in practice their calcified structure is unsuitable for the basic tests that are required."

"Which brought you to us," the Primate said.

"Yes. The two places where I could obtain material for my experiments were the mummies of Egyptian pharaohs and, of course, the blood stains on the Shroud. The tests are nondestructive, so I hoped there would be no objections to the procedure."

"And the Egyptians turned you down while I accepted," the First Primate said.

"Yes, Excellency."

"But why are you so surprised?"

"I told you, Excellency. I am not a believer."

"In this case, Doctor, that factor worked in your favor."

"I don't understand."

"Do you know what the Achilles Heel of Christianity was before the Shroud was authenticated, Doctor?"

Frakes shook his head.

"The lack of validation by nonbelievers, of course. Are you aware that there are no eyewitness accounts of Christ except for those in the Bible?" Frakes opened his mouth to object, but the First Primate stopped him with an impatient gesture. "No, it's true. Oh, no one doubts that He existed. There are historical references to His existence from the First Century, commentaries written by men who lived shortly after His time and who do not contest the fact of His existence. A few scholars have suggested that He did not exist, but by and large, they have been laughed into silence.

"But think, Doctor. How much better it would have been if we had even a single scrap of evidence that was not basically Christian in origin. Would it not be nice to have a pagan's account of the Sermon on the Mount? Or perhaps a Roman soldier's letter home telling of the crucifixion of another Hebrew troublemaker? Some corroborating evidence, as it were, from a source other than our own holiest of books?"

"I guess I never looked at it that way, Excellency."

"So for two thousand years the world's Christians took their religion on faith alone. Now faith is a wonderful thing, but is it not so much better to have proof? That, at least, is the cornerstone on which our Order was built. It is, I am afraid, the main source of friction between the old established religions and ourselves. Many of them still believe faith is enough.

"Whatever your side in that argument, however, it still remains that a number of sophisticated tests on the Shroud — the extensive analyses of the 1980s and 1990s — could not prove it a fraud. To those of us in the Order, they went much farther than the negative finding that shows up in the final reports. We have pondered the evidence and find it sufficient to prove

our case beyond any reasonable doubt. It is on those results that our beloved Bartolo built this Order.”

John Frakes licked dry lips and wondered why it was suddenly so cold in the sitting room. He chose his next words carefully, wishing that the buzzing in his ears would subside long enough for him to concentrate on the business at hand.

“I do not wish to disagree with someone as learned as yourself, Excellency, but all those original tests proved was that the Shroud is truly the burial cloth of a man who was crucified. There was no proof whatever that he was the Son of God.”

The First Primate smiled. “Which brings us to why you are here Doctor. We are an Order that has no fear of science. As I have explained, our founding was the direct result of those earlier test results. But those discoveries were somewhat limited in scope, as you have pointed out. The earliest researchers into the Shroud used nothing but their naked eyes. Later cameras, microscopes, and Carbon-14 dating techniques were used in conjunction with computer analysis. These studies yielded many valuable results, but were still limited by the fact that — except for a few small samples taken during 1973 — all tests have had to be nondestructive in nature. Those early Keepers of the Shroud were quite correct in refusing to allow additional pieces of the sacred cloth to be removed. If every scientist who wanted samples from the Shroud had been accommodated there would be little more than a handkerchief sized piece left today.”

“So you granted my request to examine the Shroud because my investigations are completely harmless?” Frakes asked.

“Of course,” the Primate said. “Even so, I had a hard night of it before making the decision to grant your request. If you had been one of us, if you truly believed that the Shroud was Our Savior’s burial garment, I would probably have turned you down.”

“I still don’t understand, Excellency.”

“It is quite simple, Doctor Frakes. You will be my pagan at the Sermon on the Mount, my Roman soldier writing his family of the Crucifixion. You have no connection with this Order and a worldwide reputation for honesty and scholarship. You will go forth and publish your findings, and we will use those findings for the further Glory of God. Now, sir, pardon my excitement but I have waited most of my adult life for this moment. What can you tell us of our Holy Relic?”

“Have you the proof positive that we seek?” Calle asked, his eyes shining with excitement no less than the Primate’s did.

Frakes cleared his throat and averted his eyes, keenly aware that the moment of truth was upon him.

“I have proof, but I fear you will be disappointed.”

“Come now, Doctor, out with it. What have you discovered?”

“As we discussed, Excellency, I first concentrated my instruments on the body images and not the blood stains. It has been a mystery for centuries just how the image came to be on the cloth of the Shroud. Well, the mystery is mysterious no longer. The body image is the result of a complex, but perfectly understandable chemical reaction. I have a report in my briefcase that you can study at your leisure.”

“Go on.”

“Our next objective was to determine the chromosome structure of the individual whose blood is on the Shroud. This is what took the better part of four months. You understand, Excellency, that there is much we do not know concerning chromosome structure. We have another millennium of study in front of us before we understand the underlying principles. But in our initial, groping way, we have scanned the cloth and developed sufficient data to identify his chromosome pattern with a ninety-five percent probability. We then analyzed the pattern extensively. The man whose shroud that is in your underground vault was almost surely a Semite. With one exception the chromosome pattern correlates well with that of a modern man of Semitic extraction.”

“Exception?” the First Primate asked, his manner suddenly intense. “You have found evidence that this was no mortal man?”

“Not exactly, Excellency.”

“Out with it, man! Was it Our Lord or not?”

"No, Excellency, it couldn't possibly have been. The very idea is grotesque, unthinkable."  
"You let me worry about what can be thought or not thought, Doctor. What have you discovered?"

"The chromosome pattern, Excellency. It had a strange structure in some of the peptide chains. It took us quite a while to identify it and even longer to check our conclusions. In fact, the implications are so far reaching for your order, that I had the work completely rerun six separate times. There can be no mistake.

"The man who lay in the Shroud had a genetic defect. He suffered from a condition known as Kurusoku Syndrome."

"We are not medical people, Doctor Frakes," the First Primate said, an edge developing in his voice. "What does that mean in English?"

"Kurusoku Syndrome was first identified around the turn of the last century. It is a genetic disease characterized by a progressive reduction of the afflicted person's mental capacity, an ever-increasing sense of disorientation with respect to reality, and if allowed to go untreated, can lead to delusions of grandeur. If it were proved that the Shroud were the true burial cloth of Jesus Christ ... well, I think you'll agree that the consequences for Christianity would be catastrophic."

#

It was twenty minutes after the alarm went out that the first ambulance arrived on the scene. For the better part of an hour, the doctors worked on the First Primate before they dared send him to the coronary unit of Our Lady of Fatima Hospital on the outskirts of Turin. He was given only a fifty-fifty chance of surviving the night. As John Frakes descended the Cathedral steps to the waiting cab, he shivered in the cold drizzle. He sat inside the vehicle in a daze. All he could remember was the memory of the old man's eyes just before the heart attack took him. The look of betrayal was one that would stay with him all the rest of his life.

It was the same look that had been frozen on his father's face on that fateful Christmas Eve so many years before. It was the look that now haunted his very dreams. Somehow, he knew that it would haunt his dreams for a long time to come.

The End

Author's Note:

*The Shroud* won an honorable mention in the *Locus* Reader Poll for 1981. Not bad for a story that I thought would be impossible to sell due to its subject matter.

For those who are disturbed by this story, The Shroud of Turin's age was confirmed by radiocarbon dating in 1990. Three different laboratories determined that the cotton which went into the weaving of the cloth was grown between the years 1260 and 1390 AD. In other words, The Shroud is a medieval fake!

Some may have noticed that John Frakes' name is strikingly similar to that of Jonathan Frakes, the actor who plays Commander Ryker on *Star Trek, The Next Generation*. This is a coincidence. I wrote *The Shroud* long before I had heard of the actor.

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The Makers searched for the secret to faster-than-light travel for 100,000 years. Their chosen instruments were the Life Probes, which they launched in every direction to seek out advanced civilizations among the stars. One such machine searching for intelligent life encounters 21st century Earth. It isn't sure that it has found any...

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Three hundred years after humanity made its deal with the Life Probe to search out the secret of faster-than-light travel, the descendants of the original expedition return to Earth in a starship. They find a world that has forgotten the ancient contract. No matter. The colonists have overcome far greater obstacles in their single-minded drive to redeem a promise made before any of them were born...

### **3. Antares Dawn - US\$4.50**

When the super giant star Antares exploded in 2512, the human colony on Alta found their pathway to the stars gone, isolating them from the rest of human space for more than a century. Then one day, a powerful warship materialized in the system without warning. Alarmed by the sudden appearance of such a behemoth, the commanders of the Altan Space Navy dispatched one of their most powerful ships to investigate. What ASNS Discovery finds when they finally catch the intruder is a battered hulk manned by a dead crew.

That is disturbing news for the Altans. For the dead battleship could easily have defeated the whole of the Altan navy. If it could find Alta, then so could whomever it was that beat it. Something must be done...

### **4. Antares Passage - US\$4.50**

After more than a century of isolation, the paths between stars are again open and the people of Alta in contact with their sister colony on Sandar. The opening of the foldlines has not been the unmixed blessing the Altans had supposed, however.

For the reestablishment of interstellar travel has brought with it news of the Ryall, an alien race whose goal is the extermination of humanity. If they are to avoid defeat at the hands of the aliens, Alta must seek out the military might of Earth. However, to reach Earth requires them to dive into the heart of a supernova.

### **5. Antares Victory – First Time in Print – US\$7.00**

After a century of warfare, humanity finally discovered the Achilles heel of the Ryall, their xenophobic reptilian foe. Spica – Alpha Virginis – is the key star system in enemy space. It is the hub through which all Ryall starships must pass, and if humanity can only capture and hold it, they will strangle the Ryall war machine and end their threat to humankind forever.

It all seemed so simple in the computer simulations: Advance by stealth, attack without warning, strike swiftly with overwhelming power. Unfortunately, conquering the Ryall proves the easy part. With the key to victory in hand, Richard and Bethany Drake discover that they must also conquer human nature if they are to bring down the alien foe ...

### **6. Thunderstrike! - US\$6.00**

The new comet found near Jupiter was an incredible treasure trove of water ice and rock. Immediately, the water-starved Luna Republic and the Sierra Corporation, a leader in asteroid mining, were squabbling over rights to the new resource. However, all thoughts of profit and fame were abandoned when a scientific expedition discovered that the comet's trajectory placed it on a collision course with Earth!

As scientists struggled to find a way to alter the comet's course, world leaders tried desperately to restrain mass panic, and two lovers quarreled over the direction the comet was to take, all Earth waited to see if humanity had any future at all...

## 7. The Clouds of Saturn - US\$4.50

When the sun flared out of control and boiled Earth's oceans, humanity took refuge in a place that few would have predicted. In the greatest migration in history, the entire human race took up residence among the towering clouds and deep clear-air canyons of Saturn's upper atmosphere. Having survived the traitor star, they returned to the all-too-human tradition of internecine strife. The new city-states of Saturn began to resemble those of ancient Greece, with one group of cities taking on the role of militaristic Sparta...

## 8. The Sails of Tau Ceti – US\$4.50

*Starhopper* was humanity's first interstellar probe. It was designed to search for intelligent life beyond the solar system. Before it could be launched, however, intelligent life found Earth. The discovery of an alien light sail inbound at the edge of the solar system generated considerable excitement in scientific circles. With the interstellar probe nearing completion, it gave scientists the opportunity to launch an expedition to meet the aliens while they were still in space. The second surprise came when *Starhopper's* crew boarded the alien craft. They found beings that, despite their alien physiques, were surprisingly compatible with humans. That two species so similar could have evolved a mere twelve light years from one another seemed too coincidental to be true.

One human being soon discovered that coincidence had nothing to do with it...

## 9. Gibraltar Earth – First Time in Print — \$6.00

It is the 24th Century and humanity is just gaining a toehold out among the stars. Stellar Survey Starship *Magellan* is exploring the New Eden system when they encounter two alien spacecraft. When the encounter is over, the score is one human scout ship and one alien aggressor destroyed. In exploring the wreck of the second alien ship, spacers discover a survivor with a fantastic story.

The alien comes from a million-star Galactic Empire ruled over by a mysterious race known as the Broa. These overlords are the masters of this region of the galaxy and they allow no competitors. This news presents Earth's rulers with a problem. As yet, the Broa are ignorant of humanity's existence. Does the human race retreat to its one small world, quaking in fear that the Broa will eventually discover Earth? Or do they take a more aggressive approach?

Whatever they do, they must do it quickly! Time is running out for the human race...

## 10. Gibraltar Sun – First Time in Print — \$7.00

The expedition to the Crab Nebula has returned to Earth and the news is not good. Out among the stars, a million systems have fallen under Broan domination, the fate awaiting Earth should the Broa ever learn of its existence. The problem would seem to allow but three responses: submit meekly to slavery, fight and risk extermination, or hide and pray the Broa remain ignorant of humankind for at least a few more generations. Are the hairless apes of Sol III finally faced with a problem for which there is no acceptable solution?

While politicians argue, Mark Rykand and Lisa Arden risk everything to spy on the all-powerful enemy that is beginning to wonder at the appearance of mysterious bipeds in their midst...

### **11. Gridlock and Other Stories - US\$4.50**

Where would you visit if you invented a time machine, but could not steer it? What if you went out for a six-pack of beer and never came back? If you think nuclear power is dangerous, you should try black holes as an energy source — or even scarier, solar energy! Visit the many worlds of Michael McCollum. I guarantee that you will be surprised!

## Non-Fiction Books

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### **12. The Art of Writing, Volume I - US\$10.00**

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This collection covers the *Art of Science Fiction* articles published during 1998. The book is 67,000 words in length and builds on the foundation of knowledge provided by Volume I of this popular series.

## **16. The Astrogator's Handbook – Expanded Edition and Deluxe Editions**

The Astrogator's Handbook has been very popular on Sci Fi – Arizona. The handbook has star maps that show science fiction writers where the stars are located in space rather than where they are located in Earth's sky. Because of the popularity, we are expanding the handbook to show nine times as much space and more than ten times as many stars. The expanded handbook includes the positions of 3500 stars as viewed from Polaris on 63 maps. This handbook is a useful resource for every science fiction writer and will appeal to anyone with an interest in astronomy.